



TOE'S Company



The founder & MD of B-Line Beauty hand, foot & body products, **ANNETTE FOLEY-CRAIGEN**, reflects on her journey from broken bones to burgeoning brand founder...

As I got closer to an age where retirement was a viable option, getting merry on the sherry was not for me, although I did give it a good try! Thirty years ago, at the tender age of 48, most of my contemporaries were on the bridge club circuit – but long-term, I knew that lifestyle was not for me.

I had trained and worked in the theatre, lived and experienced 'flower power', queued all night to see Paul Robeson's iconic *Othello* at Stratford and had coffee with Sean Connery

before he became 'Mr Bond'. I knew there was a whole world of opportunities to further explore. But what to do – was my dilemma? This is where fate played a part.

My great passion was and still is, beautiful shoes and the culture and trends that surround them. My friends know that I'm prone to going 'over the top' at times and it was on one of these occasions when wearing a sizzling pair of 'killer heels' that I fell over and broke one of the 26 bones in my foot.

While convalescing, two things happened that started the B-Line ball rolling. I picked up

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a book about Renaissance artist, Leonardo da Vinci, whose incredible achievements blew my mind. I was totally carried away by his anatomical drawings, especially the foot, which he described as the 'greatest engineering device' in the world.

As a theatre actress, this resonated with my experience, as I always created a character from the feet up, adopting a gait and posture to inhabit whichever part I was playing.

Secondly, and almost unwittingly, this opened up a new world that led to exploring the fascinating history of footwear; from the early fur foot covering adopted by cavemen through to Roman sandals and Chinese foot-binding, the teetering chopines that enabled 16th century ladies to keep their flowing gowns off the mud up and into Manolo Blahnik and Doc Martens.

I still feel emotional when I think of those poor girls in China. If you can't move freely, education and empowerment are not possible, something that today's female can hardly imagine. They became like a little doll to be aroused mentally and physically at another's whim.

My research showed clearly that shoes were great indicators of social history, while also opening my eyes to the fact that at certain periods in time, men's shoes were far more elaborate than women's.

All this made me realise that feet were the most neglected part of the anatomy. Having looked around, disappointed at what was available, I decided to fill the gap by producing my own range of plant-based footcare products; something new, something different and something exciting for me to throw myself into.

The business was launched with a compact set of three products based on tea tree oil and lavender: a foot spray, exfoliant (Body & Sole) and a three-in-one foot cream (Feet Treat), which remains the top seller 30 years later.

Making a 'B-line for Best, British and Beauty', helped raise brand awareness, along with the belief that looking after the feet is an investment in overall health and wellbeing.

Put Your Feet Up

An Australian friend had told me of the extraordinary healing properties of the native tea tree plant, a natural antiseptic that was pretty much unknown in the UK at the time. Upon investigation, although I recognised its anti-fungal and anti-bacterial properties – ideal for the feet – I disliked its rather pungent aroma. Mixing it with lavender oil, however, used down the centuries for its natural healing properties, had the effect of lifting the fragrance while strengthening the beneficial effects.

My observations of the salon sector during this period showed that footcare was very low on the priority list with therapists and clients. Salons were using 'a bit of this and a bit of that' with seemingly no dedicated pedicure procedure. That was my 'lightbulb moment', and I seized the opportunity to devise a gold-standard pedicure to educate therapists and the wider public.

The picture today is very different, and I like to think that B-Line played a leading role in raising the profile of footcare. The training B-Line offered was thorough, combining product knowledge with a broader understanding of the importance of looking after the feet.

While the years have flown past, and the product range has expanded to encompass hands and body, one thing remains the same. I believed then and believe now, that the therapist is the critical link between the client and reputation of the business. The team at B-Line strives to recognise and reward that role through support and continuous professional development. At the end of the day, if the client loves the treatment and relates to the therapist, she or he will come back.

As I look back over 30 years, highlights have been many and varied. I especially loved my experience in Tokyo as a guest of the *Japan Footcare Association*. Winning a prize for best stand display at a beauty exhibition in Brighton gave the brand a boost in the early days and more recently, we were proud to be recognised by *Fauna & Flora International* as the first independent beauty company in the

"The human foot is a masterpiece of engineering & a work of art."
Leonardo da Vinci



UK to respond to the global campaign to eradicate the use of plastic microbeads.

There's no doubting that the beauty world has changed with technology and machines now used to administer many types of treatment. While we embrace hi-tech, if there is a power outage or the lights go out, you can still be hands-on!

I feel excited at these new opportunities and saddened that there seems to be a drop in the numbers of young people wishing to enter the industry with some spas reporting difficulty in recruitment. The *British Beauty Council* is taking a lead in this area and I urge salon owners, colleges and other stakeholders to work together so collectively we continue to put our best foot forward. **S**

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