

## Fashionably expat

Meet Sara Delaney and Ellen Lobler, an expat duo who run a fashion consultancy - from both sides of the Atlantic.

By Leah Hyslop

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When stylists Sara Delaney and Ellen Lobler met in 2006, they soon decided to go into business together. Ellen, originally from the Netherlands, had arrived in UK a few years before, while Sara had lived in the UK all her life. "We shared common interests as fashionistas, professional stylists and mothers, however," says Sara. As well as, conveniently enough, both living in Surrey's commuter belt.

The pair set up **LoblerDelaney** (<http://www.loblerdelaney.com>), a fashion consultancy offering services such as personal shopping and makeovers, by the end of the year, and business soon took off. "There are a lot of professionals, a lot of yummy mummies in the Surrey/London area," says Ellen, "and we were lucky that it really just seemed to spread by word of mouth."



Expats Sarah Delaney and Ellen Lobler run their fashion consultancy from both the US and the UK.

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Just as things were looking good, Sara's husband was unexpectedly offered a job in New York, and the Delaney family began to prepare to leave the UK. Other, less enterprising people might have seen no other option but to dissolve the fledgling company. Instead, Sara and Ellen elected to run the business from opposite sides of the Atlantic.

"Fortunately," says Sara, "what we do is usually a one-on-one type of affair - wardrobe weeding, for example, when we

help people reduce their clothes to a few key items, or makeovers - so it's quite easy for us to work independently. Ellen kept our UK clients, while I've built up new ones over here. We stay in contact by email, and every few months I hop back to England to catch up - though we often spend more time gossiping than working!"

Ellen agrees that the change was surprisingly fluid, and says that she feels it made the company stronger. "We're more international now, which of course means more clients, but it also means we've got a wider sense of the fashion scene in both the US and the UK.

"I go to London Fashion Week and send Sara pictures - she goes to New York Fashion Week and sends pictures to me. And, thanks to internet shopping, we can even order in things the other has recommended from a store across the other side of the world."

The two women, who already had so much in common, now of course had the added shared experience of starting a new life in a different country. Sara thinks that Ellen probably found the transition more difficult than she did.

"For me, it's been surprisingly easy," she tells me. "New York is wonderful, and the children have really taken to life in the US - one went on a leadership tour to Washington the other day, a really amazing opportunity. People are friendly, and I've made a lot of US friends, which is good. You don't want to create a home away from home, and just be surrounded by British expats.

"When Ellen moved to the UK from the Netherlands, she had more of a language barrier, which must have been hard. Even moving to the US, I've had to learn a whole new fashion vocabulary - calling trousers pants and so on."

Ellen agrees that language was certainly the most challenging aspect of moving to the UK. She too followed her husband when he was offered a job abroad, and "though I thought I was fluent in English, I soon realized how much I needed to learn. People still ask me where my accent is from. Luckily however there's quite a wide community of international people around here, which helps me feel more settled."

Both women have also had to adapt to an environment where their industry is subtly different. "Fashion in the UK is much more conservative than continental fashion," says Ellen. "Dutch clothes are a bit more wacky, a bit more funky. They're also less revealing. You don't see Dutch girls wearing a miniskirt and heels, whereas that's common in the UK. So I had to re-learn a lot when I left the Netherlands, finding out what shops were good and what the trends were."

Sara says she experienced exactly the same transition when moving from the UK to the US." If the UK's conservative, the US is even more so. What I miss is Britain's quirkiest shops. You can find boutiques and vintage stores in New York but there's not so many, so you have to hunt."

Organising the business across two continents has had the advantage of letting both women focus on what they do best. Ellen sees herself as the more creative part of the team, with Sara as the better at communication. "Sara's a good writer. It comes naturally to her, which it can't to me as a non-native speaker, so she's much better at handling the website and communication side of the business. Her blog, **Notes From a Stylist** (<http://notesfromastylist.blogspot.com>) , (<http://notesfromastylist.blogspot.com>) is very popular and I'd like to see it more attached to our own website in future.

"By contrast, I love dealing with clients. A lot of people who come to us for help have low self esteem, and watching them walk away with more confidence is really wonderful."

Sara agrees that New York has given her a chance to pursue her writing more. "The writing is the thing which gets me into places like New York Fashion Week, and I've even found communities, like Independent Fashion Bloggers in New York, which have helped me meet more people. But I've also got a lot of clients.

"The great thing about the US is that they are very used to stylists, whereas in the UK they're more something that celebrities have, or a one-off treat. So you find that some people become your regulars, and you get very used to what their wardrobes are like, and what they need adding."

Their busiest time tends to be the Christmas season, when people want help finding party outfits, though there is a year-

long queue of people with new jobs who want advice on how to make a good impression. Is there one thing people tend to do wrong, either in the US or the UK, when choosing their wardrobes?

"I think it's the same problem the world over," Ellen says. "People buy too many clothes that don't really 'go' with each other, so a lot never gets worn. That's why we encourage people to buy capsule wardrobes, full of items that you can use again and again in different combinations.

"The other thing I've noticed is that people tend to concentrate more on their work clothes, so they have no sense of identity outside work. This is especially true in the UK, where people seem to just throw on jeans and a fleece at the weekend.

"What we want to do is encourage people to express their personalities a bit more in clothes, and feel really good, really confident in them. I hope we achieve that."

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