

At the same time, women business owners are the new kids on the block in the world of commerce and the least likely to have experience marketing their products and expertise outside the country.

The trade mission will give the Canadian women an opportunity to learn about customs regulations and market strategies, as well as make contacts with businesses in the Washington region. The Canadian entrepreneurs will be meeting with leaders of 80 regional firms on Friday.

"We're not going to take home \$100 million in contracts, but we know there are women who will be signing their first contracts in the U.S. this week," said Andrina Lever, a Toronto consultant who is one of the organizers of the mission.

For most of the participants, the value of the trip will be in the lessons to be learned about taking their enterprises to the next level.

"I'm looking forward to see who the mentors are, particularly the American mentors," said Sheena Pennie, president of the Ottawa-based Delta

Media public relations firm. "There are a lot of American women who have been successful in business and exporting who will have practical advice to offer."

Pennie, who recently handled public relations for the Somalia inquiry, said that coming from a capital city she is hoping to make useful contacts with her counterparts in the U.S. capital.

Others, like Melanie Sibbitt of Two Crazy Ladies Inc. of Toronto, is thinking purely in business terms. She has already formed a strategic partnership with a Nevada convention management firm to create promotional materials — such as T-shirts, pens, mugs and such emblazoned with corporate logos — for conventions in western U.S. and is now hoping to make inroads in the Northeast.

"We're the same as any other businesses, only they're run by women," she explained. "I'm looking at this as an opportunity of a lifetime because traditionally it's been men who have been the exporters. Now it's our turn."