TONI-MARIE ION-BROWN – THE JOHN FURLONG AWARD

Letter Perfect

Toni-Marie Ion-Brown's leadership has steered the Calgary Petroleum Club through every challenge and kept it on a steady course as "Calgary's Premier Club."

The true mark of a great brand is how it stands the test of time, no matter how the world may change around it. For the Calgary Petroleum Club, founded in 1948, that test has been passed with flying colors, thanks in large part to the steady hand and visionary direction of Toni-Marie Ion-Brown, CCM, CCE, ECM, the club's General Manager since 2017 and a part of its staff since starting as a $5/hour server in 1990.

At a club known from its beginning as "CPC," Ion-Brown's leadership in expanding what those letters have come to represent has earned her recognition as a 2026 John Furlong Award winner through the Excellence in Club Management® Awards (see "Honored by Their Peers," pg. 28). "We haven't had to change our name—or wanted to—but we have also needed to find new ways to show how 'CPC' can also mean, and how we can be seen as, 'Calgary's Premier Club,'" she explains.

While it will always be important to celebrate and honor CPC's history and roots, Ion-Brown emphasizes, it has experienced dramatic change since originally opening as a male-only business club, even while occupying the same clubhouse building in downtown Calgary since 1958. "For a city club with no guest rooms and no athletics, people, hospitality and community have always been at [CPC's] core," she notes.

Calgary Petroleum Club was founded in 1948 and has occupied the same downtown building since 1958. The club now has 2,370 members.

As a result, it's been critical for the club to take the lead in readily embracing societal changes, as it did when welcoming women as full members in 1988 (CPC has since had six female club presidents in the past 15 years, in addition to selecting Ion-Brown to be its first woman GM).

Relying on those core values has also been vital to helping CPC weather a rash of especially harsh challenges it has encountered over the years (including smoke damage from a fire started outside the club by a serial arsonist in 2005 that required a complete shutdown and restoration of the club building). In Ion-Brown's nine years as GM alone, the list has already included:

- an energy crisis that exerted a particularly strong blow on Calgary's economy and CPC's membership;
- COVID, during which Canadian clubs were subject to much stricter restrictions that were extended for much longer periods. "It wasn't until mid-2022 that we truly began to see correction and recovery," Ion-Brown says;

Spreading the Word

A major boost to expanding the brand of Calgary Petroleum Club and also position it as "Calgary's Premier Club" has come from the "CPC Back to Business Podcast," which Toni-Marie Ion-Brown championed and directed the launch of at the end of 2022.

The weekly podcast series, for which a special studio (pictured) was created in the club, features interviews with the city's top business leaders, entrepreneurs and philanthropists on a wide variety of topics (see examples, above). While many of those interviewed are CPC members, the series, which is independently produced, has become so popular that the club is now frequently contacted by other well-known speakers and business leaders who are interested in being featured.

"The podcast has differentiated our club significantly and helped to reinforce our brand and promote greater diversification of our membership," says Ion-Brown. The series, which can be found on all podcast platforms, has earned an impressive rating of 4.8 out of 5 from Apple and received the Club Management Association of Canada's "Excellence Through Innovation Award" in 2025.

Ideas & Achievements

Implemented at Calgary Petroleum Club under Toni-Marie Ion-Brown's Leadership

FOR FACILITIES

- Led $6.85 million full-facility renovation in first year as General Manager (2017), funded through innovative Member Legacy recognition program.
- Reimagined existing club lounge into a dynamic "workbar" and shared workspace, creating a casual setting for meetings and remote work. Since its introduction, use of the space has increased by more than 200%.

- Leased nearby patio space for outdoor dining and socializing, leading to steady growth in use.
- Pioneer Room was created as dedicated space to honor Calgary business icons and their lasting contributions to the club, city and nation.

FOR MEMBERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

- Introduced Young Professional membership category for ages 21-35 to create opportunities for emerging business leaders to engage with the club.
- Created a Professional Women's Subcommittee to recognize the importance of empowering women in business.

FOR MEMBER ACTIVITIES & EVENTS

- Positioned CPC as the premier pre-game destination before National Hockey League or Canadian Football League home games for Calgary's teams, as well as the place to watch televised sporting events, by creating Sports Lounge space, introducing early dining hours and encouraging "sports-focused" casual attire.

FOR COMMUNICATIONS

- Launched Club Connections, a quarterly magazine for members that has also become an advertising vehicle to generate additional revenue.

FOR FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE

- Overall club revenue growth of 40% since 2017.

• most recently, a water-main break directly following the Calgary Stampede, the summer rodeo/festival that attracts close to a million-and-a-half visitors to the city, that caused an 11-day closure of the club and a $150,000 revenue loss.

A Guiding Force

Through all of that and more, Ion-Brown is credited with steering CPC with a steady and determined hand and guiding it to new levels of success and accomplishments (see details in "Ideas and Achievements" boxes with this article), starting with the $6.85 million, full-facility renovation that members approved in 2017, just three weeks after she became the club's new GM.

"Toni-Marie's immense skills were brought to light as we embarked on [that] transformational renovation," Michael C. Erickson—CPC's president when she was named GM after a nationwide search that drew over 350 applicants—wrote in her ECM nomination. After the renovation was completed successfully, he added, she has gone on to distinguish her tenure by "embracing essential changes to enable the CPC to evolve into a contemporary business club and deliver an enhanced membership experience, and playing a pivotal role in ensuring that the club is now thriving and financially strong."

Ion-Brown's ECM nomination also included over a half-dozen letters of support from members of the CPC management team and other industry colleagues, with all citing the special empathy she has always displayed on the people side of the business, both for member and staff relationships. In particular, many cited the value of the outreach she initiated during the pandemic by openly sharing the difficulties it placed on her personally.

"She made a video [describing] her own struggles and sent it to the staff to let them all know they were not alone in [dealing with] the challenges and if they needed assistance, the club had many avenues to assist them," wrote Kerri Price, the club's controller. "Her people-focused leadership has created a culture at our club that allows staff to feel heard, safe and important. Her commitment to a more collaborative and stronger club community is unmatched."

Only half-jokingly, Ion-Brown summarizes her approach to taking on whatever new challenges may emerge as one of "never wasting a good crisis." She credits the collective resolve of CPC's membership and staff for always "digging in" and relying on "a deep strategic plan and master plan to guide us forward."

"Not every chapter has been easy," she acknowledges. "But today, [CPC] is uniquely positioned in the heart of the business community in Canada's fourth-largest city. We are beating budget, exceeding targets and outperforming comparables as we serve a large, engaged membership. That is a testament to the people in our club and the strength of our community."

And to an enduring and resilient brand. ■

Ideas & Achievements

Implemented at Calgary Petroleum Club under Toni-Marie Ion-Brown's Leadership

FOR FOOD-AND-BEVERAGE SERVICE

■ Banquet activity has grown significantly in recent years; 10 club events are now held per month, alongside 120 weekly member bookings

■ Fine dining, promoted as "more than tradition—[an] experience to be celebrated," remains strong, highlighted by special events arranged through the Chaîne des Rôtisseurs.

■ $1 million state-of-the-art wine cellar created to allow members to enjoy and showcase exceptional wines. Scotch Club and Wine Club created, with growth of 50% and 100%, respectively, over five-year period.

■ Launched retail liquor and wine sales program within the club in 2024, after securing license through extensive advocacy. The initiative led to onboarding a classically trained sommelier and creating a highly successful retail program that generated over $300,000 in sales in its first year.

FOR STAFF DEVELOPMENT & SUPPORT

■ Developed Occupational Health and Safety Program to empower employees to take ownership of working safely and foster a "We Care" culture throughout the workplace.

■ Recognizing during the pandemic that employee benefits underemphasized mental-health support, all restrictions within the benefits package for counseling and mental-health services were removed. The benefits program has since been further enhanced by adding People Connect and Sparrow features that allow 24/7 online support.

■ Implemented retention program that provides compensation rewards tied to years of service.

FOR CLUB CULTURE

■ Made successful recommendation to Board that casual attire be accepted in additional areas of the club, creating a more comfortable environment for members to hold meetings without imposing dress expectations on clients. The initiative has strengthened member satisfaction and retention.

FOR CLUB RECOGNITION

■ Earned Distinguished Clubs, Elite Status in 2025—the first private club in Alberta to achieve that designation.