





# How I did it

In the race to be crowned *Private Dentistry's Practice of the Year 2007*, **Sparkle Dental Boutique** in Hanwell came a very close and commendable second, but also secured the title of most attractive practice. And with a host of other impressive awards on display, it's hard to believe that principal **Sunita Verma** once had no desire to run her own practice. Here she reveals why she changed her mind

I qualified from Guy's Hospital in 1990 and went on to gain excellent experience in all aspects of general dentistry by working in various practices in West London, where I grew up. I loved dentistry but had no interest in running my own practice during that time; I enjoyed my work and was able to indulge in my passion of travelling regularly.

One day in general conversation, my uncle told me of a practice that was for sale opposite his house. The seven-year itch must have set in and I ended up buying this rundown NHS practice in 1997, which was located in a 1930s semi detached house in Hanwell. Occupying an enviable corner position on a busy road, I called it The Smile Centre. It was housed on the ground floor but the toilet didn't even contain a wash basin at that point! I had no idea about running a business but, over the years, I built the practice to operate six days and two evenings a week, with a team of eight, including two associate dentists.

I was committed to providing a good service for our patients and following tried and tested business principles. Very quickly The Smile Centre achieved the Investor in People Standard and BDA Good Practice Scheme in 2003. I enjoyed every aspect of general dentistry, but my passion was cosmetic dentistry and so I invested heavily in my own training to improve my skills. I interpreted the direction of changes in the NHS as unfavourable and something that I could no longer rely upon. Using this insight, I decided to undertake a transformational change to my practice environment and its services and, in 2006, I chose not to renew my NHS contract – a very difficult decision. Saying goodbye to a substantial contract value and my associates was one of the bravest decisions I have made to date. A single-handed practitioner once again after nine years, I was totally out of my comfort zone working 60 to 70 hours a week...madness!

## Planning issues

I appointed two different architects at different times from 2003 to 2005. Neither of them were able to deliver my vision as both presented plans that did not work within the remit of the local planning department. They also failed to address the fact that the practice had to remain open throughout the build. I had lost two years with applications being rejected and I was getting quite impatient to start creating my dream, so I took over the design myself. This gave me the ideal opportunity to think about space planning and design from the view of my patients, my team and myself. I spent many an evening, graph paper in hand, planning the patient journey and plotting the layout. I had countless delays from Ealing Planning Department and decided to start building work without full planning permission in January 2006!

## The building work

I employed a firm of builders that had been recommended to me. Initially, everything went well, but by May, the project was seriously behind its deadline. We were having serious problems with substandard work and the use of inferior quality goods that had not been specified. We were working on a building site with constant knocking and banging, clouds of dust, hanging wires and portaloos. With no end in sight, sleepless nights, the absence of a regular NHS income and the support of colleagues, these were truly the dark days. The final nail in the coffin was the builders disappearing off site and





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leaving us in the lurch. Disheartened by my experience of architects and builders, I had no choice but to take over the project management of the build myself. Together with my practice manager Kavita, we got up to speed with building regulations, health and safety and disability regulations. In between patient appointments, I would make calls to various contractors, suppliers, the council and so on and Kavita did the same. The internet proved invaluable and we sourced everything from garden tiles to lead lined doors to bathroom fittings all online.

There was little relief, but my dedicated nurse, Wing Tang was a real source of unending support at a time when it would have been a much easier option for her to find a job elsewhere. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to her as the only thing that was guaranteed each morning was that Wing, Kavita and I would turn up to work! Everything else was a venture into the unknown!

I took on a team of local builders who proved a godsend. They had worked on various residential projects for me in the past, but nothing of this scale. Being Polish, language was sometimes a problem, but I have to say we muddled through and the quality of their work and craftsmanship was outstanding. Finally in December 2006, a year after work started, and six months after the original completion date, the Sparkle Dental Boutique totem sign was erected and our new practice basked in a purple halo of light.

Sparkle boasts three surgeries, a separate sterilisation room, consultation room, relaxation room, luxury washroom, a manager's office, separate staff washroom, kitchen and communications room, the hub of our IT and digital music system.



## Sparkle identity

Our new identity was key. I took our inspiration from sparkling jewels and wanted our dentistry to be valued much like a fine piece of jewellery... something of desire and brilliance, something rare, precious and valuable.

Why boutique? The idea for a boutique style environment came from boutique hotels and exclusive jewellery boutiques such as Tiffany & Co; a place where the look of precious jewels could be bought to life in a chic dental environment. Interior design was another passion of mine and within the limitations of a house I wanted to showcase an environment that was bold, innovative and comfortable for patients. With a keen desire for practicality, modern simplicity and timeless aesthetics, touches of detail including accent coloured walls and niches, bespoke walnut cabinetry, brushed stainless steel and designer furniture were incorporated.

They say that diamonds are a girl's best friend and no doubt, my favourite accessory is the huge diamond that sits in its own glass case within the reception desk. This was my best buy at £99 courtesy of John Lewis. I designed the whole reception desk around it!

## Every room a jewel

I decided to use Clark Dental to provide our dental equipment. Matt Rowlingson was very enthusiastic and efficient and his down to earth approach made this side of the project run very smoothly. Matt's team were not only incredibly supportive but juggled their installation dates around the never-ending delays and problems we were having on site.



My treatment rooms are a pleasure to work in. We have the first fully functioning 12 o'clock delivery system in the UK with identical set up in two interconnecting rooms. This is a concept that is popular in the USA, but as yet not so prevalent here. As a left-hander, this system has been the single best thing I have implemented. The rear delivery has proved an ideal solution for keeping instrumentation out of the direct view of patients and the round nurse's console table makes four-handed dentistry a reality. Working between both rooms brings increased productivity and efficiency. Both rooms have floor to ceiling windows that look out onto a courtyard garden with it's own water wall, a visual treat for patients and the team.

The treatment rooms come fully loaded with intra-oral cameras, Schick digital X-rays, Velopex laser and Canon G5 digital camera.

Ice Media planned and managed our IT infrastructure so that our new computers would support the latest technologies. Haree Patel, director of Ice Media was an outstanding asset to the project and worked efficiently to implement a separate comms room, an off-site back up facility and our digital music system, Sonos.

I must not forget to mention the A-dec 500 chair, which provides the ultimate in comfort, especially during lengthy procedures. We have a waiting list of patients wanting to take this chair home with them!

### **What would I have done differently?**

If I had to do it again, I would have employed an architect that understood my vision and the complexities of keeping





Lloyd Goodall Photography

a practice running while doing building work. Early involvement with the planning department would have been advisable to get an idea of their criteria for passing an application. Most importantly, I would have checked the credibility of the building firm, viewed their previous projects and have proper time linked contracts. This is something I did not do, to my peril. That said, I saved over £120,000 by taking over the project myself!

I funded most of the project through personal savings and a loan of £100,000 from Natwest Bank so that my overheads were manageable.

The journey has been a rollercoaster ride and the phrase 'What doesn't kill you makes you stronger' certainly applied last year! The creation of Sparkle Dental Boutique is a true labour of love, not only because of the challenges of the building work, but also the intensive team training, the exponential learning curve involved in learning to work in a new space with alien equipment and delivering a totally private service cannot be underestimated. That however is a whole other article!

### Was it worthwhile?

Sparkle Dental Boutique has superseded my expectations. Everything is created twice, once in the mind and then secondly the physical manifestation of that idea; creating the latter was certainly more painful, but the vision realised has been worthwhile. We have been in profit since the first month of opening and are continuing to go from strength

to strength. A year on, the practice is amazingly simple to run as we have a small, relaxed team, patients love the environment and care we are providing. The biggest and most important difference for me is the satisfaction I get each day knowing that I've made a genuine connection with my patients, not just their teeth. I make the time to understand their needs and share in their personal stories.

This year I have readdressed my personal work/life balance. I work four days a week. I no longer work evenings or weekends and have continued to enjoy my passion of travelling outside of the boutique. I am taking Bollywood dance classes and have just finished my training to become a volunteer for a national charity called Voluntary Reading Help, which helps disadvantaged children develop their reading skills.

The icing on the cake has been the recognition from respected peers in my profession. Last year, we were crowned best practice environment at the Dental Awards, best practice (London) at the *Dentistry Awards*, most attractive practice and runner up most innovative practice and practice of the year at the *Private Dentistry Awards*.

### Final thoughts

My heartfelt thanks goes to my wonderful sister, best friend and practice manager, Kavita, without whose dedication, support, passion and drive, Sparkle would have remained little more than an idea in my head. She is the true jewel of the boutique! [PD](#)

# Companies involved in the project | Project costs

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Equipment  
(two treatment rooms): **£100,000**

Building costs, including  
labour and materials: **£190,000**

IT, phone and  
music systems: **£35,000**

Bespoke joinery,  
glass entrance,  
reception desk,  
bathroom fittings  
and signage: **£30,000**

**Total cost of project: £355,000**