

# partnership in action

## UKIBC Case Study

# BOUDOIR LONDON

Boudoir London's first store was founded in Juhu, Mumbai, two and a half years ago by Ms Dalbir Bains, a UK national with leading corporate experience in the Lingerie, Swimwear and Nightwear sector as Director of Buying for BHS. Having both generated a high level of interest from national media, Bollywood, and Indian women in need of clothes that fit, Dalbir has brought glamour and know-how to the Indian lingerie sector, where a renaissance has consequently begun.



**Sector:** Retail / luxury goods  
**Timeline:** September 2005 – present, operational 2.5 years  
**Employees:** 5 Indian national, local in Mumbai

**Dalbir, you have created India's unique lingerie retail experience at Boudoir London in Juhu, Mumbai, providing lingerie from the finest international brands. How did you come to create your business?**

It was born out of two real frustrations. First, the inability to buy good quality, properly fitting lingerie in India, which was ridiculous as India was fast becoming a sophisticated branded market. The lingerie retail environment which was usually male dominated was not really conducive to lingerie purchasing and women felt that they could not shop comfortably in this environment. Most women I spoke to said they only purchased whilst abroad as it was a far more pleasant experience.

The other frustration was with my job; As much as I loved it, I felt as Director of Lingerie Buying I had reached the top of my career and as I was curious about my ability to succeed as an entrepreneur, and I felt it was time to take the plunge.

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One of the first challenges was considering what to do. In the UK, whatever you think of as enterprising and clever has usually been done before.

As England is such an established business market. I knew that I needed to look elsewhere and as the market was booming in India and women wanted what I was good at delivering, it seemed to make sense.

## **You were Director of Buying for BHS' lingerie department, for Sir Philip Green. How many years were you there?**

5 years, although I've only ever worked in lingerie buying. I joined BHS in 2000 as a Senior Buyer just running one department on the lingerie division, and then I got promoted to Head of Buying, and then Director of Buying for the entire division. Once you get to Director of Buying, it's a senior position but you wonder, where do I go from here? I was enjoying it but I was conscious that five years down the line I might get bored, which is something I dreaded.

## **Yet you had to give up a great position in the UK, move to India, set up on your own – did you not feel that it was a huge risk?**

It was a massive risk. To be honest, most people take steps like this for a multitude of reasons; because they haven't got a job, or they want to live in another country, or their partner might be moving abroad so they go too. Very few people think: you know what? I'm earning a good salary here in England, I've got a very nice life here, I've no reason to leave the country but nevertheless, I'm going to go and do it. I genuinely was going there solely to run the business, and I wasn't there for any other reason. So it was a huge risk, and if it didn't work, I'd have to turn around and come back.

## **How did your family and friends react to that decision?**

There was a huge amount of surprise, and some disbelief. Everybody was aware that I was beginning to reap the rewards of a successful career so they were surprised that I was prepared to give it all up and start from the bottom. Also I was going to a country where I had no experience of working and to deliver a product that was not necessarily going to be successful.

As for my parents, the first generation of people to migrate to England for better prospects, it was difficult for them to understand why I would reverse their journey and move to the country that they left 40 years ago.

## **Did they change their mind when they saw what you were doing?**

Yes. I don't think that it was until I made this move that my family in England were fully aware of the growth that was happening in the Indian economy, and the aspirations and the success that surrounded it. But after I left and started reporting back, their mindset about India changed. They suddenly realised that not only is India booming but the whole world has its sights on India.

They finally realised that some of the biggest opportunities are in India and that my business model makes sense.

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## How much financial or constructive assistance did you use when setting up Boudoir London?

For financing, I first sought a bank loan. Because the bank was apprehensive about financing a project abroad, which was not visible for them, they needed an especially detailed business plan. In terms of other support, I was on my own as I didn't know anyone in Mumbai. I had to work alone on researching it.

## You didn't employ a research company or consultant?

No, I couldn't afford to then. I was very conscious that I was no longer the employee of a major company. I was building my own company and spending my own money. The faster I spent it the quicker it would run out, so I decided that I had to draw on my own skills. I researched the market myself, then I had to decide on things like what location would be best for the first store, what brands would be best for the market, which marketing angle would be most effective, how to present to the media, and to consumers, and how they would best respond to it. All of those things I did through trial and error.

Whilst doing this alone was mainly for financial reasons, I also felt that there were very few people in India who would understand my concept and be suitably experienced in this sector (which was hugely underdeveloped) to add value to the research.

## Did you focus on detail to make your plan as comprehensive as possible?

Absolutely, and not just for the bank, but for myself. One of the benefits of having experience in the corporate environment before becoming an entrepreneur is that you are used to working in a very systematic way, with extensive financial models. I tried to replicate within my own business as many of those models as I could. That way I knew that it was possible to execute.

## Did you consider what would happen if your business failed despite all of the careful planning you had undertaken?

Yes, I did a failure strategy. It may sound crazy but at the back of my mind I was concerned about what would happen if I failed, so I decided that the first thing to do was deal with that uncertainty. Once I had written that strategy - i.e. if it fails I will come back to England and take the following steps, I felt I had confronted that fear. Then I put that aside and got on with the business of making it succeed.

## What was your planned company structure, in terms of rollout?

I had planned for rollout, across India, sooner than we actually have. One of the reasons that we still have one store, despite the success of it, is that working in India has challenges that are different to those you find anywhere else. Another reason that I have waited to open the second store is for the right investment. You need investors who you can be good partners with. I have met a lot of potential investors, who I haven't thought are quite right for the business. Sharing the vision of the business and adding value, and taking it to the next level, are key and we are still hunting for the right investor.

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## Can you profile the right investor?

It could be one of two things. Either a silent partner who finances the business but allows me to take it forward. Or an investor who will be involved in the growth, but knows a lot about the business. What I don't want is an investor who insists on involvement but does not understand this complicated business of retailing lingerie in India for the Indian woman .

## When you entered the market, you knew this business very well. But were there any adaptations you had to make to the Indian market?

Absolutely. The Indian market proved to be quite different from the UK market as there was no awareness about the importance of wearing the correct bra size, different lingerie for different outfits and how to buy a complete lingerie wardrobe. Women's interpretation and understanding of lingerie was quite limited and so in order to make my model work I felt I needed to educate the consumer about lingerie and its fit, and what lingerie is supposed to do. I started to focus heavily on the P R story of Boudoir London which became very popular and I soon started my own column called the Lingerie Doctor in Mumbai's second largest newspaper. I was really surprised that this hadn't been done before but in an industry dominated by men they probably wouldn't have had the right experience.

I now write article upon article and what started of as a form of free advertising has now become very credible PR . I think now very few stories are written about lingerie without my input which is a great place to be in after two and a half years. Last week I was asked by Vogue India to do a Lingerie Blog and despite the fact it is time consuming it is all brand building . Boudoir London is fully responsible in India, I think, for changing people's mindset about lingerie. Women used to come in adamant that they knew their size, which was usually wrong. Now they ask to be measured , know their B cups from their DD cups , know their half cups from their plunge bras and most importantly realise now that lingerie plays quite an important part in their dressing up.

## You've attracted quite a few Bollywood stars, and celebrity attention.

Yes, our shop's in Juhu which is kind of Bollywood central, so if we didn't get them I'd be surprised actually. But I always say to people, that getting the Bollywood stars in is great, but converting a low income bracket housewife to wearing our lingerie for whom Boudoir London would normally be expensive is far more gratifying because i feel we have made them realise how much better they will look . We've improved that spend from about £3 to £25, and that's all part of the education. So that's the biggest boost, because I know we've already made a difference.

## Do you find that the nature of your product has been affected by cultural differences?

To be honest, if anything it's been in a positive way, because I think Indian women are very glamorous, and really look after themselves. When they realise that a product can make them look or feel better they get very excited about it.

One thing that's surprising is that when Indian women get married, they come to the store and spend a fortune as they are building their trousseau . They definitely spend more on bridal lingerie than us Brits !

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## And which if any differences have caused problems for your business?

My biggest problem is finding and keeping the right staff. I believe that a business is only as good as the people that run it, and one of the downsides of the booming economy is that all the industries are growing, and people are moving jobs like there's no tomorrow. The general level of retention is very low: attrition is so high. That is something that's affecting every business, across sectors, in India. It is difficult to find people who want to work and are happy to stay. Coming from the UK where frequent job movement is career suicide, I find it frustrating that training and investment in people can be a waste of time as they do not recognise the long term potential.

## Could a company share scheme work?

I think it should but the approach at present is quite short term one so even when companies have excellent share option schemes and other benefits, they are finding it difficult to retain staff as the highest salary payer will always be the most exciting employer to work for.

## What are your recruitment methods?

Mainly by word of mouth as that is the best form of referencing I can use. In retail, following up people's references is not always easy or possible so I prefer to have some inside knowledge. So we find people through contacts or friends of friends. One thing that I get really annoyed with is the shameless headhunting where people walk into stores and headhunt there and then.

## Is that the same for managers?

Again we use our contacts and recruitment agencies but finding the right people at managerial and director level is really difficult. Retail is suffering because it is not classed as a professional job even at management level and many store managers are looking at office based retail work as opposed to store based as they feel that is more prestigious. So there are many retail people of a high calibre shifting to Operations, PR and Marketing as opposed to Store management.

## How are expansion plans for Boudoir London?

We have finally found an operations director (who is also an expat) which will enable us to move to the next stage of store expansion. One thing that I have learned as an entrepreneur, that Sharon Bamford (CEO, UKIBC) has also reminded me of, is that you cannot run your business and manage an investment for it at the same time. It's impossible. I did not come to India to open one store but a whole chain. However the day to day management of the business is very time consuming. I hope with the appointment of a Store Operations Director and focused mentoring that I am going to avail of, I will be able to extract myself from the daily operations and focus on the bigger picture.

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## It sounds as though you're looking forward to the next level.

For sure, there will be a second store this year. But I think once you find the right partner, it's a rollout model. Once you've got two, you may as well have ten – it's the same principle. But one advantage of delaying, is that we've learnt a great deal about the market, and I'd much rather have understood that with one store, than with ten! We've established a lot, we've learnt a lot, and I'll go into store two, three and four with a huge amount of information about the Indian consumer, more than I think most people in India. Plus when we launched Boudoir's first store, we created a model that was totally replicable; our brand mix, our conceptual layout; everything has proven viable as a model that can be recreated. It just needs the right investment for that rollout.

## Do you have advisors to help manage that process?

No, and I think that is something that I would definitely recommend. I went to the UKIBC event in Delhi a few months back and I met Chris Francis [a UKIBC director and Founder of Cardionetics] and I met Dr Shai Vyakarnam [a UKIBC director and Director, Centre for Entrepreneurial Learning, Cambridge]. After some informal conversations with these two gentlemen, I realised how much direction they were able to offer me and it dawned on me that in the whole time that I was making the transition from corporate to independent I had worked alone and with very little support. For one person to run a business, strategise, and be disciplined enough to think of the future growth as well as day to day is difficult to do. I've been very conscious since meeting them that the business needs advisors,, who will ensure that the business is growing at the right speed and all areas are growing simultaneously. So we don't have advisors at the moment, but the UKIBC has helped and it's something that I would very much use in the future.

## How do you feel that UKIBC can best assist a business like yours?

I think that UKIBC could provide some kind of mentoring, maybe a forum where there are like-minded people doing what I am doing who can come together and share experiences and support each other.

I think events like the Entrepreneurs' event in Delhi, where you can meet Business Angels and other business people are ideal. It is an opportunity to have a lot of useful conversations. By attending these events and functions that UKIBC do, any entrepreneur has the opportunity to raise their profile which is really important for new businesses.

## We know how little spare time you have, but you are also an important advisor to people.

Saeqah Kabir [UKIBC Next Generation India Project Executive, responsible also for UK India Business Angels Network] has been keen for me to get involved with UKIBC in India. And one thing that I would like to say, is that although there are many challenges associated with becoming an entrepreneur in India, it is the most rewarding thing that I have ever done and what I would like to do with UKIBC is to inspire and support as many people who have a similar idea of becoming an entrepreneur in India, but maybe need some direction or confidence. Not many people go to their grave able to say that they left their country, went to another, set up a business, which became successful, became pr savvy and gained a huge amount of brand recognition in two years. I think there are a lot of people like me who could do it, who probably haven't got the courage yet.

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