

JENNIFER BERNARD

Bernard Interiors

Jennifer Bernard established interior architecture and design company Bernard Interiors in 2008, realising her dream of owning her own business.

The firm specialises in interior architecture and design for luxury commercial and residential projects throughout the UK and abroad. It provides turnkey solutions, consultancy and procurement services for a variety of sectors including hospitality, leisure and business, with specialist knowledge in the interior design of five-star new-build care homes, care apartment complexes, refurbishments and care/retirement villages. From small beginnings, the company reached the milestone of £1 million in turnover last year.

Tell me how your entrepreneurial journey started

I studied interior architecture at Edinburgh College of Art, after which I moved back to the North East to work for an architect's practice specialising in commercial interiors. The firm worked on a number of impressive projects, such as the Sage headquarters, but I soon learned that a career sitting in front of a computer screen wasn't for me. I found that I liked being on-site, building a rapport with clients, and I concluded that I wanted to run my own business.

My next move wasn't to start a company straightaway, there was more I needed to understand before I could do this. In 2005 I took on a sales role in an international contract wall covering company. This mixed sales with design, mostly for clients in the hotel and hospital sectors. I spent a lot of time visiting and advising clients, and in many ways it was like running my own business, which reinforced that going it alone was the right path. After four years I left and the rest, as they say, is history.

What was your first business premises?

When we first started the company we set up an office on my then business partner's dining room table. This obviously wasn't a long-term solution, so we took some office space in a development in the Team Valley. We were there until three years ago, when we moved to our current space in Northumberland.

We're in a converted farm building in Ponteland and have configured the premises to include a library, a design studio, space for the administration of the business, and a showroom, which doubles as both a luxury meeting space and my office.

How has the business grown?

When we first started it was a business partner and me. There were five of us working at our Team

Valley office. My partner left the firm in 2009, and now there are seven of us with a strong network of suppliers and contractors. In terms of finances, we exceeded £1 million turnover last year, which is a result of steady growth.

Our first contracts tended to be residential, working on projects like apartment blocks. Through one developer we worked with we won a contract in the healthcare sector, which opened up what would become a big part of our business.

How did the recession affect your business?

The recession hit just after we'd started the company, so it's difficult to tell the direction we would have taken without it. It was the crash in the property market that made healthcare, especially clients operating retirement homes, a core sector for us.

How has the market changed since you started the company?

There is much more competition now than there was a few years ago. While on the surface that might not seem like a positive, it has the effect of driving everyone to go further for their clients.

The rise of social media has heralded a big change too. It has put design out there and made it much more accessible. From an industry perspective it is great to see so many more people taking an interest, and from a purely business view it gives us a new way of getting our message to potential clients.

What would you say your unique selling points are?

As an interior architecture and design company we know our niche and have built up a strong reputation. We go the extra mile on all details and live by our mantra "Personal, Polished, Professional".

How do you handle internal motivation and staff rewards?

A good example of the way we stay motivated is when we are pitching for work. Bringing the team in to help put together a bid document not only gives you access to their best ideas, but also gives everyone a sense of ownership in the firm's success. This really makes a difference when our efforts are recognised, both directly by customers, but also in our industry. We were recently nominated for two SBID International Design Awards, one Health Care Design and Residential House under £1 million.

This might be a cliché, but it's important to have a laugh in the office. Building a team that works

together and gets on is paramount to running a successful business. On top of this good communications are essential, we have a weekly team meeting to keep everyone in the loop, together with strong processes and systems to back this up.

How does your motivation now compare with that when you started the firm?

It's actually greater now than when I started the company, especially since I became a mother. My son was born in June 2015 and he has given me a completely new outlook.

Every business has its highs and lows, they are a just part of running a company, but splitting with my business partner has really increased my determination to succeed. In many ways, the hard times build within you the strength to grow.

How did your business structure come about?

The company has two teams, design and operations. I manage the design team directly and we work with our clients to find unique and creative solutions to meet their needs. The operations team ensures that our plans are implemented efficiently and this enables us to deliver (on) our promise. We have a storage facility for items en-route to clients, and an outsourced delivery partner.

One part of our operation I am very passionate about is using local, North East suppliers as much as we can. Obviously this is not always possible as we source products on a global basis, but it is important to me to support our region when I can.

Do you have a mentor?

My mentor is my father. He founded the Responsive Engineering Group, the fact that our experiences have been in very different sectors hasn't been an issue, many of the rules of business are universal and his advice has been invaluable.

Their best advice I have been given is that you have to do things that scare you if you want to be successful. You need to feel the fear and do it anyway. It's absolutely important, as "shy bairns get nowt!".

Any future plans you would like to tell us about?

Further growth is the plan. We aim to increase our market share in our key sectors and are planning to enter new markets. This means scaling the business and increasing the size of our design team.



Jennifer Bernard is a member of the Entrepreneurs' Forum, a unique group of like-minded people who come together through peer-to-peer mentoring and a series of inspirational events to share best practice, create valuable connections and grow their business. For more information, visit www.entrepreneursforum.net