



Passion for the brand

There's a lot of building going on in London where the Great West Road becomes the M4 and it isn't just the steel and glass corporate HQs that are reaching for the sky.

Also on an upward path is a British Eyewear company under the stewardship of Harvey Dhadwar, a familiar face at optical exhibitions and a man with strategy in his DNA.

Dhadwar, who started his business career in marketing and as an analyst, says it was the passion to build a British brand in London that brought him into the optical business. 'It was brands that turned me on but I wanted to get into a business that was more creative,' he says. This brought him to the conclusion that he needed his own venture to concentrate that creativity. The seed for Zuma London was sown when Dhadwar linked up with an old university chum, and optometrist, Tej Johal.

Between them they identified a gap in the rimless market between top of the range brands such as Lindberg and lesser known brands failing to deliver on quality. 'I looked at the market and decided to invest.' Dhadwar spent some time out researching the market, visiting trade shows and travelling the optical manufacturing hot spots around the world, using his analytical skills to devise the strategy.

He admits that his first choice would have been to manufacture eyewear in Britain, ideally London. Dhadwar, who hails from Maida Vale and sees London as his manor had to conclude that it: 'simply wasn't viable'. Trips to Italy and Japan led on to Korea and China, where much of the product originates, says Dhadwar. The final stop was a factory in Korea which could produce the right high quality titanium product. 'The quality was brilliant, it is all hand made and the cost base is right'.

What the west London duo, who were trading as FEI at the time, brought was colour to lightweight titanium eyewear. The strategy was in flow and the Zuma brand, Zuma means balance in Japanese, was launched to UK optics at the 2009 Optrafair.

From a 3m by 3m stand 98 clients were signed up. 'Our conversion rate was phenomenal; we were converting 75 per cent of the people we were

Harvey Dhadwar aims to build on the success of his eyewear brands Zuma and Zuma London by continuing to understand the needs of UK independent practices. **Chris Bennett** reports



Harvey Dhadwar: 'We started our business working with independents and we are loyal to them'



showing the product to.' It was the combination of a titanium, quality rimless product at the right price, he says. This was at a time when quality rimless was expensive and some budget product simply wasn't up to scratch. The evidence of Zuma's quality was approaches from labs specialising in three-piece eyewear, says Dhadwar. The product also opened the door on the rimless market for women. 'Add a little colour and a different shape and you are in,' he concludes.

Show of strength

The success of Optrafair allowed Zuma to work on its brand. 'After the success of the show we started to create our identity. We wanted to be identified as a British brand, all product is stocked in

the UK, next day delivery, a UK design team and a two-year guarantee. We love working with independents and we are super flexible.' Dhadwar also expresses loyalty towards independents. 'We started our business working with independents and we are loyal to them, we also have a good insight.' He says a one-fits-all approach just doesn't suit independents. 'One independent might be open two and a half days a week and another might have three full-time consulting rooms, they need flexibility.'

'We don't force people to have a minimum number. We don't say you can't do this or you can't do that,' but they have to be reasonable too, he adds.

The next step of the strategy was to leverage the power of the Zuma brand into Zuma London as the name of the company.

Since then Zuma has branched out into ever more colours, different shapes and supra styles. More brands have been taken on and the firm has grown to service 1,200 practices, employ five sales agents and two reps and have a head office staff of three plus casual labour as needed. 'We still feel like we are in our infancy, we have got to remain as lean as possible. All of the staff are multi-skilled and we need them to be as flexible as possible,' he says.

Inevitably the journey has seen some bumps in the road and he is candid about flexibility the firm has had to adopt to get where it is today. Back in 2009 times were tough and the decision was taken to stock some budget lines to complement Zuma. This proved to be a mistake, says Dhadwar. The firm had to shift hundreds of frames on low margins. 'We just weren't set up for that and we dropped it within eight months.' The message was stick with the strategy, lower volume, higher margin product. 'That's where my passion was.'

The search for brands to sit alongside Zuma also saw it take on another brand which Dhadwar candidly admits was 'my biggest mistake ever. We shot ourselves in the foot'.

This proved a salutary lesson, says Dhadwar, but it stood Zuma London



The link with Morel has added Lightec products to his portfolio

departure for Zuma London, bringing colour and acetate to the fore with younger wearers in mind and an air of Parisian spirit. Rebel is masculine and bold both in colour and acetate size. It uses technology to keep the weight down while the use of colours and texture offer an urban sports look and feel. All of these products build the scope of the portfolio which is great, says Dhadwar, tantalisingly promising much more product to come in the New Year.

in good stead when looking to the next leg of its strategy. When the right brand emerged Dhadwar made sure it was what the market wanted and proceeded with caution. 'We learned the hard way but we know how to test product out.'

Morel had seen Zuma at many shows and approached the west London firm with an offer to distribute some of its brands in the UK. Morel has a history dating back to 1880 and is among the exclusive club of eyewear firms operating from France's Jura mountains. Zuma chose carefully this time, says Dhadwar.

The link with Morel has since expanded to include a number of

brands. Dhadwar is clearly delighted to add the screwless, minimalist, yet strong Lightec products to his portfolio. Across the range are stainless steel and TR90 mixtures featuring full and supra styles in ultra light styles. Carbon fibre is included in the material used while the polarised Alpha sunwear range is a real highlight with inline glazed stainless steel, weld-free, screwless pieces. Mauris Morel offers a more classical look with big eye sizes and designs modernised from an extensive back catalogue. Among its signatures are a five barrel M hinge injection moulded to the letter's shape.

Morel's Nomad range is a bit of a

Ever the strategist, Dhadwar alludes to big plans for Zuma and Zuma London, continuing to understand and work with UK practices and expand the portfolio.

What he can't do is hide his enthusiasm for the Zuma brand and his intentions to grow that into Europe and the US. 'If you have your own brand you have ownership,' he says. 'The creative stuff for us is Zuma London in 25 countries. It's so bloody interesting to create, it's exciting to do new things and present the company and bring that energy. We have got some really exciting product development going on.'

Zuma's balance of passion and strategy looks set to build. ●

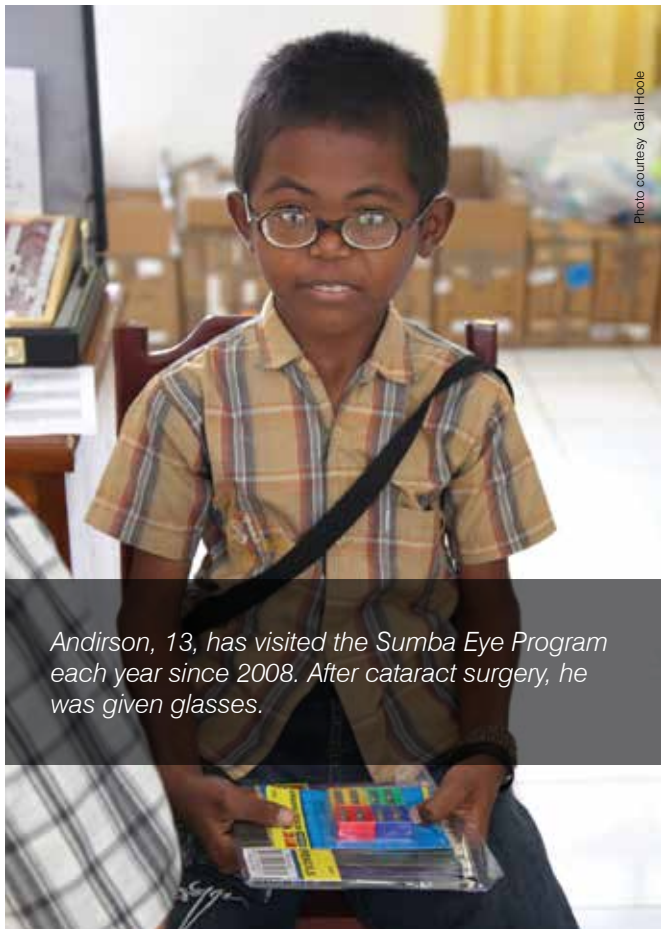


Photo courtesy Gail Hoole

Anderson, 13, has visited the Sumba Eye Program each year since 2008. After cataract surgery, he was given glasses.

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