



# Where image is everything

*Gemma Ward unravels the story behind Professional Beauty's Salon of the Year*

Since relocating to spacious new premises last summer, Image in Ipswich has become a prestigious name in the British beauty arena. The new six-room salon was named *Independent Business of the Year 2012* in its hometown just a few months after the move. And at the recent *Professional Beauty Awards*, it garnered the entire industry's attention when it took home the accolade for *Beauty Salon of the Year (four rooms or more) 2013* following its entry debut.

But despite entering the industry spotlight only recently, the business itself is nothing new: achieving its current position is the result of a long journey of education, research and constant business updates.

Image has been flourishing for over a decade under the watchful eye of owner Sue Carter, who originally set it up in the backroom of another local salon in the late '90s. Formerly a Lancôme make-up artist

working in London's Harvey Nichols, the would-be owner decided to venture into beauty when an opportunity came up to rent a room. "I loved working in London but I had young children and the commute eventually became too much," she says. "So I decided to build on the experience I had to offer with more services, starting with colour analysis, make-up and facials."

Before long, Carter wanted to "broaden her horizons" and began enrolling on a range of NVQ courses covering everything from nails to body treatments – eventually becoming fully qualified in beauty. The business took off, and after two years she was turning clients away and finding that there wasn't enough hours in the day to meet the demand.

Then in 2001, when a small 500 sq ft salon became available in the local area, she decided to take the plunge and go into business alone. The new standalone salon contained two "hilariously small"



treatment rooms that Carter admits were only just big enough to carry out massages with the bed at one particular angle. But instead of accepting the limitations, the owner worked with the space and focused on staying on top of the game by keeping up with industry innovations, client trends and education. The commitment paid off; and before long, the business had completely outgrown its premises.

After 11 years Carter knew it was time to move into the space the business deserved. "We had to move because we literally had clients pouring out of the salon," she says. "So we began searching for new premises in 2011 and bought the ideal unit later that year."

The new space was "almost derelict" so Carter had to build the interior from scratch. While she initially consulted with REM, the owner devised the entire design herself – from the layout of the rooms

## SALON STATS

**NAME:** Image  
**LOCATION:** Ipswich  
**OWNER:** Sue Carter  
**OPENED:** 2001 – moved to new premises in 2012  
**SIZE:** 2,800sq ft  
**STAFF MEMBERS:** Seven full-time, two part-time  
**BEAUTY ROOMS:** Six alongside separate manicure and pedicure areas, a skin bar and training room  
**PRODUCTS:** Dermlogica, Elemis, Sienna X, Bio Sculpture, OPI, Nail Harmony, Universal Contour Wrap  
**PRICES:** From £36.50 for facials and £22.25 for a manicure  
**DESIGN:** Self-designed  
**CONTACT:** [Imagesalon.co.uk](http://Imagesalon.co.uk)



to the décor and sourcing the furniture. It took around six months to complete with the help of family members and her partner, who also runs his own roofing business. “We literally worked every hour we could during the evenings and weekends,” she says. “Neither of us had done a project like that before so it was tough. But I’m pleased to say that it has definitely paid off.”

The inside of the new salon is a mix of fresh white walls and high-gloss furniture accented with lime green and purple finishing touches. Rather than sourcing furniture through one supplier, the owner says she spend a lot of time researching and visiting showrooms to get the best deals. Her favourite pieces include an upcycled reception desk and sideboard, which were taken from the old salon and re-worked to look like new pieces. Carter also worked hard to make the space

environmentally friendly by installing LED lighting and infrared heaters.

Today Image employs nine members of staff – including her two daughters and stepdaughter who are all qualified therapists. As well as working in the salon, Carter says they plan to set up an academy in its purpose built training room for other therapists in the area. All three team members have educator qualifications and will offer enrichment and top-up courses in all areas of beauty. “We’re so passionate about what we do and we really want to raise standards,” says the owner. “We’ve found that lots of therapists that have completed NVQs still aren’t ready to service clients. We want to offer them a place to come to brush up on their skills and gain confidence.”

It’s clear that this ‘can do’ attitude is part of the secret behind the salon’s success. While many hair and beauty businesses are struggling in the current climate, Image’s takings have “grown massively” over the past three years and the team currently sees around 200 clients every single week. “I think clients come to Image for a variety of reasons,” says Carter. “But I guess one of the biggest things for me is that we’re all incredibly passionate about what we do. I only choose new team members who are genuine and dedicated to their job. When people love what they are doing their attitude is infectious and clients pick up on it.”

Image also offers attention to detail that clients often won’t get elsewhere. These include complimentary fresh fruit and amenities baskets in each room. The salon will also be opening a new roof terrace this summer where clients can relax with a drink before or after their treatment. “We try to offer all the extras people expect when they visit a good spa,” she says. “It’s

important to make yourself stand out.”

Carter is in fact always on the lookout for new ideas to implement – even on holiday. “Wherever I am in the world I always visit spas and salons and ask the owner if I can look around,” she says. “If I see a great idea I may borrow it and put my own spin on it. But it isn’t just other beauty businesses, you can get ideas from all client-facing sectors.”

Offering her clients exactly what they want is a number one priority for the owner. To do this, she runs regular focus groups – outsourced by another company – with the aim to uncover fresh ideas from loyal fans and people that are new to the salon. “These have been absolutely invaluable,” she says. “We always try to implement whatever people want – some suggestions have been a bit too wacky but we try to accommodate wherever we can. I think this is very important, particularly in the current climate.”

In addition, Carter has also chosen 10 Image ambassadors who try out new treatments and products before they make it on the menu. The clients are from across the board – including professionals and stay at home mums – so the owner can garner a cross section of opinion. “A couple of clients were so thrilled to be chosen – it has been a wonderful business move for us,” says the owner.

Moving forward with a taste for victory, Carter would be forgiven for wanting to chase more glory. But rather than concentrating on winning more awards, she says her main focus will be on her clients’ needs. “It was amazing to win,” she says. “But my customers are the most important thing and looking after them will continue to be my biggest focus for the future. If you put yourself in your clients’ shoes then you can’t go wrong.”