

TRENDS

the nose has it

SMELL CAN AFFECT OUR MOOD, OUR EMOTIONS AND THE WAY WE BEHAVE. BUT OUR MOST POWERFUL SENSE IS ALSO OPEN TO ATTACK FROM MAJOR COMPANIES. ANDREW LOSOWSKY REPORTS

ILLUSTRATIONS CLEMENTINE HOPE

FALSE SCENTS have been added to fabric conditioners, face cream, the interiors of new cars and so on for almost as long as the products have existed. However, companies are now starting to use both real and artificial smells more subtly, to try and change our shopping patterns without us realising it.

Woolworths, for example, introduced the smell of mulled wine and Christmas dinner into 20 of its UK stores in the build-up to the festive season. Superdrug used the aroma of chocolate in a central London store on Valentine's Day. And London Underground filled some of its busier platforms with a refreshing perfume called Madeline, to help cheer people up – as well as to give its three million passengers a break from the whiff of some of the less hygienic customers.

"What's called 'environmental marketing' is becoming tremendously valuable," says Nick Murray, chairman of Galileo Brand Architecture, a leading brand-development company whose clients include Shell, Cadbury's, Microsoft and

Abbey National. "You can literally set up appetite and an expectation in the mind of the customer."

While it's easy to ignore a persuasive billboard or flick past the carefully targeted adverts in a magazine if you choose to, you have no control over what your nose picks up. Increased sales show that this suggestive, almost subliminal, method of advertising produces results.

"The key [for a successful smell] is for people to become aware of it the moment they walk into a room," says Frank Knight, of the Lancashire-based company Dale Air, whose commissions have included supplying a nationwide chain of travel agents with the smell of coconut oil. "What you find is that the smell stays in people's memory and is then associated with that particular store," he says. "It gets people into the right mood and then they might buy more products."

Smell can evoke mood swings and memories more effectively than any other sensation. "No other sensory system has direct access to the amygdala – the emotional centre of your brain," says Rachel Herz of the Chemical Senses Centre in Philadelphia. "Memories brought back by odours are experienced in a much more emotionally potent way than those from other sensory cues. In a most basic and primitive way, smells tell us what to approach and what to avoid." Smells can affect your memory, concentration, mood and emotion – so no wonder that the marketers can't wait to unleash its potential.

There are seven basic smell groups that us humans can distinguish between: camphoric (eg. mothballs); musky (perfume); ethereal (Tipp-Ex); floral; peppermint; pungent (vinegar) and putrid (rotten eggs). Smells themselves are created by tiny odour particles – and you only need 0.5 parts per trillion in the air for some people to pick one up.

When they do, the right smell to the right person can have a remarkable effect. Al Pacino, playing a blind, depressed ex-soldier in the film *Scent of a Woman*, dances a highly charged tango with Gabrielle Anwar after he smells her lingering perfume. For Lieutenant Colonel Kilgore (Robert Duvall) in *Apocalypse Now*, the indelicate aroma of napalm in the morning was the smell of victory. On the other hand, the artist Andy Warhol's favourite odour was the lobby of the Paramount Theatre on Broadway.

"Of the five senses, smell has the closest thing to the full power of the past," Warhol wrote in *From A to B and Back Again*. "Smell is really transporting. Seeing, hearing, touching, tasting are just not as powerful if you want your whole being to go back for a second to something."

An increasing number of companies are now trying to exploit this sensation. One clothing company has tried pumping a unique smell into its shirt packaging. Meanwhile others are starting to copyright their own smells before

people try to replicate them – the smell of Crayola crayons, for example, is now patented, as is a particular perfume called 'Eau de Rolls-Royce 1965 Silver Cloud'.

"One case I've been involved in has been to develop a mini store at petrol stations," says Nick Murray of Galileo. "It didn't matter what we did, the consumer was still focused on engine oil and petrol. So we pumped in artificial smells of coffee and food. It helped give the outlet credibility as something more than just the usual garage shop."

"If you want customers to try something new, you have to create an expectation in their minds about what it's going to be like," says Murray. "You can stimulate them in more ways than just with visual information – which is where environmental marketing comes in."

To create the smells, Murray calls in manufacturers like Dale Air (whose slogan

is 'aroma by design'). By mixing any of several hundred chemicals, it can supply a man-made version of an enticing odour, be it freshly cut grass or popcorn, and its smells provide a more long-lasting effect for a fraction of the cost and the effort. When the customer walks through the door, a carefully chosen aroma can co-ordinate with the shop displays to provide an atmosphere that encourages them to spend more money. While store managers may be rubbing their hands with glee, not everyone is impressed with this new sales trend.

"It is a devious tactic to try to get people to buy things," says Paul Fitzgerald, of the anti-capitalist group Enough. "People aren't aware that it's having such an influence on them. It's a pathetic trend and a symptom of market saturation. And you have to ask why you can be influenced by fake smells – it shows that people are buying far too many things that they don't really need."

Whether a reasonable extension of the 'total brand experience' or a violation of consumer rights, one thing's for certain: there is still no substitute for an oven and some dough to provide the elusive smell of fresh bread. Strange as it may seem, this basic aroma is the holy grail of the smell world. The aroma of freshly baked bread creates a welcoming, domestic

atmosphere as well as stimulating the appetite, and no manufacturer of artificial smells has yet perfected an imitation. If and when one does, it will be in demand all over the world, particularly from estate agents who could use it to help sell a few extra houses.

The smell business isn't just about pumping standard aromas into shops: many companies specialise in more unusual scents, and these can be the most interesting to work on, not least because of the research involved. Among the more bizarre odours Dale Air has been asked to supply was the smell of tyrannosaurus breath for the Natural History Museum in London, the aroma of a stale mummy for a castle in Sweden and the fragrance of jaguar urine for Chester Zoo. For requests such as these, Knight talks to the experts to find out about the conditions that could form a part of the overall smell. In the case of T Rex, he and the palaeontologists established that its morning breath was probably too foul for tourists, and instead replicated the creature's humid, tropical habitat with just a whiff of rotting meat.

Yet it's the most straightforward aromas that can cause the most problems for

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manufacturers. "Take lemon, for instance," says Knight. "You'd think it was a basic smell. But it takes 20 different oils all mixed in different quantities to get that right."

Undeterred by these and other challenges, the smell industry had a tentative foray into the interactive world when the now-defunct company Digiscents claimed to be working on a box that would allow people to experience different smells from websites, or even to download the odour of a particular food on sale over the internet. Using a basic selection of oils, Digiscents intended to replicate several hundred smells when instructed by a particular game or website.

One of the major difficulties with such a device is how to get rid of the smell quickly once it has been let loose, and then effectively replace it with another – a problem that the partners of people with sweaty feet know only too well. It comes as no surprise to learn that speed cameras catch far more people driving too fast around places that smell bad than elsewhere, but the effect of a foul stench can be so dramatic that the Association of Chief Police

Officers (ACPO) is currently looking into the use of disgusting smells – or malodorants, as they're known – as a useful weapon for riot control. Last year, the Pentagon commissioned scientists to come up with the worst stink-bomb possible in order to force rioters to disperse without causing any harm. The UK police force is certainly interested in the idea. "We are looking at a whole range of non-lethal weapons including malodorants," an ACPO spokesman said recently. "In a riot or hostage situation we want to minimise the risk of injury to the public and a malodorant might be one answer."

However, its effect could only be short-lived. Even with the worst smells, you begin to develop what's known as nose fatigue. Just as sniffer dogs have to take a rest every ten minutes, so our own nasal receptor cells get worn out by constant stimulation and stop sending messages to the brain – which is why you can't smell your own perfume or aftershave for more than a few minutes, even if you've just bathed in it.

That hasn't stopped the first law-suit against smell from being brought in Canada against a

neighbour's cooking – and if that weren't enough, a firm of lawyers also based in Canada has declared its workplace a scent-free environment. Violators are sent home to shower on unpaid time. Such instances in the UK are rare, but according to a spokesman at the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the law does cover you against olfactory harassment: "Smells actually come under the category of noise as a statutory nuisance. They're fully covered by the Environmental Health Act."

However, as long as it doesn't directly affect the quality of life in your neighbourhood, there is nothing to stop companies carefully replicating pleasant fragrances on their own premises to heighten their brand image or affect behaviour. Though it can't make you act unnaturally out of character, this new manipulation of the senses is taking a grip on both shops and products – and until the companies themselves get nose fatigue, nothing short of a cold or a clothes peg will stop it. ●



Take home a smell

A New York-based company called Demeter specialises in phials of unusual fragrances for a discerning market, as well as more traditional perfume and aromatherapy oils. Among their best-selling scents are: pruning shears, laundromat, holy water, snow, gin & tonic, cinnamon toast and sticky toffee pudding. Demeter is currently looking into shipping their smells to the UK.

In the meantime, Dale Air is producing special 5cm³ Cubes that will allow people to take smells home with them from museums or even from the seaside. "We're hoping to sell those to souvenir shops around the coast," says Dale Air's Frank Knight. "We're going to produce selection boxes. Inside will be a mixture of our smells, including sea breeze, rock and popcorn."