



**Take
A whiff**

- 1. Scratch
- 2. Sniff
- 3. Note: Aromas such as this grassy one are increasingly pumped into stores.

Something In the Air

In a growing trend, retailers are perfuming stores with near-subliminal scents. Call it branding's final frontier.

By Robert Klara

In 1921, Coco Chanel was preparing to take the wraps off her first commercial fragrance. She had already contracted the most renowned perfumer in Europe to create her No. 5 scent, designed the *moderne* bottle herself and sent samples to all the society women in Paris. But Chanel needed an extra push to help sell

the fragrance at her boutique at 31 rue Cambon. That's when (the story goes) the designer ordered each of her salesladies to spray the perfume all over the boutique, from the dressing rooms to, especially, the entrance.

Good marketing ideas have a way of sticking around. Today, thanks to the development of electronic scent diffusers, brands no longer need to hose down the air with expensive bottles of *parfum*. And that's a good thing. At a time when brands have already fine-tuned everything from their store color palettes to employee dress codes to the music thumping through the speakers, scent—the sole remaining sense that can directly influence how a customer regards a brand—is becoming an increasingly important instrument in the marketer's toolbox. Given that smell is the most powerful and emotional of all the senses, the

ILLUSTRATION: SAM BOSMA

bigger surprise might be that it's taken brands this long to wake up to smell's potential.

"This is a huge trend," observes environmental psychologist Eric Spangenberg of Washington State University. "The technology has advanced to the level where anyone can do it."

Indeed, it seems like almost everyone is. Singapore Airlines uses a scent called Stefan Floridian Waters to perfume the cabins of its airplanes. Samsung has reportedly pumped the summery scent of honeydew melons into its New York flagship store, and British Airways diffuses the fragrance of meadow grass in business-class lounges. Sequoia, a scent designed by Lorenzo Dante Ferro, greets guests at New York's Mandarin Oriental as they step in off the street, much like the alluring blend of citrus and green tea floats from "air machines" strategically tucked into Kimpton's Hotel Monaco locations. Customers at Victoria's Secret and Juicy Couture no longer have to bother hunting down a sample bottle of the stores' branded perfumes to know what they smell like; they just need to walk into the stores and sniff the air.

Behind-the-scenes diffusers have also largely freed Abercrombie & Fitch employees from spritzing the air with the clothier's muscular array of colognes; the smells are pumped into the air full-time now. And the list goes on and on: Westin, Bloomingdale's, J.W. Marriott, Hugo Boss, Ritz Carlton and Jimmy Choo—all brand their retail environments with distinctive aromas (some custom-designed, some off-the-shelf) wafting through the lobbies and aisles.

"Brands realize now that this is a part of doing business," says Andrew Kindfuller, CEO of ScentAir, the largest manufacturer of scent diffusers in the U.S. "We're implementing these systems in many different environments—not just hotels and retail, but funeral homes, retirement villages, and medical and dental and law offices."

Brands want their customers to be in such environments because, as research has shown, even a few microparticles of scent can do a lot of marketing's heavy lifting, from improving consumer perceptions of quality to increasing the number of store visits. At the same time, the technology has its liabilities. It's also not cheap—and not without its critics.

Chanel's example aside, scent diffusion in retail spaces, a practice sometimes called "ambient scenting," dates back roughly to the 1970s, when retail stores began toying with the first scent diffusers—Rube Goldberg-type contraptions that never caught on.

"In the old days, they used these cartridges with some sort of material soaked in scented oil and a fan would blow it out," explains Jennifer Dublino, COO of the Scent Marketing Institute. "The scent would be really intense at first, but then it would wane." Worse, the stores' merchandise would end up coated

with a fine film of oil.

But technology improvements have been dramatic. Proprietary technologies vary—cold air diffusion, dry air evaporation and several others—but the basic idea works like this: High air pressure or a vibrating electronic membrane atomizes a fragrant oil into microscopic particulates, which are then pumped ("diffused") into the output duct of a store's HVAC system.

"The mist is so fine you can't even see it coming out of the atomizer," says Ed Burke, ScentAir's marketing director. "You don't have to worry about residue, and you can control the intensity."

Brands that use the technology have a singular aim: to put people in the mood to spend. "Pleasant, subtle scents lift our moods and impact buying behavior," says Donna Sturges, president of Buyology, a neurological

ful clothes and hear beautiful music—why not make it feel even better and have a great smell? It's like a 'hello.'" Simmons had scent diffusers installed in all 42 of the company's stores two years ago. Not only do customers like the smell, he says, but "they've even asked if we sell the fragrance, so we're looking to expand to candles."

Victoria's Secret is pleased with the results too. According to the brand's vp of fragrance Mark Knitowski, stores waft the brand's signature scent in the air to "increase the sensory and emotive connection with our customers. We have found—provided the right level and fragrance—the customer is more happy and willing to spend more time in store."

According to Zev Auerbach, executive creative director for Miami-based Zimmerman Advertising, an ambient scent works best when it evokes imagery that's tied to the mer-

HOW IT WORKS



The diffuser mechanism (this one from ScentAir) turns a fragrance into microscopic particles.

HVAC ducts, connected to the diffuser, distribute the scented particles into the air.

Customers become peripherally aware of, and influenced by, the pleasant scent.

marketing firm based in New York. Brands that have found the right ambient scent, she says, "have seen results as high as double-digit increases in brand preference."

"In retail spaces, you're saturated with visual and audio to the point where you've learned to turn them off," observes Steve Semoff, SMI's co-president. "But olfactory is a different kettle of fish. Sight and hearing senses go to the left brain, but smell is hardwired to the right brain's limbic system, which is your emotional core. It triggers an emotional response, and the customer builds an emotional connection with the brand."

For Ward Simmons, vp of marketing for Hugo Boss, scent was the last piece missing from his marketing mix. "For us, it's about the customer experience," he says. "If you walk into our stores, you already see beauti-

chandise. "If you see a bathing suit in a store, and you smell the scent of ocean, you're more likely to want to buy the suit and go on vacation," he says. "It's the combination of the see and the smell." Auerbach hastens to point out that such a connection isn't just anecdotal. "This is pure science," he says.

There is indeed a sizeable body of studies establishing links between pleasant smells in retail settings and improved brand perception. Spangenberg, a marketing professor and dean of Washington State U's college of business, has studied and written about human response to scents in retail environments. "We've shown that scent can increase the customer's positive shopping behavior," he says. "It keeps people in the store longer, they enjoy it more and they express more positive intentions to return."

ILLUSTRATIONS: SAM BOSMA

A 1998 study from the University of Pad-erborn in Germany revealed that when retailers use "olfactory communication," it can increase consumer perceptions of product quality. (A few years ago, a home-improvement chain in Germany discovered that the moment they began pumping the scent of fresh-cut grass into the stores, more customers began rating their salespeople as knowledgeable.) Still other evidence suggests that a pleasant ambient smell has an effect on shopping times and frequency. A 2011 study from Hasselt University in Belgium demonstrated that a pleasant fragrance in the air increased the likelihood that consumers would revisit a store. Semoff attests that there's also evidence that scent can keep people there too. "If you introduce a scent, customers will linger longer," he says. "And if they do, purchase intent goes up."

both in a good and bad way," referring to the feeling that some stores overdo the scents of their signature colognes, and if a consumer doesn't like it, he or she may stay away, period.

Cost is another factor. While some smaller companies opt out of necessity to go with an off-the-shelf aroma (ScentAir's Kindfuller says that the popular scents among smaller retailers right now include citrus, fig, tea and grass), a signature scent—especially if it's a branded cologne or perfume—is labor-intensive. "If you have a fine fragrance product, you can re-engineer it to deliver it via scent-diffusion equipment, but it requires a lot of art and expertise," Semoff says.

Simmons relates that Hugo Boss spent two months tweaking the formula of its signature scent before getting it right. And little wonder. Asked to describe the juice, Simmons says it contains "light accents of fruits and citrus with a hint of cocoa fill[ing] the top note before a green floral heart of gardenia, jasmine and muguet over a foundation of vanilla, sandalwood, cedarwood and amber."

Then there's the price of the diffuser technology itself. While a portable unit suitable for a dressing room might run a mere \$130, the HVAC-ready diffusers start at \$2,000, and a large area like a hotel lobby may require several of them. Replacing the scent oil then becomes a fixed monthly cost: as little as \$30 to several hundred dollars.

Finally, a certain haze of controversy hovers over the topic of scent diffusion. Consumers and employees are inhaling microscopic droplets of oil misted into the air by the diffusers, and most are unaware of the fact. It raises questions not only about whether customers are somehow being behaviorally manipulated, but also whether it's safe to be breathing the stuff to start with.

As to whether ambient scenting is tantamount to subliminal manipulation, the answer seems to be no—for the most part. "It is not subliminal," Spangenberg says. "But it is peripheral, and if you don't draw customer's attention to the scent, it is more effective." That said, "One could argue that it's nothing more insidious than pleasant music," he says.

The question of health ramifications, however, may not be as easily dismissed. SMI's Semoff maintains that scent particles in the air are no cause for concern. "The fragrances used are all approved by the International Fragrance Association and meet a high level of global regulatory compliance. [The concentration] is one part per million, so you're way below the level that would trigger an allergic response," he says.

Not everybody believes the industry position.

"It's nonsense," says Judi Shils, founder and director of the advocacy group Teens Turning Green. "Who has any idea what dose is the tipping point? Nobody can say that X amount of this chemical in your body will not

'[Scent] triggers an emotional response, and the customer builds an emotional connection to the brand.'—Steve Semoff, SMI

do anything."

Anne C. Steinemann, a professor of environmental engineering at the University of Washington, adds that "there are no harmless levels. Even one part per million is high for certain chemicals. It depends on the substance and the individual. Tell a mother with a child who has a peanut allergy that it's 'just one peanut.'" She refers to the growing use of scent diffusers as a "public health hazard" that's "putting people at risk."

Shils claims to be in touch with "quite a few" Abercrombie employees in Southern California who claim that the presence of too much fragrance in the store environments have made them ill—claims that Abercrombie corporate has vigorously disputed. Abercrombie's response to Teens Turning Green, which it made available to *Adweek*, reads in relevant part: "The [scent diffusion] machines emit a water-based, safe fragrance that complies with local, state and federal law. The scenting formulation is also without Air Contaminants as defined by the U.S. Occupational Safety & Health Act. Therefore, based on available information, we firmly believe that the use of this scenting program poses no threat to the health of our associates or customers who are in the store."

Steinemann remains unimpressed by such positions. "The standards of OSHA are really old, and their regulations do not apply to these products," she says. OSHA did not return phone calls seeking comment for this story.

In the meantime, scent diffusion is steadily gaining awareness among marketers, which means that its use is likely to increase. "Scent is grossly underutilized by brand builders," Buyology's Sturges says. "But this has been changing in recent years, and we're starting to see it be introduced in academia. The science is clear: Scent has incredible potential."

That's something that Hugo Boss's Simmons knows already—and he says he's never seen an instance of the smell turning a customer off. In fact, he says, "the stores would feel cold without the smell. When I walk into a store and the machine is broken, I notice that something's missing." Next up, he says: installing diffusers in the Hugo Boss stores in Canada. —*robert.klara@adweek.com; Twitter: @eastsiderob.*

