

Marketing with fragrances is nothing to sniff at

From July 2009

By Sandy Smith

Smell is a powerful sense credited with triggering emotional responses — even improving moods. It's no wonder, then, that a growing number of retailers are targeting the nose when it comes to reinforcing branding and enhancing the overall shopping experience.

"As a merchandising concept in retail, it's still relatively new," says Tom Conroy, CEO of Charlotte, N.C.-based scent marketing firm ScentAir. "In the retail vertical, there are really two or three different objectives" for its use.

Key among these objectives is branding, using the nose to "communicate a message that they may be delivering in print and in the rest of the marketing mix," Conroy says. "It becomes a new tool to expand their brand messaging and communication."

The scents can also be used to "billboard" a certain area of the store. American Eagle Outfitters uses ScentAir to broadcast a new fragrance or cologne in sections of its stores.

Bloomingdale's has used scent to showcase fragrances outside the Manhattan flagship when new products are launched, says Dennis Dunn, the store's visual merchandising director. With the success of that approach, Bloomingdale's began using fragrance for the third objective Conroy describes — enhancing the overall retail experience.

Bloomingdale's Manhattan store has used scents to mark special promotions, such as coconut in the swimwear department; others have used a baby powder aroma in the infants department and lilac in intimate apparel.

"It used to be nice to have a novel concept to distinguish themselves from the competition," Conroy says. "Now it's an imperative. They have to get serious to win the hearts and minds of consumers."

Scent has a strong connection to memory, according to research by the Sense of Smell Institute, a division of The Fragrance Foundation, headquartered in New York. People have a 65 percent accuracy rate in recalling smells a year later; by comparison, visual recall of photos is 50 percent after three months.

Since the sense of smell is processed by the area of the brain that handles memory and emotion, there is a strong tie among all three. Some tests show a 40 percent improvement in mood after being exposed to a pleasant scent. The Sense of Smell Institute also reports that scent can have a powerful influence on how long a person stays in a room or, presumably, a retail environment.

If that sounds fanciful, consider that the technology behind ScentAir was developed by a former Lockheed Martin rocket scientist who became an "Imagineer" for Walt Disney World, where scents were used to enhance rides and themed exhibits.

The scents can be delivered via portable canisters, called ScentWaves, or piped in through a heating and air system, allowing for targeted deployment or whole-store enhancement. The canisters can cover about 2,000 sq. ft., while the HVAC application can scent about 300,000

cubic ft. Since 2000, the company has developed signature scents for retailers ranging from Saks Fifth Avenue, Macy's and Nordstrom to Guess?, Hallmark and Sony Style.

Developing signature scents is a process Conroy likens to incorporating disparate instruments in the creation of music. "It's the combination of those things that ultimately creates the finer points of the fragrance or the message," he says. "We know that by starting with this broad spectrum of [1,500 stock] fragrances, depending on the message, we can filter and come down to various segments that will play on the emotions of the consumer."

Global preferences

Developing a signature scent typically takes 90 days, but for global businesses it can take much longer. "These companies want to make sure the message they are conveying is the same in New York as it is in Madrid and that does add a whole other level," Conroy says. "That's why we work with four or five of the leading fragrance manufacturers that have the science and market research in these major global centers so that we're familiar and aware of the preferences in these markets."

ScentAir has tackled some of its more unusual applications outside the retail world. The Children's Museum of Indianapolis asked the company to imagine the scents that would have been found when dinosaurs roamed the earth (yes, dinosaur dung was among the smells that "enhanced" the exhibit).

Coors used it to bring a Rocky Mountain winter to a summer convention in Florida. A Lexus dealer has the scent of chocolate chip cookies wafting through the waiting room and green tea and lemongrass at the front entrance. Westin Hotels has used a signature scent to create a welcoming sense of familiarity in its 130 properties.

For retailers, scent can be a powerful complement to traditional marketing and it functions much the same way. "Developing a signature fragrance is much like how you develop a message in print or radio: What do you want to communicate to consumers, and how often?" Conroy says. When matched with in-store promotions, "our customers are able to see increased dwell times in the scented areas of the store and related retail lift."

Bloomingdale's Manhattan store is using ScentAir during the holidays to enhance the mood of its massive visual presentations. "I only think it makes it larger than life," Dunn says. "You might be seeing gigantic snowballs and smelling pine. It works together to make it even larger for the customer."

Once a store has determined it wants to use scent marketing in conjunction with a promotion, ScentAir will work with the marketing team to determine the best scent strategy. "It's not always the use of one fragrance," Conroy says. "Sometimes it's multiple impressions."

Some retailers will feature one fragrance at the entrance, another at checkout and still another in a particular portion of the store, with fragrance-free areas in between. "This delivers multiple impressions where it counts," Conroy says. "Music is a good metaphor; sometimes silence is the best portion of a piece."

Holiday planning

At Bloomingdale's, holiday planning starts in May, with Dunn and his staff sitting around a conference room table sniffing scent samples. With the array narrowed down to about eight scents, the smells are then worked into the overall theme of visuals and, as each presentation is assembled, the ScentAir canisters are strategically hidden.

Dunn will change out the scents midway through the holiday season, "so it's a constant, updated fresh scent which makes the whole experience different."

The Manhattan Bloomingdale's is a tourist destination in its own right and there's a need to "create theater," Dunn says. "That's what we're known for. By the time customers get to the sixth floor where the Christmas shops are, they are mesmerized." And, for many of them, they want to take it all home with them, including the scent. "We get asked so often if it's potpourri and if they can buy it," he says.

Customers wishing to purchase a form of marketing may be the highest praise. And that's exactly why Conroy believes scent marketing is here for the long haul. "The adoption of scent as a legitimate form of communications has been proven and now accepted [and] I expect it to become more ubiquitous across retailing in the years to come."

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