Sniff . . . and spend

Now that the retail industry has caught a whiff of smells' success, prepare your nose for the marketing onslaught.

By Karen Ravn
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When Verizon introduced its Chocolate cellphone last summer the seductive aroma of chocolate wafted through its northeast stores, and customers sniffed out a good deal.

In 2006, when ScentAndrea, a scent marketing company in Santa Barbara, put chocolate and sent on 33 vending machines in factory break rooms in Ventura (plus a sign that said it was Hershey's candy people were smelling) the brand's sales tripled.

And in 2005, when Exxon On The Run convenience stores in North Carolina highlighted a new brewing system with coffee scents from ScentAir, a scent marketing company in Charlotte, coffee sales perked up by a healthy 55%.

Just three examples of "scent marketing," the scintillating strategy that nosed its way into Advertising Age Magazine's Top 10 "Trends to Watch in 2007."

Stores and product designers devote countless hours and dollars to such matters as the color and shape of a package or the precise arrangement of items in the aisles of a store, the better to coax shoppers to linger, purchase and impulse-buy. Now, scent marketers say, it is time to turn to the nose. "Most marketing -- 85% -- is visual," says Harald Vogt, founder and chief marketer of the Scent Marketing Institute in Scarsdale, N.Y. "Scent marketing is the last frontier."

Already it is a $100-million business, and Vogt predicts it will reach $500 million or even $1 billion within the next seven to eight years.

Scent marketers say this makes eminent sense. After all, no matter how tempting a display of barbecues looks, you'll have a harder time passing it by if the aroma of meat on the grill is greeting your nose. Plus, who can deny the emotive pull of smell? One whiff of a scent can make a person laugh or cry, and exclaim with delight ("Those roses are lovely!") or disgust ("What have you been feeding the dog?").

And with the advent of TiVo and iPods, scent marketers argue that they're needed like never before. "The consumer now has the tools to block out the cacophony of advertising we are battered with daily," says Carmine Santandrea, founder and chief executive of ScentAndrea Multisensory Communications in Santa Barbara, the company responsible for putting scent in the Chocolate phone campaign. "At least we can make it smell good, and pull people into the message by the nose."

So confident of success are scent marketers that some, at least, are willing to put their money where their mouth is.

Santandrea offers a money-back guarantee that any promotion he runs will increase sales enough to pay for itself.

Science (much of it published in such tomes as the Journal of Marketing and Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services) is backing up the influence of scents on human shopping behavior. It has shown, for example, that scent can make shoppers spend more time and money in a store and make them pay more attention to a brand.

"You don't want to overestimate its effects," says Paula Bone, a professor of marketing
at West Virginia University in Morgantown, W.Va. "It's really just a part of your overall marketing strategy." It also has to be done right: "The new-car smell is a really good smell -- but not in a shoe store," says Rachel Herz, a professor at Brown University and a consultant on the psychology and neuroscience of aroma.

But, taken together, the data suggest that the right scent at the right time when sniffed by the right people can make them more likely to walk up to a cash register, less likely to walk away from a slot machine.

Here’s how our noses get us reaching for our wallets.

The ideal trigger
Suppose you're walking past a bakery, and you smell bread baking. That makes you hungry for bread, so you go in and buy a loaf.

It's scent marketing at its simplest (and most successful): You smell a scent connected to a particular product, and you decide to buy the product. For years, for example, Disneyland's Main Street confectionery store has been pumping candy aromas into the air outside the store from its "Smellitzer" machines.

But scent marketing's more subtle than that -- it also nudges associations in our brain between smells and other good stuff. Suppose you're house-hunting and you come to a house that smells like chocolate chip cookies, the kind your mother used to make. Suddenly you’re remembering when you were a kid and your mother let you eat some of the dough. That feels good, so perhaps you buy the house. No wonder Realtors urge home sellers to bake cookies just before a prospective buyer comes knocking.

Many products don't have their own scent, of course. Scent-marketers want to market those scent-challenged products too. One approach is to give whatever product they're marketing its own "signature scent" and then patent that scent so nothing else can ever smell that way.

Any time you go to a Westin Hotel anywhere in the world, you'll smell the Westin Hotel signature scent. But you won't ever smell it anywhere else.

Another scent-marketing approach is to use a not-necessarily-original "ambient scent" to market, in one fell swoop, all the products in a particular area -- a section of a store, say.

Across the country, Bloomingdale's uses baby powder scent in its baby department, lilac scent in its intimate apparel department and coconut scent in its swimsuit department.

"We don't claim our systems will increase customer spending. We're creating a pleasant environment," says Murray Dameron, director of marketing for ScentAir, which provides the Bloomingdale's scents.

The ambient scent is meant to enhance customers' impressions of the entire area along with all the products in that area -- and store owners probably wouldn't object if the scent made customers spend more too.

Does it?
It seems like a lot to ask of a smell, but researchers have shown that it can. For several decades, smell laboratories around the globe have been churning out research reports that demonstrate scent's salesmanship -- often with undergraduate students as guinea pigs making shopping decisions in laboratories kitted out as stores.

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In a study published in the Journal of Marketing in 1996, for example, a team led by Eric Spangenberg of Washington State University tested 308 undergraduate students in a "simulated store environment" set up in a consumer behavior laboratory and offering "one-stop shopping," including kitchen and school items and athletic gear. The store was infused with either an ambient scent previously judged to be inoffensive or no scent at all. Students filled out a questionnaire about the store and its products while exploring it alone and at their own pace.

Spangenberg's team found that the presence of the inoffensive scent was enough to raise the students' evaluations of the store and, to a lesser extent, its merchandise.

The students were also a little more likely to behave the way store owners would like them to behave: They looked at more products and indicated a greater likelihood of buying something.

Other studies have found that shoppers spend more time in pleasantly-scented stores -- or, for that matter, that gamblers will spend more money in pleasantly-scented casinos.
In a landmark 1993 study, over the course of three successive weekends, Alan Hirsch, founder of the Smell and Taste Treatment and Research Foundation in Chicago, measured how much money was gambled in three separate slot-machine areas in a Las Vegas casino. On the middle weekend, Hirsch scented two of the areas -- one with a "floral mix," another with an "inactive odor" -- but not the third. He compared the amounts gambled in each of the three areas on the three weekends.

In the floral mix area, the amount gambled was about 45% higher on the weekend it was scented than on the weekends before and after. The amounts gambled in the other scented area and in the no-scent area didn't change over the course of the three weekends.

Las Vegas casinos do use ambient scents (such as jasmine in the MGM Grand and "Seduction," a signature scent, in the Venetian) but any connection between this and Hirsch's study may be circumstantial. "Scents are very effective in neutralizing and masking the smell of cigar and cigarette smoke," says Yvette Monet, a spokeswoman for MGM Mirage, parent of MGM Grand Las Vegas Resort.

Good chemistry

You can't just put any old scent out there on the shop floor and expect your coats and shoes to fly off the rack.

You need that critical je ne sais quoi known as "congruence" -- how well a scent fits the environment where it's used. "People need to be cognizant of the potential consequences of doing it wrong," Spangenberg warns.

For example, in another Spangenberg-led study, 140 undergraduates watched slides of a wide variety of merchandise in a store about 100 miles away from the lab and then filled out a questionnaire about them. While they did this, music was playing -- either Amy Grant's "Heart in Motion" CD or her "Home for Christmas" CD -- and the lab was either scented with an odor called "Enchanted Christmas" or had no scent.

When "Home for Christmas" was being played, adding "Enchanted Christmas" generally led to higher customer evaluations of the store and the environment. But when "Heart in Motion" was being played, adding "Enchanted Christmas" either had no effect or brought evaluations down.

The authors speculated in this 2005 report that congruence is also important between scent and other factors in the environment. One would not expect brisk sales, they suggest, if a Christmas-y scent were combined with Christmas-y music in a store right about now.

Gender matters too. Men don't go for sweetpea and frangipani. Women aren't so keen on charcoal and motor oil.

And it can make a bottom-line difference. In 2005, yet another Spangenberg-led team tested 181 real-world shoppers in a clothing store scented either with rose maroc, previously determined to appeal to males, or vanilla, previously determined to appeal to females.

When the scent was congruent with the merchandise -- with rose maroc in the men's section and vanilla in the women's section -- shoppers were happier campers than when the scents were reversed: Not only did they evaluate the store and its merchandise more favorably, but they also spent about 50% more time there, bought almost twice as many items and spent more than twice as much money.

Out-of-sync-scent snafus could easily occur in a shopping environment such as a mall, which is a complex intermingling of myriad factors with plenty of chances for unfortunate clashes. Scientists have found that even minor changes -- in odor, color scheme, type and volume of music -- can put a kibosh on congruence, causing shoppers to rate product quality lower and enjoy their shopping less.

In fact, though most researchers have talked about the positive effects of congruence, Bone and coauthor Pam Ellen have suggested that the negative effects of incongruence seem to be what really matter. Adding the scent of suntan lotion might be a plus for a swimsuit promotion, but adding the scent of pumpkin pie would probably be a much bigger minus.

Suppose the first time you ever smelled a wet dog, she had just pulled you out of a lake where you were about to drown. Then you might grow up liking the scent of wet dog.

But if the first time you ever smelled a wet dog is when she had just pulled you into a lake and got your party clothes soaked, you might grow up thinking wet dogs stink.
Many of our judgments about scents are learned, based on our personal experiences and personal associations. Besides, some of us can perceive and identify scents better than others. Women, as a rule, have better noses than men -- which could make them easier prey for scent marketers (they might notice scents men miss) but could also make them tougher sells (if it's meant to smell like lemons and smells like limes, that might sour them on the whole scene).

These differences make life interesting for scent marketers, but researchers have begun to unravel the complexities.

Youth is a factor. In one soon-to-be-published study, a team led by Jean-Charles Chebat of École des hautes études commerciales de Montréal found that shoppers younger than 35 spent more in a suburban mall when it had a pleasant ambient scent than when it didn't. But this was not true for older shoppers -- possibly because the sense of smell declines with age.

The type of shopper being lured is another complicating factor. A 2005 study examined the effect of a pleasant ambient scent on two kinds of shoppers in a suburban mall: impulsive (those who made unplanned purchases) and contemplative (those who didn't).

According to the shoppers' own reports, the contemplative ones spent more money in the presence of scent. Impulsive ones spent less.

Pairing a smell with music can be fruitful, as the Christmas-scent-and-music studies show. (So did a 2001 study pairing a relaxing scent with slow-tempo music and a stimulating scent with fast-tempo music.)

But sensory overload is a risk. In the impulsive-contemplative study, when music was playing and scent was present, both shopper types spent less than they spent in any other situation. Unlike the case of Christmas-y music and Christmas-y scent, music and smell weren't linked in a pleasing, congruent way.

In 1998, Herz published a study in which she found that our senses all evoke equally accurate memories, but scents evoke more emotional ones. Perhaps no study has been more influential in the scent-marketing industry.

One company, ScentAir Inc. of Charlotte, N.C., says on its website: "ScentAir enables businesses to create a unique in-store experience by engaging memory and emotions through patented scent delivery systems." Another, AromaSys Inc. of Lake Elmo, Minn., says it transforms experiences "into emotional memories that give customers a reason to return."

Vogt, of Scent Marketing Institute, says, "The sense of smell goes straight into the limbic system in the brain, which is responsible for emotions and decision-making. Scent can trigger powerful memories in the consumer. How much better does it get?"

This is the theory behind going on a baking spree when you want to sell your house. But do emotional memories really play much of a role in a trip to the mall to buy some toothpaste? And if not, what is going on?

For one thing, consumers' responses to scent are proving not to be purely emotional. In a 2003 study, subjects evaluated familiar and unfamiliar brands presented either with an ambient scent or not. The next day they were tested on their memory of the brands, again with or without scent. Having scent present when they were first evaluating the brands improved subjects' later memory of them, the study found. It also found that the scent wasn't changing the subjects' self-assessed emotional state, but it was increasing their attention -- i.e., they took longer with their evaluations.

Analysis suggested that it was this increased attention -- a cognitive, not emotional, process -- that improved brand memory.

Other researchers have reported that scent does not influence shoppers to buy more at a mall by putting them in a good mood, thus making them think more highly of the mall and the products in it. It's the other way around. The smells make shoppers think more highly of the mall and the products in it. That, in turn, puts them in a good mood -- which makes them buy more.

A "Got Milk?" advertising campaign in San Francisco earlier this year put the scent of chocolate chip cookies into bus stops. It was meant to move people to buy milk (not a house), and it was aborted after one day.

Some people had complained because they thought it might make homeless people feel bad because they couldn't buy cookies or milk. Others had complained because they thought the artificial scent might be releasing dangerous chemicals.

Scent marketers are adamant that everything they use has been tested and approved.
for safety. But some people in the industry worry that, as the use of scent marketing continues to expand, more people will start objecting to it because they think it's dangerous, or it'll bring on allergies -- or maybe because they just don't like it.

Halifax, Nova Scotia, has declared itself a fragrance-free city. In Santandrea's opinion, people there are missing out. "The nose is here to stay," he says, "and we are going to tweak it."

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