

# Future Sense: Defining brands through scent

According to research by Millward Brown\*, it is estimated that by the end of 2008 over 35% of Fortune 500 companies will adopt the concept of sensory branding. Of the five senses, the sense of smell is by far the most powerful yet also the most underexploited medium through which to connect brand and consumer. Welcome to the world of 'scent-sory' branding.

By Stephen Bell, Creative Director, Coley Porter Bell

We all know that the future of brand communications is going to be multi-dimensional. The catchphrase 'sensory branding' is coined by marketers for the concept of any form of communication between a brand and its consumers that involves the senses. While currently being uttered in confident tones across boardrooms worldwide, it seems almost like yesterday's news before the challenge has been met.

A growing number of companies are recognising there is potential in stimulating senses other than the visual for effectively connecting brands with consumers. The research by Millward Brown also revealed that the concept of sensory branding has so far been particularly successful in Asian countries as they are much more in tune with their senses than any other place in the world. The Japanese have shown around 50% more sensitivity than Americans. Clearly, tapping into the human senses is going to become big business over the next few years, but are we really in tune with what this involves and which senses have the most untapped potential?

Consider the sense of smell. When was the last time you actually stopped and smelt flowers, took a deep breath of sea air or let your nose flirt with freshly baked bread? The sense of smell is one of the most powerful and advanced forms of human interaction with our surroundings, but one that has very often been overlooked as a medium of communication. We are always concerned with how things appear and feel, but how often do we consider their smell?

### Welcome to the world of 'scent-sory' branding

About 75% of all the emotions we experience on a daily basis are generated by what we smell - not what we see or hear. Our sense of smell is extremely powerful as it acts directly on the limbic system, which controls emotion and memory. A study by the Fragrance Institute showed that, on average, people can recognise around 10,000 odours. We also have a great capacity to remember them: we can recall smells with around a 65% accuracy after a year but our recall of images is a lot lower, at around 50% after only three months. This ability for smells to stay in our memory means we form an emotional attachment to them. Nothing new in this phenomenon, which perfume houses have built their fortunes on for years, but it is a very interesting area for brands to explore. How could they smell? How could consumers connect with them? And fundamentally, what is it they want to be remembered for?

This ability for smells to stay in our memory means we form an emotional attachment to them. Nothing new in this phenomenon, but it is a very interesting area for brands to explore. How could they smell? And fundamentally, what is it that brands want to be remembered for?

The use of scent in branding really has roots in the smell of products themselves. For example, some brands, such as Playdough, Johnson's baby lotion and Marmite, have had a signature scent for years and are inadvertently ahead of the game; interestingly these brands make an impact in childhood and are built into our memories. Back in the late 1990s, Coley Porter Bell (CPB) worked with celebrity hair stylist Charles Worthington when he launched his hair care range. Not only was the transparent, frosted and distinctively shaped packaging we created key in making the brand stand out, but the smell made an impact too. CPL Aromas developed a scent that worked right across the range and gave it a unified Charles Worthington 'smell'. It was a strong part of the brand's appeal, keeping consumers coming back for more. Bringing this up to date, and providing the potential for customer interaction before purchase, the Eastman Chemical Company has produced a bottle with a cap that encapsulates and releases a certain smell. Still in development, it will be able to give consumers a guide to the scent of the product inside, without packaging seals being broken. And then there is the mistress of reinvention, Madonna, who was way ahead of the trend for aligning brands and scents when she released her 'Like a Prayer' album in 1989 with a cover that smelt of incense.

We are increasingly seeing examples of smell being a primary consideration in three-dimensional branding, outside the confines of packaging, and some brands have already managed to break into a new league as effective implementers. Starwood Hotels have been quick to use the power of fragrance and have introduced signature scents in their hotel lobbies, tailored according to their stature and the guests they want to appeal to: Sheraton will smell like fig, clove and jasmine, Westin like white tea and Four Points like cinnamon. The hotel concept 5+ Sensotel has taken it a stage further with proposed experience rooms that stimulate all the senses using light, sound and scent to suit the mood of each guest. Singapore Airlines created a patented Stefan Floridian Waters aroma for use at all consumer touchpoints from flight attendants' perfume and airplane interiors to the hot towels given out on take-off.

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According to US cult clothing brand Abercrombie & Fitch's head of corporate communications, they attribute their success to the complete in-store experience; "It's about what you see, what you hear, what you smell". The stores have a distinctive fragrance that lingers until you get your clothes home and take them out of the bag, thus prolonging the experience. But the use of smell to extend a company's branding is not limited to the hospitality sector or relaxed fashion retail environments; Samsung, the Korean electronics giant, have developed a cool, edgy scent to create an atmosphere that encourages consumers to linger and shop a little longer. Even McDonald's are considering sensory branding as part of their re-image of outlets across the world: not only do the prototype restaurants have curved counters and touch screen ordering points but they will 'smell' of coffee in the morning and fries in the afternoon.

As part of his book *Brand Sense*, author Martin Lindstrom revealed research that shows that introducing a scent into an environment can actually change people's perception of time. Prior to the test, at Galeries Lafayette in Paris, shoppers claimed they spent around 45 minutes in-store though the actual time spent was around 40 minutes. After spraying, consumer perceptions changed; they thought they had spent only 25 minutes in store despite spending over an hour. And there is proof that scents can influence purchases; when Hershey's store opened in New York Times Square, the actual smell of the chocolate couldn't permeate the hygienically wrapped bars so they had to create the experience. When they sprayed a chocolate scent in-store, sales allegedly rose by 34%.

### A branded scent for CPB



'See' atmosphere scent created by CPB

We recently decided to put the CPB brand to the test, and immerse ourselves in our own scent-sory branding exercise. Again working with CPL Aromas, we developed an atmosphere scent for our studio that we feel encapsulates the spirit of our agency. It was enlightening for our designers and planners to work in an alternative approach to branding, having become so used to expressing brands in a visual and tactile sense. Having established what we felt the agency should stand for, we then explored what this could mean in terms of the medium of scent. The three notes that make up a scent - top, middle and base - are crucial to quality and longevity and can significantly change its personality. The final fragrance, which we named 'See',

has bright citrus notes with a soft green edge on a clean woody base; the notes work together to give a classic smell that has a twist underneath to reflect the fact we feel our agency is colourful, creative and unexpected.

One of the biggest lessons that came out of creating our scent 'logo' was the realisation of the emotional links that people have with smells; they can trigger memories and form strong and deep connections. When Marc Jacobs launched his new range of 'splashes' for Summer 06 he wanted to bottle his favourite summer memories, understanding how powerful smell can be in evoking emotions. He focused on the 'fragrances' of freshly cut grass, cool summer rain and a perfect white cotton t-shirt, each of which also has relevance and therefore emotional appeal for the consumer.

### Conclusion

The possibilities for brands to benefit from scent-sory branding are big, but it has to be relevant to your target audience and how you want them to feel about you. A long-standing example of simple, intelligent implementation is at Thomas Pink, the upmarket shirt retailer. As part of their in-store experience, the smell of freshly laundered shirts wafts through the air, reinforcing nostalgic (and hopefully pleasant) memories of clean washing. There is no doubt that a brand will reach deeper into a consumer's psyche if it can communicate with them on many levels. Smell adds a potent connection because it isn't influenced by reason on the way to the brain. This means it is even more important if you are using scent as part of a brand experience to make it a good one. Both good and bad experiences linger longer in the scent memory.

For brands that do not instantly have that direct, literal link to a smell (such as shirts and fresh laundry), the use of scent within the brand experience needs to involve more imagination to think outside the ordinary and translate the brand's character. In a bookshop, for example, the travel section could smell of sun lotion, while the business section could have a sharp, fresh smell to aid concentration. Or what about the smell of books and paper? This is surely becoming a nostalgic, soon forgotten element of a world quickly being replaced by the internet. Or even the smell of coffee and breakfast to recreate the feeling of relaxation when sitting reading the Sunday papers?

Our sensory future will be defined by those products and services that enhance our experiences and stimulate our less-exploited senses. And with so far only 35% of leading companies predicted to be taking this on board in the next two years, there is still plenty of *air space* available for the smelling.

For those brands considering the scent-sory approach, it really is about relevance and creating an experience. Scent-sory branding doesn't have to be just about selling, it can build a relationship too. Why not have a hospital smelling like a tropical island or an aroma to counteract dustbin lorries? We have also seen it put to good use as an educatory tool in the Department of Health's Anti-Smoking campaign: press adverts with scratch & sniff panels reminded smokers that while their hair may look great, it probably smells like an ashtray.

Our sensory future will be defined by those products and services that enhance our experiences and stimulate our less-exploited senses. Brands that will be most successful will be the ones that use a multi-dimensional approach that defines their identity and unexpectedly reaches out to consumers

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beyond the visual appeal of their environments, advertising or packaging. If executed in the right way, it should result in making relationships deeper. And that is the key. No one wants to be overpowered by a brand's smell - but they do respond well to gentle triggers or signals they can identify with.

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### Credit:

Coley Porter Bell is a strategic brand design agency who has produced award-winning work for brands including Kotex, Macleans, innocent drinks, BP, Canary Wharf and Nestlé. They are part of WPP and were awarded Business Superbrand status in 2005.

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