



How one man's little-known firm is influencing what you buy, feel and eat - using only the power of scent

Sweet Smell of Success



BY CHRISTOPHER MIDDLETON
WITH LOCAL ADDITIONS BY
SALLY MCMULLEN



From pine and gingerbread at Christmas to the smell of dinosaur poo at a museum, scent marketing has become a powerful retail weapon

WHAT WOULD IT HAVE SMELLED LIKE when dinosaurs roamed the earth? How come there's a hint of coconut in swimwear stores? And while we're at it, why do some gyms have the appealing waft of fresh apple instead of sweaty bodies? The answers to these questions can be found locked away in eight corporate offices around the world, starting with the smell factory powerhouse located on the outskirts of Maidenhead in Berkshire, England. Here, secreted inside a series of silver suitcases, are row upon row of tiny glass phials, each containing a different, but instantly identifiable, odour.

REMOVE ONE LID and the air is full of the scent of baby powder. Undo another, and it's garlic bread. Try a third, and suddenly you're in a world of suntan lotion and coconut oil.

And that's just the tip of the olfactory iceberg inside the corporate offices of ScentAir, a company that has, without many people realising it, become Smell Central. Five years ago, the idea of "fragrancing" was almost unheard of. Now it's big business globally, with "olfactory marketing" becoming a carefully targeted retail strategy.

Far from its humble beginnings in an unremarkable-looking building in the UK, ScentAir now has over 1000 employees who have installed over 80,000 deployments with companies across 109 countries around the world. ScentAir's growing list of clients ranges from car dealerships and department stores to theme parks and museum exhibitions, government and defence organisations plus hotels and health-care facilities to name a few.

You thought that deliciously appealing smell in the Ikea store was the aroma of gently baking gingerbread? Sorry, it comes from an electric fan blowing across an artificially created liquid, designed in ScentAir's laboratory to reproduce the whiff of warm cookies. The same goes for that earthy hint of patchouli oil in the Harley-Davidson motorbike showroom. It's coming not from the seasoned leathers of some grizzled biker, but out of a discreetly hidden plastic nozzle.

"Five years ago, I was the only employee," recalls ScentAir founder Christopher Pratt, who trained as a town planner and ran a hot-dog company before turning his attentions to smell. "[In the UK] I've got a team of 12, with salesmen out on the road all the time. And the number of clients has just mushroomed."

ScentAir's machines – which start at £100 a month for installation, servicing and refills – are present in more than 40,000 locations. Clients include

clothes shops (General Pants Co.), theme parks (Sea World, Universal Studios), convenience stores (Bi-Lo and 7-Eleven), hotels (120 branches of Marriott), jewellers (Goldsmiths, Tiffany & Co), London's famous Hamleys toyshop and even Leonardo Di Caprio, who reportedly splurged \$10 million on a New York apartment that comes

under international law. But the International Fragrance Association lists more than 3000 substances that are used in perfume production, with names such as benzonitrile and trimethylloxazole. Scents also come from fruit and other natural sources.

The majority of businesses that employ ScentAir's services want to lull



complete with a ScentAir system.

Walk around one of the huge new Westfield shopping centres in the UK and you'll pass through anything up to half a dozen ScentAir "deployments", as they're called. These bespoke bouquets come with an assortment of name tags. Among some 2000 scents, there are Green Bamboo, White Tea and Thyme, and New-Mown Grass - not to mention Leather Sofa and anything in the vegetable line from Onion to Rosemary.

ScentAir won't divulge how its scientists create smells, partly because it's impossible to copyright a fragrance

customers into a sweet-smelling sense of security, encouraging them to spend longer on the premises and so more money. Numerous academic studies have demonstrated the part that smell-power can play in generating income.

As long ago as 1995, a research programme in Las Vegas found that punters put 45% more cash into slot machines when the room was scented.

Another study, carried out by Dr Alan Hirsch, director of the Smell Taste Treatment and Research Foundation in Chicago, discovered that customers were prepared to pay \$10.33 more

for Nike trainers in a nicely scented shop than in an unscented one. And when the Hard Rock Hotel in Orlando, Florida, decided to use ScentAir's chemically created Sugar Cookie and Waffle Cone fragrance to steer customers towards their in-house ice-cream parlour, takings increased by 45%.

Getting the right scent for a business is a highly scientific process. "The first thing you've got to do is establish your customer profile. Then you choose the fragrances that fit it," says Pratt. "To appeal to female customers, you'll need odours with lots of fruity, fresh, floral notes. Male customers respond better to woody, muskier scents. And people over 40 don't like the aroma to be too aggressive - it puts them off.

ScentAir designed a fragrance for the 2014 Singapore Air Show that would specifically appeal to 30- to 50-year-old males - the air show's target market. "I can't reveal specific ingredients but it was a masculine scent and one of the notes was dark chocolate," reveals Terry Jacobson, ScentAir's Asia Pacific regional manager. "The key thing with fragrance is ambiance - it creates mood, personality and character."

Position is also important. Some shops just install the machines at the entrance, so customers get that distinctive waft when they enter and leave. Others use a variety of fragrances throughout different areas of the store.

"In Singapore, the 313 Somerset shopping mall changes its scent quarterly to match fashion trends," explains Jacobson. "Using a signature scent builds a sense of comfort and familiarity between a branded environment and people visiting (and returning)."

ScentAir also provides "neutralising" odours for businesses at basement level (nightclubs, discos, restaurants), which don't want the unalluring smell of damp. And since New Zealand's Christchurch Airport began using local organic smells of bush-land and golden-sand beaches, tourists have commented how therapeutic the smell is after a long flight.

But some clients want something less pleasant. ScentAir supplies the waft of meth labs and raw sewage for US Homeland Defense Training; the



Phials containing the smell of everything from baby powder to burning tar

smell of dinosaur poo for a children's museum; and the smell of turpentine for an Andy Warhol retrospective art exhibition. While many museums would want to avoid this smell, ScentAir has even created a musty scent for the Singapore ArtScience Museum's exhibition on RMS *Titanic*.

Pratt pauses our conversation, opens a window and reaches into the bottom of a silver suitcase. "I would describe this as the not-so-fragrant end of what we do. Reading from left to right, we have burning tar, bad fish, urine, vomit and faeces." A quick sampling of each phial confirms the accuracy of the ScentAir scientists' work.

Indeed, there's no doubting that, used properly, nose-power is the next best thing to time travel. "Nothing stimulates memory and emotion more than smell. It's extremely deep-rooted in all of us," says Pratt. "When I was little, I used to spend a lot of time with my grandfather in his shed-cum-workshop. The minute I catch a waft of that mixture of wood and oil, I'm transported straight back to being a five-year-old boy."

Compared with the huge amounts of money firms spend on marketing,

WAFTS AND WHIFFS

Ask anyone with a sensitive nose – there's a fine line between a scent being pleasant and it becoming overpowering.

Terry Jacobson explains that ScentAir uses a range of tools to measure airflow and temperature, and a concept called "Scent Time" that allows it to control the fragrance levels based on how long a shopper is typically expected to remain inside a retail space. "We can set intensity by day or part day so, for example, if your shop is busiest around lunch time we could increase the intensity then and drop it after."

public relations and design, explains Pratt, the budget they put aside for smell is tiny.

"But they're now starting to take the importance of odour on board. You can make a shop look a certain way, you can make a shop sound a certain way, and you can make a shop feel a certain way. Put all that together, and you've got an A-rated store. Add an attractive fragrance, and you go straight from A to A+!" **R**

*
*

PARTY POOPERS

The British parliament, under Oliver Cromwell, banned celebrations of Christmas in 1647. Despite the day not being officially reinstated until 1660, many people just ignored the ban and continued with their traditional Twelve Days of Christmas.