

Opinions

Scent branding: Signature fragrances can run afoul

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Scent or stink? Here's why the hospitality industry should, or should not, get into business of signature scents.



By Rachel Roginsky and Allison Fogarty

In the everlasting quest to distinguish one brand from another, scent or aroma branding has proliferated, particularly at the high end of the hospitality industry. Since Wynn pioneered scent branding in casinos, and Starwood popularized it in hotels, it has become harder and harder to find an upscale lodging brand that has not succumbed to the trend. Numerous articles, some in this publication, continue to promote the benefits of signature scents.

Proponents have a convincing rationale: Researchers claim that appropriate scents enhance customer experience, evoke comfort and security and incline patrons to spend more. Research has demonstrated that the sense of smell is among the most sensitive of our senses, and is closely linked to our emotional memories.¹

In theory, positive associations will flood back to us whenever we smell a pleasant odor, forever associating those memories with a brand.

Martin Lindstrom, a frequently quoted brand marketing specialist, sponsored a study that compared the consumer perceptions of identical products examined in scented and unscented environments, which found that 84% of test subjects preferred the product placed in the scented room.² This and other such studies, of course, are heavily promoted by scent branding companies who have no interest in disseminating conflicting information.

However, popular wisdom would indicate that hoteliers should proceed with some caution. Generations of students

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have been advised to avoid wearing cologne, aftershave or perfume to job interviews. Why? Since scent is linked to emotional memories, it is impossible to predict with certainty that interviewers will react positively to any given fragrance. And students are advised to consider what might be the result if the interviewer was hypersensitive or allergic to the fragrance.

Dr. Anne Steinemann, an internationally recognized expert on pollutant exposures and associated health effects, including topics of indoor air quality, investigated consumer preferences regarding fragrances in the environment in 2016. This study found that 34.7% of U.S. adults surveyed reported health problems due to exposure to fragranced products. The most frequent complaints were: respiratory problems (18.6%), mucosal symptoms (16.2%), migraine headaches (15.7%), skin problems (10.6%) and asthma attacks (8.0%). Adverse health effects following exposure to air fresheners and deodorizers was reported by 20.4% of respondents; key issues were respiratory problems (9.5%), mucosal symptoms (7.6%), migraine headaches (7.2%), skin problems (5.7%) and asthma attacks (4.7%). Similar surveys of Australian and Danish populations have generated similar results.³

Significantly for hoteliers, 20.2% of the surveyed population reported that if they enter a business and smell air fresheners or some fragranced product, they want to leave as quickly as possible, and “22.7% indicated that they have been prevented from going to some place because they would be exposed to a fragranced product that would make them sick.”⁴

The actual ingredients of most fragrances are a closely guarded secret, but several studies have determined that they contain a cocktail of volatile organic compounds and phthalates, albeit in very small quantities.⁵ These fragrances are then generally dispersed through the environment with some form of diffuser that breaks them down into a very fine mist which lingers in the air.⁶

Over the past several years, several properties have installed diffusers into ventilation systems, allowing fragrance to be dispersed throughout a property including into the individual guest rooms. For customers with fragrance sensitivities, a night spent in these hotels can be problematic, as there is no easy way to minimize exposure by hightailing it through the public areas into the relative safety of an unscented room.

While several chains have started to offer hypoallergenic rooms—generally for a fee—this may not always be the preferred route for guests. Should a guest with a fragrance allergy be forced to avoid nuts and feathers as well? And should these guests be required to pay extra to avoid something the hotel is actively doing to chemically manipulate the environment?

As an industry, we should consider that chemical sensitivity, including fragrance allergies, may be considered a disability under the ADA requiring “reasonable accommodation.”⁷ Accessible meeting guides already mention the need to address multiple chemical sensitivities, which include fragrances.

Lodging brands targeted at relatively small sub-segments of the travel market been flourishing in recent years. Considering that more than 20% of the population prefer an artificial freshener-free environment, can a brand highlighting unscented air be far behind?

¹Kevin D Bradford & Debra M Desrochers, “The use of Scents to influence Consumers: The Sense of Using Sense to make Cents,” *Journal of Business Ethics*, 90: 141-153 (2009)

²Nigel Hollis, “Smelly Business The Dollars and Sense of Scent Branding” ESOMAR Fragrance 2007 Presentation.

³Anne Steinemann, “Fragranced consumer products: exposures and effects from emissions” *Air Quality, Atmosphere & Health* (2016) 9:861-866 p 863.

⁴Anne Steinemann, “Fragranced consumer products: exposures and effects from emissions” *Air Quality, Atmosphere & Health* (2016) 9:861-866 p 864.

⁵Anne C. Steinemann, Ian C. MacGregor, Sydney M. Gordon, Lisa G. Gallagher, Amy L. Davis, Daniel S. Ribeiro, and Lance A. Wallace, "Fragranced consumer products: Chemicals emitted, ingredients unlisted" Environmental Impact Assessment Review (2010)

⁶Buhler, Brendan, The man behind casinos' scent science, Las Vegas Sun, January 10, 2010

⁷McBride vs. City of Detroit, Case 07-12794, Nov 2008

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