



When scent crosses the ethical line

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If there's one thing I'm superb at, it's leaving the mall with an armful of cinnamon-scented objects every December. I don't especially like the smell of cinnamon – in fact, I associate it with unpacking a shameful séance's worth of scented candles. But it reminds me of holidays past in which my mother pulled off a mirage of jolly order. I appreciate the things it convinces me I am as I ransack the mall three days before Christmas: festive, prepared, on top of my life.

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The projected billion-dollar industry around scent marketing makes it one of the branding world's most pungent moral dilemmas. Ed Burke, director of communications at global scent-marketing company ScentAir, calls scent marketing “the business of emotional transportation.” Carrying the consumer to some place more ideal is the intended result of scent marketing, pursued by everyone from mall food courts to luxury fashion lines.

From a marketing standpoint, the emotional power of scent is good for brand recognition and can enhance the consumer experience. But when a consumer lacks the defences they'd have against a hammy billboard they see or a melodramatic radio jingle they hear, some suggest the approach is too sly – especially as it becomes a more commonplace tactic.

At Orlando's Hard Rock Hotel, ScentAir used sugar-cookie and waffle-cone smells to “act as aroma billboards” that lured guests toward the hotel's ice-cream shop. For Alberta-based homebuilding company Jayman, ScentAir designed a white tea and fig scent for its sales centre and show homes.

“It's fresh yet sophisticated,” says Jayman's director of marketing, Careen Chrusch. “It doesn't take away from the visual experience, and helps solidify the positive memories [consumers] have when they think of our brand.”

Hugo Boss began selling signature-scented tamboti wood and tonka bean candles after consumers

praised the smell of its retail locations and, like my aspirational cinnamon trigger, wanted to take the smell home.

A study conducted by Chicago's Smell & Taste Treatment and Research Foundation claimed the amount of money gambled into Las Vegas slot machines increased by 45 per cent if the venue smelled good.

"Scent affects mood and scent affects emotion," says Kevin Bradford, a marketing professor at the University of Notre Dame's Mendoza College of Business. "It works without you having the opportunity to filter it. To me, that is extremely unethical."

According to Aradhna Krishna, a professor at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business, scent marketing falls into the category of sensory marketing. In her book, *Customer Sense: How the 5 Senses Influence Buying Behavior*, she defines sensory marketing as "marketing that engages the consumer's senses and affects their perception, judgment and behaviour." Krishna says that "no other cue is as potent as a scent-based cue," and explains that the structure of the human brain is responsible for the close link between memory and smell. The olfactory bulb, which handles smell, resides near the amygdala, which handles emotion, and the hippocampus, which processes memories.

Dawn Goldworm, co-founder of the New York-based olfactive-branding firm 12.29, helpfully divides scent marketing into two specific categories: ambient scenting, which uses pre-existing smells, such as movie-theatre popcorn, to recall consumer memory, and olfactive branding – what 12.29 does – which creates signature scents based on a brand's qualitative traits and specific clientele. For New York clothing designer Zac Posen, 12.29 blended saffron, orange blossom and leather to channel what 12.29 calls the "Zac Posen Woman" – hard-working, fun and sensual.

The Canadian Marketing Association's code of ethics states that marketers must not knowingly mislead consumers. In the United States, the Federal Communications Commission says it is unethical to transmit information below the consumer's threshold of awareness. According to Bradford, "scent could be introduced to the environment at a level lower than what consumers could possibly detect, and it would still affect their emotions. Consumers should be able to detect the things that are influencing them."

What ethicists such as Bradford call manipulative, many marketers say is just beautifying the consumer experience. "Communication using the sense of smell is just logical," Burke says.

Is scent marketing devious? Perhaps. Does it work? Let's ask my collection of cinnamon-scented candles.

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