

Fine Fragrance Business Trends

SITARAM DIXIT

Senior Manager – Fragrance Applications
International Flavours & Fragrances India Ltd.
E-mail: sitaram.dixit@iff.com

Aromatic brews flaunting, gossamer-like qualities like power, mystery, sport, sensuality, passion, practicality, etc. have always beckoned and bewitched humans, down the ages. Prayer or penance, to cure or to conquer, fragrances were intertwined with the lives of the ancients, finding immortality in civilisations, especially amongst the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Mesopotamians, the Romans, the Indians, etc.

Consumer preferences and desire for different and newer fragrances in any age were and are closely related to social and economic development.

Ability to sell repeatedly

The real test of marketing a fragranced product is not to sell once, but also ensure that the consumer buys the product again.

The success of any fine fragrance depends not only on the co-ordination and interrelationship of the many phases of creativity, but also in fulfilling the continually increasing consumer consumption and demand. It is no doubt simple to sell almost anything the first time around, but the ability to sell the product repeatedly to the same consumer largely depends on its intrinsic value.

People groom themselves to bolster their self-assurance in dealing with people in their sphere of influence. The fragrance used should be appropriate to their personalities, with the delicate breath of their fragrance gently stressing their charms. A person chooses a product based on the fragrance that dis-

cretely outlines the individualistic features of their personality. The choice of a fragrance is the stylish co-ordination of personality and is a matter of good taste. Fragrance selected should be unobtrusive and reserved, giving an impression of being aesthetic. The fragrance should enchant and fascinate, without tending to be extravagant.

People are sensitive to odours and resent one who spreads a cloud of intense odour around at every motion. A person doing so will strike us as being showy and bothersome, no matter how popular the fragrance is. It is only the veiled odour phenomenon that playfully approaches, but is capriciously withdrawn, that is appreciated as mystically attractive and alluring.

Concept of a fine fragrance

The total concept of a fine fragrance is vastly different today. Customers and marketing personnel often compare a fragrance creation with successes of the past and expect to replicate the same success story. Often, one fails to remember the cost of creation, effort and the time spent to create the super success. Let us also not forget the fact that earlier successes were achieved without market research and consumer tests. Perfumers used to create fragrances using their inspiration and personal likes and dislikes.

The fragrances were applied in their respective product forms and sold to consumers. Fragrances were pure works of art, a harmonious olfactive mixture that complemented their persona-

lity and spread a mysterious charm all around, giving a feeling of freedom and liberation.

Today a fragrance is successful not on the perfumers creative ability and fragrance quality alone, but also on concept selling, product management, customers view point, appearance or presentation, marketing, endorsements, publicity, product distribution and finally consumer requirements.

Demands on fragrances

Fashion and lifestyle living now have a major role to play in fragrance preference. Fragrances were purchased and worn to strengthen ones personality and charm. Nowadays, people buy because it is supposed to provide a personality, according to modern day's lifestyle requirement and promises made in keeping one up-to-date with the latest fragrance trends.

Fragrances now have very similar requirements as consumer goods. It requires large investments in marketing, presentation and publicity for commercial success.

This does not mean that fine fragrances are far from artistic creations, but merely states that commercial rules have to be followed during creation, while retaining the same quality followed in earlier times.

Clients today believe fragrances to be simple mixtures of aromatic materials and not a harmonious accord achieved with difficulty. Fragrances are

graded according to the price of the raw material used to create them, as it is easy to decipher the fragrance composition with modern analytical methods. Cost of creation, technical application and research, evaluation and panel testing are largely ignored in the calculations. Ironically, without hesitation, we purchase a marble carving or a canvas painting at exorbitant price, much more than the cost of the marble stone or the cost of canvas and paint, but reluctant to spend similarly on a fine fragrance purchase.

Fragrance is to odour what music is to sound. However, it depends on what we consider as music. Music that resembles noise more than melody is popular today. Louder the noise, larger is its popularity. Can we say the same about perfumery? Perfumers today, create fragrances in the quickest possible time, very similar to products popular in the market. During evaluation and consumer testing fragrance created are generally compared with more or less the same benchmarks.

The market eventually ends up monotonous, having a host of look alikes with a true connoisseur suffering the tyranny of sameness. Very similar to the popularity of out-of-tune loud music, people prefer stronger fragrances that may no longer be unique and sophisticated. Loud music can lead to improper hearing; can we extrapolate it in perfumery as olfactively deafness?

Slaves of market dynamics

We live in a democratic society where evolution of market requirements is continuous and cannot survive if one does not change with the times. Fragrance is born out of creative intuition and playful imagination. No doubt, it is wonderful to create unique mind bogging fragrances, but one cannot also ignore

the hard realities in life that have to be faced. Fragrances created have to be adapted to fall in line with market rules and requirements albeit by force of market dynamics.

Fragrance creation now has to make use of consumer and market research reports, in addition to the perfumer's intuition and knowledge of the ingredients to obtain originality and efficiency at the most competitive prices. This obviously is not easy, but then there is no way out. One not only has to accomplish it but also improve upon it more as an ongoing basis.

Fragrance creation

The customer presents the consumer profile to the perfumer. The perfumer, in turn, has to strive and translate the image into reality, using all available creative skills directing the creative effort towards the customer's concept of the consumer's requirement. The fragrance profile is the basis for directing all fragrance creation requests.

The profile is interpreted to the perfumer in several ways possible. Ideally it starts with a dialogue between the fragrance company representative and the product or brand manager of the manufacturing company.

From these first discussions, various elements are reviewed to help the perfumer understand the fragrance direction, target audience, key demographic and psychographic characteristics, competition, product formulation, concept positioning and all other aspects to be considered for fragrance direction. Base materials and delivery systems are evaluated and provisions made for product compatibility, stability and toxicological testing.

Another method of communication is

between the fragrance supplier's representative and the manufacturer technical group. To add to the confusion, a fragrance evaluation group is generally used to evaluate the created fragrance and also the perfumers themes, thus introducing one more dimension in the interpretation of the required fragrance profile. A major drawback of these systems is the lack of dialogue between the creative perfumer and the consumer – the maker and the user. Very often it is a hit or misses, at least in the first trials.

The customer generally ends up choosing the fragrance with the least of the several evils, without realising the fact that the perfumer may not have interpreted the consumer requirement of the fragrance profile as precisely as perceived by the product or marketing manager. This results in the consumer not receiving the perfumer's creative talent to the fullest and has to be satisfied with a fragrance profile that does not meet with their expectations.

Another important fact is the time given to the perfumer to create the fragrance. Creative perfumery takes time. To create a genuinely original, interesting new fragrance in a couple of weeks can only be a matter of conjecture.

To be effective in today's market the perfumer's creation should be commercially viable. A commercially viable fragrance means it has to show an accepted trend, be recognised by the public and by the panel of testers. Fragrance communication is difficult, as there is no common or accepted vocabulary to describe odour.

The lack of common language make the exchange of information more difficult for the perfumer to interpret and understand demand, especially if the direction given is vague and indecisive. A new fragrance is created only when the per-

fumer is being innovative. The perfumer starts creating with personal ideas and feelings.

In today's real world, however the perfumer has to respond to the request that include very specific directional requirements. It can be for a new fragrance line or the modification of the existing fragrance.

The real measure of a perfumer's creativity lies in how the perfumer interprets the profile direction. To create a good fragrance from a great number of accords by using the available natural and synthetic aromatic notes is the challenge.

The fragrance theme

The fragrance theme decides the success or failure of a concept. Selecting a theme is the most important critical step in fragrance development. Theme selection is generally done by the close interaction between the creative perfumer, the technical and the evaluation group. This cooperation is necessary if the fragrance selected has to be anywhere close to the required theme.

A painter organises colours on the palette. The perfumer too likewise organises aromatic substances through odour classification. Generally the perfumer simplifies requirements for the right smell by the preparation of pre-blended bases, containing a dozen ingredients to obtain the desired effect, fully aware that to maximise the required level of effect, the blends are put together only by selecting aroma ingredients that work best in the combination.

When fragrance brief is received for creation, the perfumer considers a group of odours available so that a general basic sketch is drawn. However, it has to be well balanced and interacting, as it

represents the framework of a finished fragrance. The sketch has to be strong and represent a distinctive characteristic, if it has to become popular and famous.

Balance between the notes

In any fragrance, the nose recognises the top, middle and base notes. These notes when well adjusted are the building blocks of a fragrance idea. After a best sketch is selected a balance of the top, middle and base note is achieved. This is done by starting with the middle notes and then working toward the bottom and top note, keeping in mind that the fragrance is in harmony throughout the creative process.

A top, middle and base note varies from fragrance to fragrance. A top note in a fairly heavy oriental can be the middle note of a lighter less pronounced fragrance. In any case, the fragrance created should be aesthetically pleasing with the different elements.

The aroma ingredients used in the creation should get fully integrated in the blend without distorting the original concept.

A perfectly balanced fragrance at any given concentration may not be at balance at another concentration level. It is erroneous to expect a fragrance at 6% concentration to be as good at 15% or 25% levels. In an extract the top notes are played down, when compared with cologne, as in an extract the middle note is important for good fixation, unlike in cologne where the fresh top note is necessary.

Similarly if an extract is diluted from 20% or 25% strength to cologne strength of 6%, it will lack top note and not have enough fixation. In this case you need to increase top note, reduce middle notes

and increase base notes to improve fixation. A unique balance has to be optimised for various alcohol concentrations, as well as for different end-product forms.

We know how an artist uses bright colours to highlight a painting. Similarly, a fragrance has to have a touch of citrus, green or floral notes to highlight a creation. This highlight is more pronounced if the top is in contrast with the heavy base note, very similar to a painting, where the brightness gets highlighted in a dark background tone.

The middle notes are the most important part of any fragrance, as it delivers the statement one wishes to communicate. It can vary from floral to herbaceous lavender, to spicy. The base notes should be solid to carry the compound, but at the same time not heavy enough to pull down all the fragrance complexities.

In any case, the top, middle and base notes should be linked evenly, as only this continuity can bring about a fragrance creation having a great body without any holes.

A blend without interruptions ensures a fragrance with proper depth. A fragrance with depth is a fragrance where the base notes come up to the top and play with our nose in the first sniff, similar to a low tone in music that play with our ears, complementing along with a high tones.

Assessment of a fine fragrance

Although preliminary assessment to determine character and balance of the fragrance can be performed on a blotting strip, the final evaluation should be done in an applied product the way it is going to be used by the consumer. This step will give early warning of improper

stability, any product changes, discoloration observed, etc.

An extract or cologne should also be evaluated by use on the skin, in addition to the blotting strip assessment. An important consideration in evaluating a fine fragrance is the question of aging or maturation. Notes like amber and musk tend to get stronger during maturation. Green notes and aldehydes that are overpowering initially get mellowed down with age. It may be prudent for the perfumer to set the base aside for a while and then go back to it, check and adjust the ingredient proportion before final application and evaluation.

Innovation in any business function is very critical for development, for beating the competition and for increasing market share and profits. Strategies that

were very successful yesterday may not serve the challenges of tomorrow and one has to rethink strategies and models, to be successful.

"Get innovative or be dead" has been the statements of many business gurus. An old Chinese proverb states, "Man must sit in a chair with the mouth open for a very long time, before roast duck fly in." God does give every bird its food, but he does not throw it into the nest. Similarly, we have to work for what we need or want.

Innovation is very much, the result of a directed action of creative expression and entrepreneurial behaviour, that all stem from oneself.

To be a successful one should be driven by a strong sense of personal mis-

sion, constantly challenging oneself, leading to change in leaps and bounds, than incrementally. An idea does not come by itself. We have to look outwardly, everywhere, and at all times seeking connections from varied areas and consciously work hard for them.

The creation of a fine fragrance involves far more than just the translation of an abstract idea into a commercially viable product. Right from the beginning there should be a clear understanding between all the concerned stakeholders as to what exactly have to be accomplished. Constant communication and the combined use of talents in marketing, technical, evaluation and creative perfumery is necessary if goals have to be reached and greater strides have to be made for future fragrance development.