

# The insider

## Putting Out Fires

A day in the life of the small fragrance house perfumer

By Robert Siegel

**T**he small house perfumer wears many hats—fragrance creator, customer liaison, writer, crisis manager, last-minute shopper and more. Here, author Robert Siegel presents a frank, humorous view from the trenches, offering a look inside the ever-evolving day-to-day responsibilities, pressures and quirks of the fragrance business.

### 9:00 AM

Monday morning. I arrive at work, ready to tackle several new projects due this week. On the way, I had been thinking about how I want to finish that pomegranate fragrance I've been working on for one of our West Coast candle customers, reassuring myself vehemently that it's not a big rush, even though I've had it on my desk for a few days, and now I finally have a chance to work on it, after having been occupied all of last week creating several new baby wipe fragrances for a prominent client.

### 9:15 AM

Checking email. Here's one from our purchasing agent:

"Help! Production is making an old formula, and needs a replacement for mousse de chene yuogo absolute. We last purchased it from Camilli, Albert & Laloue in 1989."

OK, I can assist. I look at our inventory list of oakmoss absolutes. Seems we have about 10 of them, though I see we have no stock on most. We need to clean up this list someday. OK, here's one that seems close.

"Use code number 3232," I tell her. "We're better off anyway, since it is IFRA-safe. I know this raises the raw material cost by 14 cents, but that old material's price was outdated anyway."

We'll worry about that later.



*2:00 PM: I do an initial evaluation of the aloe vera fragrance; it needs more green rose notes, more fruity apple ...*

### 9:30 AM

My manager bursts into my office.

"There's a new baby wipe on the market with an aloe vera fragrance," he says. "That customer we submitted the wipes to last week wants a quick duplication to add to their fragrance profile."

"Do we even have that product here?" I ask.

"No," says my manager, "someone has to run to the store and pick it up, so we can extract it and give it to analytical. Do you mind?"

Of course not. I was hoping to get outside today. So I take a drive, and to my pleasant surprise have to stop at several stores before I find what we need.

#### 10:00 AM

I'm back in the lab. The fragrance and analytical directors are in a managerial meeting. Who can do the extraction? Well, time's a-wasting. I squeeze out the water from the wipes and give it a few rinses in methylene chloride in a separatory flask. I let it sit for 30 minutes or so. That's about all we have time for. A few more shakes, then I draw off the excess solvent in the Rotovapor. OK, I'm down to about a milliliter. Don't want to evaporate it all away and have to start over.

#### 11:00 AM

I give the extraction sample to analytical.

"We need this run ASAP," I say.

"What? This is *not* on our project list, and we have 10 other items to look at first."

"Believe me," I say, "this is a rush. The salesman is entering it in as a project as we speak."

"Well, I suppose we can find room," analytical responds, "but you understand we won't have time to look at the chromatograph and identify the peaks."

"Fine" I say, "just put it through the GC/MS, and give me the results. *I* will do the interpretation."

#### 11:30 AM

I've finally found time to have a look at that pomegranate project, only to get a phone call from our West Coast sales rep.

"How's that pomegranate fragrance going?" she asks.

"I'm just looking at it now," I reply.

"Do you think you can get it out today?"

"No," I say, "I don't think so. I've got another rush project going; besides, this has a Friday due date."

"Well, see what you can do. I know it's a small company, but they promise to buy 25 or 50 pounds."

And that of course will lead to multiple drums. But no project is too small not to be worthy of my full attention. We spend several minutes going back and forth, basically bargaining my available time against what I know it will take to tackle this project correctly.

## Perfumers on the Job

We want to hear about *your* working day and creative process. What are the biggest challenges you face? What do you do to work smarter and faster? Send tips and stories (on the record or off) to [jallured@allured.com](mailto:jallured@allured.com).

In the end I tell her, "I'll finish it this week," thinking about how I could have been working on it rather than wasting half an hour on the phone.

#### 12:00 PM

Analytical returns the duplication run, and I take a look at the results. This "aloe vera" fragrance seems very powdery, high in heliotropine, methyl ionone, cedarwood, patchouli and phenyl ethyl alcohol. A few peaks won't have a completely successful match in our in-house library, but I'm able to make some educated guesses from my own retention time list and knowledge

from working in analytical. I make up a base formula and hand it to a technician to compound, before grabbing a quick bite for lunch.

#### **1:00 PM**

Back from lunch.

“Did you compound that formula I gave you?” I ask the technician.

“No, I’m sorry,” he says. “I got a rush sample request to make 5 lbs of ‘Strawberry Surprise’ fragrance for a customer who was short in its trial run. The manager approved the request.”

Well, what’s the point in arguing now? Apparently there are degrees of ‘rushes’ I am unaware of. I take the formula back and compound it myself.

#### **1:30 PM**

I make up the formula; it’s mixing now. I decide to use this time to go back to that pomegranate fragrance. Unfortunately, a colleague comes in to inform me that a representative from Company X-Y-Z is here showing some new fragrance materials.

“Can you stop by the conference room?”

“Well, I’m really pretty busy,” I say.

“But it will just take a few minutes,” says my colleague. “The rep wants to say hello to you.”

I tell myself, OK, I suppose I could use a break.

#### **2:00 PM**

I do an initial evaluation of the aloe vera fragrance.

It needs more green rose notes and fruity apple, and there is a melon-cucumber note in the original that I am missing. I make an experiment sample by adding a little dimethyl benzyl carbonyl butyrate, Verdox (IFF), Melonal (Givaudan) and a touch of rose oxide, and also bring up the levels of some of the things I saw in the extraction. After mixing 10 more minutes, it smells pretty close—for just being a quick extraction. But I should really put it up in a wipe base. I go to applications. Apparently, somebody called in sick today and they are swamped. Well, I’m used to that. I put it up myself.

#### **2:30 PM**

I show my colleagues the wipe prototypes.

“Not bad,” they say, “but it needs more heliotropine. Did you try adding a little caraway oil? I think the rose oxide is too high.”

“Alright, I can see that,” I say. “Thanks.”

A few more experiments, a few more prototypes, and at last I have something we all agree is good enough to send. Add a little labdanum absolute for a natural soft fruity background, and we've got a winner here.

### 3:30 PM

I put though the paperwork with customer service for labels, and find they need a spec sheet and MSDS with the sample. I go ahead and run the flash point, specific gravity and refractive index to generate that.

And 8 oz of oil plus the prototypes? Well, I have everything out at my bench, so I go ahead and make it.

### 4:30 PM

OK, the sample is ready to go. Wait, the salesman wants to smell it.

"Is there any heliotropine in this?" he asks.

"Why, yes, almost 10%," I say. "Can't really add any more at this point."

"Well, OK, I guess I can live with it.

By the way, can you write up a marketing description also?"

No problem. I write: "This fragrance opens with a fresh leafy top with a touch of honeydew melons, blending into a soft floral heart of rose, violets and powdery accords, and a smooth patchouli and cedarwood finish."

### 5:00 PM

I need to get the fragrance, prototypes and paperwork packaged before Fed Ex arrives. Our shipping manager has left for the day, so it's up to me to get it done. No problem. At least I know it won't get left on the shipping table overnight. I bring it to the Fed Ex box just as the driver is felicitously pulling up.

### 5:30 PM

My manager says good night to me before he leaves.

"Great job today. I hope we get a hit from this; we've certainly bent over backwards for the customer."

"Just another day," I reply.

As I sign off my computer for the day, I promise myself, *Tomorrow you'll work on that pomegranate fragrance.*

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