

Focus on the Perfumers

Perfumers' visibility, the prospects of free agency, finding a fragrance language and other highlights from the American Society of Perfumers' 54th annual fragrance symposium

Will the Perfumers Please Step Forward?

Today, nearly every creative endeavor has its own reality show—food, fashion, music and more. These programs dissect craft, technique, and provide engrossing behind-the-scenes insights into the creative processes and personalities involved. “People want to know what’s going on,” said Jan Moran, CEO of Crescent House Publishing, a panelist at the American Society of Perfumer’s 54th Annual Fragrance Symposium. “This is why reality shows are so popular.”

What are we to understand, then, from the absence of a perfumer reality show? As moderator and perfumer Jim Krivda put it: Are perfumers important to the public?

“To appreciate a perfumer I think you need to appreciate the art of how fragrance is made,” said Ann Gottlieb, president of Ann Gottlieb Associates. “It’s something we [in the United States] need to do better. I think it would help us out of the doldrums we’re in as a market to a degree.” In the United States, Gottlieb added, marketers have not taken great strides to merchandize perfumers. Conversely, in Europe the perfumer is so important that many marketers show more interest in the formulators than the house doing the development.

“The perfumers are the new celebrity,” said Marian Bendeth of Sixth Scents. “They are as important in the press kits to the media and buyers as the designer. And because they are far more visible—due to Chandler [Burr’s] books and bloggers, etc.—there are shrines built to perfumers right now on the internet. And we have to give Frédéric Malle a lot of credit. He allowed the perfumers to have their names on the products.” Bendeth went on to make her case for perfumers to make in-store perfumers, believing that consumers and sales staff alike would respond enthusiastically. She acknowledged that not all perfumers are comfortable being in the limelight but that those who were would have a profound opportunity to share knowledge and grow. She added, “I’d like to see credit where credit is due.”

“From a consumer perspective, it’s about transparency,” said David Frederick, chief idea officer of Alive Idea Media Group. “Consumers want to understand the inspiration behind a fragrance, the entire story from its beginning to its completion, and participate and control that discussion, allowing them to become invested in the brand.”

Marketing and communications specialist Michelle Krell Kydd pointed out that, in the age of Web 2.0, consumers are better able than ever before to educate

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(l to r) Cosimo Policastro, Marvel Fields and honoree Roman Kaiser.

Attending the ASP pre-symposium dinner were (l to r) honoree Lambert Dekker and Michel Mane.



Panelists (l to r) Ann Gottlieb, David Frederick, Chandler Burr and Marian Bendeth; for our full ASP photo album, visit perfumerflavorist.com/photos.

themselves and each other, changing the dynamics among themselves, products and brands. “They’re finding books, they’re finding Jean Carles’ charts, they’re sharing with each other,” she said. “There’s so much potential for you [the perfumers] to come out from behind the curtain, but you’re going to have to motivate the [customer] companies to do that with you. This is the time.”

Moran, whose touch screen Scentsa technology is in a number of retail stores, noted that retailers consistently want to use perfumers' identities to sell fragrances. "Our customers want to know who is behind these creations," she said. "They need more information about you [perfumers], personally. They follow your work, something that can be a real point of difference in the marketplace."

A Passion for Mentorship and Technical Excellence

Lifetime Achievement Award: Lambert Dekker

Lambert Dekker, senior vice president and chief perfumer at Takasago, has spent more than 40 years in perfumery. Technically inclined, he is well known for making fragrances that, according to presenter Gus van Loveren, "are almost impossible to make."

"Because of my engineering background, I always had a very systematic approach to fragrance projects," said Dekker, accepting the award. For this reason, he migrated from fine fragrance formulation to the technically challenging world of laundry, home and personal care scents. Over the years, said Dekker, he has worked with teams that have "been able to create fragrances that perform miracles." Looking at the range of performance—from counteracting or preventing malodors—he wondered at the potential of perfumery.

Dekker also addressed two of his primary professional passions: the safety of fragrances and mentoring the next generation. "Today, great perfumery is seriously hampered by regulators who confuse hazard with risk," he said, adding that this has degraded into what he called "political toxicology." This, he said, has affected fragrance quality and cost. Acknowledging the efforts of the International Fragrance Association (IFRA) and Research Institute for Fragrance Materials in keeping the public safe, Dekker urged fragrance houses and customers: "Let's just stick to real science and follow the IFRA standards."

"I strongly believe that it is my—and our—duty to advance perfumery by training another generation," he added. A strong mentor, he said, not only teaches, but remains actively involved in projects to continuously learn new techniques. Dekker explained that proper education can make young perfumers more successful sooner. Thus, he typically assigns younger and more seasoned perfumers onto the same larger projects. The challenges for these young perfumers, he explained, is only growing—compressed development periods, demands for "natural" fragrances, cost issues, regulatory requirements, functional needs, etc.

"Being a great perfumer requires, skill, tenacity and optimism," he concluded. "I think it's one of the most beautiful and rewarding fields I can imagine."

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-Michelle Krell Kydd, marketing and communications specialist

"I don't think consumers know enough about perfumers," added PerfumeCritic.com blogger Marlen Harrison. "I often hear people say 'I love this fragrance, I'd love to see what else this perfumer has done.' And that's very different from saying 'I love Calvin Klein's fragrances, I'd love to see what else they've done.'"

Perfumer Visibility: Complications and Opportunities

"The level of paranoia is amazing," said author and *New York Times* perfume critic Chandler Burr. To illustrate, he recounted an interaction he'd had with a brand. "These guys [the brand managers] would not let people know who the perfumers were. They're actually putting out misinformation on who created the perfumes." Burr blamed the problem on "years of suppression by the brands: 'Don't come out of the shadows, don't show yourself, don't talk about yourself.' It's a terrible culture."

"I think this is an almost trickle-up concept," said Gottlieb. "It's really only in the last few years that fragrance houses [have been] promoting perfumers to their customers. They will indicate which fragrances were done by which perfumers. It really needs to happen from the houses. We have a long way to go."

Perfumer-marketed Scents: Could Perfumers Become Free Agents?

"Can you imagine a world with perfumer agents?" asked Burr. Even in today's context there are numerous classically trained perfumers working in the industry with varying degrees of autonomy, some even boasting their own brands and custom creations. But could the industry survive perfumers moving into free agency?

Burr recounted a conversation he'd had with a senior fragrance executive, who told him, "We recognize that you can sell [perfumers'] personality." The executive acknowledged that perfumers are actual people with stories to tell. But, the source added, "This is one of the reasons we don't go into it: we don't want the free agency aspect." Burr noted the tide-turning effect that free agency has had on professional sports such as baseball: players, who had once been subordinate to the team, have now become more important than the team. Fragrance companies, he contended, are afraid of perfumers becoming stars and demanding much larger salaries (or even walking away altogether to act as independents). "It's interesting," he said. "You [perfumers] could make a lot more money; your lives could be a lot more volatile. You guys could sell a lot more perfume."

When Krivda asked whether individual perfumers should have their own Web sites, Frederick said, “Absolutely. [The Web is] the future of connecting with consumers and how they connect back to [brands].” Harrison added, “The internet is definitely benefiting niche perfume. There are so many perfumers that are selling their own perfumes on the internet.” The Web, Frederick continued, has allowed consumers to become part of the marketing process. This is not only true for niche and independent brands, but for the multinationals as well.

Kydd, a strong advocate for fragrance industry adoption of the Web, said, “I think some of the houses may want to collaborate with the companies manufacturing the fragrances to think about how blogs can be created inside corporations that will help consumers with information.”

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—Ann Gottlieb, Ann Gottlieb Associates

Gottlieb, meanwhile, was cautious. “It’s still tough to sell fragrance if you can’t smell it,” she said. “We’re in the infant stages as far as [the internet is] concerned because the industry here is built from the top down.”

It’s About the Fragrance, Stupid

Living Legend Award: Camille McDonald

“Perfumers make magic and miracles out of molecules, and you do it against the odds every day,” said Camille McDonald, president of brand development and merchandising at Bath and Body Works (BBW). “Whether it’s our wacky industry practice that forces you to create the fragrance before you know you have the job, or that you relinquish the fate of your creation to the customer’s design and marketing resources—all that demands a very special breed of passion, perseverance and courage. That’s the stuff of legends.”

McDonald paid tribute to some of the perfumers that have graced her career, including James Bell, Harry Fremont, Laurent LeGuernec, Annie Buzantian, Jim Krivda, John Gamba, Frank Voekl and Steve DeMercado. “Only two years ago,” said McDonald, “*Japanese Cherry Blossom*—one of Harry Fremont’s fragrances—launched BBW’s first oriental [scent]. This year, that fragrance alone will deliver \$140 million at retail in the United States, making it far and away America’s number one fragrance.”

Echoing political strategist James Carville’s famous dictum, McDonald told the audience, “Now and forever it truly is about the fragrance, stupid.”

Capturing Nature

Tribute to Roman Kaiser

Roman Kaiser, the legendary research fellow, is celebrating 40 years with Givaudan. For the last 33 years, he has famously focused almost exclusively on the investigation, collection and reconstitution of 2,500-plus exotic natural materials. These Scent Treks (Givaudan) have lead Kaiser to more than 50 global locales, where he has captured the scents of vanishing flora. In accepting his honor, the scientist said he has always been “trying to understand how nature creates its fragrances.”

Fragrance Lacks a Coherent Language

How do we explain the lackluster excitement and prestige surrounding fine fragrance today? Everyone on the panel agreed that the problem springs in part from serious disconnects among fragrance houses, marketers, in-store staff and consumers. Much of this is a question of language and education.

“The onus is on the people training the people who are working at counter,” said Kydd. “It’s about the art and what’s being conveyed to them. What are we giving them to make them excited so they can make the consumer excited?”

“Get rid of the notes,” suggested Burr, deriding such marketing ambiguities as “amber.” Gottlieb sympathized. “The way most companies talk about fragrances—top, middle, dry—goes way over people’s heads and they can’t relate to it,” she said. “We’re dealing with something that’s so difficult to comprehend. How do you transmit to a client what a fragrance smells like?”

Burr suggested technical honesty, highlighting the actual contents of fragrances in marketing. “Instead of saying ‘this has notes of rose and praline and jasmine’ and all that, what you could say is: ‘This has a fabulous ... natural pink peppercorn.’ It’s a real raw material, it’s the truth—you’re taking [consumers] behind the scenes.”

But Gottlieb wondered aloud if that was really the way to sell the romance of what perfumers do, highlighting a long-running rift between two camps: those who believe technical details ruin the magic of perfumery and those who believe consumers are hungry for it. “There’s a certain amount of romance around fragrance as an art form,” said Harrison, pointing out that many consumers associate fragrance with metaphors, ideas and memories—ethereal components. “That’s what fascinates me about this industry. How do we have language that people understand when we’re talking about chemicals?”

“I really disagree,” said Burr. “You’re not going to sell any more little lovely abstract tone poems. Yes, there is a mystery to [perfumery], but people want to see behind the scenes, the strings and the wires.”

“Some people want more details, other people want language that’s florid, that gives them the feeling when they see it,” said Kydd. “It depends on the person. We can’t block emotion. It’s not in [fragrance’s] nature.”

Burr added that there is room for creative, but hon-

est, language in fragrance descriptions.^o “I was talking to some people about a fragrance and described its structure as linear, and they said, ‘Wow, I never thought of the idea of a perfume being linear.’ There’s so much language we could use.”

“Sometimes it depends who you’re speaking to,” said Kydd. “Metaphors are good. Maybe the more intellectual part of the population could grasp that. We’re not necessarily talking to all those people.”

“We need to create experiences that bring our brands to life and connect to consumers on their terms,” Frederick added. “The people that represent our brands need to be completely embracing that experience in order to articulate what that fragrance is about.”

Issues of language aside, Bendeth’s concerns focused on a lack of education and familiarity among fragrance buyers, journalists and PR staff, many of whom she pointed out do not regularly wear fragrance. “We need proper information [in-store], because there is misinformation being imparted at counter level. There are store employees who don’t care ... We should demand respect.”

“This is the perfect time” for more education, said Kydd. “Fragrance sales aren’t exactly booming. There’s so much sameness in the marketplace.” She added that a great deal of marketers—many of them talented—lack any true understanding of fragrance. “If you’re selling a car, shouldn’t you know what it’s like to sit in it and drive? If the marketer doesn’t know, how is the consumer going to know? And how is the marketer going to know how to make a good decision? That’s a really big problem.”

Moran concurred, pointing out that retail staff are stretched thin largely due to excess launches. “They have a hard time processing that much information,” she said. “The new [in-store staffers] don’t have that frame of reference of the classic brands. There’s a lot of fabulous information on the internet, but they’re at work, they don’t have PCs on the floor and they don’t have the time to read the information that you wonderful [bloggers and authors] are writing. The customers are bringing in information. They’ve printed out volumes of material, and then the sales associates feel intimidated because they don’t have that same access to the information.”

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—Lambert Dekker, Takasago

Are Fragranced Products Cannibalizing Fine Fragrance?

At one point, Krivda wondered if consumers aren’t shunning fine fragrance in favor of olfactive expression via the more sophisticated air care, detergent and cleaning products available on the market. “I had a client say to me, ‘I don’t want to clean the bathtub, then the toilet and

^o For example, a passage from Burr’s August 27, 2006 review of Guerlain’s *Rose Barbare*: “The result sweeps over you like the silent, massive shadow of an Airbus A340, a tactile component that makes you narrow your eyes.”

“Polish your story. More and more of you are joining sales calls to participate in feedback. It’s very helpful for you to participate. The more of a relationship you establish with your company’s clients, the more the clients are going to want to be there to engage. It’s your responsibility as much as your company’s to make that link, to make your customers want to be with you.”

—Ann Gottlieb’s advice to perfumers

then put it on my neck,” said Bendeth. “She said, ‘This fragrance smells like my cleaner.’”

Gottlieb added, “With fragrance being such an important—and growing—part of personal care and cleaning products, a lot of women get their fragrance from that and don’t feel the need to use more personal fragrances, because they’re surrounded by fragrance all the time. There isn’t a product around now that is not finding ways of stating that there is perfume in the product. We are little by little potentially replacing wearing fragrance with ... being surrounded by scent.”

“Angel Couldn’t Happen Again:” the Flood of Launches

It wouldn’t be a fragrance industry event without mention of the dizzying number of perfume launches. “Everything that we’re talking about here is related to the fact that the American public is not getting the quality fragrances that they used to get,” said Gottlieb, adding that “it doesn’t appear that we’re going to stop launching at the rate we are.

“Because of the profits of the big companies ... they tend to let brands that don’t show immediate success fall by the wayside, which is one of the reasons we’re seeing so many new fragrance launches,” said Gottlieb. “We don’t pay attention to the brand and let it grow like we used to. *Angel* couldn’t happen again. There isn’t a company that would launch a fragrance and nurture it and [give it] time to grow. We want instant success, which is why we talk the openings of fragrances.”

Sorting Through the Green Hype

When it comes to natural, organic or sustainable scents, Bendeth expressed a pragmatic attitude. “There’s room for everything,” she said. “It’s another expression of perfumery. Let the customer tell you whether they want to spend money on it or not.”

“They need to know what it is first,” Gottlieb noted. “The difficulty is the disinformation that’s out there. When someone is misinformed, what they ask for is unrealistic. There are values to using some naturals. I don’t think consumers know what the differences are and why one should use them or not. We owe consumers an explanation.”

However, Burr said, “We’re not marketing perfume [when we promote ‘all-natural’]. We’re marketing a philosophical and intellectual point of view that is anti-scientific and incoherent. Perfume is not meant to be all-natural. [That’s] not perfume.”

Innovating with Limited Editions

Bendeth voiced concerns that the average North American retailer is not bringing real experiences to consumers, favoring color and beauty above fragrance. In this context, she asked marketers, “Would you consider selling your own limited editions of a regular brand direct to the consumer on the Web? Take the money for yourself if you’re going to lose [sales] to that little wagon in the mall. Make it different. Don’t do a flanker. Do something original.” When Burr suggested that perhaps fragrance houses and perfumers themselves to the same thing, Bendeth said, “Why not?”

Taking Fragrance in New Directions

The panelists’ conversation led to the topic of scent possibilities outside the bottle. Following Japan’s NTT Com experimenting with cell phone-driven scent devices that marry audio and visuals with fragrance (including olfactory “playlists”), the possibilities appear endless. Various speakers discussed the idea of corporate scents for hotels, spas, design-savvy brands such as Apple. Bendeth felt that there was potential for interior-design scents tied into specific condo developments, for instance, which would present a next-level branding opportunity. Meanwhile, Gottlieb mentioned a Parisian hotel that already spends ~52 cents per day per room on scent, which for regular customers can signal comfort and familiarity.

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Perfumery for Those Over 35

In addition to novel applications, the fragrance pie has room to grow in traditional segments aimed at a group often ignored by marketers: those over age 35. Bendeth complained that so many fragrances dubbed as “universal” are in fact aimed straight at the youth market. Meanwhile, simple concepts such as femininity have fallen by the wayside. Older consumers, she pointed out, may not want to have single-mindedly sexual scents foisted upon them. (In a related note, Bendeth said, “We need more greens, floral woodys and aldehydes,” pointing out that today’s launches are not sufficiently balanced across categories.) “If we’re looking to grow our business, we have to find a way to talk to the over-35 consumer,” said Gottlieb, who noted that this group has money and loves fragrance, but has been abandoned by the mainstream industry.

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