



Joy Atkinson

The importance of fragrance in a competitive CPG landscape.

“The market ... is highly competitive,” says Joy Atkinson, Firmenich’s newly named vice president of body and home care, North America. “Every single

consumer packaged goods company (CPG) is fighting to maintain market share and, while doing so, maintaining profitability.” Atkinson, whose responsibilities include categories such as hair care, soap, deodorant, detergents, air fresheners, and household cleaners, says that her customers are examining every product facet in order to squeeze out costs: advertising; packaging, including the type and wall thickness of plastics; and fragrance. Fortunately, she says, “Fragrance continues to be a key decision maker [for consumers]. Now is the time to be creating and capturing value with our clients through innovative fragrance experiences that deliver what the consumers want most ... knowing that they made the best choice for their money. We know that [fragrance] is a continued driver for consumers to purchase and repurchase products.”

Fragrance manufacturers are facing rising commodity prices, in addition to volatile pricing on natural products that are vulnerable to natural disasters and weather patterns. At the same time, today’s consumers have a low tolerance for price increases on products. For example, Atkinson notes that many consumers have returned to using bar soaps as a means of saving money. “It’s a very interesting time right now to try to make incredibly great products at an incredibly low price,” she says. “It’s a challenge not only from the supply side, but from the manufacturing side, too.”

Atkinson notes that 2009 was characterized by extensive cost-cutting by CPGs; today, she says the theme is cost containment. “We’ll be in this cycle at least for the next few years,” she says. “It’s so closely tied to the economy and jobs, especially in North America. The CPGs are going to continue to [be challenged] along with the American population. When job growth comes back and consumers have more disposable income, then we might see a resurgence. It’s going to be a very conservative next few years.”

Despite this, she notes, “Although economists are stating that the bulk of recent growth has come from businesses restocking their inventories, many also believe this has run its course. I’m pleased to state that our North American

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home and body care business remains strong. We do not see this slowing any time in the near future.”

Atkinson, who describes her job in terms of making Firmenich’s manufacturing partners more successful, has a varied background, beginning as a management trainee with JCPenney and subsequently holding roles such as buyer of men’s fragrances and cosmetic accessories for Rich’s Department Stores (now a part of the Macy’s group), marketing director of home fragrances for Tsumura International, and senior account executive at Firmenich in New York. The common theme throughout, she says, is “fragrance and the world of how fragrance delights consumers.”

Atkinson adds, “The client is at the center of everything that we do. Through our actions and our abilities to deliver winning fragrances, we want to be the partner of choice.” To become clients’ “preference and reference,” as she puts it, requires empathy achieved by both consumer and customer intimacy. “We understand the challenges that today’s consumers are facing. Therefore, we also understand how these challenges present themselves to our customers, the manufacturers, and how we can help our manufacturing partners win in the marketplace.”

Among the solutions and innovations Firmenich is pursuing to compete in the changing marketplace are sustainability, new ingredients and technology. “Our continued innovation stream—the reinvestment

of 10% of our turnover into research and development—is based on another of our guiding principles: ‘think client,’” says Atkinson. “By continuing to reinvest in ourselves, we are able to transform our client’s ambitions into reality. Our breakthrough ingredients and technologies continue to be driving forces within our industry. We have an amazing ability to delight our customers, and ultimately the consumer, with beautiful, impactful fragrances.” When asked how Firmenich services its customers in a tough economy while also pursuing sustainability, Atkinson quotes Firmenich CEO Patrick Firmenich: “It is a game changer.” She adds, “Our sustainability strategy is fully integrated into everything that we do. It is both a moral and strategic business obligation. Every employee is fully aware of how important this is to our company. We are extremely proud of our focus in this area.”

In examining the human element of the Firmenich home and body care fragrance team, Atkinson uses the analogy of the US Navy Blue Angels aerobatic flight demonstration team, focusing on teamwork, trust and understanding the value of each individual to the group. “I think all of us would agree that we are flying through a storm right now,” she says. “Therefore, it is more important than ever that we deliver our best, and work together to accomplish our goals. One of our guiding principles is to remain true. This means staying true to our values as we position ourselves for the future. We live our fundamentals every day. They set the culture for our company and help us create for today and tomorrow. And, we walk the talk—starting at the top with inspiring leader, Patrick Firmenich. He leads with passion, talent and integrity, and expects that from all of us. This leadership focuses on the entrepreneurial spirit within each employee. This is reinforced through talent development and diversity at all levels. I am a perfect example of that. As the first woman to hold this position, I find it promising to everyone, especially our young talent, that Firmenich embraces the potential of everyone.”

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