

Fragrance Q&A: Consumer Concerns and Industry Reality

As consumers become increasingly aware of how fragrances touch their lives through everyday products, the industry needs to provide truthful, educational and positive responses to critical comments.

Lauren Salisbury, Arylessence, Inc.

Our industry has a perception problem. I have always viewed the fragrance industry much as one would hope it to be viewed: glamorous; mysterious; steeped in rich histories that cross borders; a sexy union of science, passion and art. But once I began my career and people would ask me, “So, what do you do?” I quickly realized that not everyone wears my rose-de-Mai-colored glasses. People’s questions sometimes made me feel a little green, and I don’t mean in the “how are we going to define ‘natural?’” sense.

As consumers become increasingly aware of how fragrances touch their lives through everyday products, the industry needs to provide truthful, educational and positive responses to critical comments. In the age of the internet, consumers have just enough information to be afraid, but not enough to be informed. Rumors and allegations about the fragrance industry—especially where safety and regulatory issues are concerned—can spread a thousand times faster than the industry can properly address lawmakers’ new bills or reactively modify its endless number of existing library fragrances.

The industry has a responsibility to itself, as well as to its consumers, to respond to these inquiries truthfully and, of course, in a way that accurately portrays fragrance. People are fascinated by fragrance and deserve a dialogue that is thought-provoking, educational and fun, rather than opaque, defensive or sarcastic. The industry’s role should be to educate in a way that inspires enthusiasm for fragrance and perfumery.

Here, I’ve collected some common questions I’ve received from consumers, as well as my responses:

Q: *I don’t understand how you spend your time. Do you just smell stuff all day?*

A: This one is my favorite. It reminds me of the response stay-at-home mothers often receive when asked what they do, which usually sounds like, “I see; so you don’t actually work.” Of course, one’s exact response depends upon one’s actual job description. As a fragrance evaluator, I usually launch into a list of tasks and responsibilities that are slightly more challenging than “just eating bonbons” or “just smelling stuff all day”: managing projects, guiding creative perfumery, interacting with clients, conducting market research, identifying and forecasting fragrance trends, dealing with regulatory restrictions and country inventories, communicating internally and externally, and yes, smelling things. The challenges and joys inherent in each of those tasks are only part of what make the industry so fascinating.



The industry’s role should be to educate in a way that inspires enthusiasm for fragrance and perfumery.

Q: *Aren’t you worried about your health, working with harmful chemicals all day?*

A: This one is a doozy, and a proper response would likely fill an entire *Perfumer & Flavorist* publication. I usually approach this question from a position of polite education. Technically, everything is made of chemicals, which may or may not be harmful to humans, including water, oxygen, limonene and cinnamon leaf oil. It is impossible to avoid chemicals, regardless of which consumer products one purchases, and all life on the planet involves chemical interactions.

Q: *I only wear fragrances with natural ingredients to avoid dangerous synthetics.*

A: First of all, just because something is “natural” does not mean that it is “safe.” The complete naturalness of poison ivy leaf oil is the example I use that seems to resonate for most people who approach me with the natural vs. synthetic challenge. The oil from poison ivy leaves is completely natural, yet nobody would want it on his or her skin, and most people accept both of these statements as truth.

Furthermore, many fragrance ingredients that are termed “synthetic” already occur in nature. There are regulatory restrictions against certain chemicals that occur naturally in things we love to eat, such as limonene in the peel of citrus fruits. Limonene has been deemed harmful to the environment as well as to the skin, so the amount that we can add to a fragrance formula is restricted. But we can’t regulate limonene as it’s found in nature or how consumers behave with these chemicals, perhaps without even realizing it, outside of the fragrance world. Here I’ll demonstrate this concept with a story that often makes me laugh.

Reproduction in English or any other language of all or part of this article is strictly prohibited. © 2015 Allured Business Media.

If I'm walking home from the grocery store with a bag of oranges on a sunny day, and the bag splits and my oranges tumble to the ground, according to some fragrance regulations, I have just harmed the environment with the load of chemicals I've carelessly dumped on the planet. If I brazenly pick them up with my bare hands, I have probably allowed limonene onto my fingertips, which will continue to undergo sun exposure for the duration of my walk home. And when I finally decide to peel and eat one of those oranges, I am releasing potentially harmful, volatile chemicals into the air, onto my hands and perhaps down my chin. Should this interaction with chemicals—some of which could be synthetic if developed in a lab—be regulated? I would venture to say that I, like most consumers enjoying a small moment of pleasure in their chemical-drenched daily lives, want to be free to enjoy the experience. I live for joyful, chemical-filled moments such as these. Chemicals, even synthetic ones, are not immediately the enemy.

The point is that the word “chemical” has taken on many different connotations, and these negative interpretations can skew our whole understanding of what fragrances are, and how they can be a seamless part of the environment in which we live. Yes, some can be harmful if handled improperly. Sometimes I wear gloves and proactively try to keep pure benzaldehyde off my skin, but no, I do not worry about working with harmful chemicals all day. Ask a perfumer in his or her late 60s who is still drinking wine, perhaps also smoking cigarettes, and still running marathons, if he's harming his health.

Q: *Why do we even need fragrance? Isn't it dangerous and unnecessary to add more fragrance chemicals to products that are already full of chemicals?*

A: Many people do not realize that people love fragrances. Our sense of smell is so elegant precisely because it occurs below the conscious level—so subconsciously, in fact, that many people are not aware of the huge impact fragrances have on our emotions and decision-making. With regard merely to the fragrances the industry manufactures and the products it helps create, fragrance is necessary for so many reasons:

- It helps to mask unpleasant base odors that might make everyday chores unpleasant.
- It is a huge signifier of certain characteristics; it is a form of non-verbal communication before complete thoughts may even be formed or words fully uttered. A fragrance



If I'm walking home from the grocery store with a bag of oranges on a sunny day, and the bag splits and my oranges tumble to the ground, according to some fragrance regulations, I have just harmed the environment with the load of chemicals I have carelessly dumped on the planet.


communicates so many different traits people deem necessary for running their lives, be it cleanliness, desirability, efficaciousness, power, performance or trust. Without fragrance, people have no way of judging whether their efforts have accomplished anything. Would anyone feel like their bathroom was clean if the cleaning products didn't smell fresh?

- Fragrance can be a great source of pleasure. Who among us will question the necessity of art, music, nature, love? Chocolate? To my knowledge, nobody is asking the chocolate industry what is the point of their chocolate chemicals. The same could be said of coffee and caffeine. Caffeine, like most chemicals, can have both positive and negative effects, and the key to safe, pleasurable, productive experiences is to consume it in moderation. The fragrance industry supports following instructions and adhering to the intended use of products in which its fragrances may be found.
- It is the most fundamental way of interacting with the world. Many amazing books and studies have already been written about the debilitating impact of anosmia, and how losing one's sense of smell can lead to clinical depression. One's sense of smell is too often taken for granted.

Fragrances are a vital part of everyone's lives, and without them all would be lost. As an industry professional, I may be viewing them through rose-colored glasses, but I hope the industry can collaborate to correct consumer perception problems, communicate that fragrance ingredients are used safely, and convey to those outside the industry that its eyes are fully open.

I'm sure I'm not alone in receiving skeptical or even hostile comments regarding fragrance. I'd like to hear from the *P&F* readers what questions they frequently receive from consumers, as well as the answers they provide to both inform and reassure them. Send your comments to me via the email address below.

Address correspondence to Lauren Salisbury; lauren@thelittlenose.com.

To purchase a copy of this article or others, visit www.PerfumerFlavorist.com/magazine. 



In the age of the internet, consumers have just enough information to be afraid, but not enough to be informed.