

# The Flavor Parables: Designing a Program to Train Flavorists

By Robert C. Lijana, The Procter & Gamble Company, Cincinnati, Ohio, USA

This article is about training flavorists in a successful manner. It presents some essential guidelines—I call them parables—to optimize the training that apprentices should receive to maximize their learning, and to maximize their long-term value to their company. This article is not meant to delineate specific flavor/perfume raw materials, nor is it meant to focus the reader on specific keys, blends or finished flavors. Rather, it stays at the basic level so that the readers may design the best program for their own needs and for their own companies.

Other articles written during the past two decades discuss the components of a training program. Some of these articles provide an overview of a flavor company's training program.<sup>1-3</sup> Some provide background on selection of candidates and their training, as presented through the Society of Flavor Chemists.<sup>4-7</sup> Others provide day-to-day details of training.<sup>8-9</sup> I refer the reader to these articles by some of the masters in our industry for this type and level of detail.

## The Incentive to Train

Master/apprentice training goes back thousands of years, providing a rich history from which to draw. For example, to quote the First Flavorist:

*The Lord said to Moses, "Take the finest spices: 500 shekels of free-flowing myrrh, half that amount of fragrant cinnamon; 250 shekels of fragrant cane; 500 shekels of cassia; together with a hint of olive oil; and blend them into sacred anointing oil, perfumed ointment expertly prepared."*

—Exodus 30:22-25

Even then, expertise was highly valued! Thus, with the bar so high, the incentive to train must be extremely strong.

Those with the passion to become flavorists can choose no more exciting a profession. Mastering the craft truly allows creation of great products, if not great joy.

*I dwell in possibility –  
Fairer house than prose –  
More numerous of windows –  
Superior – for doors –  
Of chambers as the cedars –  
Impregnable of eye –  
And for an everlasting roof –  
The gambrels of the sky –  
Of visitors – fairest –  
For occupation – this –  
The spreading wide my narrow hands  
To gather Paradise.*

—Emily Dickinson<sup>10</sup>

In our case, gathering paradise is all about providing consumers with great-tasting products that are truly delightful and pleasantly surprising, use after use after use. Building the skills to reach this kind of goal is what a world-class training program is all about. In your hands is now one of the tools by which your best flavorists can be constructed. Think beyond the narrow sense of the word "flavor," since this is what the consumer is now demanding. As Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote, "The mind, once expanded to the dimensions of larger ideas, never returns to its original size." Whether you are a manager, technologist or flavorist, your hands can help do this. Trainees and apprentices need to be stretched, and your products need to be stretched.

### The Reasons to Train

Do not underestimate the long-lasting power of a training program once properly constructed. This requires keeping a vigilant eye on program execution so that it delivers on what it promises. My company has spent the last three years doing this for a group of highly-capable flavorist trainees. Let me share with you our learning based on theory, experimentation, and advice from outside master flavorists. We believe that we have a training program that can be highly effective, proprietary to the company and applicable across project areas. It can also provide the basis for a significant competitive advantage.

And although the focus of this particular article is on flavorists, its lessons are equally and directly applicable to perfumers. The lessons apply equally well whether training is occurring within a flavor house or within a consumer-goods company. Procter & Gamble chose to invest in a thorough multi-year training program for four main reasons:

- To build competency within the company.
- To build communication skills in our flavorists so that they can effectively converse in the language of the industry.
- To enhance the credibility of our flavor organization.

- To be able to complement what flavorists in the world's best flavor houses can do.

### The Objectives of Training

Program objectives must be developed first. They should come from formal agreement between technical experts and appropriate management. Advance thinking and consensus building between these two groups will help with establishing design principles and measuring progress during the course of training.

The objectives of our program are listed below. These objectives are not the requirements for every company's training program, but they show the types of topics that should be considered both technically and commercially. They can be starting points in the development of your own program objectives.

***Develop effective flavorists with state-of-the-art formulation and technical skills:*** Note that the target is effectiveness, not mastery. This is a practical consideration, balancing overall training time that is available with the total amount of material that must be learned. Three years does not a complete flavorist make, but it is a reasonable allocation of time to build useful skills.

**Build a keen business focus into the flavorists' approach:** Even as the technical aspects of creating and applying flavor materials govern success, so, too, do the business elements that drive the establishment of projects within a consumer-goods company, or the acceptance of briefs by a flavor company. To succeed in the flavor industry, one must have at least an appreciation, if not an understanding, of a company's financials, its internal business dynamics, and its external business and market dynamics. This is because success these days is far more than good taste. Success also depends on timeliness, overall value and total costs, to name just a few of the pertinent business factors.

**Ensure broad credibility and recognition for the flavorists:** To achieve this, a training program must have depth and breadth. It must have real teeth so that an objective third party would be impressed. Achieving this credibility is necessary both inside the trainees' company and outside in the flavor industry at large. This is important so that all flavorists, internal and external, can share a kinship with each other. It is also important so that apprentice flavorists can build a strong sense of accomplishment, pride and self-confidence.

**Infuse a spirit of flavor enjoyment and creativity within the company's flavorist community:** Without fun, the flavorist's work becomes just another job. Without the positive energy and encouragement of others, creativity wanes.

### Design Parables for a Training Program

Here are critical design principles for a successful training program. These "parables" help set the structure, from which the details can flow. Many excellent guides<sup>1-9</sup> written by well-respected flavorists can provide the details. Refer to them as you fill in the specifics of your program.

**Get the right people:** Excellent flavorists must have a strong left-brain/right-brain connection and must be able to seamlessly blend art with science. They must have a passion for creation and for the creative arts. They should have superb acuity of the senses. They should possess a sound science background and must be judged to have an ability to succeed within their company. The passion to become a flavorist must be so intense that it provides strong incentive to endure an apprenticeship. Absence of this "fire in the belly" is tantamount to failure.

**Focus on the business:** Our training program is built into six-month independent blocks. Each block is designed to stand on its own in terms of a unit of study around similar sets of materials. What is similar is not necessarily the chemical homology (although it may be), but rather the use of those materials in the products the business is most focused on. This could be actual retail products (as is the case in a consumer-goods company), or it could be finished flavors intended to be sold to such companies. Business focus also means that blocks are sequenced to give quickest exposure to materials of most use to your business.

**Iterate and build on chains, groups, blends and projects:** Knowledge building is set up in a block so that trainees learn flavor raw materials by chain length and also by group homologues (that is, materials tasting alike although their chemistry may be different). By making targeted or simple blends of those materials, and by use of projects, invented if necessary, we integrate all of a block's teachings into a real product. This cycle is repeated continuously throughout the training program, using a two-steps-forward, one-step-back approach to ensure materials already learned are built upon.

**Train 50% of the time:** Optimal learning occurs when the trainees are investing, on average, about half their time in training and the other half in bona fide project work of real financial consequence to their company. Training at much more than this leads more quickly to boredom and precludes the possibility of developing effective linkages to, and understanding of, the business. On the other side of the coin, it is often extremely difficult to set aside even 10% of time for training; seemingly important daily business needs get in the way. Get rid of them. Training must take a priority.

**Get out of the box:** Goals of the program are to provide skills to build flavors in the way the company has always built them, but also to teach processes to bring in ideas and approaches that are new from both artistic and scientific points of view. Ways to do this include exposing the trainees to materials they would not typically see within their immediate business, and using the skills of outside flavorist experts. The task of the best mentors is not just to teach what a flavor raw material tastes like. Rather, their task is to teach an approach—a way of thinking about creating flavors and solving problems.

**Assess skills regularly:** On a frequent basis, outside master flavorists and inside mentors need to provide an ongoing objective assessment of the trainees' skill-base development. This helps keep the program on track, and, more importantly, helps the trainees identify flat spots and

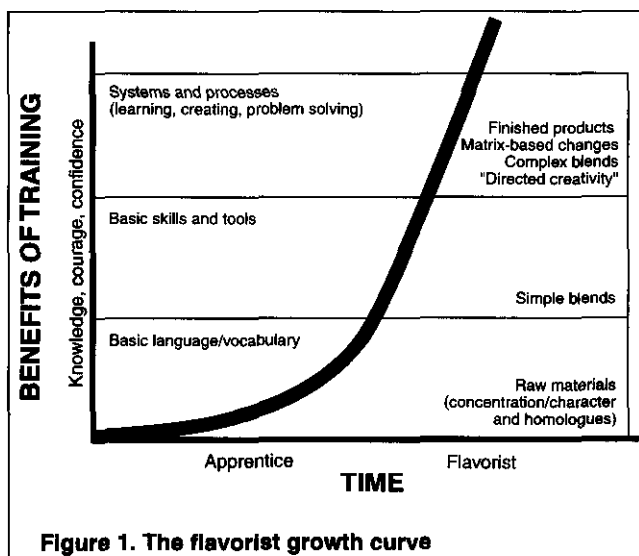


Figure 1. The flavorist growth curve

build confidence in their growing abilities. In addition, this kind of personal and professional interaction with other flavorists builds rapport. It is important to have a strong network in this industry.

### **Overview of Program Design**

Figure 1 illustrates the contents and benefits of this training program, along with a learning curve that starts slowly but accelerates quickly through the trainees' exposure to subject matter and work experience. Starting at the bottom left, the flavorist trainees (apprentices) begin the three-year formal training program culminating in their graduation as flavorists. Of course, the graduating flavorist's skills are probably sufficient only to allow the person to create reasonable flavors against reasonable product matrices and against reasonable technical challenges. However, this meets the standard of effectiveness established for the program.

In addition, by the end of the three-year period, the trainees should have been effectively exposed to all five of the major skill areas that must be built into a successful flavor-development organization: creative design, functional formulation, measurement, the iterative process and technology.<sup>11</sup> This is critical to building a successful and profitable flavor organization within your company.

In Figure 1, complexity in materials increases from bottom to top, from raw materials through simple blends of those materials, to use of flavor keys in actual finished products (be they finished flavors or complete retail products). Simultaneously, learning progresses from a buildup of straightforward flavor vocabulary, through basic skills, to an understanding of systems and processes by which flavors are designed and technical challenges overcome. It is through this technical and creative growth that the trainees' self-confidence rises, as does their formulation courage.

### **Conclusion**

As everyone in the industry knows, mastering the art and science of the flavorist takes many more years of practice. But the beginning is often an end, to paraphrase T.S. Elliot, and to make an end is to make a beginning.<sup>12</sup> This is certainly true of flavorist training. It's a lifelong endeavor.

A dedicated training program is, however, quite special and should be singled out to stand on its own. It is a gift to savor, and is always there as a springboard for fantastic flavors that meet the needs of the world's consumers and customers.

#### **Reflections on a Gift...**

*During that season –  
Which may never have been at all;  
But which has become more real  
Than the one that was –  
Watermelons ruled.  
It was a summer of limitless bites,*

*Of hungers quickly felt  
 And quickly forgotten  
 With the next careless gorging.  
 But in a jar put up by Felicity,  
 The season which maybe never was  
 Has been captured and preserved.  
 And when we unscrew the lid  
 And slice off a piece  
 And let it linger on our tongue:  
 Unicorns become possible again.*

—John Tobias<sup>13</sup>

We should reflect on that often, and let summer, and masterful training, come often. That is your gift to yourself, to the flavorists of the future, to the consumer and to your business. Let a dedicated training program be part of your success, enjoyed even more with just a bit of watermelon.

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Address correspondence to Robert C. Lijana, The Procter & Gamble Company, Health Care Research Center, P.O. Box 8006, Mason, OH 45040 USA.

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