

PERFUMER & FLAVORIST

Fine Fragrance: *Art* or Business

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The Image of Fine Fragrance

The noblest product of the fragrance business is, without any doubt, the fine fragrance. It is the purest expression of our art, and throughout the ages it has been considered the most valuable. Although there still remains a part of this myth today, we all agree to recognize both the artistic value and the commercial importance of perfumes—be it in toiletries, cosmetics, soaps or any functional applications which are becoming increasingly developed on the market. It is quite clear that the same imaginative effort is required to create the desired image of functional perfumes which is adapted to the product and at the same time respects the constraints of suitability.

Nevertheless, this myth has left a deep wish within every perfumer—that of creating a fine fragrance success.

Facts

Although this myth persists, the fine fragrance concept has changed quite distinctly and those who want to be successful in this field must be aware of this. Nowadays strangely enough, many

people who are the principal actors and beneficiaries of this change do not want to admit or recognize this fact.

For example, our clients and marketing people often evoke the great fragrance successes of the past as a guideline for their requests. It is as if they not only ignore the time which was dedicated to the creation of these successes, but also the price and the fact that most of these successes were obtained without using panels or consumer tests, as is common in today's trend.

As another example, let us take a look at some publicity made when a new perfume is being launched. This publicity states the names and the exceptional origin of the natural raw materials used in a perfume. But, as everyone with a bit of experience in this field knows, the price limit imposed upon us perfumers permits only the utilization of "traces" of these products, or, in most cases, simply interpretations or reconstitutions.

Comparisons with the Past

In the past, a perfumer's success depended solely on the perfumer. One could call this the "Golden Age of Perfumery." The perfumers created according to their inspiration and taste. Problems such as price, supplies, stability and marketing did not interfere in their work. The perfumer composed a work of art, an olfactive harmony which was purchased by customers who found what they were looking for in the perfume they chose. It complemented their attire, strengthened their personality, attributed charm, a mysterious air, or gave a feeling of escape.

Concept of Success

Now things have really changed. A perfume's success no longer depends only on the perfumer, but on the concept coherence of consumers, of our clients, of our product management, and of perfumers.

We must also take into consideration the customer's point of view, where success depends on four elements: appearance (presentation), publicity, quality, and distribution.

Lifestyle

Fashion and the present lifestyle are increasingly playing their role, so does snobbery. In the past, one tried to secure and strengthen one's personality with a perfume. Today the majority simply prefers to buy a perfume which provides personality according to the present fashion and the promises of publicity. A perfume is no longer being understood, loved or not loved—it is being worn as proof of being up-to-date.

Consumer Goods

These concepts, these conditions for success and the means used for commercialization of perfume and that of all scented products prove clearly that fragrances have become consumer goods.

In fragrance companies of renown, launching, presentation and publicity methods require increasing investments and, consequently, the prices fixed for our creations are nearing more and more those of the mass market. These are obvious proofs that fine fragrance market rules are those of consumer goods.

But it would be incorrect to think that the perfumers are no longer artists. Their creations became simply commercialized and sold as consumer goods. They must therefore create while taking these rules into account. This is also the case for other artists such as designers or stylists who conceive and design other consumer goods. Furthermore, this consumer-dependency is present in all arts. Personally, when I like a painting or another work of art, I don't need to consult test results to confirm my choice. However, those who want to invest in a work of art or in the launching of an artist would more likely follow various soundings. These soundings are dependent on art critics and the press which are, to some extent, consumer panels. Indeed, practically all expressions of art are being marketed.

As artists, then, our task is to create consumer goods. However, it is up to us to be attentive that these goods retain their quality and particularity. It is up to us to defend that part of creation.

Cost of Creating

Methods of perfume analysis have improved and, as a result, more and more clients tend to evaluate the perfume's price according to the cost price of the raw materials. The cost of creation is being more and more ignored, and the same stands for research investments, costs for applications, tests and panels.

We, as creators, together with our companies must defend creation. A perfume is not simply a mixture of raw materials, but a harmony, an accord, a means of expression. It is this harmony, this accord, this expression which makes the value of the mixture.

I believe that no one would ever consider the idea of buying a statue at the cost of the ton of marble or stone, a painting at the cost of the paint and frame, or a dress at the cost of the material.

A real danger exists and is menacing our profession. The originality, quality and beauty must be paid for and not only for fine fragrances, but for all fragrance segments.

Artistic Level

A definition for perfume says: "Perfume is to odour, what music is to noise." I like this definition very much and repeat it often. Obviously, it all depends on how one defines music, but I feel that more and more, in today's perfumery, the same kind of music is being made, that is, more and more noise. You will ask why? Well, the reasons are simple.

If we are really frank with ourselves and take into consideration the rate of new perfume launchings on the market as well as the time and the prices which are imposed upon us, we are using nearly the same or similar raw materials (with a few exceptions in each company). We try to produce as quickly as possible something which resembles what the people clamour for on the market. During the selection panels, our creations are compared with more or less the same bench marks. To get rid of this monotony, others are making different noises until these noises become monotonous in their turn.

There is also another reason for turning up the volume. The olfactory level of all marketed products, of all the perfumed products, including fine fragrances, is becoming higher and more and more out of tune. This leads the public to become olfactively "deaf," without even realizing it.

Fine Fragrance in the Future

We cannot oppose the evolution of the market, the democratization of perfumes, or the evolution of customs. I know that some, nostalgic of the good old times, will criticize my attitude. If they have the means to live by making art only, and if they can find clients who do not want to make any profit but only want to play "Patrons of Arts," let them benefit from this opportunity. But how many can deliberately choose this direction, albeit marvelous?

Unfortunately, the world, especially today's, is made of realities. It is up to us to face these realities.

Change in the Perfumer's Attitude

First of all we have to explain to the young perfumer trainees that although everything they are learning is absolutely necessary, they have to be prepared to adapt their theoretical knowledge when asked to create in line with the present market rules. Nor should they be surprised if some of their bottles containing natural raw materials and even some synthetic ones collect dust on the shelves.

We have to make quite clear that the time given to them for their studies will have nothing to do with the theory that "the perfumers must create in a quiet and serene atmosphere, without any preoccupation other than their art." They will have to create by using the information derived from various market research reports. They will have to use their intuition towards the future. They should not hesitate to modify the set compound rules. They must try to improve their knowledge of the behaviour of raw materials at their disposal so as to obtain more originality and more efficiency at the most competitive price.

Obviously, this task will not be easy but they will be obliged to accomplish it and to improve on it. I do hope that, from time to time, the "apparition" of some new miraculous synthetic product will help them to create new successes and trends. But such "apparitions" are becoming very scarce and they are only breathing-spaces in the search for creation. In the meantime, however, perfumers must continue to create. They cannot stand still and wait for something to fall from the sky. And we always have to keep in mind that to be able to use a new product, we have to know the behaviour of the existing ones very well.

Conveying a Better Understanding of Perfumery

We must improve others' understanding of our profession: of our problems, of our difficulties, but also above all, of our possibilities and our hopes.

We must not forget that we are dealing with people who do not have our creation experience, but who are experts of sales, marketing and publicity, just to name a few. We have to make them understand perfumery so that their knowledge can enhance our creational effort instead of hindering such with inappropriate principles. We have to remind them, from time to time, that after all it is the perfumers who have invented perfumes and created perfumery.

We must underline that more and more of the available time and investments are dedicated towards panels, tests, discussions, presentations, which are detrimental to creation. They should be reminded that when a perfume is being launched, the first sale owes a lot to the marketing, the image, the packaging and publicity; the second and following sales depend above all on the product's quality. An accelerated launching rate is made to the detriment of this quality.

We have learned to eat better, to know that it is not only a question of nutrition, but of taste and pleasure. We have learned to appreciate good wine without always demanding prestigious and exceptional vintages. We have learned to get to know better music, painting and other arts. We, therefore, also have to learn to smell better. The more we promote the value of perfume, the more we will educate public taste, and the more our profession will become rewarding.

As perfumers, we can further support this action and we can do so even more effectively with the support of our companies and of institutions like the British Society of Perfumers.

We have to change our methods like everything around us. The perfumers are ready for the change, they want it. But while change is inevitable, it can and must be made respecting the unique quality of perfume.

Conclusion

Perfume has always been part of our environment, of our well-being, and will become more and more a sort of defense against the surrounding materialistic world. A touch of fantasy, an element of dream, of escape at "arms reach"—or should we say "at flacon's reach." As long as we need a dream, an escape, a fantasy, the perfumers will have their place to maintain in society.

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