

Four Decades as a Perfumer—Comments by a Contrarious Curmudgeon

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They gave me twenty minutes to tell you about the last forty years of perfumery. That's typical of the type of requests most perfumers get.

Before I begin my talk, I would like to state that the opinions expressed are strictly my own and result from being in perfumery for over forty-five years. In no way, do they reflect the opinions of the company I work for.

Four Decades of Perfumery—in English, that means forty years—where have we progressed, where have we retrogressed, and where have we reinvented the wheel? I propose to present not only a rear mirror view of perfumery in comparison with what it is today, but I'd also like to comment on some of our current practices, foibles and discombobulations.

The annual perfumers' symposium has always been a very important event in the life of a perfumer. Originally, the topics discussed concerned problems of perfumery, the growing of natural material, the synthesis of new aromatic chemicals, and other topics specifically aimed at the perfumer.

As a sign of the times, in the past ten years, most symposium topics have been slanted towards theories of olfaction, physiology, and most often, the marketing of fragrances. At this point, I submit that the marketing of fragrances does not

belong except in a peripheral manner at a perfumer's symposium. Although perfumers can be helpful in marketing, it is not their area of expertise. Unfortunately, I find more and more individuals at finished goods houses asking the perfumers for help in marketing. As a result, we perfumers are becoming as knowledgeable as the many so-called marketing directors—truly a sad commentary on today's state of affairs.

Right after the war, that is World War II for the younger people in the audience, most fragrance houses had one or two perfumers on staff, with a few exceptions where there might be as many as four or five. As industry recovered in the 1950s, the number of American perfumers grew slowly, but surely. By the 1970s there was a veritable explosion of perfumers whom we named "90-day wonders." To make my point, whereas in 1950 there were only about forty members of the Society, by 1970, we had over 250. When you think that a mature perfumer takes at least 15 to 20 years to develop given abilities, you can readily see that most of the perfumers at that time were still in their infancy.

Because most fragrance houses were significantly smaller than they are today, the perfumer played a very important role. He not only created fragrances, but also he usually was in charge of

quality control and production, in addition to other administrative duties. Now and then he might make occasional visits to the customers, but usually the sales department made the contacts. This contrasts with the perfumer of today, who, while not necessarily involved in production and quality control, has now most often become involved in, and is sometimes presented as an expert on, market research, merchandising, packaging, and so on.

A perfumer was not only expected to know perfumery, but in general also needed a very good knowledge of cosmetic formulation. Very few of even the large essential oil houses had a cosmetic chemist on staff. Most of the cosmetic formulations were done by the perfumer. This of course stands in contrast with some cosmetic departments of today that vie in size with the perfumery department. The perfumer, in addition to setting standards for raw material, also had to know where each item originated, how it was made, what the starting materials was, and the limits of its physical characteristics, in order to determine if the quality were acceptable. In contrast, today, this function falls to a separate department equipped with instrumentation not available thirty to forty years ago. Most young perfumers in training today unfortunately are not very conversant with the origins of their raw materials. While this is not necessarily a mortal defect, it certainly is a handicap.

During World War II, raw materials were difficult to obtain, and often just not available; and the raw materials you could get were of poor quality. You always purchased "the best quality available." Powders adulterated with some other type of crystal were not unusual. And no essential oil was free of being "bouquetaged," a nice French word meaning adulterated.

WW II gave an extra gave an extra impetus to the growth of our industry. Because of the shortage of supplies from Europe, due to the war and its aftermath, many American manufacturers started or expanded their facilities for the manufacture of raw materials. I even remember a time when the company I was working for purchased Jasmine Concrete from Egypt. It was brought over to America as ballast in ships returning from the Mediterranean war zone. This was extracted to make Jasmine Absolute. To better tell you how scarce this material was, when we filtered the extract, I had to scrape the filter paper to get every last 10th of a gram. And in addition, had to re-extract the filter paper to obtain what might be entrapped.

The number of raw materials available to the

perfumer had been pretty standard from the 1930s to the 1960s. The perfumer's imagination was confined by the limited palette the perfumer had available. Using the same materials over and over, the perfumer's powers of innovation were strained to the limit.

Fortunately, during the 60s and 70s the work that the chemists had been carrying on came to fruition. The synthesis of linalool and the development of various ionones and musk chemicals paved the way to an explosion of new materials starting in the early 70s. Thus, the perfumer today has multiple sources and choices for his creative efforts. Complaints often heard about the lack of creativity should not be directed at the perfumer. Don't blame the perfumer. Too often, the perfumer is asked to make a wonderful creation in a mere 30 days. Or he's asked specifically to mimic fragrances already on the market.

Originally, the perfumers made the final selections for submission to important customers. The sales department had very little input in this decision. The perfumers knew what had been created, an idea of the customer's needs, and they put their best foot forward. Today, of course, we have odor evaluation boards and so-called marketing groups which make the decisions by committee. Of course, you are all familiar with the animal which has a huge body, small brain, four stumps for legs, a short tail and a long nose reaching to the ground. It also uses the nose to each with. Obviously, the elephant was designed by a committee.

Many perfumes today are put out by mega corporations. They lack the personal dynamism exhibited by a smaller, if more driven, entrepreneur. At one time, many of the finished goods houses had a strong director, usually someone who owned the business or had a vital financial interest in the business. Or there may have been a marketing manager who relied on personal intuition and feel of the market place for selecting a fragrance. Giants like Charles Revson and Estee Lauder, did not and do not make their selections based solely on "market research." Essentially, they knew what they wanted, were able to recognize a superior product, and most of all, were able to sell it based upon their own innate intuition and experience.

Today, although we still have very astute and able managers, unfortunately they are besieged with much static from various groups within their own organization, causing a certain amount of timidity and reticence to stick out their necks or to go with their own gut feelings. Therefore, a

consensus, by committee, usually is the final arbiter. When we realized that the average life of a new introduction is only about four to six years, we obviously are not selecting the best fragrance.

The Fragrance Profile

While originally the perfumer would submit fragrances based upon experience and the perception of the customer's needs, in the past decade we have encountered a new phenomenon, called "the fragrance profile." Issued by finished goods houses, this profile supposedly tells the perfumer what type of perfume the customer wants to market. Usually it will read something like this:

Client #1. Wants a light green floral, suitable for the 25 to 40 age group. Client #2, wants a heavy oriental, suitable for the 25 to 40 age group. Client #3, wants an aldehydic mossy for the 25 to 40 age group.

You will notice that the choice of odors for the 25 to 40 age group pretty much represents the whole gamut of fragrance types. The question one has to ask is in what way is the appreciation of beauty different in the 25 to 40 age group, compared with the 40 plus. This reminds me of my father-in-law who at the age of 82 poked me hard in the ribs and pointed to a young lady in a mini skirt. When I said to him, "Why, Pop, I didn't think you were still interested in that stuff." He replied, "Why not? You can admire beauty at any age."

The best example of this, is the fragrance Shalimar which enjoyed tremendous popularity in the USA from its creation in the 1920s, until the 1950s. By the early 1960s, it had the image in the popular mind of an old lady's perfume, mainly because of its association with a mother or a grandmother. However, by the late 70s and early 80s, it once again became popular with the baby boomers who had no memories of an older generation wearing this fragrance. One must admit, that maintaining a steady group of admirers over 60 years says something about Shalimar. It says something about the perfume that has been appreciated by both the young and the old.

Perfumers, of course, have their problems and pet peeves. Don't ask me to create a fragrance based upon an age group, hair color, or daytime or evening wear. Instead, just ask me to make a beautiful fragrance all ages can admire at any time. I assure you, your sales will reflect your better judgment. Don't expect a miracle worker when we must encounter problems of stability

and compatibility of the fragrance in ancillary products, like creams, lotions, talcs or soaps. If you load your product with ingredients that have strong smells, don't expect all fragrances to cover your malodor and still smell like the original fragrance.

Don't expect certain types of fragrances to translate equally well in all types of products. Because perfumery is so little understood by most people, every time something goes wrong with a product, the first thing to come to mind is "it must be the perfume." My forty-five years of experience has taught me that more often it is the product itself, or one of the packaging components that is often the cause of malfunction. I will not mention errors in formulating the product.

Outside of odor and color and possibly solubility corrections, there isn't much I can do with a fragrance to change its specific gravity, infrared curve, emulsion breaking capabilities, and so forth, without destroying the fragrance. Don't shoot the perfumers. They're doing the best they can.

New Aromatic Chemicals

The explosion of new aromatic chemicals, many of which have reached tonnage quantities in a very short time, has created problems for the manufacturer of aromatic materials produced in smaller quantities, but nevertheless just as important to the perfumer. Unfortunately, it is becoming less and less economical to manufacture small batches of aromatics. This in turn has led to the demise of many chemicals which have proved their worth over the years. Don't you love the supplier who touts new aromatics as panaceas for all new creations and the solution to all perfumery problems? After many experimental tries, you finally learn how and where to use the aromatic material he touted. Then one day, glory be, you actually sell a formula with the new chemical in it, only to discover that the supplier has discontinued the item because its annual usage was only a few hundreds pounds, not the expected several tons a month. Now, poor perfumer, what are you supposed to do?

Impact of Instrumentation

One of the more important advances in perfumery, and one with probably the greatest impact on our industry, is the implementation and use of various instruments such as infrared, nuclear magnetic resonance and gas chromatography. I remember the last time I spoke before a symposium—more than twenty-five years ago—in the early 1960s. There was a great furor

about the use of gas chromatography.

It was touted as being a tremendous aid for the duplication of perfumes—yes, perfumers have been duplicating perfumes long before 1960. And, with time and technical improvement, it would eventually dispense with the need for a perfumer for this type of work. Indeed, with proper computerized input, they also suggested that it might become a creative force, and thus the predicted demise of the perfumer. At that time I argued that no machine would ever replace a perfumer and that gas chromatography should be look upon as just another tool for the perfumer's use. Twenty-five years later, we now have almost three-fold the number of perfumers, in addition to the many chemists and technicians who operate the various instruments and other analytical devices. And all agree that they still need a nose for the final analysis.

To quote my friend, Dave McReynolds, an amateur perfumer in the best sense of the word, "The perfumer is in a remarkable field where the product wins fame, and not the artist." This has been true for the greater part of the 20th Century. However there recently have been several attempts to give the perfumer a day in the sun. Because of the relative secrecy, or should I say,

shroud of mystery, as to who really created what, occasionally a situation arises where some publicity seeking incompetents try to blow their own horn, and finding no horn to blow, will claim to have created this perfume or that perfume in an attempt to boost their image. We perfumers usually know the truth. Unfortunately, the rest of the industry doesn't and very often are taken in by these horn blowers. So many people have claimed to be the father of Charlie and Giorgio, that I would be ashamed to be seen in public with their mother. While I hardly expect the public to become excited about which perfumer created what perfume, I do think that the perfumers' creations should be acknowledged by their house so that at least those in the fragrance business will know the creative people.

In summing up, while there have been many changes in the past four decades, many things still remain the same. This multimillion dollar industry still rests upon the "noses." The perfumer's agony in bringing forth a creation is more than compensated by the ecstasy of success.

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