

# The Future for Fragrance in Mass Marketed Products

By John J. Hiller, PhD,  
Lehn & Fink Products, Montvale, New Jersey

**T**he thing that makes artists diligently pursue their media is passion. Perfumers are passionate about their art and I share that passion for fragrance, that medium of art that we pursue.

But, perhaps from time to time we should look at this medium without the passion and consider it from the point of view of a casual observer. Why? Because fragrance, the art and passion of the perfumer, is used at its end-point in products, whose customers are often not the least bit passionate about it. The care and diligence that the perfumer puts into the development of a detergent fragrance is not often treated with the same passion by the consumer. In fact, detergent is often considered a necessary part of an onerous task that they would prefer to avoid altogether.

It is important that we add to our passion and dedication for perfumery and product formulation a recognition and appreciation of the consumer's attitudes, both functional and perceptual, about our products and their symbiotic relationship. This should be done, indeed must be done, very studiously and carefully, so it is additive to, not detractive from, the passion we share for our products and our art.

About two months ago, the cover of the American magazine *Psychology Today* featured, among other things, pictures of a computer, a chair and a soft-shelled crab. The computer keyboard and chair had been carefully engineered by man to be ergonomically "user-friendly," a very popular

term often associated with today's high technology products. The magazine, however, also pointed out that the soft-shelled crab, which has been around a long time, is eaten shell and all, and is a natural "user-friendly" product. This is unlike other crabs, lobsters and shell fish from which you have to work hard to remove the delectable meat.

Today, awareness of "user-friendly," the intentional concentration on making products easy, convenient and simple to use and, in some cases, having products in which "user-friendly" is the major product point-of-difference is becoming an important part of all products, including those that we make.

"User-friendly" extends past the finished product to the supplier as well. Compounded perfume oils, essential oils, specialties, and flavors, increasingly have to be "user-friendly" both for the immediate user—the finished goods manufacturers—and the final user—the consumer of the finished product.

When I was growing up in this business and learning to be a product formulator, the most important judge of the product itself was inside the company. We developed formulations to please ourselves and "ourselves" were usually formulators, who had never talked to a market researcher much less a consumer. We would attend meetings with the marketing department and speculate about what these market research re-

## Fragrances from Production to Market

ports on our products really meant, but we all knew that the only judge of product acceptability was the R&D Director. While the internal judge varied from company to company, more often than not market research and marketing only participated in rendering an opinion on the result, but did not participate in the development of the product itself.

Today, concomitant with the maturation of marketing as a consumer science, development of product concept and product is often a true team effort. All aspects of the final product are developed in concert with and in response to consumer opinion.

Market research today is also a determinant of direction rather than just a judge of the result. Now that market research and the consumer are partners with the formulator in the development of products, "user-friendly" becomes an increasingly important product attribute and the standards of acceptability change considerably. When the judge of acceptability is the consumer, rather than the artists who create the products, factors other than pure functionality become increasingly important. For example, a formulator may be pleased with a floor polish which is 2% higher in gloss than the competitive product

when measured by a glossmeter. However, the consumer, whose eye can't detect a 2% difference, would perhaps be more impressed by a handy applicator. While a perfumer might be ecstatic about the introduction of a sweet, apricot note to a floral bouquet composition, the consumer might prefer a fragrance that announces a really clean toilet.

This consumer judgment is the only one that really counts and such judgments *simply cannot* be made in the laboratory or executive office. The household products industry, to a significant degree, and the toiletries segment, to a somewhat lesser degree, have recognized this and taken steps to evaluate products accordingly, but it seems to me the cosmetics and alcoholic fragrance segments of our industry have some changes to make. Similarly, the fragrance suppliers, who often seem to concentrate their efforts more to the alcoholic fragrance end of the business, need to mentally move out of their own familiar surroundings and at least meet their *real* customers—not the dress designers and aestheticians—but the people who wear the dresses and shampoo their hair.

We can certainly argue and discuss this basic debate between personal creative intuition and sequential consumer testing with respect to product development, but I believe there can be little debate when it comes to developing fragrances for mass market items. At the very least, it is absolutely critical to have the marketer and fragrance supplier completely in "sync" both with each other and with the product user. If "user-friendly" means the difference between product success and failure, it often rests squarely on the fragrance.

Success is, therefore, not dependent on the type of creativity traditionally attributed to perfumers, but rather it rests on the "new creativity" in which the fragrance is perfectly matched to the consumer perception of product concept and product execution to make it right for the consumer's own needs.

So, I am writing here as a born-again formulator, a chemist, who can now use words like consumer perception, product positioning and even the words marketing and chemistry in close juxtaposition without the slightest hint of a sneer on my face. But, despite the fun marketing and R&D people have in kidding each other, it is obvious that marketing and science are not only both important in consumer products, but also that many exciting consumer-significant developments happen at the interface between marketing and science.

Much of our progress, whether it be in science,

economics or even religion, occurs at the interface between two disciplines or specialties. Examples in material science, genetic engineering and molecular biology are well-publicized. In our business, there is also an interface between the perfumer's art and the product formulator and this is the interface that I want to concentrate on. It seems to me that there is insufficient interplay between the perfumer and the product formulator now, and the more complicated the final formulation, there is even less interplay. In a simple alcoholic fragrance formulation, there often is a fair amount of collaboration with respect to the complicated fragrance oil, but as the formulation becomes more and more complex the perfumer and formulator tend to have less contact. Whether or not you agree that this is the case, I hope you will all agree that maximizing the collaboration is desirable and that it is at least as important for household products and toiletries as it is for alcoholic fragrance preparations.

Convenience, ease of use, time saving and other "user-friendly" attributes become more and more important to a consumer, who is working longer hours outside the home. Other realities, such as the large number of available

products, the cost of advertising, government regulations and consumer concern about chemical safety, as well as demographic changes such as the size of households, and two income families, all lead to the important conclusion that successful products must be perceived by consumers as not only satisfying their functional needs, but also as being appropriate for their modern life-style.

I am not referring to psychological, or so-called "life-style" needs, such as the need to have someone's name stapled to the rear-end of your blue jeans or an alligator on your sweater, but *real product attributes*. Such qualities are the appropriate color for the product functionality, fragrances that communicate long-lasting cleanliness by surviving long after the product has been used, and products that do the same job as others, but with less work. *Convenience-Ease of Use-Time Saving*—important product attributes that the perfumer and formulator need to build into the "user-friendly" products required by today's marketplace.

I was reminded of another interesting term on a recent trip to Sweden. "Value added" is an expression that Europeans may be more familiar with than Americans, particularly with respect to

## Fragrances from Production to Market

taxes. It occurred to me that the words "value added," along with "user-friendly" have special meaning in looking at the responsibility that perfume and perfumers have in household product development.

Just as it is important for "user-friendly" attributes to be part of a product, it is increasingly important that our products have "value added." For a long time we have recognized the importance of having a product "point-of-difference." Some companies have used this as their major strategic approach to developing new or improved products. But, today, in addition to having an advertisable product difference, it is important to get "value added" from the ingredients being used. There are several, obvious reasons this is so.

Due to inflation, competition, or regulatory actions, the cost pressure on raw materials as a percent of selling cost has become very acute, particularly in the case of household products. Therefore, it has become quite attractive to get additional performance—particularly additional consumer-important claims—without adding additional ingredients.

Although formulating new functionality into a product using extra, costly ingredients isn't the easiest thing in the world to do, it is still much easier than getting the new functionality from the same number and type of ingredients. This is an opportunity for fragrance to provide "value added." Fragrance, at least on a raw material price per pound basis, is often the most expensive ingredient in a formulation and, therefore, an obvious candidate for the finished goods manufacturer to look toward in an effort to get "value added" in the product—whether that "value added" be new consumer-perceivable performance, new advertisable claims, or both.

Traditionally, formulators have often asked the fragrance suppliers to look at fragrance projects in two ways. First is the "lower cost fragrance project," where the formulator asks the supplier for competitor-parity fragrance performance at a lower unit cost. Second, is the "new, improved formulation project" in which the formulator tries to improve current performance characteristics at the same, or slightly higher, cost. In other words, we often work together to do the same things we have always done, but cheaper or better. Often, it seems to me, we consider the more creative people to be those who can do the same things both better and cheaper. But the real opportunity to be creative in household products is to do the more difficult—to develop ingredients that do new things and provide more than a single performance attribute. It is *necessary but not sufficient*

for fragrance just to smell good—it should do other things also.

Everywhere in the world, government regulations and the costs of conforming to those regulations make it most difficult to develop and introduce truly new ingredients. Yet the large number of competitive products, the need to advertise and the concomitantly significant amount of research that we are now conducting make it mandatory to continuously introduce new products and improve our present ones to meet the competitive pressures. These realities, therefore, add impetus to research on "value added" for our present raw materials and on the synergism that can result from the unique combination of our raw materials. Fragrance, due to the large number of ingredients that are available, provides one of the best raw material opportunities for research on "value added" in terms of the economic realities of today's marketplace and regulatory environment. Research of non-perfumistic functionality of fragrance materials is unexplored territory and presents both an opportunity and an obligation for suppliers and finished goods houses.

Again, I'm not talking about scientific or perfumistic chicanery to obtain a false "value added" claim or the "illusion of performance," but rather true, functional product attributes that your consumer, as well as your copywriter, appreciates.

Articles appearing in various trade journals over many years often describe the perfumer's major objective as to duplicate nature, i.e., to reproduce the exact smell of neroli, or rose. This, of course, has to be done with a relatively small number of ingredients while nature does it with two hundred or more ingredients. The result of this work is the addition of very small amounts of a number of expensive additives to go from say 90+ % of nature to perhaps 98% of nature. I do not in the least want to minimize the importance, or significance of these pursuits, but would like to point out pragmatically that it is done because most consumers, even the sophisticated ones, couldn't recognize or identify 100% neroli, even if we could reproduce it.

There are obviously many good reasons why the pure research and other pursuits for excellence in this business are right, but we do need to *analyze very carefully* how much our technology base should be applied to each problem. Perhaps we should apply the perfumer's creativity to more practical matters. This practical bent, most often needed in household products, is not a diminution of the perfumer's art, but a highly creative, demanding challenge and opportunity. The

challenge, as discussed earlier in this presentation, is to make fragrances that are appropriate and opportune for our needs in mass market products. It might be a good idea for the perfumer to give them (read this as "consumer") what they want, not what they (read this as "customer") ask for.

Our sense of smell, particularly when not trained, is not as keen or as far-ranging as that of many animals, but we can register and intelligently process olfactory data. It is this registering and intelligent processing of data that allows fragrance to be a powerful, functional ingredient in our household products. Attributes like "user-friendly" and "value added" become possible due to this human capability. It, coupled with the non-odor, functional capability of fragrance ingredients, leads to an exciting, challenging future for fragrance in mass market products.

And so, although we work closely together as marketer and supplier of mass market products, it is quite unusual for the formulator from the marketing company and the supplier's perfumer to talk about the real objectives of the project before it starts—to talk about the art that we both practice. The perfumer usually works on a profile brought in by a salesperson. The compositions are judged by an internal evaluation panel and selected for submission by the sales department. The product formulator works off an R&D project form. The formulations are screened by market research panels and selected for consumer testing by the marketing department. No matter how it is done, most of the critical, creative work is done with very little personal contact and discussion between the formulator and perfumer. Much of the contact is via pieces of paper with dull descriptions, reports and verbal communications by third parties. When we do speak directly to each other it is usually about details—instability, off-color, off-odor, precipitates, and so on. By this time the major determinants of product success or failure have been set and we can only tie pretty bows and ribbons on our mistakes. I believe it is necessary to have early, direct, close contact between the major architects of product quality—the formulator and the perfumer.

I hope my comments have a positive effect on the relationship between us. The needs of today's consumers present an exciting opportunity to expand our creativity and a challenge that is perhaps more difficult than ever.

Address correspondence to John J. Hiller, PhD, Lehn & Fink Products, 225 Summit Avenue, Montvale, New Jersey 07645, U.S.A.

