

Perfumes—and Perfumery

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The perfume industry can generally be divided into three categories but without well-defined boundaries: prestige perfumery (French, American and Japanese), mass market alcoholic perfumery and non-alcoholic perfumery. A fourth category could be food flavors. Although they are not perfumery, they are nevertheless related to perfumery and are manufactured by the same firms.

Non-alcoholic perfumery includes the scenting of cosmetic products, soaps, detergents and a number of industrial perfumes. This category is by far the most important in terms of volume and revenue and also provides all sorts of difficulties. These products present the most common scenting problems that confront perfumers. Thus, while this work may not emphasize creative qualities, it does require thorough technical skills in chemistry, physics and biology.

Today's perfumer must be acquainted with the analytical techniques of nuclear magnetic resonance, all types of chromatography, and the sensitivity tests on animals and on humans.

In non-alcoholic perfumery, perfumers must be familiar with about one hundred raw materials

of which more than 95% are synthetic. They must know each material's performance in each base to be perfumed. They should know the interferences and the dynamics of the materials among themselves, the products that must be excluded or the authorized percentages of some of them, and the negative lists of this or that customer.

Once a formula has been established, specially computed for compounds which are sold by the ton, materials costs will be updated constantly.

Perfumers already have or will soon have a computer to help with all of these tasks. And a perfumer who does not yet know the basic language of data processing experts should hurry to acquire it in order not to be rapidly left behind.

Because they are often present when the marketing people make a presentation, perfumers know very well the twenty most important international customers. They must also learn the marketing "language" in French as well as in English.

For the submitted fragrance, the perfumer will use a simplified plan of a familiar perfume, a plan of his or her own, or taken from the company's formula bank.

It is the best performing product which will be selected, so the parameters had better be well chosen.

When a new detergent or a new soap is brought on the market, perfume houses find it an interesting event. The work is complete for the perfumer who already had to apply skills of a perfume compounder.

The second category, mass market alcoholic perfumery on a worldwide scale, is enormous and goes from the traditional French perfume, which does not pretend to the level of "super prestige," to the perfumer of Cairo who sells, in a Pharaoh-like mysterious manner, mixtures made in Paris, Grasse or Geneva. While it may not be the most creative, it is actually the most alive area of perfumery and also one in swift evolution.

I don't think I am wrong when I state that every day, in the entire world, ten persons start to create a perfume. Perhaps only two get as far as the finished product, but this means several hundred new products are thrown on the market every year. Most people are satisfied with one single creation and then return to their original occupation.

Who are these people? Agents for well-known

brands who wish to try their luck with their own product. Perhaps transport agents or dealers who are fascinated by the precious products which they move. Import-export agents who, after a prosperous operation in a related market, start their own business. And also, fortunately, professional perfumers. All of these people fight mercilessly twice each year at the Mecca of perfumery: the duty-free shops exhibition (held alternately in Cannes and in Miami).

What do the millions of scent bottles sold every year in the world look like? Most of the time, they are standard bottles, dressed up poorly because of a lack of imagination, or ostensibly decorated in order to attract a certain class of customers. One also finds original bottles and packaging, in good taste, but not always of good quality because of their cost price.

A few complete lines consisting of extract bottles come in three strengths and in several sizes—lotion, splash and spray. But most of these perfumes are presented as a 10% concentrated lotion, in a standard bottle of 100 ml and equipped with a spray pump.

What is found in these scent bottles? Rarely original mixtures but very often imitations (admitted or not) and products which take their inspiration from established perfumes.

In this respect, during a recent "round table" of the STPF,* one of my colleagues mentioned the word "imitation" without disapproval which caused muttering in the audience. "Imitation" is, after all, the most often used word in a perfumer's language, but not in public.

Recently I noticed something unusual: a not-so-good imitation of a well-known perfume has been exported in the mass market. In view of the success of this product, there are now requests for imitations of this imitation.

Imitation products are generally of average quality, but sometimes they do offer the quality of a top-notch product. Mass market alcoholic perfumery is developing. Not being limited by its name to a well-known character, the brand can develop. If the perfume has been badly chosen, it can be modified, changed and the packaging improved. Its principal characteristic is the purchase price for the consumer. It is two or three times less expensive than prestige perfumes.

The distribution channels are varied: traditional boutiques, drug stores, some department stores, the open market places, the distribution meeting, door-to-door selling, mail order, enterprise committees, gadget and gift stores, fairs and supermarkets. Mass market alcoholic perfumery will advance in quality and originality without hurting prestige perfumes.

As far as prestige perfumery is concerned, I will limit myself to a few personal opinions on some of its aspects. Can it be said that it is creative perfumery? Yes, of course, but only as far as it must be.

How to define it? It is rather delicate, but it can be said that it is found on a person who is either well known or would like to be, that it is presented with elegance and often at great cost by a bottle designer, that it can be bought in Paris, Quartier de l'Opera, at Chaix in Nice and at Bloomingdales in New York, and that its publicity can be admired in the classic media.

It is created in Paris, New York or Tokyo. There, for some four or five releases per year, some fifteen companies involved in compounding perfumes do battle. Which means that 150 perfumers are involved and will compete during the two years required for evaluating and modifications. I will spare you a description of the battle.

This contest should ensure a good result. The winning perfume should have all the qualities of originality and esthetics. But it is not always so, since nobody wants to risk losing with too daring a compound.

I can imagine two levels in the future of prestige perfumery. One level is widely accessible, wide open to the world and is commercial, and another more prestigious level that is also more daring and more restricted and, as in the case with high fashion, perhaps less profitable.

I have never seen a secretary or the (female) president of a company go to work in a Azzaro or Paco Rabanne evening outfit and yet these fashion designers continue to create designs which can be qualified as highly original.

If I let my imagination drift even further, I think that when Christian Dior ran his fashion house, he did not leave the creation of his designs in the hands of the manufacturers of his fabrics. I am willing to believe that Yves Saint Laurent does not have the time to do everything, but he inspires his team, and it is unlikely that a collection is launched that does not carry his imprint and style. So why not imagine that the great makers of perfumes will have their own stylist. That would be progress.

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