

Follow your nose: how fragrance affects consumer behaviour

Researchers at the University of St. Gallen (HSG) present studies on the impact of fragrance on buying patterns

Our sense of smell affects what we buy more than we might think. After all, fragrance has a direct impact on the brain's emotional centre. Scientists from the Research Centre for Customer Insight at the University of St. Gallen (FCI-HSG) have now proven that simple scents chosen to enhance the product can boost sales by up to 10 percent.

Does fragrance have a positive impact on consumer emotions, and does this trigger product evaluations and behavioural reactions? In view of the increasingly dynamic market and intensified competition, companies wishing to secure their commercial success must address these issues. As product ranges become interchangeable, as shops and products become increasingly similar, and as society's values shift in the direction of more zest for life, not to mention more consumption, emotionally-oriented marketing looks set to become a key focus of consumer research. Consumers generally decide to buy something not because they are particularly well informed about the product, but because of its price or quality. Emotional aspects of a shopping experience also play a role in the evaluation process.

Fragrance puts consumers in the mood to shop

As an aspect of emotionally-oriented marketing, fragrance has become a focus at the University of St. Gallen (HSG). A series of empirical analyses in marketing and other disciplines has revealed that scents can have a profound influence on an individual's purchasing and consumption patterns. They have a direct and immediate impact on the subconscious, thus triggering an emotional response which is generally not subject to cognitive control. The olfactory receptors are directly wired up to the oldest part of the human brain. Fragrances can conjure up memories or alter our emotional state in the blink of an eye – quicker even than auditory stimuli.

Although this finding is undisputed in both theory and practice, to date no information has existed on the specific impact of different scents on purchasing and consumption patterns. Insights from the world of psychology suggest that the complexity of the individual stimulus has a crucial impact on the effect it produces. Science recognises that the simpler the stimulus, the more attractive it is. This is based on a straightforward functional mechanism: something experts refer to as "ease of processing". The simpler a pattern or object is, the more easily it can be processed by the brain and the smoother the process, becomes. This ease of processing has a positive influence on an individual's emotional state, making environmental stimuli appear more attractive.

Fragrance has advertising appeal

Researchers at St. Gallen used a series of studies to examine the effect of fragrance on printed media. For instance, consumers were presented with an advert for shower gel, the scent of which had been applied to the paper. This process was facilitated by ultra-fine microencapsulation technology provided by Minden-based company Follmann & Co. (Germany), Europe's leading microencapsulation producer for printed fragrance ads and active research partner during the two year study period.

The aim of these studies was to determine the extent to which emotions triggered by fragrances effect consumers' decisions when purchasing products, and the degree to which this overrides product information such as quality or price. Consumer perception of the match between the shower gel and the fragrance used was also investigated. A yellow gel, for instance, was felt to match a lemon scent, but not an orange one.

The results showed that it pays to use a fragrance that best fits the product, otherwise consumers become confused and feel that their expectations have not been met. Interestingly, the quality of the advertising message itself is of lesser importance if the advert is scented. Even when the fragrance was combined with poor argumentation, purchasing was seen to increase. On the other hand, in the "no fragrance" control group, consumers processed the information presented very carefully – the poor argumentation stopped them from making a purchase.

The type of product was of no significance. Researchers at St. Gallen devoted a second study to a non-scented product – a stole. In this instance they investigated whether scent was a factor in consumer product evaluations, even though, in objective terms, fragrance has no relation to stoles. However, here too, the researchers established that the rate of consumer purchasing was higher if the advertisement was appropriately scented.

Fragrance would therefore appear to have a greater impact on human behaviour than previously assumed. Apparently, consumers accept scent and delight in the positive wave of emotions it triggers.

Customer Insight Research (FCI-HSG)

Customer Insight researchers focus on human decision-making behaviour, and on that of consumers in particular. They attempt to identify patterns in the way individuals decide in favour of, or against, different products. To this end, they conduct experimental studies in a laboratory setting as well as in the field. For instance, they investigate what it is that affects consumer interest, willingness to purchase, actual purchasing or consumer satisfaction – and to what extent. Among others, these studies are sponsored by the Swiss National Science Foundation and the HSG's own fund for basic research. Cooperation with active research partners is common. These provide the infrastructure needed for a particular study, or develop technology in instances where the research centre lacks the capacity, expertise or means to produce the necessary technology itself.

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University of St. Gallen (HSG)

Since its founding in 1898, the University of St. Gallen (HSG) has been renowned for the internationalism, applicability and integrated nature of its study courses. These days, HSG educates 6500 students from 79 nations in the following disciplines: Business Administration, Economics, Law, and Social Sciences. And not without success: the HSG is one of Europe's leading economics universities. It has been awarded two major international hallmarks of distinction for the high quality of its integrated educational concept, namely EQUIS and AACSB accreditations. The university offers Bachelor, Master and Ph.D. programmes. Furthermore, HSG also offers a comprehensive portfolio of high quality continuing education courses. Research at HSG focuses around its 40 institutes, research departments and centres, which form an integral part of the university. The institutes, for the most part independently organised, are generally self-financing, and yet retain close ties with activities within the university.

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