
The Making & Marketing of Fragrances

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Let's increase your knowledge of the fragrance industry by playing the Fragrance Buzzwords game.

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Before we can begin to understand the “whys” of perfumery, we must first understand the process of smell. Of the five senses, the one that is the least understood, particularly in Western societies, is smell.

Let's start to solve the mystery. Smell travels through the nasal cavity into the mucus membrane which contains about ten million specialized cells that respond to different scent chemicals. From there, the smell is transmitted through the smell receptors to the olfactory nerves. What we experience as a smell depends on the combination of cells that are stimulated by the chemicals carried on the air that we breathe. The receptor organ for smell is the “OLFACTORY LOBE” (Definition #5 in Fragrance Buzz Words) which is situated on the undersurface of the brain's frontal lobe. Part of the olfactory lobe is the olfactory bulb. The undersurface of the olfactory bulb receives the olfactory nerves. Upon detection of smell, the olfactory bulb signals the cerebral cortex and sends a message to the limbic system, which is the emotional center of the brain. The limbic system in turn is connected to the hypothalamus, which controls the body's hormonal system in addition to being associated with the establishment of memory patterns, moods, learning, and emotional states.

Smell is dependent upon the release of volatile microscopic particles into the atmosphere. This is where essential oils and the whole perfumery field come into play.

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“ESSENTIAL OILS” are the building blocks of perfumery. They are oily volatile liquids obtained from plants and animals used to make scents and perfumes (Definition #8 in Fragrance Buzz Word). Essential oils, also called volatile oils, are often contained in more than one plant part. Among flowers, those with the thickest petals tend to be the most fragrant. Those flowers that are white like jasmine and gardenia are also known for a more intense odor. These oils are released as little bubbles into the air that burst and create smells.

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One of the most interesting essential oils and one of the most necessary comes from animals. They are often called “PHEROMONES” and are released by an animal to attract a mate (Definition #6 in Fragrance Buzz Words). Musk from a deer and Civet from the civet cat are examples of pheromones. Definition #10 in Fragrance Buzz Words). “AMBERGRIS” is another example of a pheromone. It is a gray substance produced in the digestive tract of a sperm whale and is found floating in lumps on the ocean. (Definition #7 in Fragrance Buzz Words). These scents are obnoxious in their undiluted form and exquisite when diluted.

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The art of perfumery has been around for thousands of years. In this artwork, Egyptians wear cones on the top of their heads filled with essential oils that ooze into their hair. “INCENSE,” burned as an offering or to drive away evil spirits in many ancient societies, was one of the earliest recognized uses of essential oils (Definition #9 in Fragrance Buzz Words). Perfumes were also used in other parts of religion. The “ROSARY” was wooden beads soaked in rosewater and other fragrances and used for religious purposes. (Definition #1 in Fragrance Buzz Words). During a time of disease and a lack of sanitation, rosaries provided pleasant smells in areas like a church congested with people who didn’t take baths for months. These human smells were not always considered unpleasant. The scents provided by the human body did not become unpleasant until the 19th century. In Elizabethan times a lady would give her lover a “LOVE APPLE” to inhale which was a peeled apple that she had kept in her armpit until it was saturated with her sweat (Definition #15 in Fragrance Buzz Words). Putting scents on the body is a relatively new thing; the most common use for scents in earlier times was to perfume the environment in some way to control foul odors.

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Another use for essential oils during past times was in “AROMATHERAPY.” This is the therapeutic use of pure essential oils to promote health, beauty, and well being. (Definition #12 in Fragrance Buzz Words). This age old art is actually gaining in popularity today. Examples of the uses of essential oils for aromatherapy purposes are chamomile tea to help you sleep, eucalyptus to open up the sinuses, cucumber to sooth the eyes and “LAVENDER,” popularized in England to prevent infection from the plague (Definition #2 in Fragrance Buzz Words).

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The perfume industry as we know it today began in Grasse, France around 1890. (Definition #11 in Fragrance Buzz Words). This area is in the south of France and has a Mediterranean climate which is well suited for many of the plants that produce essential oils. Also, the major distillation process to extract the essential oils was invented here.

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One of the most important of the flowers grown in Grasse is jasmine. It is among the principal ingredients in 83% of all perfumes. It is also one of the

most expensive oils in the world (Definition #17 in Fragrance Buzzwords) because the yield is so small. Their blooms are harvested at night or at dawn when, due to a chemical action, the fragrance is the strongest.

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It takes a lot of people to make a perfume but the main person, the creator, is called “THE NOSE.” (Definition #16 in Fragrance Buzz Words). Today this person would have to study the art and science of perfumery for over six years. They can detect more than 10,000 scents and can extrapolate a single scent from compounds of scents. Because of the intense training and natural talent required in this field, there aren’t very many of these people in the world. Needless to say, they are sought after and highly paid for their talents.

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The perfumer learns to create fragrances by using “NOTES” as building blocks. This is a scale used to classify and group different essential oils used in perfumery (Definition #4 in Fragrance Buzzwords). The top notes should lift the fragrance. It is often the first smell that attracts you but also the first to leave. Never judge a fragrance by the top note. Orange blossom, cucumber, and grapefruit are good examples of top notes.

The middle or heart note is the most important. It is what you remember and makes you love the scent. Rose and jasmine are lovely middle notes.

The base or low note gives the perfume its staying power. It is often called a fixative because it sustains the scent. Base notes are the strongest of scents, so a small amount could overpower the perfume. The resins, pheromones, spices, and strong herbs fall in this category.

All scents can be switched into any category depending on the concentration of the scent. Ylang-ylang can be a top or middle note. Vanilla can be a middle or base note, and so on.

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Once the perfume is developed it is further categorized by the overall scent. Floral has six subcategories. About three-fourths of all feminine perfumes fall into this category. Oriental has three subcategories. They are best worn in the evening or cool weather because they are heavier fragrances. Chypre has six subcategories. It is woody and mossy. Citrus has no subcategories. It is very popular today. It is denoted by its refreshing scent. Fougere has no subcategories. It has high concentrations of lavender, fern, citrus, herbs, and oakmoss. It is mainly a category for masculine scents.

The last category, Green, has no subcategories. Its dominating notes are sage, rosemary, grass, leaves, and green floral such as hyacinth. This category is also growing in popularity with women.

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This is an example of a fragrance classified as Floral. It is an unusual scent because it has no middle notes. This fragrance won't last two seconds without the very strong fixatives of amber and musk in the base note.

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This is an example of a fragrance classified as Floral/Green.

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This is an example of a fragrance classified as Floral/Ambrey. This category/subcategory is denoted by its heavy, warm, sweet scents. All of the top notes are heavy, but particularly the jasmine and ylang-ylang. The sweet scents are vanilla, jasmine and orange blossom. The warm scents are sandalwood, amber, and vetiver.

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This is an example of a fragrance classified as Oriental. Look at the typical base notes of patchouli and vetiver used as middle notes. You will also notice how heavy the base is.

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A true "PERFUME" contains 15% to 30% of the fragrance's compounds and the rest is alcohol. (Definition #13 in Fragrance Buzz Words).

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A "COLOGNE" contains 2 to 5% of a fragrance's compound, and the balance is alcohol. (Definition #14 in Fragrance Buzz Words).

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In the early 20th century chemists learned to isolate and duplicate essential oils. Consequently, many of the oils used in perfumery today are synthetic. They are called "ALDEHYDES" and are chemicals from alcohol and some natural plants that provide fragrances for modern perfumes (Definition #3 in Fragrance Buzzwords). Not only can they duplicate many of the natural essential oils, they can make thousands of new scents that don't exist in nature.

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One of the first uses of aldehydes was in Chanel No. 5.

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Ok, let's see how you did on the "Fragrance Buzzwords." Raise your hand if you got 16 or more right. Those who got 12 or more raise your hand. What about 8? How about 4? (Note to Teacher: Give prizes of sample perfume fragrances from stores.)