The Sweet Smell of Success

With over 800 fragrances on the market and a new one appearing almost every week, the perfume business is very competitive. Creating a distinct, new fragrance is both complicated and expensive; each manufacturer seeks to differentiate its perfume from the plethora of others on the market. This process begins with the “nose,” a person with a keen olfactory sense. This person helps concoct new perfumes by combining up to several hundred ingredients from the thousands available. The manufacturer’s goal is to produce a fragrance that the public will find irresistible.

To develop a new perfume, the “nose” tries to balance three key ingredients, called “notes.” The top notes are the more volatile, easily accessible aromas such as lemon or orange. These provide the initial tang to a perfume and give potential buyers their first impression. Floral smells from jasmine, iris, or rose oil, a derivative of rose petals from Bulgaria, are often the source of the middle notes, also known as the “heart notes”; they give richness and body to the fragrance. The base notes come from ingredients such as sandalwood or cedar and provide what is called the “dry-down,” the smell that lingers after the fragrance has dried on the skin.

Increasingly, synthetic ingredients are being used in creating perfumes. They are usually cheaper and can cut the cost of a fragrance by as much as three-quarters. Furthermore, they greatly extend the range of possibilities available to the “nose.” They are also readily available and not subject to the uncertainties of the weather: the harvest of Bulgarian rose petals, for example, can be ruined by a hot, dry spell at the wrong time.

Synthetic substances have also replaced two ingredients that were once used to “fix” the various oils in perfume to ensure that the fragrance did not dissipate once the bottle was opened. One is ambergris, a grayish wax found in the intestines of sperm whales. The other is musk, the strong-smelling substance secreted by a gland in the stomach of the male musk deer. Because they were derived from endangered species, both products are now banned by international agreements.

Once a new perfume has been created by the “nose” and approved by the maker, attention turns to the name, the packaging, and the commercial launch of the perfume. While all three are important, no one factor can guarantee success, for there is a saying in the trade that “in the end, the perfume decides.” In spite of the vagaries of the marketplace, however, once a perfume wins acceptance, it can create a strong consumer loyalty. The success of some perfumes is attested to by the fact that they remain best-sellers for generations.

Since the perfume business is a worldwide one, the name chosen is usually one that can be easily pronounced in many languages; a conscientious manufacturer considers thousands of possible names before making a decision. The final choice
may be a word that is familiar, or it may be something more esoteric, perhaps a name taken from a language such as Sanskrit, that suggests mystery and romance.

The packaging consists of the bottle holding the perfume, the box it comes in, and the point-of-sale advertising material. The shape, size, color, and overall design of each package are carefully engineered to give the product both a timeless quality and a fashionable look. A design that is too trendy at the time it is introduced, but which quickly becomes dated and in need of refurbishment within a few years, would be a costly mistake.

The introduction of a new perfume is critical to its success and can cost tens of millions of dollars. It often begins with a trade party, perhaps held in an exotic location, to which hundreds of guests from the fashion business and media are invited, all expenses paid. The manufacturer hopes that none of the recipients of such largesse would be so churlish as to disparage the product after being so lavishly entertained. After all, it is axiomatic that most people do not bite the hand that feeds them.

Who pays for all this? Ultimately, the consumer does. An expensive perfume might sell for as much as $150 an ounce. The total cost of that bottle’s contents? Anywhere from $5 to $10.

Answer each question in the form of a sentence. If a question does not contain a word from the lesson, use one in your answer. Use each word only once.

1. What quality must a perfume blender have?

2. What does the “nose” do?

3. What are top notes?

4. What is rose oil?

5. What is musk?

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attest
axiom
churlish
concoct
derivative
differentiate
disparage
dissipate
esoteric
olfactory
plethora
refurbish
secrete
vagary
volatile
6. What advantages do perfume makers gain from using synthetic ingredients instead of plant derivatives?

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7. What were ambergris and musk used for?

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8. How might a perfume maker attempt to refurbish a poorly selling product?

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9. Why might a perfume manufacturer give a perfume an esoteric name?

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10. Why do perfume makers entertain guests from the fashion and media industries so lavishly?

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**FUN & FASCINATING FACTS**

- In England, a thousand years ago, a member of the poorest or peasant class was called a ceorl. Over the centuries, the word changed to churl and acquired a negative meaning. It eventually dropped out of use, although the adjective form churlish has survived.

- When George Washington became ill in 1799, his condition was diagnosed as plethora, an excess of blood in the body. Doctors treated this condition by bleeding the patient. No one was ever cured by this treatment, which contributed to the deaths of many patients, including Washington. The practice was eventually abandoned, but the word survives, referring to a general over-supply. The word is formed from the Latin word plere, “to fill.” Other words sharing this root include complete, replenish, and deplete.