

Meet the Man Who Nose

How this man's little-known Berkshire firm is influencing what you buy, feel and eat—using only the power of smell

BY CHRISTOPHER MIDDLETON
PHOTOGRAPHED BY SEAMUS RYAN

WHAT DOES THE MOON SMELL LIKE? How come there's a hint of mulled wine in the air in that department store woollens section? And while we're at it, why do all the toilets in Legoland have the appealing waft of bubblegum?

The answers to these questions can be found locked away in an unremarkable-looking building on the outskirts of Maidenhead. Here, secreted inside a series of silver suitcases, are row upon row of tiny glass phials, each containing a different, but instantly identifiable, odour.

Remove one lid and the air is full of the scent of baby powder. Undo another, and it's garlic bread. Try a third, ►



MR AROMA

Hamleys toy shop
is just one of
the companies
Christopher Pratt
and ScentAir
work with

◀ and suddenly you're in a world of sun-tan lotion and coconut oil.

And that's just the tip of the olfactory iceberg. For this is the headquarters of ScentAir, a company that has, without many people realising it, become UK Smell Central. Five years ago, the idea of "fragrancing" British stores, cafes and theme parks was almost unheard of. Now it's big business, with "olfactory marketing" a carefully targeted retail strategy.

You thought that deliciously appealing smell in the Ikea store was the aroma of

attentions to smell. "Now I've got a team of 12, with salesmen out on the road all the time. And the number of clients has just mushroomed."

ScentAir's machines—which start at £100 a month for installation, servicing and refills—are present in some 3,000 UK locations. Clients include clothes shops (Mango, H&M, Juicy Couture), theme parks (Drayton Manor), furniture stores (Harveys), hotels (12 branches of Marriott), jewellers (Charles Fish, Goldsmiths, Tiffany & Co) and

because it's impossible to copyright a fragrance under international law. But the International Fragrance Association lists more than 3,000 substances that are used in perfume production, with names such as benzonitrile and trimethyloxazole—though scents also come from fruit and other natural sources.

The majority of businesses that employ ScentAir's services want to lull customers into a sweet-smelling sense of security, encouraging them to spend longer on the premises and so spend

the Hard Rock Hotel in Orlando, Florida, decided to use ScentAir's chemically created Sugar Cookie and Waffle Cone fragrance to steer customers towards their in-house ice-cream parlour, takings increased by 30 per cent.

GETTING THE RIGHT SCENT FOR A BUSINESS is a highly scientific process. "The first thing you've got to do is establish your customer profile. Then you choose the fragrances that fit it," says Christopher. "To appeal to female cus-



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gently baking gingerbread? Sorry, it comes from an electric fan blowing across an artificially created liquid, designed in ScentAir's laboratory to reproduce the whiff of warm cookies.

The same goes for that earthy hint of patchouli oil in the Harley-Davidson motorbike showroom. It's coming not from the seasoned leathers of some grizzled, bandana-wearing biker, but out of a discreetly hidden plastic nozzle.

"Five years ago, I was the only employee," recalls ScentAir founder Christopher Pratt, who trained as a town planner and spent a few years running a hot-dog company before turning his

Hamleys toy shop. Walk round one of the huge new Westfield shopping centres and you'll pass through anything up to half a dozen ScentAir "deployments", as they're called.

THESE BESPOKE BOUQUETS COME with a colourful assortment of name tags. Among some 2,000 scents, there are Green Bamboo, Pure Gardenia, White Tea and Thyme, Sierra Rain and New-Mown Grass—not to mention Leather Sofa and anything in the fruit and vegetable line from Onion to Rosemary.

ScentAir won't divulge precisely how its scientists create smells, partly

more. Numerous academic studies have demonstrated the part that smell-power can play in generating income.

As long ago as 1995, a research programme in Las Vegas found that punters put 45 per cent more cash into slot machines when the room was scented with a pleasant fragrance, rather than just the odour of sweat and desperation.

Another study, carried out by neurologist Dr Alan Hirsch, director of the Smell & Taste Treatment and Research Foundation in Chicago, discovered that customers were prepared to pay £6.25 more for Nike trainers in a nicely scented shop than in an unscented one. And when

tomers, you'll need odours with lots of fruity, fresh, floral notes. Male customers respond better to woody, muskier scents. And people over 40 don't like the aroma to be too aggressive—it puts them off.

"Next, you've got to decide which parts of your operation you want to fragrance. Some shops just install our machines at the entrance, so customers get that distinctive waft when they enter and leave. Others use different fragrances in different sections of the shop.

"A lot of shops also like to vary their scent to fit the time of year: new-mown grass in summer, perhaps, or the smell of pine cones at Christmas." ▶

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◀ BEFORE PRESCRIBING

a smell, ScentAir draws up a shortlist of fragrances and conducts tastings—or, more accurately, sniffings—with clients. These are done on a blind basis, with each aroma presented in an anonymous package wrapped in silver foil. The optimum number of sniffers is two or three, as experience shows that if you ask too many people, the results get diluted.

Christopher’s team provides “neutralising” odours for businesses at basement level (nightclubs, discos, restaurants) which don’t want customers catching the unalluring smell of damp. And since Legoland UK started releasing ScentAir’s candy-like aroma into its toilets, customer questionnaires have begun to mention the loos in glowing terms.

But some clients want something on the less pleasant side of the odour world. ScentAir supplies the waft of oily machinery for HMS Belfast’s engine room; the smell of freshly dug earth for Manchester Museum’s section about the city’s foundations; and the smell of burning



BOX OF TRICKS

These phials contain the smell of everything from baby powder to burning tar

rubber for a number of indoor go-kart tracks. It’s even installed the smoky scent of cordite in the lunar section at the Science Museum, to mirror what astronauts and scientists say is the predominant smell on the moon.

CHRISTOPHER PAUSES OUR CONVERSATION, opens a window and reaches into the bottom of a silver suitcase. “I would describe this as the not-so-fragrant end of what we do. Reading from left to right, we have burning tar, bad fish, urine, vomit and faeces.”

A quick sampling of each phial confirms the accuracy of the ScentAir scientists’ work. Only once you’ve regained your senses are you in a state to put the

obvious question. Who on earth would pay good money for that?

“Well, as it happens, one of our most regular customers is the London Dungeon,” Christopher tells me, cheerfully uncorking a small but deadly test tube. “This, as far as we can tell, is what the average street in Southwark would have smelled like a few hundred years ago.”

It most definitely does what it says on the phial. No wonder most of the capital’s population used to go about with a freshly picked bunch of flowers—a nosegay—pressed up against their nostrils.

Indeed, there’s no doubting that, used properly, nose-power is the next best thing to time travel. “Nothing stimulates memory and emotion more than smell. It’s extremely deep-rooted in all of us,” says Christopher. “When I was little, I used to spend a lot of time with



my grandfather in his shed-cum-workshop. The minute I catch a waft of that mixture of wood and oil, I’m transported straight back to being a five-year-old boy.”

Compared with the huge amounts of money firms spend on marketing, public relations and design, explains Christopher, the size of budget they put aside for smell is tiny.

“But at long last, they’re now starting to take the importance of odour on board. You can make a shop look a certain way with decoration, you can make a shop sound a certain way with music, and you can make a shop feel a certain way with the quality of service you offer. Put all that together, and you’ve got an A-rated store. Add an attractive fragrance, though, and in terms of appeal and customer spend, you go straight from A to A*!” ■

Wonderful World of the Web

☀ It’s 25 years since Tim Berners-Lee developed the World Wide Web (read more on p43). In celebration, here are a few amazing facts about the power of the internet:

- The world’s first website is still online: info.cern.ch/hypertext/www/TheProject.html
- Of the seven billion people on the planet, more than 2.4 billion use the internet. Asia accounts for 1.1 billion.
- The most popular YouTube video ever is “Gangnam Style”, with **1.9 million views**.
- There are approximately 840 million websites—up from 65 million in 2005 and 350,000 as late as 2011.

