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Are You on the Right Scent?
Anna Girard, PhD, Marcel Lichters, PhD, Marko Sarstedt, PhD, and Dipayan Biswas, PhD

Have you ever walked near or into an Abercrombie & Fitch store? If yes, you might have noticed a special scent, which, a couple of years ago, was a bit overbearing, but has recently been replaced by a more subtle variant. We can only speculate what the primary driver behind Abercrombie & Fitch’s decision to install an ambient scent is. Possible goals include creating a pleasant atmosphere, advancing their customers’ service experience, or simply masking bad smells in their retail stores. Importantly, Abercrombie & Fitch is not alone in its efforts to leverage ambient scents. With an annual growth rate of 10% and a volume of over $200 million in 2017, the market for ambient scents is growing rapidly.

It is, therefore, not surprising that ambient scents have also received considerable attention in academic research. Prior research in this domain has revealed that pleasant ambient scents have a positive influence on consumers’ perceptions, of, for example, the physical servicescape and their brand evaluations. Looking at prior research, however, we identified several blind spots in the literature. For example, do the positive effects also hold when consumers are repeatedly exposed to ambient scents without being aware of it? And do the positive effects prevail in a service environment characterized by many different olfactory influences (e.g., malodors)—as is often the case in real-world service settings? How do consumers react to the discontinuation of a scent campaign?

Study Design

We quickly realized that answering these research questions is very challenging in a laboratory setting, where consumers (typically students) are exposed to an ambient scent under highly controlled conditions—as commonly done in prior scent research. Evaluating the long-term effects in an olfactory-rich environment requires collaborating with an industry partner who would grant us access to its servicescape over several weeks, ideally months. Finding such a partner was very challenging, but we managed to convince a regional subsidiary of Germany’s major railway company to support the project, as well as to involve a professional fragrance manufacturer who designed two different scents that fit its servicescape. Our first task was to identify the most appropriate scent and the optimal level of intensity, which we did by running a series of pretests. We found that even in the highest intensity levels, most customers did not
notice the scent, which was diffused via the train’s air conditioning system—that is, they principally processed the scent subconsciously.

Next, we exposed commuters on a specific rail route section between two midsize towns in Germany to the ambient scent. The experiment ran over a period of four months. Every two weeks, trained interviewers went through the trains and identified the study participants and surveyed them with regard to their service perceptions. We simultaneously also surveyed commuters on another train section, where the trains were not scented. This was done to rule out any other explanatory factors that might contribute to changes in commuters’ service perceptions over time. Our results not only confirm ambient scent’s positive short-term effect, but show that the use of a subconsciously processed long-term ambient scent has an enduring, positive impact on consumers’ evaluations of service quality, service experience, and service value. Furthermore, our results indicate that ambient scents’ positive effect on service evaluations persists for at least two weeks after the ambient scent has been withdrawn.

Our research produced some further striking findings, which we couldn’t report in the full paper. Most notably, we also queried consumers’ satisfaction with the service provider and brand attitude and found no notable improvements in these constructs over time. This highlights an important boundary condition in the application of subconsciously processed ambient scents. Customers simply do not feel like they received preferential treatment from the service provider. Thus, subconsciously perceived scents do not contribute to companies’ branding efforts. We also ran a series of qualitative interviews with several of the participants. These interviews confirmed that most participants did not notice any special scent and that they were generally in favor of introducing a pleasant ambient scent into the train compartments.

**Implications for Real Estate**

Thinking in terms of the real estate industry, our study results suggest that real estate professionals can use subconsciously processed ambient scents to enhance potential home buyers’ situational evaluation of the service experience, its quality, and its value. This effect not only functions temporarily but also when repeatedly frequenting your listings. An example might be when buyers repeatedly visit a specific property or view different properties you may have listed. In light of the positive effects and the low costs associated with ambient scents’ use, scents have the potential to offer good returns on investment. Professional fragrance manufacturers sell ready-made scents for prices of approximately $30 per cartridge, which lasts several weeks. Ambient scent is applied by placing the scent carrier in existing air conditioning systems or via scent diffusing devices.
Recommended Reading


References


About the Authors

Anna Girard, PhD
Dr. Anna Girard is currently working in the project management office of an international sporting goods company. Before that, she worked as a research and teaching assistant at several research institutes and gained extensive experience working for international retail and service companies. She wrote her doctoral thesis at the Institute for Marketing of the Ludwig Maximilians University in Munich, Germany. Her research interests focus on sensory marketing especially on scent marketing, service and retail marketing, and privacy in information security research. Her articles have been published in the Journal of Business Market Management and the Marketing Review St. Gallen and her research has been featured in several German media outlets.

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Dr. Marcel Lichters’ (PhD – Otto-von-Guericke-University Magdeburg) research interests over the years have varied from context effects in consumers’ product choices, over conjoint analysis in product innovations processes, sensory product research, and most recently to consumer manipulation through sensory marketing phenomena. His articles have been published in journals including, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of Business Research, Journal of Service Research, Marketing Letters, AMS-Review, Business Research, Health Policy, Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, BMC Health Service Research, and International Journal of Psychology. Lichters has also gained extensive experience while working for years in
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Dr. Marko Sarstedt’s (PhD – Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich, Germany) main research interest is the advancement of research methods to further the understanding of consumer behavior. His research has been published in Nature Human Behavior, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Multivariate Behavioral Research, Organizational Research Methods, MIS Quarterly, Decision Sciences, and Psychometrika, among others. Marko has coedited several special issues of leading journals and co-authored four widely adopted textbooks, including A Primer on Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). According to the 2019 F.A.Z. ranking, he is among the three most influential researchers in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. Marko has been named member at Clarivate Analytic’s Highly Cited Researcher List, which includes the “world's most impactful scientific researchers.” Marko regularly consults leading companies on market research and data analysis topics.

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