

**Paul Clark**

**Running Head: Management overview  
of Scent as a Marketing  
Communications Tool**

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## Abstract

The paper provides an overview of the scent marketing communications. It first discussed why scent is an emerging communications tool in the marketing industry: and how scent represents a direct route to emotions. Then, focusing on the business to consumer markets, and using the different objectives of marketing communications as a framework, this paper outlines the role scent marketing communications can be used to create customer awareness, generate consumer engagement, and motivate purchasing decisions. This paper provides a blend of academic research and documented anecdotal information to support the emerging role of scent communications in the marketing industry. Moreover, this paper provides an analysis of the extent an ambient retail scent, and a product scent, also contribute to increasing consumer confidence.

**Keywords:** marketing communications, marketing touch-points, consumer decision-making, scent marketing, scent communications, AIDA.

## About the Authors

**Paul Clark**, grew up near Vancouver, British Columbia. The majority of his professional career has been spent in Asia where he worked between 1991 and 2002. Geographically, his experience was earned in Greater China, including Taiwan, Hong Kong, and in Shanghai (7 years).

His interest in marketing communications is based on a range of Canadian and international experiences and insights, including occupations across the value chain, the study of military history as an undergraduate, and traveling internationally.

Internationally, he has worked in heavily cross-cultural situations, both large multi-national companies, and with smaller entrepreneurial start-up ventures. In Canada, his marketing experience includes working as a Sales Representative (B2B business equipment markets), and currently as an owner of a small business (Shanghaidirect.com). His main areas of interest are the international sales and distribution of consumer products

At a functional level, his career has focused on sales and marketing – with an emphasis in "the fast moving consumer goods (FMCG)" industry. He has participated in this industry from several vantage points: as Retail Buying Manager for a large grocery chain, as Regional General Manager for a large wholesaler, and as an external consultant. Similarly, he has used his management, marketing skills and market experience to sell management-training programs to multinationals in the China markets

Academically, he received a B.A. in Military History from the University of Victoria (1986), Diploma in Business Administration from The British Columbia Institute of Technology (1988), and a M.B.A. from the University of Western Ontario (2002). He is now working on a Doctorate in Business Administration from the Swiss Management Centre.

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## Introduction

Internationally, marketers are increasingly challenged in communicating effectively to targeted consumers. This due to “declining effectiveness and rising costs of advertising.” (Scala, 2005, p. 1) For example, at the retail level,

the problem of effective communication advertising and promotional methods is particularly pressing ... where consumers are presented with a bewildering array of product choices and where advertisers have severely limited opportunities to convey a message. (Scala, 2005, p. 1)

Undoubtedly, as the marketing industry is increasingly competitive, marketers constantly pursue innovative methods to effectively communicate their message to consumers. Due to this situation, the use of scent as a communications tool is an emerging area in the marketing industry.

Indeed, “scent marketing and signaling is one of the latest and most personable communication technologies to be introduced.” (Brumfield, 2008, p.103)

Specifically, as one expert noted, “If you’re looking to increase sales, the best approach is an appeal based on emotions. And the quickest way to reach the emotions is through smell.” (Brumfield, 2008, p. 36)

The following paper provides an analysis of the role of scent marketing as a communications tool. This analysis includes an:

- Identification of significant historical milestones in this area,
- Overview of how scent is linked to our memories and emotions
- Explanation of why scent is a valuable communications tool for marketers
- Explanation of the future significance of scent as a marketing communications tool

## **What is Scent Marketing Communications**

To begin, a definition of scent is appropriate. In brief,

Scent is broadly defined to include aromas, fragrances, perfumes and pheromones. Scent can also be a molecule that removes odor molecules of smell. A scent is typically a volatile or at least or at least nominally vaporizable material that stimulates receptors located primarily in the nose. (Scala, 2005, p. 2)

Additionally, “scent is a biological mechanism used for recognition, communication, and signaling”.

In turn, for the marketing industry scent is also increasingly recognized as a communications tool “used to deliver a powerful and intricate message, and evoke a desired response” (Brumfield, 2008, p. 4)

Indeed, for marketers, the significance of scent as a communications tool is profound. Specifically,

Researchers have been studying how scents stir and trigger memories, emotions, moods, desired, cravings, perceptions, and the brain’s warning systems. ...When you consider how these facts and revelations relate to marketing, branding, advertising, and environmental and product design, the implications are astounding (Scala, 2005, p. 9)

As one scent marketing expert states, “The important thing is to realize that advertising means communication, and scent is its most powerful form” (Brumfield, 2008, p. 106)

In sum then, for marketers scent serves as a communications tool. However, as this paper reveals, scent is more than an ordinary communications tool. Uniquely, scent is able to penetrate directly to our emotions. With this characteristic in mind, the use of scent communications for marketers is significant as it is a means for marketers to directly influence the consumer decision-making process.

## History of Scent Marketing

In the last number of decades, there have been a number of notable milestones contributing to our understanding of the role of scent as a marketing tool.

One of the first study's drawing attention to the significance of scent within the marketing industry occurred in 1932. In this research, tests were conducted exploring the relationship between a products odor, and consumer's perceptions of its quality level. During this study women were exposed to a number of nylon stockings – each pair had “either a faint narcissus, fruit, sachet, or natural scent (somewhat unpleasant)”. (Fitzgerald and Swati, 2008, p. 295) Results concluded that:

The stockings with the narcissus scent were evaluated more positively – considered the best by 50% of the housewives. He concluded, “scents of one type are more influential in determining this judgment of product quality than scents of another type. (Fitzgerald and Swati, 2008, p. 295)

Later, in the 1969, links between scent and both sales and consumers perceptions of product quality were again identified. In this study, Cox (1969) reported,

Nylon stockings with an orange odor sold better than unscented stockings. Approximately 90 percent of the women selected the orange-scented over the unscented version. Many of the women felt that the scented stockings were of better quality than the unscented ones. (Fitzgerald and Swati, 2008, p. 290)

In the 1970s, fragrances also began to gain recognition as a tool for retailers. During this time, the study of Aromatherapy also became more widely accepted. Indeed,

Aromatherapy, enhancing the smells of indoor environments by introducing specific aromas, fist became fashionable in the last '70s. (Schifferstein and Block, 2002, p. 540)

Also in the retail environment, the next widely documented study demonstrating the significance of scent as a marketing tool involved linking consumer perceptions of products with their fragrance. In this situation, research was conducted analyzing the influence of scent on consumers purchase intent. Specifically, this study, which received a “tremendous amount of media attention,”

Found that 22 of 35 subjects liked a pair of Nike shoes better in a room with a floral ambient scent than in a non-odorized room (Fitzgerald and Swati, 2008, p. 290)

In turn, “Scratch and Sniff Stickers” represented one of the next milestones for scent in the marketing industry, in the 1980s in North America.

Scratch and Sniff stickers were very popular. Initially teachers “brought the stickers to use as rewards for their students on homework and tests.” (Smellstickers.com, 2008) However, due to their popularity, the stickers were quickly “made available to the general public” and soon, “scratch and sniff stickers became a household word, and anyone who grew up in the 1980s can recall their tremendous popularity.” (Smellstickers.com, 2008)

In 1982, further recognition of the significance of scent in the marketing industry occurred, when the Olfactory Research Fund coined the term “aroma-chology.” Of note for marketing, this area of expertise is “concerned only with the temporary effects of fragrances on human behavior, feelings, of well-being, moods, and emotions.” (Olfactory Research Fund, Ltd., 2008, p. 7)

Therefore, as outlined above, there have been a series of significant milestones involving to the use of scent in the marketing industry. These milestones have involved the use of scent in both retail environments and to enhance products themselves.

## Scents as emotional stimulators

The role of scent in marketing is based on the following three interwoven tenants. These tenants include, recognition that our:

1. Memories include, and memory recall is stimulated by our olfactory sense,
2. Emotions are directly influenced by our olfactory stimulus
3. Most intense emotional memories can be evoked by odor
4. Association between specific odors and brands can be purposefully created through planned marketing experiences

To begin, it should be noted that our memories include olfactory information. As one researcher observes,

Encounters throughout our lives form indelible imprints upon us, replete with emotional significance. In real time, the scene is experienced through all of the senses, then stamped on our memory centers through smell (Brumfield, 2008, p. 7)

In other words,

The facilitating effect of odorants in retrieving memories has been shown by the power of odorants to prompt seemingly forgotten autobiographical information and to improve memory performance (Schifferstein and Block, 2002, p. 540)

Secondly, it is also acknowledged that there is a relationship between fragrances and emotions. Indeed, it is commonly understood that scents have the ability to influence our emotions. As one author stated, for example,

The memories evoked by fragrance are generally associated with events involving closeness and social events. These memories are directly linked to the emotions we felt the first time we encountered the fragrance.

Remembering a scent also recalls emotions involved with the original occurrence. ...how something looked, felt, sounded and tasted. If our experience is pleasant, the odor will be remembered as good. If it is unpleasant the odor will be remembered as bad. (Scala, 2005, p. 6)

Similarly,

Compared to the responses made to input from visual and auditory systems, responses to odors are relatively emotional. Indeed psychologists have been able to use odors in experimental manipulations of affect and have shown that odors aid the recall of emotional memories. (Wyrzenski and McCauley, 1999, p. 713)

In comparison, environmental cues selected by the other senses are processed by our brain through a more “cognitive, judging, analyzing, prejudiced filter”. Specifically, “unlike the other four physical senses, scent takes an express route I

directly to the emotion creating right side of the brain, leaving all of the other sense in its dust. (Scala, 2005, p. 6)

Additionally, from a biological perspective,

Whenever the olfactory buds in the brain detects a smell, a chemical message is immediately sent directly to the limbic system, and enigmatic primordial part of the right hemisphere of the brain. The limbic system contains the keys to our emotions, our lust, our perceptions, and our imaginations. Their result is immediate: when we smell, we feel (Scala, 2005, p. 6)

Thirdly, it is also acknowledged that those emotions evoked by odors are often the most emotionally laden. Indeed, research confirms, “memories evoked by our sense of smell are more emotional than memories evoked by our other senses.” (Sense of Smell Institute, 1992, p. 8)

Clearly then, as the above analysis outlines, “Memory and smell are closely interrelated – smells are recognized as powerful emotional triggers that can instantly call to mind past experiences.” (Wyrzenski and McCauley, 1999, p. 712)

Moreover, research suggests that our most emotionally-laden memories are cued by our olfactory senses. One expert suggests, “Smell is a potent wizard that transports you across thousands of miles and all the years you have lived.” (Brumfield, 2008, p. XXII)

In turn, for the marketing industry, as scents are able to create an emotional reaction within consumers, their use as a communications tool is significant. However, before the marketers can harness a designed scent as a communications tool, it first needs to be associated with a positive experience. Indeed,

Scent is a powerful memory stimulator, but for scent to be used successfully in advertising a specific scent or scent program needs to be associated with a product in a consumer's memory. The process for creating the association between a product and a scent involves creating an environment in which a potential customer can experience a product. (Scala, 2005, p. 11)

As such, for organizations seeking to develop an emotional relationship with consumers a range of opportunities exist to introduce a scent. For example,

By presenting your brand scent in combination with the adrenaline rush of a sporting event, thrill ride, or adventure, consumers will be imprinted with a full-blown memory of surprise, excitement, and joy, which will be recalled every single time they smell your brand's signature aroma. (Brumfield, 2008, p. 19)

In other words then, organizations seeking to link their brands with experiences, locations, or events may be accomplished through the distribution of the scent at locations where their targeted consumers would be experiencing positive emotions.

With this background in mind, it is therefore clearly possible for brands to become linked with specific olfactory cues. Or, in other words, “Consumers may learn an association between a particular scent and attributes of products through advertising or product experience.” (Schifferstein and Block, 2002, p. 539)

For instance, marketers have spent a great deal of effort creating the belief that a pine scent means clean. In addition, it may be that the scent itself becomes an important attribute of a product and, thus, becomes a part of consumer expectations. (Fitzgerald and Swati, 2008, p. 290)

In essence then through processes such as this, marketers are able to establish a link between an odor and consumers emotions. Specifically, “the odor acts as a cue that either consciously or unconsciously activates stored knowledge – images, information, personal memories – related to the target object.” (Schifferstein and Block, 2002, p. 540)

In other words, as one advocate of scent marketing states,

My theory is that uniquely formulated branded scents will be able to induce a patterned physiological reaction in consumers after strategically introducing a scent during an emotional experience and then repeating its delivery at the point of sale (Brumfield, 2008, p. 19)

Therefore, research and practical experiences suggests it is possible for brands to be associated with specific fragrances or odors. In turn, it is therefore possible for specific fragrances to remind consumers of specific brands. Through the use of senses then, it is possible for brands to become truly emotionally engaged with consumers.

## Why scent is important to the Marketing Industry

The use of scent as a marketing tool is an emerging area specifically relevant to marketing communications. This is due to the significance scent has on our emotions and hence our decision making process.

The following examples further illustrate this connection. Specifically, the following examples illustrate the influence of scent on our:

- Attraction to a specific retail environment and willingness to stay in a retail environment
- Evaluations of a products overall quality
- Purchase decision

Similarly, the following lines offer examples demonstrating the importance of scent to an overall brand image and branding campaign.

### **Senses create brand awareness and engagement**

To begin, at the retail level the influential role of scent on consumer behavior is increasingly recognized. Research suggests that a positively scented retail environment tend to both attract consumers to it, and also increase the longevity of consumers shopping experiences. Indeed,

Scent causes inquiry. In other words, when shopper's smell something appealing, they tend to think: "that smells good...where is the smell coming from?" (Santandrea, 2007 p. 182)

Similarly, "over the years, scent technology has become more sophisticated, with retailers using scent marketing to make customers feel more comfortable in their stores and to put them in the mood to buy (Schifferstein and Block, 2002, p. 540)

Additional research also concludes "Retailers are using scents to create a more comfortable, positive and inviting atmosphere. Such an atmosphere not only makes for a better shopping experience, but also tends to create repeat traffic." (Santandrea, 2007 p. 182) Indeed,

Besides an overall improvement of the pleasantness of the shopping experience, an ambient odor can also draw attention to specific products. It can provide concrete information about the presence and the characteristics of one or more products in the perceiver's vicinity. The smell then serves as a cue that activates cognitive and affective information about these products. (Schifferstein and Block, 2002, p. 539)

Anecdotal support reinforcing the potentially positive influence of odors in the retail industry is available from the real estate sector. In this case,

Real estate agents "know" that the scent of freshly baked cookies has a strong influence on perspective homebuyers, making them feel right at home (often recalling a dozy, happy childhood home). (Brumfield, 2008, p. 103)

Additionally, in retail services, scent is also a practical communications tool. For example, in London's large Heathrow Airport, "Douglas Fir, a distinctly relaxing fragrance, which is effective in lowering moods, is used to put travelers at ease and reduce the stress of travel." (Schifferstein and Block, 2002, p. 547)

Clearly then, for the retail industry, a positive aroma has the ability to both attract customers to a location, and also make customers feel comfortable, relaxed, and more likely to linger.

#### **Senses contribute to positive overall product evaluations**

Secondly, research also suggests aromas contribute to consumers overall perceptions of a products overall quality (Fitzgerald and Swati, 2008, p. 290). The following two examples taken from the automobile industry exemplify how the role of scent is used as a marketing tool in both England and the United States. In England,

When Rolls Royce buyers began complaining in the mid-1990s that the new just didn't lie up to their earlier models, the company went to work to track down the problem. They found that the smell was the issue. They returned to a 1965 Silver Cloud for their inspiration, and deconstructed its aroma identifying 800 separate elements. They reconstructed the classic scent, and now spray it under the seats of new vehicles (Brumfield, 2008, p. 13)

Similarly, premium car brands in the United States are also employing scent to bolster vehicle brands. In the United States,

For Cadillac, the new-car smell, that ethereal scent of factory freshness, is no longer just a project of chance. General Motors recently revealed that its Cadillac division had engineered a scent for its vehicles and had been processing it into the leather seats. The scent was created in a lab, was picked by focus groups, and is now the aroma of every new Cadillac put on the road. It even has a name. Nuance. (Hakim, 2003 p. 1)

The process used by GM to confirm the need for scenting its vehicles, and the scent selection, also demonstrates the extent our olfactory sense influences our perception of product quality. In GM's situation, to test aromas,

The company brought 340 Cadillac owners together in Houston presented them with six different Cadillac's and asked them for their impressions of the interiors. Five of the otherwise identical interiors were imbued with different scents and a sixth was a Cadillac in the buff, so to speak. The owners were asked about everything but smell and they favored the car scented with what would be dubbed Nuance (Hakim, 2003 p. 2)

Clearly then, scent is increasingly being used as a marketing tool to communicate to consumers. Specifically, "automakers like GM are recasting cars, and particularly luxury vehicles, so that the things that potential buyers smell, hear, and touch are increasingly a result of engineering rather than chance" (Hakim, 2003 p. 1)

### **Sense contribute to purchase decisions**

Research also suggests a positive aroma has the ability to influence consumers purchase decisions. Indeed, “Scent, which acts on the limbic system of the consumer, evokes powerful emotional and memory experiences that can aid in persuading a consumer to purchase a product.” (Scala, 2005, p. 1)

Similarly, additional research reports, “Scent, as a powerful memory jogger, can aid in plating a desire to purchase a specific product, but scent is even more effective when combined with a multimedia advertising message.” (Scala, 2005, p. 7)

Again, anecdotes from industry serve to reinforce these findings. For example,

When a swanky London nightclub added the scent of coconut to the atmosphere of the club, it found that sales of the rum drink Malibu more than doubled. (Santandrea, 2007 p. 182)

Also, from the car industry, as one expert also states, “Smell would not be the first impression that a potential car buyer would have, but it could be a deal breaker nonetheless.” (Hakim, 2003 p. 2)

Anecdotal information also suggests “dramatic increases in chocolate sales from vending machines when airborne chocolate scent is delivered into the region around the vending machine.” (Santandrea, 2007 p. 182)

### **Sense contributes to brand building by creating a positive image and increasing mindshare**

For branding building, the importance of scent should also be underscored. In this case, by gaining an emotional connection with consumers through the use of an appropriate scent, it is possible for brands to generate more customer loyalty.

For example, “Leveraging the powerful sense of smell allows your brand to stand out among our competitors and more memorable in the minds of your consumers – the key to building ‘mindshare’.” (Stevens, 2007 p. 30)

Similarly, for retailer store brands smell is also important because,

The scent can become a part of the retailer’s identify, a part of its brand. It has the potential to become the most powerful part of a brand because of the long memory associated with the sense of smell. It is very powerful ...for people who want to build a brand in the mind of the consumer.  
(Santandrea, 2007 p. 182)

Another example from the banking industry also illustrates the influence of scent. In this situation, Decatur First Bank in Georgia prepared and distributed popcorn at its branches. As the Bank President stated,

“We choose popcorn because it tells people they’re welcome, and that we want them to feel comfortable,” says Judy Turner, President and CEO.  
“The smell of the popcorn really shapes the full feel of the branch when customers walk in... it allowed the strategy to truly utilize both smell and

taste – creating an even more powerful and interactive e experience for both the customer and the employees... It provided an engaging brand-building strategy.” (Stevens, 2007 p. 33)

Therefore, the role of scent as a marketing communications tool has a number of applications. As the above analysis has outlined, at a retail level, a positive aroma has the ability to both attract customers and by providing a calming environment, increase the length of their shopping experience. Moreover, research suggests the use of an appropriate scent is also a factor in increasing a positive overall evaluation of a product’s quality. Anecdotal evidence also suggests scents have a positive impact on sales volumes.

Similarly, for brands, scent also is increasingly recognized. For example, through building an emotional link with consumers through scent it is possible to increase customer awareness, engagement, and mindshare.

## Limitations of scent as a marketing communications tool

It should be noted, however, specific scents are not universal in their ability to both trigger a common memory, and in turn, incite a completely predictable emotion.

In particular, scents are subject to an individual's experiential background and also are culturally laden. At an individual level, for example,

Human responses to a scent are not universal: reactions can be individualized. Scientists say that we are especially susceptible to individual "smell imprinting" during intense emotional experiences – either good or bad.

As a result, not all smells provoke happy memories. For example, for some people, the smell of flowers may become associated with a spouse or loved one's funeral – a particularly unhappy experience – and thereafter, the scent of flowers may serve as an unwelcome or sad reminder. (Wyrzensniewski and McCauley, 1999, p. 712)

At a broader societal level, emotional responses to scents are also not universally predictable. For example,

Since smells imprint feeling and memories on people, it is only natural for separate families, communities, ethnicities, and cultures to share separate responses to varying types and strengths of smells. (Brumfield, 2008, p. 14)

Indeed, as one expert noted, "smell is subjective". (Stevens, 2007 p. 34)

Clearly then, whether or not a specific scent carries with it a positive or negative emotion is not completely predicable. This is because each individual's experiences with specific odors are diverse. Also, at a cultural level, different odors carry different connotations and therefore also stimulate diverse emotions.

Moreover, it is also important to ensure olfactory associations with products are appropriate. For example, as one researcher states it is,

Doubtful that the addition of any pleasant scent should improve the evaluation of a product or service... Thus, it is an oversimplification to state, "if it smells good – they will come!" The appropriateness of the scent must be considered. (Fitzgerald and Swati, 2008, p. 290)

Overall then, the use of scent as a communications tool requires sensitivity to individual differences in backgrounds and culture – both of which may influence the appropriateness and effectiveness of a particular scent.

## Scent Marketing – the future

With this understanding in mind, the significance of scent as a communications tool for marketing oriented organizations is clear. Currently, although one expert speculates that “relatively few companies have yet to incorporate scent into their marketing and advertising strategies” (Brumfield, 2008, p. 109), the significance of using this medium is increasingly acknowledged.

As the same enthusiastic expert writes,

There is a tsunami of scent on the horizon that’s about to make landfall. It will be of historical significance, transforming every aspect of business and life around the globe. Whether or not you are keen about the idea, at this point, it’s an unstoppable phenomena. There hasn’t been a wave of this magnitude in the field of marketing and advertising since the onset of photography. It’s all due to the new discoveries and our growing understanding of the subtle influence that scent has upon the human mind and body. (Brumfield, 2008, p. XV)

Indeed, “bold, forward-thinking companies have begun to embrace the subtle influences of scent to reach out and touch the emotions of their customers (Stevens, 2007 p. 34), and Aroma’s impact on the next generation of commerce will be broad and diverse. The understanding of the significance of scent as a language and communication tool will become common-place (Brumfield, 2008, p. XXIX)

For example, at a product level, one industry expert speculates brand images will be reinforced by olfactory senses. He expert writes,

High quality products will deliver premium aromas and responses, while low-end brands will smell just as they are: like cheap imitations. We will be able to discern and differentiate between products with our noses

In other words, in light of the influence appropriately scented have the potential to communicate with us, “Scented products and the emotional imprint they carry will command brand loyalty.” (Brumfield, 2008, p. 46)

Similarly, at a practical level,

Scent marketing will be distributed through all series of marketing paraphernalia. Accoutrements of business like sales brochures, letterhead, catalogues, product data sheets, white papers, and other printed information should also be branded with your organizations signature scent.  
(Brumfield, 2008, p. 165)

## Conclusion

In summary, the role of scent as a marketing communications tool has been acknowledged since formal research was completed in 1932. Subsequent additional research, and the incorporation of scent into products such as “Scratch and Sniff,” has further emphasized the significance of this medium to marketers.

As this analysis has outlined, our olfactory sense is uniquely linked to our memories and emotions. Scent is recognized as being a powerful method through which we are reminded of memories, and the emotions those memories carry. Moreover, as recent research as indicated, it is possible for marketers to link a scent – and through this scent an emotion – to a brand through an olfactory experience.

As a marketing communications tool, the olfactory medium has the ability to influence our decision making in a number of ways. Specifically, through an appropriate scent, it is possible for individuals to be drawn to a specific location, or product, and also to invoke feelings of comfort and relaxation.

Additionally, research and anecdotal evidence suggests the presence of a suitable scent may also influence our:

- Perceptions of products overall quality. Examples of the use of scent by well-known automakers have demonstrated these phenomena.
- And consumer purchase decisions.

Lastly, for brands, the use of scent is also increasingly recognized for its ability to increase awareness, contribute to a consumers positive perception of brand quality and create an emotional engagement with consumers.

With the above knowledge in mind, it is expected that the use of scent as a marketing communications tool will increase significantly in the near future. Indeed, as marketing organizations seek effective methods to communicate with consumers, the use of scent as a communications tool is uniquely effective.

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