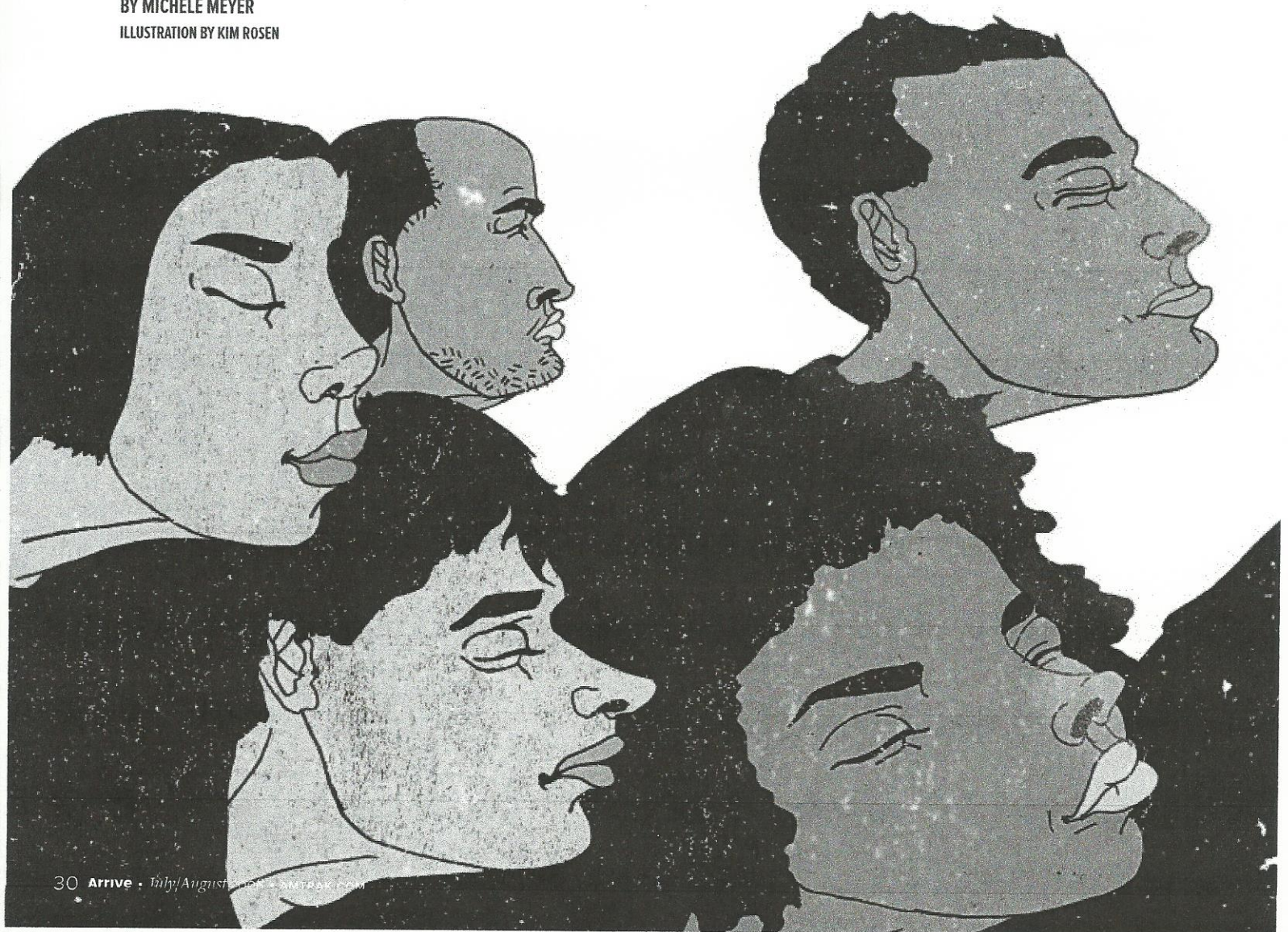


The Sweet Smell of Success

It all started with perfume ads, but does fragrance marketing really work?

BY MICHELE MEYER

ILLUSTRATION BY KIM ROSEN



Catch a whiff of popcorn and you crave it—right now. Doesn't matter if you're at the airport and your plane is boarding. So it's no wonder that marketers blow the aroma of brownies through groceries, infuse auto dealerships with the scent of pricey leather and fill travel agencies with the smell of suntan lotion.

"Smell has been the Cinderella of the senses, the forgotten sense," says Theresa L. White, adjunct associate professor in neuroscience and physiology at SUNY Upstate Medical University in Syracuse, N.Y.

As she and other researchers have found, smell, more than any other sense, awakens lust, nostalgia or revulsion. And it's all a matter of brain biology. Odor travels through the brain's emotional center—the limbic system—and so is closely tied to feelings.

'Eau de Loot'

Marketers have chased us by the nose ever since Chicago's Smell & Taste Treatment and Research Foundation

discovered, a decade ago, that if you sell a tennis shoe in a scented room, shoppers are willing to pay 20 percent more. Exxon's On the Run stores added a java aroma, and coffee sales jumped 55 percent.

It makes sense, because much shopping and eating is emotional, not

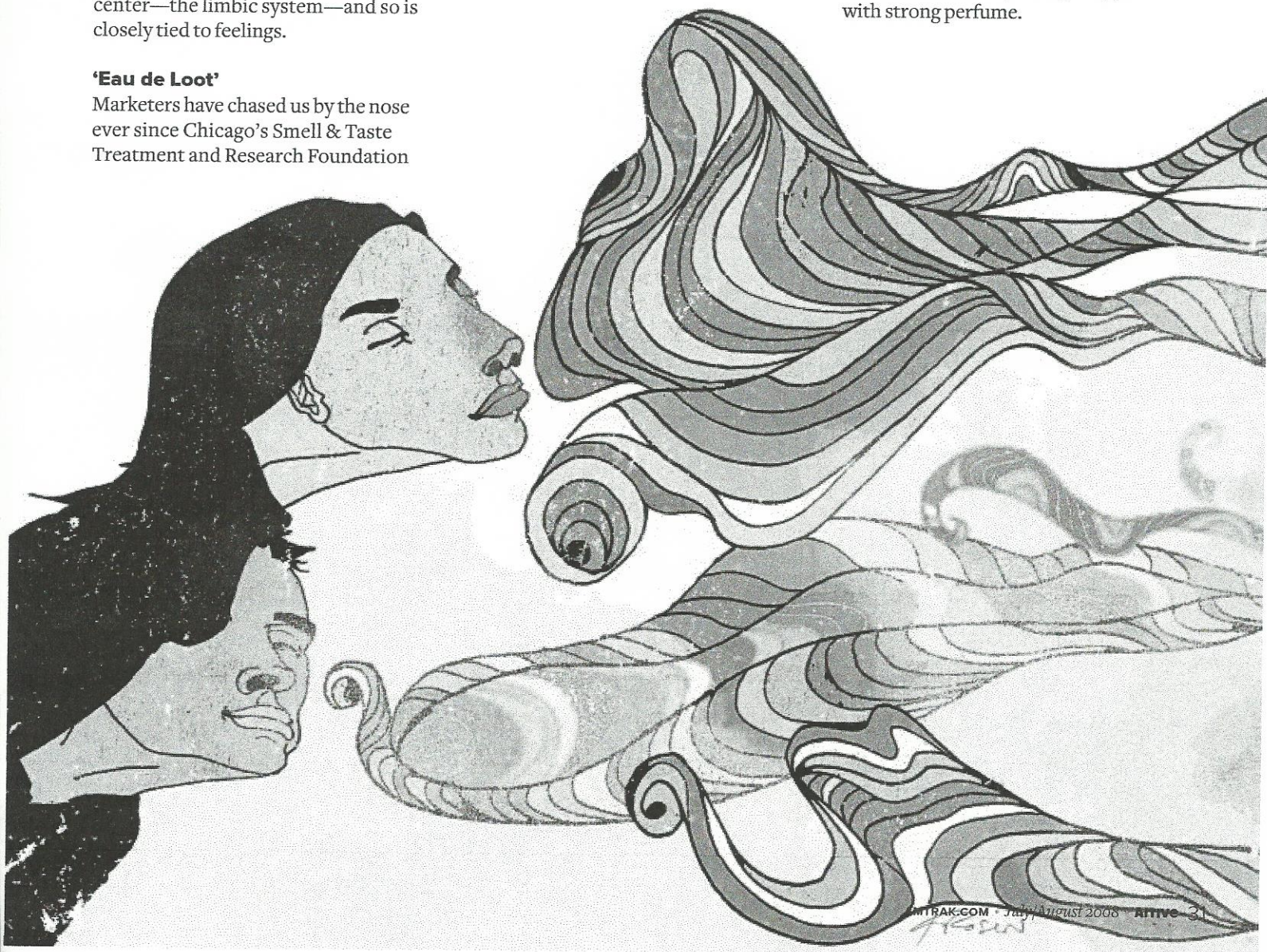
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rational. "You want to get people into a store and keep them there," says Harold H. Vogt, founder and chief marketer at Scent Marketing Institute in Scarsdale, N.Y. "As time flies by quickly in an appealing atmosphere, you spend more money."

On the business battlefield, the power of marketing can be blown to bits by happenstance. If a customer wears gloves, he can't feel. If he looks in the wrong direction, he won't see. And if he's listening to an iPod, he won't hear the campaign. But he cannot hold his nose for the minute or so needed to walk beyond an odor. "You've got to breathe the scent again."

That's why advertisers are willing to spend quadruple a newspaper's ad rate for aromas, and why some firms pay up to \$125,000 to create signature scents that will remind consumers of a product without even realizing it. And that's why, Vogt says, fragrance marketing is a \$100 million business—and is expected to top \$1 billion within the next decade.

At that price, brands cannot afford approaches that turn potential customers into enemies, as can happen when clerks douse unsuspecting shoppers with strong perfume.



Too Much Information

So how can firms deploy fragrance to seduce rather than assail? First, technology has forsaken the traditional scent strips and cards that reeked in magazines whether you liked the odor or not. Instead, drops of oil are embedded in printing ink and are released only when rubbed.

In stores, machines placed in air-conditioning ducts keep a scented mist light—not heavy and sticky. They also release intermittent and varied amounts so our olfactory mechanisms won't tune them out.

"If you vary the fragrance levels, the olfactory system is more likely to pay attention to it," says Pamela Dalton, senior research scientist at Monell Chemical Senses Center in Philadelphia, Pa.

Even then, results aren't guaranteed, says Mark Peltier, president of AromaSys Inc., a firm that creates such equipment—and is challenged by older buildings and their drafts. "Light and noise will go where you aim it. That's not true with aroma. Air flow is in charge." And chaos would erupt if every product in a grocery or electronics store emitted its own aroma.

Match Point

Further complicating the quest to make scent into cents are our personalized preferences. Experience creates the associations that lead us to love or loathe an aroma. To sway us, a scent also must be appropriate to surroundings.

"If it's just a smell, it can be annoying, even when it's pleasant," says Peltier. The heavy seaweed and wet rock odor along Oregon's coast would be nauseating on a Florida beach, where citrus, coconut and vanilla seem right. "And if you took *that* aroma and put it in a Vail lodge, instead of a woody scent, it would be ridiculous. Context is critical."

The best fragrances evoke a brand's best attributes. Thus, a clean linen aroma befits Thomas Pink menswear clothiers, says Rachel Herz, Brown University psychologist and author of *Scent of Desire* (William Morrow, 2007). "A chocolate smell would have no impact on shoppers, because it's irrelevant to the product." But add that smell to a

vending machine and it triples Hershey's candy sales.

A less tangible connection works for DeBeers Diamond Jewelers in Beverly Hills, whose citrus cocktail aroma simply symbolizes the product. "Bright, sparkling and rich. In that store, I'm feeling



The Nose Knows

"The future is limitless," says Mark Peltier, president of AromaSys Inc., a firm that creates scent-sending equipment. Among future projects are those that:

- Use distinctive wood and leather notes for each luxury car brand.
- Suit conventions' themes.
- Ignite spectators' passions—and taste buds—at sports arenas.
- Calm passengers during flights—and delays.

diamonds," Herz says. "It augments the products' perceived value."

Heaven Scent

A retailer also can generate a scent trail. Most obviously, fudge stores and bakeries send out a lure in malls. A Florida hotel, frustrated with sluggish business at its tucked-away ice-cream stand, piped in the scent of fresh-baked cones. "People found it and sales went up dramatically," Vogt says.

Other successful ads included a recent Sprite campaign with a lemony fragrance and the playful slogan, "SubLemonal." And fragrance strips still work, if they are mild. Westin placed an ad in magazines that was so successful the chain added candles and lotions to its unique aroma within six months. Last year, Omni placed blueberry-scented strips in the *USA Today*s delivered to rooms, to seduce guests into ordering coffee—and muffins.

Readers of *People* and *People en Español* magazines responded with fan mail

after holiday-themed ads used aroma-embedded ink to broadcast white chocolate for Chips Ahoy!, cherry for Jell-O, cinnamon bun for coffee and strawberry cheesecake for cream cheese. (Stroke of genius—or deviousness—was the bonus insert of peppermint- and cinnamon-scented gift tags.)

“Anything that’s interactive—in this case, rubbing the ink—creates excitement,” says Paul Caine, president of Time Inc. Entertainment Group. “Scent marketing is front and center at *People*, absolutely,” he says. “We already have more fragranced projects in the works.”

Rest Assured

Hotel chains recognize that “a scent can make a locale seem richer and grander,” Herz says. “And if you had a wonderful vacation in Hawaii, every time you smell the resort’s unique scent you’ll think, ‘Oh, I’ve got to go back to Hawaii and stay at that resort!’”

That’s why Westin devoted about a year to exploring 50 possibilities before finalizing a custom scent in 2006. “After traffic jams and airport delays, our White Tea fragrance is wonderfully refreshing and calming,” says Nancy London, marketing vice president for Westin Hotels and Resorts in White Plains, N.Y. “It turns a transactional experience—checking in or paying your bill—into an emotional one.”

But another hotel wasn’t as wise; it pumped fragrance into guest rooms. “I was so upset a Paris hotel thrust a really strong odor—oriental and fruity like Gucci’s Rush—in my bedroom at night without warning me,” says Lyn Harris, a London perfumer at Miller Harris, who made no such mistake as creator of the Dorchester Hotel’s signature scent.

Resorts that employ subtlety—and keep fragrance confined to public areas—find scent marketing is a gift that keeps on giving. A guest at Langham Place in Hong Kong didn’t realize the hotel had a signature scent of ginger flower until she arrived home. “When I opened my suitcase at home, the clothes from my trip smelled great,” says Anna Stancioff, vice president of Manhattan travel publicity firm Hawkins International.

Combine the memories the aroma evoked, and a repeat customer was born. And as any marketer will tell you: Nothing smells sweeter than success. 