

The hard smell

Next time you're out shopping and you suddenly find yourself overcome by the urge to splurge – stop and sniff the air, says Bijal Trivedi

 THE AIR in Samsung's flagship electronics store on the upper west side of Manhattan smells like honeydew melon. It is barely perceptible but, together with the soft, constantly morphing light scheme, the scent gives the store a blissfully relaxed, tropical feel. The fragrance I'm sniffing is the company's signature scent and is being pumped out from hidden devices in the ceiling. Consumers roam the showroom unaware that they are being seduced not just via their eyes and ears but also by their noses.

You can expect more aromatic encounters as you browse the stores this festive season. Scent, marketers say, is the final frontier in "sensory branding". Of all our five senses, smell is thought to be the most closely linked to emotion because the brain's olfactory bulb, which detects odours, fast-tracks signals to the limbic system, which links emotion to memories. Retailers hope that making this direct link to our emotions may seduce us into choosing their products over a competitor's. "Branding is all about how a customer feels about a company or product – it's an emotional connection with the customer," says Randall Stone, a New York-based marketing expert at branding consultants Lippincott Mercer, who helped create the Samsung scent.

To date, there is no conclusive evidence to prove that scenting a product will persuade a shopper to buy it, but it may tip the balance in favour of a particular brand or product. As a result, more and more marketers, gadget makers and retailers are turning to scent in the hope it will help forge long-term relationships between consumers and their brands, and ultimately sell more stuff.

Scenting stores to sell products such as electronics or clothes not normally known for their aroma is a recent development. There are about 20 scent-marketing companies in the world, collectively worth around \$80 million, says Harald Vogt, co-founder of the Scent Marketing Institute in Scarsdale, New York.

A decade ago, marketers tried to scent stores in Europe. The attempt backfired – in part because fragrance is considered an

individual experience and scenting public spaces is regarded as "polluting the atmosphere", says Vogt. European and American retailers were also concerned that pumping chemicals into stores could give some shoppers breathing problems, leaving companies vulnerable to prosecution.

These worries haven't deterred everyone, though. The appearance of cheap technologies to disseminate scents has spurred casinos, hotels and spas to experiment with pumping them out to make consumers feel more pampered. Early this year Westin Hotels & Resorts began scenting its hotel lobbies with a signature fragrance called White Tea.

"We wanted to make an emotional connection," says Nadeen Ayala, senior PR director for the chain. The response from guests has been enormous, she says, prompting the company to launch a line of White Tea scented candles.

Westin and Samsung are not alone in using scent to tap into consumers' psyches.

"People spent more money when the store was scented"

Diamond retailer De Beers scents its sparkling Manhattan and Los Angeles showrooms with an aromatic blend that includes floral, citrus and green tea; cellphone company Verizon Wireless recently used chocolate-scented displays to market the new LG Chocolate phone; and Sony is raising the stakes by not only scenting its Sony Style stores but also sending its signature scent home in scented sachets in shopping bags. Sony is also considering impregnating the hard plastics used in its gadgets with the fragrance, says David Van Epps, CEO of North Carolina-based ScentAir, developer of Sony's signature scent.

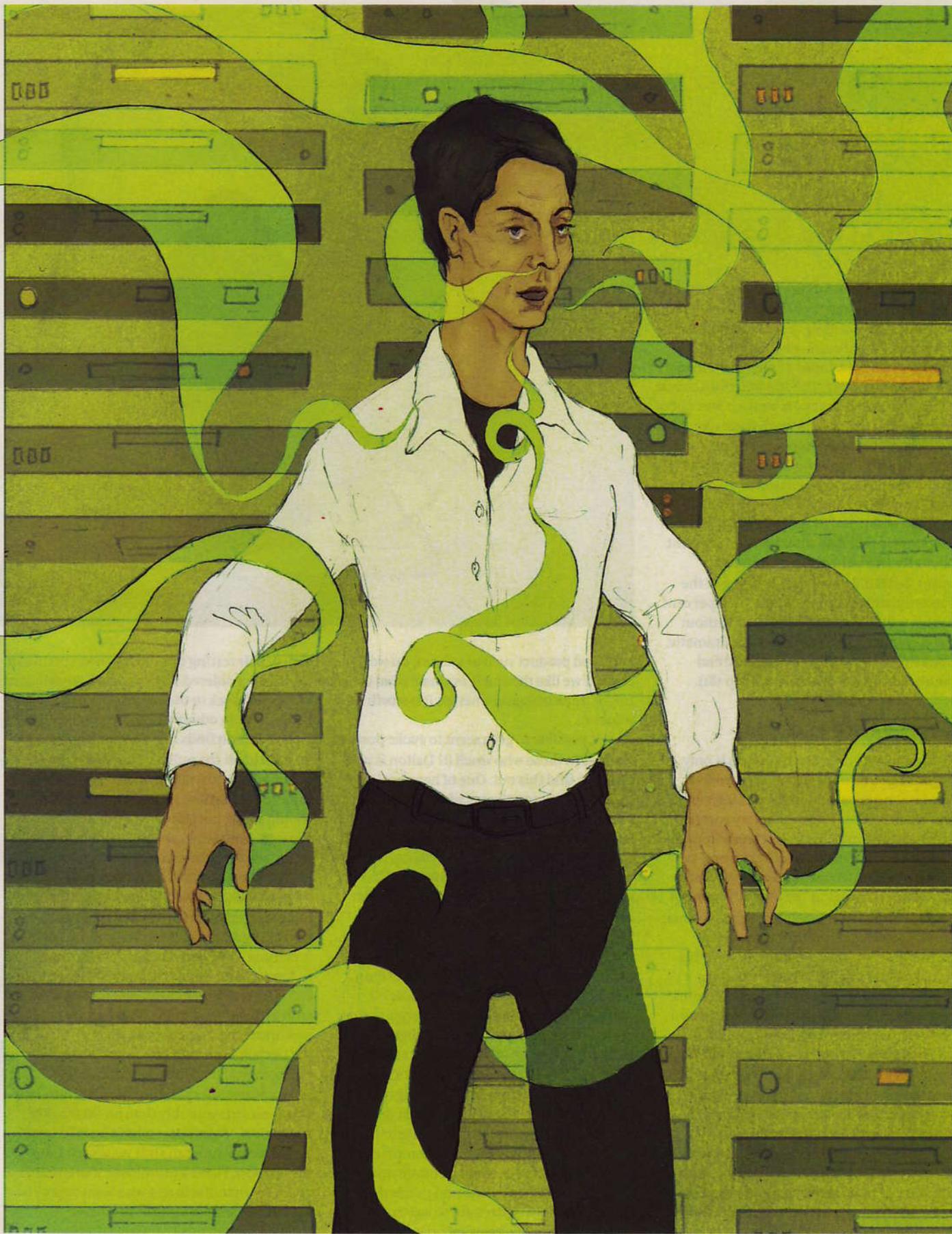
These companies are among the few that have gone public with the practice. Most retailers are still reluctant to admit they use scents in their stores, says Vogt, so it's hard to get any firm figures on the impact of scent on profits. It is only within the past couple of

years that independent researchers have begun measuring the impact on sales. However, several studies have shown that pleasant scents encourage shoppers to linger over a product, increase the number of times they examine it and in some cases increase their willingness to pay higher prices too.

In one recent study, accepted for publication in the *Journal of Business Research*, Eric Spangenberg, a consumer psychologist and dean of the College of Business and Economics at Washington State University in Pullman, and his colleagues carried out an experiment in a local clothing store. They discovered that when "feminine scents", like vanilla, were used, sales of women's clothes doubled; as did men's clothes when scents like rose maroc were diffused.

"Men don't like to stick around when it smells feminine, and women don't linger in a store if it smells masculine," says Spangenberg, who led the research and has been studying the impact of ambient scents on consumers for more than a decade. Spangenberg says this most recent study underscores the importance of matching gender-preferred scents to the product. Both men and women browsed for longer and spent more money when a fragrance specific to their gender was used to scent the store atmosphere. "Scent marketing is a viable strategy that retailers should consider," says Spangenberg. "But they really need to tailor the scent to the consumer."

Anticipating which scents will be most appealing to the broadest audience is tricky, because there is no such thing as a pleasant aroma that everyone will agree on, says Rachel Herz, a visiting lecturer in psychiatry at Brown University Medical School in Providence, Rhode Island: "A universal hit does not exist." That's because there are distinct geographic and cultural preferences for certain scents, and also gender-specific preferences within each culture (see Diagram, page 39). Samsung's signature scent took a year to develop and candidates were tested in the US, Germany, China, Brazil, Thailand, Korea and Russia to find one with broad appeal. ▶



TIM GAMBELL/NOTTRAM

Maureen Morrin of the school of business at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, in Camden, and colleagues tested the effects of smell on the spending habits of mall shoppers. They pumped a "pleasant, citrusy" odour throughout a mall in Montreal, Canada, then intercepted shoppers on their way out of the mall and quizzed them on their spending.

They divided the shoppers into two categories: the "contemplative" ones who said they normally only purchased planned items, and "impulsive" purchasers, who claimed to be more whimsical in their spending. Morrin was surprised to find that the light, pleasant odour had no impact on the impulse buyer, but it did boost the spending of the contemplative shoppers by about 14 per cent compared to others who browsed without the scent. While the result was not dramatic, marketers viewed it as a positive trend (*Journal of Service Research*, vol 8, p 181).

Direct link to emotion

Exactly how scent exerts its effects is only beginning to be understood. When odour information travels from the olfactory bulb and reaches the primary olfactory cortex it activates the limbic system at an earlier stage of processing than do the other senses, says Pamela Dalton, who studies cognitive and sensory psychology at the Monell Chemical Senses Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This triggers an almost instantaneous emotional response in mammals. It is this initial reaction that marketers hope to exploit by using scent in products or stores.

Dalton's research, originally funded by a Gulf war medicine programme, was at first directed at exploring how odour could trigger flashbacks in war veterans and whether these associations could be altered or decoupled. But the studies are also of great interest to Monell's many corporate sponsors.

"Every smell triggers a friend-or-foe reaction," says Avery Gilbert, chief scientist at the Scent Marketing Institute. We shouldn't underestimate our ability to evaluate smells consciously either, he says. When we choose

a scented product such as a shampoo we check if we like the smell, evaluate what others might think of it, and whether it is worth its price tag.

Is it possible to get a scent to evoke positive feelings in those who smell it? Dalton is now trying to find this out. One of her ongoing experiments investigates whether an odour initially paired with a stressful or relaxing stimulus will trigger the same physiological response when volunteers are exposed to the smell the next day or a few days later. The experiments take place in a metal chamber containing a giant plasma screen, a device for turning scent into an aerosol, a heart-rate monitor and a computer monitor to communicate with the participant. Dalton's test odour is galbanum – an aromatic oil derived from the *Ferula gummosa* plant that grows in northern Iran and is an ingredient in many Asian perfumes. To me, it smells like wet dirt. Once in the room, the participant has a pulse monitor clipped to their finger and is left alone while the plasma screen inflicts bloody, violent scenes from the horror film *Saw II* on them. Characters in the movie are strapped into harnesses and endure mind-warping forms of physical and psychological torture that is very stressful to watch.

If a participant's heart rate rises 10 per cent

above their resting rate during the experiment they are considered a "responder". Responders are invited back to the chamber to experience the galbanum odour without the hair-raising videos. Dalton finds that a second exposure is enough to set the pulse racing even without the images. "Our olfactory system is first and foremost a warning system for things we should avoid, not things we should approach," she says. Thus when an odour is tied to a negative event, the association forms quickly.

The same type of experiment is also done with relaxing stimuli. When the odour is tied to a pleasant experience – dimmed lights, a reclining chair, relaxing images and deep breathing – the association is much slower to form: many more encounters are needed before the volunteer responds to the odour with a drop in heart rate, blood pressure and breathing. Nonetheless, even if the participants didn't demonstrate a physiological reaction to the odour alone after a pleasant experience they still rated the odour more favourably than on their initial evaluation. "So odour can have an effect and just one exposure can shift your preference," says Dalton. That's a promising, if preliminary, result for manufacturers who want to embed signature scents in specific products.

Even though positive associations may



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