

## The power of scents in consumer products

### 1 Warmer

#### a. Work in pairs or groups.

- Write 6 everyday household or body care products you buy that are scented.
- What type of scent does each of these products have?
- Write the type of product and its scent on the lines, e.g., *hand soap, French lavender*
- Share and compare your answers with the rest of the class.

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### 2 Find the information

- #### a. Skim read the article and make a note of all the scented products as well as the types of scents mentioned there.

### 3 Key words

- #### a. Read the definitions and find key words in the article that match them. The paragraph number is given in brackets to help you.

Check your answers and your understanding of how the words are used by using the same word to complete the example sentence immediately after each definition.

Then read the complete article to see how each of the key words is used in context.

1. the fact that something is present everywhere (3)

The \_\_\_\_\_ of mobile phone cameras has ruined the market for disposable snapshot cameras.

2. bringing a lot of money (5)

Despite their initial doubts, the shareholders were delighted when the merger turned out to be very \_\_\_\_\_ for both companies.

3. attempts to discover your competitors' industrial secrets using secret methods (7)

*Since the recent case of industrial \_\_\_\_\_, the company no longer allows visitors to take their phones on the factory tour.*

4. great skill or ability (7)

*She is well-known in the business for her \_\_\_\_\_ as a trouble shooter.*

5. when something is tested thoroughly to make sure that it works as planned (8)

*In stage four, the new medicine was \_\_\_\_\_ on volunteers in their 20s and 30s.*

6. something you have that gives you an advantage over, or makes you more successful than, your competitors (9)

*Being able to speak Japanese definitely gave her an \_\_\_\_\_ over the other applicants.*

7. bring a particular emotion, idea, or memory into your mind. (11)

*The designs will hopefully \_\_\_\_\_ happy childhood memories in many buyers.*

8. things that you say to persuade someone to buy something or support you (12)

*The entrepreneurs were only allowed ten minutes for their \_\_\_\_\_ and the chance to convince the business angels to invest in them.*

9. relating to populations (13)

*Before we decide whether to open a new branch there, we need to know more about the \_\_\_\_\_ of the area.*

10. the amount of time between two related events (13)

*Customers have to allow for a short time- \_\_\_\_\_ between placing their order and delivery.*

11. the number of people who accept or buy something that is offered (13)

*The initial \_\_\_\_\_ was lower than we had anticipated, but it should improve next quarter.*

12. things that represent a concept or meaning (14)

*The increase in the number of vegan options in restaurants is just one of the \_\_\_\_\_ of the shift towards people being more aware of the chemicals and unhealthy practices of factory farming.*

## Switzerland's 'Silicon Valley of smell' prospers in age of big data

*THE PANDEMIC HAS CHANGED HOW PEOPLE WANT THEMSELVES, THEIR CLOTHES AND THEIR HOMES TO SMELL.*

BY SAM JONES

- 1 Is artificial intelligence already deciding how you smell?
- 2 Before the pandemic, it was popular in America to smell sweet: a growing trend for fruit — even caramel — scents in consumer products such as shampoo or detergent had become notable. Quite what was driving this unpleasantness is not clear.
- 3 But there are signs of a shift. The Covid-19 pandemic has changed how people want themselves, their clothes and their homes to smell — and not just in America. Now people want to believe everything they touch is squeaky clean — even antiseptically so. The astringent ubiquity of rubbing alcohol has lodged itself in the public smell consciousness, sitting alongside citruses, menthols and such as a signifier of hygiene.
- 4 What people like to smell changes all the time — more gradually than seismically but with huge business consequences. Rarely do we stop to think about how much of our environment — and the products we consume in it — is scented. But almost everything is.
- 5 On the outskirts of Geneva, between the suburbs of Vernier and Satigny, is proof of how lucrative scent (and flavour) can be. This is the "Silicon Valley of smell", says Gilbert Ghostine, the chief executive of Firmenich, one of two companies based here that dominate the way the world smells. The other is Givaudan. (IFF, a third giant of the sector, is based in New York).
- 6 Both Givaudan and Firmenich have a 10-year, compound annual growth rate in revenues of about 5 per cent. The pandemic barely dented this.
- 7 The two are fiercely competitive. Smell espionage is real and a code of silence surrounds the companies' clientele. Both Givaudan and Firmenich like to boast about their technological prowess and the clever things they do. (This extends to food, where the world's vegans have a lot to thank them for. So do the world's dieters — Firmenich likes to boast it removed 1.2tn calories from food products in 2020 thanks to its sweeteners and flavour enhancers).
- 8 The efforts they go to are exacting, almost Willy Wonka\*-like. In their laboratories outside Geneva are whole rooms filled with dozens of washing machines, in which different detergents and scents are trialled on regulation sets of undergarments, towels and T-shirts. Others are full of drying racks to see what new scents smell like as laundry dries.
- 9 But the real edge these companies have is in knowing what their customers want. When it comes to staying ahead of slow, hidden shifts in the smell-desires of global consumers, data are invaluable.
- 10 Last month, Firmenich launched its "scentmate" portal. Customers no longer need to liaise with an expensive perfumer to work out what they want their new candle, washing powder or moisturiser to smell like. They can simply upload their preferences to the portal — Something fresh? Something heady? — and an algorithm will churn out recommendations.
- 11 This is particularly powerful as the world globalises, an key driver of sector growth. The extent to which products need to be adapted to local cultural tastes and expectations is more and more important. Fragrances that evoke air-dried clothing and urban-escapism might be very different in England than, say, Thailand.
- 12 So the portal allows customers to specify other factors such as geography and price, too, in order to recommend scents to suit needs. It is backed up by a constant stream of consumer data, gathered from testing panels across the world. Givaudan has also identified data and digitisation as vital to transforming how it pitches and sells its scents.

*Continued on next page*

13 This big data of smell might show, for example, that clove is becoming a more popular aroma among east London hipsters in high-end cosmetics —and that historically that market has led scent preferences in Berlin among a similar demographic, with perhaps a two-year lag time before take-up in broader consumer markets.

14 All of which is not to say that the perfumers' art is over. In fine fragrance, the noses of scent's Silicon Valley are being asked to source ever more unusual and aggressive smells. Uniqueness and originality are the signifiers of elite status. So much so that even "animalistic" and "faecal" smells are making their way — albeit in small amounts — into expensive new fragrances, one perfumer told me. Scentmate could not predict that.

15 This could also tell us something about the way AI and big data will impact our lives more broadly. The big social divide in the future may be between those who can afford to be original, and those whose tastes are shaped by algorithms.

*\* Willy Wonka = a fictional character from Roald Dahl's 1964 children's novels *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator*. He is the eccentric owner of the Wonka Chocolate Factory.*

FT

Sam Jones, 10 August 2021.

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## 4 Understanding the article

a. Are these sentences True or False according to the information in the article? Tick (✓) the sentences that are true. Rewrite and correct any that are false.

1. The pandemic changed the way consumers prefer their household products to smell.
2. The author misses the sweet smell many products had before the pandemic.
3. Along with globalization, the scents used in products are becoming increasingly standardized.
4. Information from around the globe is being gathered and used by the scent industry to create algorithms that help producers decide how to scent their products for different markets.
5. The top three companies working in the field of scent, taste, and flavour are all based in Switzerland.
6. Like most businesses, the Swiss scent companies suffered large financial losses due to the pandemic.
7. By watching preferences in one trend-setting country, scents are adapted to suit the wishes of that demographic in other countries that are known to follow trends.
8. Algorithms and technology in the scent industry signify an end to the human art of perfumery.
9. High-end consumers like to show their status through the originality of their scented products and fragrances.
10. In the future, only those with a lot of money to spend are likely to have homes that smell different to everyone else's in their area.

## 5 Business language

- a. Connect the words on the left and right to make useful business language. Then find and circle each word pair or phrase in the article to check your answers.

Talk about the meaning of each and look up any you do not know.

- |                    |                    |
|--------------------|--------------------|
| 1. squeaky         | dented (something) |
| 2. sitting         | divide             |
| 3. compound annual | alongside          |
| 4. barely          | stream of ...      |
| 5. a code of       | driver             |
| 6. a key           | clean              |
| 7. a constant      | growth             |
| 8. social          | silence            |

- b. Write two sentences for each word pair or phrase. The first sentence (a) should be about the article, and the second (b) should be about a different topic.

- 1.a. \_\_\_\_\_  
1.b. \_\_\_\_\_  
2.a. \_\_\_\_\_  
2.b. \_\_\_\_\_  
3.a. \_\_\_\_\_  
3.b. \_\_\_\_\_  
4.a. \_\_\_\_\_  
4.b. \_\_\_\_\_  
5.a. \_\_\_\_\_  
5.b. \_\_\_\_\_  
6.a. \_\_\_\_\_  
6.b. \_\_\_\_\_  
7.a. \_\_\_\_\_  
7.b. \_\_\_\_\_  
8.a. \_\_\_\_\_  
8.b. \_\_\_\_\_

## 6 Discussion

### a. Discuss these questions.

- How important is scent when you buy a product?
- Are there any products that you purposely do not buy because you find the scent off-putting or unpleasant?
- How interested are you in being able to create your own room spray or personalized perfume?
- How much more would you be willing to pay for a body care product that is especially scented to your liking?
- In addition to the scents used in products, how else might scents be used to encourage people to spend time (and money) in a particular shop, spa, gym, café, hotel, etc.?
- The article gives an example of particular scents aimed at hipsters. Talk about the changes and differences you have noticed in scents used in products aimed at your grandparents, in those aimed at your parents, those aimed at your age group, and those aimed at consumers younger than you. Discuss not only the type of scents, but also the intensity of the scents, and how they are sourced and produced.

## 7 Wider business theme – Redesigning product features

### a. Work through the steps of this task with a partner and finally present your ideas and product suggestions to the rest of the group.

You work for a company producing electrical air fresheners. You specialise in floral scents and your target demographic are middle class suburban housewives. However, as the pandemic and lockdowns are dragging on, you have noticed a decline in sales, despite the fact that your target customer has spent more time at home. The market research and the new trends in the industry have shown that floral scents are giving way to more crisp and clean ones. You have been tasked with redesigning the two top selling products. Think about:

- How you can change the scent to include the new trends but not lose the staple floral smell.
- How you will market this change to your core customers.
- How you could use this change to market the new product to a new group of customers. Who could these customers be? What kind of advertising would attract them?