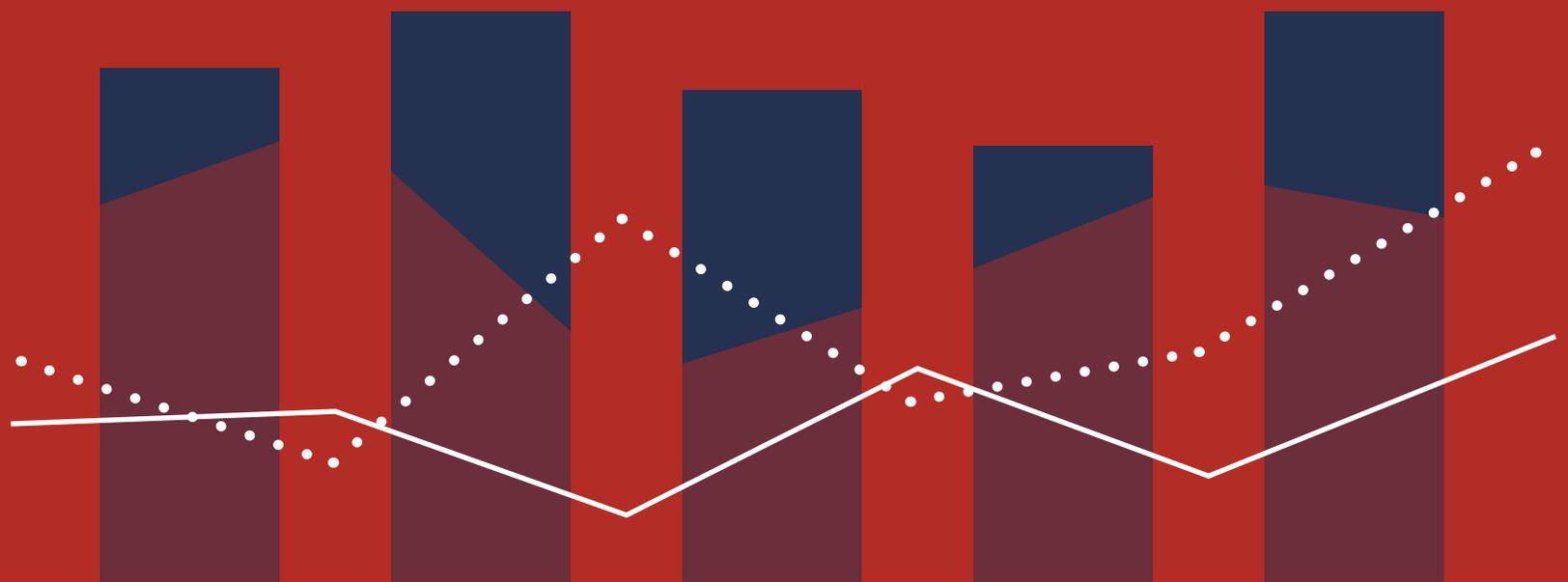


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Dollars and Scents

By Maureen Morrin | 7.13.2021

Retailers face unprecedented challenges in today's marketplace. Traditional brick-and-mortar retailers, who rely on in-store shoppers to generate sales, now find it especially difficult to compete with online retailers like Amazon, which offer a variety of merchandise and the ease of shopping from home.

If online sellers offer many of the same goods as traditional retailers and can deliver them nearly instantly to shoppers' homes, what advantages do traditional retailers have? One unique element in the traditional retailers' arsenal is the capacity to offer a multisensory shopping experience.

Experiencing the full gamut of retail's sights, sounds, and smells is possible only for shoppers inside traditional brick-and-mortar outlets. Traditional retailers are uniquely positioned to offer shoppers sensory inputs beyond merely seeing an item on a screen and clicking a button to buy it. In a physical store, a customer can view the colors and shapes of products, feel their textures and assess their weight, and see how they drape from a hanger or their own body. The shopper can view and hear the sounds of other shoppers and see how products might be coordinated via displays.

Many store managers realize the importance of the odors and aromas shoppers smell while inspecting and selecting merchandise. Yet the customer's sense of smell may be one of the least understood and

investigated aspects of shopping behavior. Recent research offers new insight into how retailers can use ambient scents to enhance the shopping experience and increase sales.

Ambient Scenting's Positive Effects

Roschk and Hosseinpour (2019) examined 671 scent effects in 64 published articles in a recent meta-analysis. The researchers found the presence of a pleasant ambient scent during shopping increased customer expenditures by 3% on average compared to shopping environments with no scent. "Ambient scent moves consumers down the purchase funnel, indirectly fostering expenditures," they wrote.

Researchers have found ambient scents improve shoppers' mood and energy levels, enhance their product and brand memory (Morrin and Ratneshwar 2003), improve store and product evaluation, and enhance purchase intentions. To have a positive effect on consumer outcomes, Roschk and Hosseinpour found the ambient

scent should not only be pleasant and familiar to shoppers, but also congruent with the products being sold. For example, a store selling sweets should consider emitting a scent like chocolate rather than baby powder (Mitchell, Kahn, and Knasko 1995). The researchers also found unidimensional “aroma structures” were more likely than multidimensional structures to have positive effects. Orange or peppermint, for example, are simple, unidimensional aromas, where combinations like orange/basil/green tea are multidimensional. A store like Restoration Hardware might choose a pine scent, which is product-congruent, familiar, and unidimensional.

Store managers might also use scents to achieve specific strategic objectives. For example, some stores may want to create perceptions of spaciousness. Research has shown ambient scents can alter spatial perceptions due to their associations with temperatures. Madzharov, Block, and Morrin (2015) found odors like peppermint are perceived as “cool” and create spacious perceptions. Conversely, stores can emit “warmer” scents like vanilla or cinnamon to create cozy perceptions, which the authors found positively impacted the desire for premium branded products in an eyewear store and university bookstore.

Scenting the Store Environment

Conventional wisdom suggests emitting a tempting food odor, such as cinnamon bun, will attract shoppers and generate sales. But recent research suggests a more complex picture. Biswas and Szocs (2019) found brief exposure (e.g., less than 30 seconds)

to indulgent food odors increased customer consumption. However, after longer exposure to tempting food odors (e.g., more than two minutes), consumers ate less. Longer exposures to indulgent food odors actually substitute for consumption, as the brain’s reward circuitry activates and reduces the consumer’s desire to eat.

Biswas and Szocs tested scents in highly controlled lab settings and the real world, including a school cafeteria and supermarket. In one study, they emitted an apple scent (healthy), pizza scent (unhealthy), or no scent on different days near a middle school cafeteria entrance. Students lined up for several minutes and were exposed to the odors for relatively long periods. When the researchers emitted the pizza scent, 21% of items purchased were unhealthy, compared to 37% for the apple scent, and 36% for no scent. In the supermarket study, they emitted a chocolate chip cookie scent, finding shoppers purchased a lower proportion of unhealthy items (30% of total purchases) and a higher proportion of healthy items (39%) compared to when they emitted a strawberry scent (45% and 26%).

Beyond the retail implications, the results suggest consumers aiming to reduce tempting food and beverage consumption may be able to control themselves via long exposure to indulgent scents.

Scenting Advertisements and Promotional Materials

What impact do scented advertisements, such as for perfume in a magazine, have on shopper response? Ruzeviciute, Kamleitner, and Biswas (2020) found consumers

encountering scented advertisements felt physically closer to the products featured. In the authors' words, the scent induced a sense of proximity because, "scents represent the very essence of their source." As a result, scented advertisements for products like soap and candles tend to be more appealing than unscented ads.

Ruzeviciute, Kamleitner, and Biswas also found scented advertisements' positive effects were weakened if

the product known for emitting the scent was already close by. The result suggests scenting flyers or posters in a store, where the advertised products are sold, may not increase sales. Scenting flyers at a distance from the products, however, may be more effective. Similarly, sending a scented promotional flyer via direct mail to households may induce a sense of proximity to the advertised product and create demand.

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