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Unlocking competitiveness through scent names: A data-driven approach

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Abstract Naming a product's scent is a key decision. The same scent can be interpreted differently when different names are assigned to it. Thus, choosing the right scent name can increase competitiveness by successfully appealing to desired consumer segments. We propose that such decisions should be data driven (i.e., on the basis of competitors' offerings and consumers' preferences) and provide guidelines on how to assign scent names to products in home care and personal care product categories, focusing on capturing market segments. Based on a large web-based dataset of scented products across multiple brands and categories, this article is the first to construct a typology of scent names empirically: unscented, concrete, abstract, and proprietary. After examining firms' assortments of scented products with different names across 12 categories and comparing them with consumers' preferences concerning such assortments, we identify major gaps. Overall, consumers demand far more unscented products and products with abstract names than currently offered; however, preferences for products with proprietary names are mostly aligned. Strategic recommendations center on naming scented products to better align supply and demand in the scented product market and capture new market opportunities.

1. Strategic importance of scent names

Consumers purchase and use scented products regularly, from personal care (e.g., shampoo, body lotion) to home care products (e.g., scented candle, air freshener). According to Statista (2008), this consumer behavior created a domestic market value of $77 billion in 2014; by 2024, this figure is expected to jump to $92 billion. Firms spend

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copious resources to craft product scents that differentiate their brands (Wilson, 2005). Consequently, a major marketing decision arises: How can firms communicate the merits of such an important product attribute to consumers via the name of a product's scent? This is not a straightforward decision because, unlike products that only have a brand name (Apple iPhone), scented products can have both a brand name (Mr. Clean) and a scent name (Apple Berry Twist or Meadows and Rain) and it is the scent name that communicates how the product smells. Yet, because most research focuses solely on scent and name perception (Engen, 1987; Engen & Ross, 1973; Herz & von Clef, 2001; Lawless & Engen, 1977), the need to develop systematic guidelines on how to name a scent effectively has gone unnoticed.

Scent names of products are critical because even a very carefully designed scent can be perceived differently depending on its name. For instance, for a lavender-scented product, the scent name Lavender accurately communicates what the scent is; Parisian Caress may not, but it may stimulate consumers' imagination and curiosity with visions of exoticism and romance. Therefore, for the exact same scented product, different scent names shape consumer expectations and appeal to different consumer segments. This is true in a brick-and-mortar setting, where consumers observe a name prior to smelling a scented product, as well as online, where smelling is not possible and consumers must rely on scent names of products alone to predict how they might smell.

This article posits that scent names cannot be an afterthought and should be treated as a critical strategic tool to increase competitiveness and capture market segments. Moreover, the process of assigning names should be systematic and rely on competitor and consumer data. Our contributions are threefold. First, we introduce a systematic approach to name scents of products and introduce a typology of scent names with corresponding ideal consumer segments. Second, we present empirical evidence showing important gaps between the scent names that firms currently supply and those that consumers demand. Finally, we recommend how firms can strategically manage their portfolio of scent names of products to reduce these gaps and capture the consumer segments discussed earlier.

2. Why do scent names matter?

Scent names are a major strategic concern for three reasons. First, it is extremely difficult to describe a smell unless consumers are familiar with it (Ackerman, 1990). For example, the scent name Rose could mean nothing for someone who has never smelled this scent before. Second, consumers perform poorly at labeling a scent (Engen & Ross, 1973; Lawless & Engen, 1977). Indeed, even although consumers might be familiar with the specific smell of a rose, they often describe it as flowery instead (Engen, 1987) or use emotional words such as pleasurable or delightful (Ackerman, 1990). Since consumers rely on their subjective interpretation of what a scent smells like, firms can harness an understanding of the language consumers use to describe scents (Zamudio, Meng, & Grigsby, 2017) to craft scent names that do not rely solely on describing a scent's composition but that also tap into what consumers prefer. Importantly, as noted, a product with the exact same scent can be named in multiple ways and be perceived differently as a result.

Third, scent strongly associates with people's memories (Engen, 1982). Indeed, more than a century ago, Edgar Allan Poe (1985, p. 153) noted in his essay "Marginalia" that "odors have an altogether peculiar force, in affecting us through association; a force differing essentially from that of objects addressing the touch, the taste, the sight or the hearing." This inextricable link between scent and memory can be leveraged by firms to target consumer segments more effectively. Physiologically, because there is a direct connection between odorant information and the amygdala-hippocampal complex, a region highly associated with short and long-term memories (Hawkes & Doty, 2009), scent automatically triggers past events stored in memory (Chu & Downes, 2000; Eichenbaum, 1996; Herz & Schooler, 2002; Rubin, Groth, & Goldsmith, 1984). When consumers are presented with a scent name such as Tropical Island, all kinds of tropical smells activate in their mind as well as past or imagined experiences of being on tropical islands. This can appeal to consumer segments characterized by relatively higher levels of curiosity and imaginativeness.

Fourth, each scented product category is unique. Successful names in one may spell failure for others. Moreover, in both personal and home care categories, scent can be a primary or secondary product attribute. The former case includes categories such as body sprays and air fresheners in which the product's primary function is influencing consumers' personal or environmental odor (Morrin, 2010). Here, removing the scent attribute would invalidate the product's use—imagine an unscented air freshener! The latter case includes categories such as hand soaps and cleaning wipes in which the "primary attributes are something else than the smell of