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# The Power of Smell

Scent marketing meets the future of gaming and Internet surfing.

**S**cent marketing is as old as a real estate agent baking cookies in a house for sale and as new as Oscar Mayer’s “bacon” alarm clock. Harnessing the primal power of smell represents a new frontier of subliminal association.

Scent marketing is defined as using scents “to set a mood, promote products or position a brand.” Scents most often are primary product attributes (*e.g.*, perfumes and deodorizers) or secondary product attributes (*e.g.*, the smell of Ivory soap or Play-Doh). Airlines, hotels, retail stores and casinos all are increasingly injecting scents — sensory signatures — into the environment’s atmospherics, believing these will enhance consumer mood and sales.

Appealing to our olfactory sense excites marketers precisely because smells can trigger an immediate emotional response in a

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consumer — rather than a thoughtful one. “With all other senses, you think before you respond, but with scent, your brain responds before you think,” says Pam Scholder Ellen, a Georgia State University marketing professor.

Olfaction and emotion are deeply connected by neuro-evolution. A marketing research study on the sensuality of products identified the “emotional and associative learning substrates of the brain grew out of tissue that was first dedicated to processing the sense of smell.” Sights and sounds are processed by more analytical parts of our brains, whereas olfaction is “our phylogenetically oldest and most primitive sense.”

Video games and the Internet already provide abundant visual and aural stimuli, but the screen environment is thus far devoid of smell (if you exclude half-eaten bags of chips, discarded taco or burger wrappers, and stale beer or spilled Mountain Dew). However, the same technologies that facilitate ambient scent marketing are now

being applied to add an olfactory “virtual reality” to the gaming and Internet experience.

Patents and recent patent applications demonstrate how inventors and gaming companies are staking and carving out exclusive rights for the delivery of evocative smells to our nostrils. For example, U.S. Patent No. 7,203,417 is directed to claims for a “portable scent delivery device.” It describes a scent generator that selectively releases smells, preferably through a headset or a mobile telephone. The scent travels to the user’s nose by diffusion.

Sony is also seeking scent technology patent rights. In a published 2013 application, it filed a patent application to “Overlay Non-Video Content on a Mobile Device,” U.S. Patent No. 12/554,958. This invention will allow olfactory content to be overlaid onto the content of video games. As published in the application, it will permit the user “to smell what the actor smells at that point in the movie.”

Injecting smells into the gaming experience is not without its complications, residual scent being one of them. As described in “Method and Apparatus for Computer Controlled Scent Delivery” (filed as a Patent Cooperation Treaty application on January 7, 2010): “Residual scent is particularly problematic in the case of individual computer gamers, which (*sic*) often play in undisturbed spaces, where scents easily linger. ... The residual scent further contaminates additional scents, which may need to be rapidly emitted in line with progress of the game.”

The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office will soon issue a patent to solve this vexing game play issue, which most of us really know nothing about, at least yet.

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