FOCUS ON DETERGENCY

Interview with Marcella Bartoletti
Fragrance & Fragrance Issues Director of Unilever

GIULIO FEZZARDINI
Household and Personal Care Today
giulio@teknoscienze.com

The world of fragrances is so vast, so pervasive, so intrusive and invasive in our lives that, paradoxically, we often don’t even notice it. Yet, scents and aromas blend into our daily routine all the time and can change our mood and behaviour. My intention today is not to explore fragrance perception and its applications, but rather to introduce our readers to a company that enters the daily lives of millions of people: Unilever, a giant whose brands are fully integrated into our lives and social context.

Unilever is in this way in home care, personal care and food in the world. In this issue we obviously consider the home and personal care. Products in which the scents play a role in consumer choice, so that the customer comes often to ignore the appeal of a discounted price of a similar product because its world is linked to that product that for him is a guarantee of satisfaction. Wellness is a reference and also, why not, a haven of rest and return energy, life force.

Unilever works in the home and personal care and food markets worldwide. This edition obviously wants to deal with the company’s home and personal care business, and in such a business fragrances play a major role. They influence the consumer in choosing which product to buy, many times leading the customer to paying no attention to price discounts of an analogous product, because he feels intimately bound to that particular product, with that particular scent, something that the consumer knows will satisfy him, make him feel well and that he even sees as the perfect shelter to rest in and recover vital energies.

Given the above, it is clear that a company working in this sector has to put a great deal of efforts and go through a lot of work to choose the right fragrances for their products. It will have to make important choices, develop ideas that can have a huge impact on its production and sales volumes. Just imagine a simple, yet common issue a company faces all the time: product X has always had that fragrance and sales are good. Shall we keep it or change it, with all the risks connected? Or again: we want to launch a new product. What fragrance shall we use for it? Choosing the wrong scent for your product can imply heavy sales losses. These two examples can let us understand the importance of the role of the people taking these decisions on fragrances in a company - thoughts that can take your sleep away! Indeed, today technology, robotics, computers can greatly help research and development work, yet in the end it’s always a man or a woman who has to take the decision, speak about it directly to other people, work out the issues. Those who work in this area must indeed have special qualities: passion, enthusiasm, imagination, energy, motivation, pragmatism, courage, tenacity, and many more could be added. Marcella Bartoletti, Fragrance & Fragrance Issues Director of Unilever certainly has the skills and qualities required for the job. We have spoken to her to shed some light on the world of fragrances that characterizes a company of the size of Unilever.

When and how was your first encounter with the world of fragrances?

I think I’ve always been a very olfactory driven person, since I was very young. I have vivid memories of myself as a child being fascinated by the smells all around me: in nature, on clothes, the food my mother and grandmother were cooking... I used to wonder why everything had a smell and where it came from, and I would grind up rose petals to try to get the oils out just like I suppose a lot of other children did. It really struck me that smelling is something you can’t switch off - just by breathing, you are constantly evaluating the environment around you.

What fascinates you most in a perfume?

Definitely it’s emotional power of scent - that power it has to take you to a different place, or remind you of a person you haven’t seen for years; it can even bring you into the experience itself and the emotions you were going through at that time. Certainly for me, there’s a fragrance that - whenever I come across it, takes me back to a particularly happy period in my life so vividly that I can feel exactly like I was reliving that time. I have photos and other memories from that same period, but nothing is as evocative as that fragrance. Equally, if something
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smells bad to you, it’s very influential - it can leave you with a lasting, negative association. That’s the flip side of the power of fragrance that’s very important.

The other thing that’s fascinating about perfumes is how hard it is to rationalise your feelings about them. The judgment that you are making tends to be very irrational or at least hard to verbalise and emotional. It is only through training that it is possible to become more rational and more able to articulate responses to fragrances and hence make more sophisticated decisions about fragrance creation. There are smells that you know very well - say rosemary, or basil, or a rose - but a finished fragrance could be up to a hundred different ingredients. Only once you have gone through the proper training can you articulate better the top, middle and bottom notes, your preferences, whether it is long-lasting enough, blooming enough, etc. But of course the vast majority of consumers, who we are trying to respond to and develop fragrances for, do not have that kind of professional training.

What has your professional route been within Unilever?

I started working in Unilever after completing a masters degree in organic chemistry and some lab experience. I joined in R&D and had a chance to work in various aspects of the business from formulation to product development and consumer technical insight roles. It was during that period that I came to realise that there is huge potential related to the fragrances that go into our home and personal care products. My feeling was that we could probably do more to really exploit and integrate all the possibilities and so my passion became to look at the way we were creating and developing fragrances and how we could create something unique that was really going to make a difference in our products. That was ten years ago and since then I haven’t stopped. Luckily enough the company offered me the opportunity to pursue this direction and over the past ten years I’d say we have come a long way. And it has been a fantastic journey. Fragrance is such a mixture of art and science.

What is the importance of fragrance for home care products?

For home care products it’s about pleasure in getting everyday chores done and satisfaction from cleanliness, freshness and hygiene. The smell of “clean” is very reassuring and a source of pride for the householder, and equally it is reassuring for the visitor to a house, or an institution such as a hospital or school. That “clean” smell can differ greatly depending on the culture and cleaning traditions in different parts of the world (see article).

... and for personal care?

For personal care, it’s also about clean, but on top of that it’s about wellbeing and confidence, about indulgence, and about enjoying the personal experience you’re having with a product. As with laundry, the fragrance experience goes through different stages, for example while you’re showering and washing your hair and also after that, in terms of the fragrance that remains on your skin and on your hair.

In your opinion, has the recession phase we are facing in this period had some drawbacks in the perfumery sector?

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The consumer is everything to us, they’re the one who decides - whether they like a fragrance, even love it so much they want to buy it again and again, and what is the signature fragrance for
a brand. But consumers and their preferences are changing very rapidly in this increasingly connected world of ours. Fragrance preferences and trends are evolving too, as you might expect, but they do not travel as fast as other types of communication, so the challenges and opportunities are tremendous.

Regional differences in fragrance preferences and habits are a key factor in what we do. We do develop global solutions for our products whenever possible but we have to bear in mind that in some cases, they would not necessarily work. Getting that balance right between customisation and delivering optimal value is a fascinating challenge, but we always remember that listening closely to our consumers is everything - and without them we are nowhere. Related to that, safety and the environment are also everything: consumers may not express that explicitly but they implicitly expect it. In any case, it is a must for Unilever to ensure we develop consumer preferred fragrances always with a high sense of responsibility, without ever compromising on safety aspects and environmental impact.

How is the consumer evolving?
What does he prefer?
Are most consumers bound to traditional fragrances or do they prefer more innovative ones?

Well, internally, Unilever has invested more and more in recent years in building our internal expertise and developing the understanding and capabilities to create fragrances. It is continuous work and you really need to pay a lot of attention because it is evolving fast, the competition is evolving fast, the positioning and market requirements are changing fast. You have to keep up to date. Developing that expertise in your company, we recognise, is not a short term thing; it’s years and years of experience; experience that you need to nurture and protect and build. Equally, working with the industry and our partners, the key achievement has been developing our partnerships into really strong and productive relationships where we talk the same language and achieve common goals. The greatest recognition that we can get is the consumer feedback: seeing that consumers really love the fragrances that we develop.

We have also instituted the biennial Unilever Fragrance Awards, in order to celebrate and recognise the outstanding achievements that are being realised in the world of fragrances for mass market products. When we held the first awards last year, it was fascinating to see how the best work was done and the solutions that were found, and it gave a great overview of how fragrances have made a difference in our business. The feedback afterwards was extraordinary, including from our Fragrance House partners. This kind of recognition in the fine fragrance world is quite familiar. In the mass market environment, in reality it is less common. Yet perfumers working in the home and personal care environment are creating as extraordinary fragrances as those working in the fine fragrance market and the scale and reach is enormous, so it was gratifying to be able to organise this event, which we hope will become an institution.

I would not say it has had drawbacks. In fact, fragrance is more important than ever: the crisis has added an extra parameter if you like. Fragrance is an expensive ingredient and we really need to make sure we’re doing the right things and delivering value without compromising the consumer aspects. Consumers will never compromise on fragrance - they won’t buy something if they don’t like the smell, however cheap it is - so you can’t cut fragrance quality easily to make savings, and there is a big risk that you’ll impact consumer preference.

The opportunity side of this is that, when times are particularly competitive, it is more important than ever to build on the aspects that differentiate your products in the marketplace - and fragrance has a key role in doing that. For me, I am so passionate about fragrance, that I love all these opportunities: the world is changing and evolving so much and people constantly offering new challenges, that I know that looking after all of that will be a pleasure for years to come.