

Does smell spell success?

A Japanese company is claiming huge increases in productivity since introducing artificial smells into the workplace, and more retailers are using odours to try and influence buying decisions. **Ewen Rose** asks if smells circulated by the air conditioning system can really help us to work harder and better.



Research carried out over a 15 year period in the US, Europe and Japan appears to show that the release of some oils and aroma chemicals into the enclosed space can have a profound influence on human mental responses.

Britain had a mixed experience with a series of bus shelter advertisements some years ago, but as the body of scientific data has built up, so the use of 'aroma technology' has become more sophisticated.

Romford-based Elemist (UK) is the latest example of a company prepared to put its weight behind the power of smell. Its 'remote fragrancing device' is being used in shops to influence people's buying decisions as well as being deployed to 'neutralise nasty niffs' to borrow another well-known advertising slogan.

Fragrances are circulated through the air conditioning system and can be chosen for 'mood making' to help in product promotions and for 'corporate signatures' at the entrance to stores.

But if smells affect buying decisions could they also affect productivity in the office?

In Japan, many offices already have computerised odour-emitters which release floral scents and the giant construction company Shimazu claims dramatic improvements in productivity as a result.

Also, according to Susan Schiffman of Duke University in the US, workers make fewer mistakes in an environment scented with peppermint. She says that smells have a direct effect on the brain "specifically the first and fifth cranial nerves", which can trigger the release of chemicals, including our body's natural painkillers.

Drugs

Aromatherapy is growing in popularity here in the UK at a tremendous rate, and fragrances have been used in medicine for hundreds of years. Many hospital wards already release lavender perfumes into the air at night to aid patients sleep, and natural remedies like this are being credited with the reduction in prescribed drugs such as sleeping pills.

So why not use them to stimulate minds or reduce stress in the workplace?

"We already know that fragrances have a positive effect on people's moods," said workplace design consultant Aron Guerin. "I always urge my clients to consider this as an option."

"Stress is a very real problem in modern offices and pleasant odours help to alleviate stress, of that there is no dispute. I just think people are a bit suspicious of 'chemicals' being pumped through their ventilation systems. Otherwise, I'm sure it would

be commonplace in Britain by now."

Some consulting engineers were dismissive of the idea because they felt that the scientific evidence was primarily centred around the effect of fragrances on influencing buying patterns and that very little work had been done on supporting the productivity theory.

Others felt that it could be simply introducing another potential source of airborne contaminants just when the industry was working towards providing the best possible standards of indoor air quality.

"I have to say that this is nonsense and shows a poor grasp of scientific principles," said Mr Guerin. "The odours we use could not be more natural. We use many of the same methods as aromatherapy, in other words, our fragrances are distilled from plant materials - primarily roots and blossoms."

So, can many of us expect to be working in pleasant, fragranced environments early in the 21st century?

"I don't see why not," said one air conditioning equipment distributor. "We are in the business of providing healthy air for our end-users and if this would enhance the quality of what we are providing, and the scientific evidence is there to support it, then we will do it."

This article is part of an on-going debate sponsored by Mitsubishi Electric about controversial issues surrounding air conditioning

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