

Fragrance Spritzers Hold Their Fire



Todd Heisler/The New York Times

Some stores are eliminating fragrance spritzers in the aisle.

By CATHERINE SAINT LOUIS
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PAMELA VAILE is no fan of the swarm of spray-happy salesclerks who lie in wait at many department stores, all of them eager to douse passers-by with a sample of a fragrance that they are sure the shoppers will totally, absolutely love once they get a whiff. “I myself will not walk through that main aisle where all the spritzers are,” she said. “I can’t stand that.”

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Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

There are now a variety of ways to obtain a sample of a fragrance, via swatches, vials or clerks holding a bottle.

Ms. Vaile is herself a fragrance marketer, part of a billion-dollar global industry that for decades has relied on assertive demonstrators to push their products. But Ms. Vaile, whose firm recently orchestrated the splashy debut of Kate Walsh’s *Boyfriend* on HSN and Sephora (which included coy, intimate Web videos), argues that “accosting a consumer with your product doesn’t convey luxury.”

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Fragrance demonstrators go back at least to the 1950s, when women were just starting to buy fragrances for themselves; previously, men gave gifts of fragrance and flowers, said Stephan Kanlian, the chairman of the master’s program in cosmetics and fragrance marketing at the [Fashion Institute of Technology](#). The novelty of spritzers

effectively enticed women to stray from their signature scent to buy something new, he said.

But today there's growing recognition in the industry that aggressive spritzing offends too many potential customers. "It's gone from being something that was a little bit fun, and something you could avoid since there weren't that many of them, to feeling like you're dodging bullets all the time," said Ann Gottlieb, a marketer who has shepherded fine fragrances from brands like Dior and [Marc Jacobs](#).

At a handful of department stores, fragrance demonstrators who pounce, spray and sell hard are being tamed. They may still flood the floor for debuts and other special events, but they are being gradually replaced by salesclerks who actually ask customers what scents they prefer and — gasp — listen to the reply.

These days, "advice" is the "it" word among fragrance retailers, connoting clerks who offer professorial knowledge rather than crass hustling of the latest must-have flacon.

By summer, [Nordstrom](#) plans to have eliminated its brand-hired fragrance models in favor of on-staff fragrance advisers, in the vein of its in-house fashion stylists who gain the trust of customers with their helpful counsel.

These advisers will ask customers what they like (floral? woody-oriental?), then offer a range from [Estée Lauder](#) to Jo Malone. Nordstrom is so committed to not pressuring its clientele that a clerk might send customers home with samples to try at their leisure with a promise to follow up.

They end up "giving the consumer what's right for her, not what *we* think is right for her," said Laurie Black, the executive vice president for cosmetics at Nordstrom.

It's a big change for an industry whose status quo has been undereducated models imploring passers-by to try, say, [Rihanna's](#) Reb'l Fleur simply because it's "hot."

Mr. Kanlian invoked the restaurant business. "When you ask a waiter, 'What's great tonight?' you don't want their response to be, 'We sell a lot of the chicken,'" he said. "What you really want is that person to say: 'If you never had it, you must have the lamb. We source it from a special place.'"

Lord & Taylor now limits the number of brand-hired fragrance demonstrators in order to provide an experience that is "as pleasurable, as easy, as not demanding as possible," said Barbara Zinn-Moore, the company's senior vice president for cosmetics. "We don't want to have dueling spritzers."

The idea is to offer a laid-back environment; someone who stops to check out a cute bottle might be given a fragrant grosgrain ribbon and invited to return if she's intrigued, Ms. Zinn-Moore said, adding "Now we have our own people trained by Lord & Taylor, and they can take a consumer 360 degrees through all the brands."

Many department stores now advise fragrance demonstrators to spray blotter paper, instead of wrists, an acknowledgment that they had a reputation as nuisances. (They still have that reputation to live down: ABC's "Modern Family" had a December episode that featured a demonstrator who preemptively spritzed a character's face.)

At Bloomingdale's, Howard Kreitzman, the vice president for fragrance, said that the store's policy at least as long as the seven years he's been on staff has been to "spray the blotter, not spray the customer," adding, "We don't permit them to chase people down the line and spray them like the old cartoon. That's not how we do it anymore."

Other experts say the problem isn't where the juice is sprayed, but the cut-to-the-chase way it is, with little to no seductive tidbits about a fragrance's origins or notes. "A lot of people avoid the department," said Rochelle Bloom, the president of the Fragrance Foundation, which has a certification program to educate fragrance sales specialists. "It's this kind of hustle."

The sheer number of fragrance debuts these days has created consumer confusion and a glut of demonstrators on the floor. "It got out of hand, the number of spritzers," said Judy Galloway, a managing partner at G-group market research. In March at a Fragrance Foundation trends forecast, she told attendees, "Sales associates need to turn away from being product pushers to product advisers."



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

WHETHER these initiatives result in any difference for consumers remains to be seen. [Macy's](#) now has a training program that puts a premium on salesclerks asking customers questions and giving them options. But it's unclear that the clerks in the Herald Square fragrance department received the memo. On a recent visit, they had all of the charm of harassing street vendors. Not one of a half-dozen who approached asked this reporter which fragrance she liked, or proffered options other than the bottle in their hand.

"Making such a significant customer-centric change in our organization is an ongoing process that we anticipate will continue to improve the service we deliver for years to come," Robin Reibel, a Macy's spokeswoman, responded by e-mail.

Sephora, which has never used demonstrators in its 12 years in the United States, pioneered a model that allows customers to try scents for themselves with clerks on hand for questions. (In 2008, the company introduced Scentsa computers to help clients distinguish a "woody-oriental"

fragrance, for example, from "mossy woods.")

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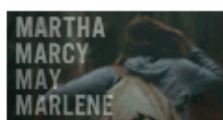
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David Knapp, 27, buys a fragrance a year at Sephora, and has five in his current wardrobe, including [Chanel](#) Allure Homme Édition Blanche. But he refuses to visit Macy's Herald Square store because the staff is "all on top of you," said Mr. Knapp, an account manager for Parham-Santana, a brand-strategy firm. "I have never in all my life passed a spritzer and said, 'Oh I have to buy that right now.'" He likes to decide in his own time.

Consumers today want samples "they can take home with them, so they can try in the privacy of their own home, and see if people around them notice it," said Mrs. Bloom of the Fragrance Foundation.

Vials now have spray-tops for greater ease. Arcade Marketing, a premier sampling company, offers brands other take-home options like ScentSeal, a sample of a fragrant gel. In stores, "multiple fragrances conflict with one another so it's hard to figure out what you really like," said Debra Leipman-Yale, its president. Arcade's new iSampler program even mails an interested online shopper a sample and a special offer within a week. A brand broadcasts the opportunity on social media or an advertisement with a URL.

Sephora.com, which allows customers to choose free fragrance samples at checkout, has a \$50 gift set of 10 fragrance vials and a voucher for a full-size bottle.

Ultimately what drives consumers to buy a fragrance is a comment from a friend or relative, smelling it on someone or getting a sample, said Karen Grant, vice president for beauty at the NPD Group, a market research firm. Only 5 percent say a fragrance demonstrator got them to buy, she added.

But don't expect spritzers to collectively vanish, she said, because: "smelling a scent will get someone to buy a scent. It does work. It's a question of how it's done and how it's finessed."

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