Scent Marketing in the Sport Industry

Minkyo Lee, Indiana University
Mingu Rhee, Indiana University
Byung Ik Park, Indiana University
Paul M. Pedersen (Advisor), Indiana University

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Human perceptions are made through the sensory system (e.g., vision, hearing) which is “the gateway” that leads humans to have interactions with their surrounding environments (Farias, Aguiar, & Melo, 2014). These perceptions have been identified as key drivers in shaping consumers’ experiences (Farias et al.). Recently a few scholars have examined the sensory experience in sport consumer behavior (e.g., Lee, Heere, & Chung, 2013; Lee, Lee, Seo, & Green, 2012). Among the five senses, the sense of smell has received increased attention by marketing scholars and practitioners because of its unique characteristics related to areas such as emotional and cognitive processing as well as associative leaning (e.g., Bradford & Desrochers, 2009; Chebat & Michon, 2003; Herz, 2002). However, none of the studies have dealt with the role of scent from a scholarly sport management perspective and thus the current work attempts to apply and adjust general scent marketing principles to distinctive circumstances of the sport industry.

Functional Role of Scent
There are several unique functions of scent within human emotion and cognitive systems. Whenever a breath is taken (humans average 20,000 breaths a day), the olfactory neurons – ingrained in our chemical alert system (Zaltman, 2003) – are immediately activated (Bradford & Desrochers, 2009; Wilkie, 1995). Without cognitive effort, the brain automatically responds to the odor (Enrichman & Halpern, 1988). Moreover, the sense of smell creates 75% of human’s emotional feelings (Bell & Bell, 2007). This is because the right brain’s limbic system – which plays a significant role in controlling emotional responses – is directly stimulated by the sense of smell while visual and verbal information stimulates the left brain (Hirsh & Gay, 1991; Wilkie, 1995). Smell itself evokes intuitive emotional responses such as pleasant, unpleasant, excited, and relaxed feelings (Spangenberg, Crowley, & Henderson, 1996).

The sense of smell even enhances affective reactions to stimuli (Doucé & Janssens, 2011). Moreover, it has been noted that scent itself is stored in the memory of humans better than any of the other senses (Goldman & Seamon, 1992). Furthermore, Morrin and Ratneshwar (2000, 2003) noted that ambient scents enable allocative cognitive resources to remember stimuli in both short term and long term memory. Also, because the emotion system (i.e., limbic system) and cognitive system (i.e., hippocampus) are chemically associated with olfactory neurons, scent has a strong connection between emotion and associative learning (Bradford & Desrochers, 2009; Herz, 2002). Associated information (e.g., affective, attitudinal, evaluative response) along with stimuli and various scents are stored in the brain nodes (Bradford & Desrochers; Herz). Thus, scent cues retrieve the stored memories associated with emotions in comparison to other sensory systems (Herz).

Because of its dynamic nature in the psychological and physiological systems within humans, marketing managers and academicians have been captivated by scent’s influential ability. In conjunction with the hedonic paradigm (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982) and mood-congruent consumer behavior (Gardner, 1987), the sense of smell has been subjected to the scholarly attention (e.g., Chebat & Michon, 2003; Hirsch & Gay, 1991; Morrin & Ratneshwar, 2000, 2003; Yun & Yazdanifard, 2013) and it has been well documented that emotions elicited from scent have a significant impact on various consumer perceptions and behaviors ranging from brand memory and evaluation to purchasing and decision making behaviors (Morrin & Ratneshwar). In addition to its unique functions, scent marketing has been practically applied in various business settings (e.g., retailer shops, restaurants, hotels, fragrance counters, apparel stands, gambling outlets) due to its cost effective (e.g., low operation costs and effort) nature (Yun & Yazdanifard).
Scent Marketing and Sport Consumers

Traditionally, the sport industry has been categorized into segments such as performance (e.g., spectators, facilities), product (e.g., equipment, apparel), and promotion (e.g., advertising, public relations) (Pitts, Fielding, & Miller, 1994). From the hedonic paradigm (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982), emotional and experiential values are determinant factors in encouraging consumers to purchase sport-related products (Kwak, Kim, & Hirt, 2011). It could be suggested that ambient scents can be a major catalyst for obtained values from the unique characteristics of sport performances. The sense of smell can enhance affective responses and create memorable experiences for sport consumers (Lee et al., 2013). For example, sport practitioners could utilize scents to amplify fans’ emotional feelings (e.g., pleasant, aroused) during and after the consumption of victorious moments in sports. Also, it could be recommended for fitness facility managers to employ ambient scents to build a better atmosphere for their customers.

Moreover, the product segment (e.g., apparel, equipment) of the sport industry should employ scent marketing in order to differentiate its products. The strategic use of scents can help in terms of differentiation, which is known to be a better strategy to construct distinctive brand position in the market (Hultén, Broweus, & Van Dijk, 2009; Lee et al., 2013). Scholars note that, ambient scents themselves itself have positive impacts on recall, recognition, and even the evaluation of brand (e.g., Morrin & Ratneshwar, 2003; Hultén et al.). Further, scents, embedded in products or infused into retail shops, produce changes in the bodily system (i.e., physiological and psychological), which, in turn, influence cognitive information processing and behavior of the consumers (e.g., Chebat & Michon, 2003; Lang, 2006). It has been found that consumer behaviors (e.g., time and money spend, satisfaction, purchasing and decision making behavior) are positively influenced by peripheral scent cues (e.g., Bitner, 1992; Chebat & Michon). Thus, sport managers should recognize the important mediating role of scents between motivational cues and sport consumer behaviors (Mehrabian & Russel, 1974).

Lastly, scent cues should be used as an effective tool in promoting sport-related products. It has been known that scent cues are triggers for humans to retrieve autobiographical memories along with emotional feelings (e.g., Chu & Downess, 2002). Sport management practitioners (e.g., strategic marketers) can facilitate desired responses from their consumers by linking a scent with a certain product (Bradford & Desrochers, 2009; Herz, 2002). For example, a scent, diffused at a certain time within a sport facility, could work to evoke in sport consumers positive memories of a sporting event. Thus, scents could be used to convince consumers to purchase sport-related products (e.g., tickets, merchandise) at diverse places (e.g., ticket office, team shop). Such scent-activated endeavors can be employed in various sport industry environments ranging sponsorship tents to staged events.

Conclusions

Over the last few decades, a growing body of literature has investigated the role of scent marketing in numerous fields. While scholars and practitioners in the field of sport management have somewhat overlooked the opportunities presented by ambient scents, the sense of smell influences emotional and cognitive systems and can have an effect on consumer behavior. Considering scent marketing’s unique attributes (e.g., cost effectiveness for sport organizations, no mental effort for sport consumers, emotional and cognitive processing, associative learning) and the sport industry’s unique context (e.g., emotional, experiential), it is highly suggested that sport researchers and practitioners examine the opportunities presented therein to better understand and maximize sport consumer behavior.