

# WHO SPEAKS FOR PERFUME?

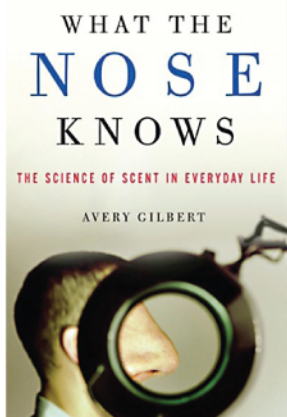
by Avery Gilbert



**P**erfume at its most fundamental is a rich olfactory experience loaded with psychological associations and allusions to personality and style. At the same time, it's an element of commercial fashion, like apparel or jewelry, which means it must be marketed effectively to a large audience.

Until recently, the industry itself—the fragrance houses and retailers—had an exclusive on communicating about perfume. Insiders could talk about green and aldehydic and chypre, but they knew these terms draw blank stares from the public. So when addressing consumers, the industry adopted two tones of voice, each of which has its drawbacks.

Ingredient Voice describes perfume as a list of components. Some are actual raw materials, others are fantasy accords. Not every ingredient in a finished composition can be detected by the human nose: people can identify only four components in a complex fragrance. Worse yet, the laundry-list nature of Ingredient Voice makes the eyes glaze over. The average memory span is  $7 \pm 2$  items, so by the time a shopper arrives at the fragrance counter, she has no chance of recalling the tenth ingredient listed in a breathless press release.



Imagery Voice describes perfume in lyrical terms. It speaks of desires and aspirations, romance and seduction. It entices the consumer to sniff and sample. There's nothing wrong with that—getting the customer to try the product is the essence of advertising. The trouble starts when imagery has only a tenuous link to olfactory impression. What begins as a Perfumer's note-to-self gets filtered through a fragrance Evaluator, a marketer and a copywriter. "My tropical beach accord" becomes "luscious plumeria blossoms blown by a warm trade wind across a beach on St. Barts." Sometimes the lyricism of Imagery Voice creates unsustainable expectations. The customer sniffs but fails to find St. Barts.

Neither voice provides objective sensory evaluation. They don't tell us how the perfume smells or how it wears over the course of the day. And of course neither voice is impartial; never is heard a discouraging word.

All that changed with the rise of perfume blogs. The industry's monopoly on fragrance description is broken; everyone is a potential perfume reviewer. Many of the new voices are well informed, but few are expert in the traditional sense. Missing from blogosphere hubbub are Perfumers and Evaluators. Perhaps it's for professional reasons—they need to stay in the good graces of current and future clients. But, if they were to speak, what tales would they tell?

Perfumery is a daily compromise between cost and style that tries not to run aground on politics. (Many a formula has been tweaked to satisfy a corporate heavyweight with more power than taste.) In some ways, the Perfumer's point of view is like movie-set gossip—interesting but irrelevant to the person watching the film.

The new voices of fragrance—the clamoring multitude of the Internet—are a motley crew. Some speak insightfully and persuasively, others are self-absorbed and proudly subjective. Some take a longer, even historical view; others focus on the here and now. All are concerned with the practical issues of wearability, quality and value. All dare to criticize. The online pecking order is still being sorted out. Respected and worthwhile voices will gain an audience; those that are trivial or off-target will fade away.

The winners of this Darwinian competition will be important to the industry as a whole. They will be to perfume what movie reviewers are to Hollywood. Imagine a world where someone writing at Scentophilia.com can make or break the new Calvin Klein, or where an Estée Lauder launch includes a blurb from Crazy4Parfum.com.

Dr. Avery Gilbert is President of Synesthetics, Inc. and Author of *What the Nose Knows: The Science of Scent in Everyday Life* (Crown, 2008; \$23.95). His book was a Los Angeles Times Book Prize finalist and nominated for the Royal Society's Science Book Prize. It is available in stores and online. *BF*