

Fragrance Innovators:
Neal Harris Talks to The Forum



Neal Harris, Founder & CEO of
Harris Fragrances

A new member of the Fragrance Foundation's recently launched West Coast satellite, Neal Harris is the founder and CEO of Harris Fragrances, creator and supplier of fine fragrance and essential oils for use in fine fragrance and personal and household products: he also heads up Scentevents®, which adds the sense of smell to the senses of sight, sound and taste to any private or professional event. Harris's vision is to put scent within the reach of every nose on the planet, and he exudes confidence when he states that while ambitious, his goal is achievable. Neal Harris sat down with the editors of The Forum to talk about his fledgling business and the state of the fragrance industry.

In Harris's view, just as décor, lighting, music and food are integral to the success of any event so, too, is aroma. And, to that end, the company provides party givers and event planners with scent delivery systems of its own design, as well as systems from business partners.

Let's say, he explained, that it's a 4th of July party...the entertainment factor goes up a notch when the whole picnic ground is redolent of barbeque, hot dogs and watermelon; a concept that can be applied to almost any theme...outdoor tea party (are the lilacs in bloom?), birthday (think banana split and soda pop) and, of course, weddings where guests celebrate in a romantic and fragrant aura of champagne, wedding cake and the bridal bouquet. The company also brings a wow factor to marketing and entertainment events. For a recent promotion done with Gumps for the launch of the retailer's collection of home fragrances, the aroma of "Majestic" (a FiFi® award winner, by the way) wafted through the streets of San Francisco, luring consumers straight to the counter. At Fred Segal in L.A. and New York's Bergdorf Goodman - rather than with tester strips or spritzing - customers "sampled" fine fragrances by walking through the scented aisles. For the premiere of the film, "Charlie and The Chocolate Factory", Hollywood Boulevard and the chocolate-brown (instead of red) carpet were infused with the tantalizing aroma of what else but chocolate.

Aside from celebratory and promotional opportunities, Harris explained that ambient scents and scent systems can and do play an important, functional role in issues of personal and public safety. For example, the odors of electrical wires and diesel fuel have long been used in military training; odors that offer combatants critical information, especially in low-visibility situations. Importantly, fragranced materials are used in otherwise odorless natural gas to serve as gas-leak alerts. Further, as a board member of The Junior Blind of America, Harris sees the educational benefits of fragrance in his work with visually impaired and disabled children and adults. He has observed that scent dispensers incorporated in playground design make experiences more realistic and interactive for those who can't see, while children with issues of attention and concentration seem better able to focus when scent is included in the teaching process. Giving back through the uses of fragrance, he added, offers an opportunity to build awareness about the many and positive benefits of fragrance.



Neal demonstrates the eco friendly Scent efX™ system at The Special Event Trade Show in January 2009. The device is use in the popular Disney Soarin' ride.

Ever on the quest for ways to move the industry forward, Harris Fragrances partners with other companies to develop innovative products and services. One such venture involves IntelliScents LLC, which holds the patent for ScentPak™. In a collaborative effort, ScentPaks, infused with the aromas of strawberries and roses, were affixed to the pages of a children's book, bringing to life the story of *Mo Smells Red*, a color-blind dog who uses his nose to smell colors. A small, hollow envelope that can be squeezed hundreds of times to release an air-based scent sample; additional ScentPak projects include perfume sampling, gift cards, party favors and, in a strategic alliance with Swingbox Licensing, scented gift boxes. Other partnerships have brought about a patent pending, scent diffusing ceramic disc that affixes to any lamp shade, and highly effective scented beads which, being made of ceramic, rather than petroleum-based polymer, are natural, eco-friendly and cost efficient. "We've seen", Harris noted, "how our expertise complements that of our partners, and how we can work together toward the success and future of all our businesses."

The discussion turned to the challenges facing the fine fragrance industry wherein sales have, in the last decade, declined by a third, translating to 2 million lost customers.

In Harris's view, the reality is that lack of confidence, fear of the unknown and the lack of money is driving consumers to manage with a lot less; "excess is no longer best", as he put it. In today's world, launching new fragrances (or anything else, for that matter) and hoping for success just won't work. "We no longer live in a 'test drive' society – it's over", he said, and "consumers at every level no longer have the money to simply buy it, try it and experiment". In the struggle to recapture the lost consumer, Harris emphasized that "truth and believability will be necessary. They need to believe in the product and brand and know exactly what they're getting." Companies, therefore, are challenged to create products that meet consumer needs and those of the environment, while brands must establish authentic connections with their customers with strategies that are more personalized, flexible and designed to meet rapidly changing technology, new media and the evolving behavior of consumers who, he said, "must become more important to marketers."

At the end of the day, Harris is convinced that transparency, supported by passion, will open new doors, attracting consumers who are more educated, particular and very picky. He added that, of course, there will always be a place for fine fragrance though, at the moment, people may be satisfying their craving for scents in other ways, citing booming sales of candles, air fresheners and diffusers, along with body and hair care products.

As the conversation came to a close, Harris shared his thoughts about The Fragrance Foundation. Excited and energized by his association with the organization, he's enthused by the work the Foundation is doing and the important benefits membership offers; for him, the opportunity to meet industry marketers and decision-makers. Starting a new company with limited resources, especially in the present economic climate, he said, is the ultimate challenge. "The Fragrance Foundation is making it possible to do big things even when you are very small. I am tremendously grateful for their support."