Q&A

Perfuming fundamentals must be reinstated to combat creative stall

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The Society of Scent emphasizes the perfumer and the juice, rather than brand marketing. Image credit: The Society of Scent

By JEN KING

Formed by a group of veteran perfumers, The Society of Scent has set out to remedy the fragrance industry, as its course has veered from thought-provoking artisanal creations to branded money-making schemes.

Based on the ideology of "the slow scent" movement, the Society of Scent's aim is to rejuvenate the art of perfumeries in a sector that has become obsessed with frequent, cannibalistic product launches and high-budget marketing campaigns that do not often concentrate on the artisanship of the fragrance juice. Similar to a chef at the helm of a restaurant kitchen, the Society of Scent feels that perfumers, not necessarily the brand on the label, should be at the forefront of fragrance creations to recapture consumer sentiment.

"From food to contemporary art, we discovered that transparency, authenticity and creation are the key parts of the engine that draws real interest and desire from the consumer," said Frédéric Jacques, co-founder of The Society of Scent, Bronx, NY.

"The Society of Scent is a scent movement embracing a community of scent lovers, who believe in the joy of discovering, experiencing and sharing an under-explored sense: olfaction," he said.

"The scent culture, once detached from fashion, represents an elevated lifestyle."

In this Q&A, Mr. Jacques discusses the perfumers' creative challenges in today's perfumery marketing paradigm, why the fragrance sector needs to return to its artisanal roots, how wellness and olfactory trends are connected and reasons why New York's South Bronx is the ideal location for the Society of Scent headquarters.

Frédéric Jacques, co-founder of The Society of Scent

Please see below for the dialogue:

Can you please share a bit about your background in the fragrance sector?
I joined the ROURE School of Perfumery, now Givaudan, when I was 19 years old with the idea that I would love to become a perfumer.

Half way through the three-year program, I realized that perfumers were not creatively as free as I had imagined and were instead almost entirely directed by a system that had more to do with the marketing of the product than the product itself.

That turned me off a little and at the end of the program, I was happy to join the Evaluation group, which is pretty much an internal relay of that chain of command, and a place where you can impact the development of the 'juice' in a role similar to one of creative director.

Being already trained as a perfumer gave me a lot of credibility both internally and externally in that role and evaluation eventually became my thing. It puts me in a unique position for interacting with both sides of the business, the creative on one hand and the market on the other.

But it is not all about me. We are a team here, and one fact of the utmost importance is that we are a creation lab with its own nose: Jean-Claude Delville is our master perfumer, and he has retaken full ownership of his art.

Our only constraint is to create beautiful scents, not to cater to any particular demographic or match some unrealistic budget objectives.

Jean-Claude has spent his career with the most famous fragrance houses and created a number of internationally acclaimed fragrances. But this is not the important part, it just demonstrates his ability.

What is critical though is his, and our, approach to creativity, the quest for renewing himself and his writing, to look for newness, for new authentic creations that come from the guts, and is a reflection of a deep respect both for the art and for the consumer.

What inspired the creation of the Society of Scent?
[The] times… Now is a time for forthcoming thinking and innovation.

From food to contemporary art we discovered that transparency, authenticity and creation are the key parts of the engine that draws real interest and desire from the consumer.

The Society of Scent is a scent movement embracing a community of scent lovers, who believe in the joy of discovering, experiencing and sharing an under explored senses: olfaction.

The scent culture, once detached from fashion represents an elevated lifestyle. Scent is cool!

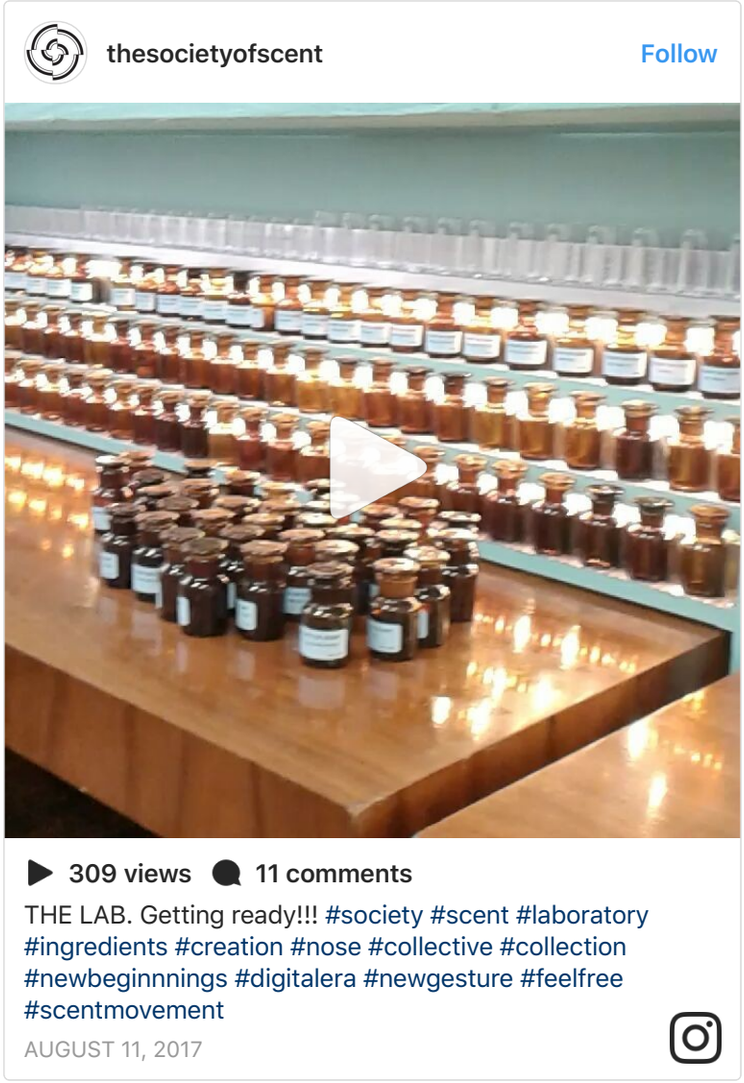
We want to dedicate our work to this community, starting with our own designs from the lab through a diversified collection of scented products.

We are aiming for creation, quality and innovation. Every scents coming from our lab located in the South Bronx, NY and created by our master perfumer Jean-Claude Delville.

We believe in the power of conversation between creatives, talents and experts dedicated to create amazing sensory experience; it's the essence of the Society of Scent.

The Society of Scent is a genuine platform of experience, education and consumption.

Our belief is based on the idea of 'the slow scent' movement where process, easiness and clarity is part of the scent discovering experience.



What is your role at the Society of Scent?
My role is to assemble human energies and talent and lead them into a coherent place that represents what we stand for and the vision and value system that we go by and that we apply to everything we do.

I am the conductor if you wish. There is a lot of talent in our little group and we need to make sure that it all lands in one place that the consumer understands well and loves.

Why is it important for perfumers to have a voice in the fragrance sector when so much is brand-focused?
Because they are 'the source,' just as chefs are the source of the restaurant industry.

If you are going to pay top-dollar for something, you need the experience to be fueled by the inspiration of the artist.

That is what you pay for, the unique writing of an imaginative, talented and experienced perfumer, or chef, photograph or winemaker. That is at the beginning of the experience. You can't imagine going to a top restaurant where there is no chef, right?

The noses are the creators. They are few in the world and we have to recognize their value. In our world creation is crucial, combined with expertise, and capacity to decode emotion and desire.

We also have to encourage the transmission of knowledge as their legacy.

The luxury fragrance sector generates huge profits for brands — what challenges do you feel the sector is currently facing?
Well I think if you focused on fine fragrance alone and do not read the numbers where it is consolidated with makeup, cosmetics and other products, you would be surprised by how many launches are actually absolutely not profitable.

Of course, there are a few brands that are hugely profitable and the good news is that they are the ones that do the job right. So, at the end of the day, the consumer does know better than to fall for bad products.

If they do, they probably won't buy it a second time. To plagiarize David Ogilvy, 'The consumer is not an idiot, she is your wife,' or maybe she or he is you.

I am amazed by the number of marketers that would not really buy what they put on the market.

So to answer your question, the sector is facing the difficulties that any sector sleeping on their laurels does: too many irrelevant product launches, poor quality, lack of transparency vis a vis consumers and storytelling.

It is a formula that we apply over and over again and it is getting old, especially when the cost of goods is indecently low and the overall quality very poor.

We need to put the money back into the product, not just the advertising, promotion and distribution. This is of course a challenge for big companies as most of them rely on public money, with very little possibility of changing the paradigm.

Instead, they just shop for small innovative brands that have already taken the risk and succeeded to attain a critical size. They slowly then turn them in mega brands that will probably follow the same pattern of cost cutting, trade centrism and risk adversity which overall creates a deficit of innovation and a drop in quality.

Time will tell, but for us independence is a critical aspect of brand equity 'preservation' and it is not just by chance, no pun intended, that Chanel or Hermès are doing very well.

It is also not just by chance that they are two brands who understood a long time that to be legitimate perfume houses, they needed to have a perfumer on board internally.

Quality is key in the process. In the perfume industry we deal with human and living ingredients. The process has to be organic and ethical. Pleasing everybody is not the goal, but being recognized by a valued community of consumers is the goal.

How can going back to the core of artisans perfumers help the fragrance sector long term?
It will save the sector. There is no other path, and when you think about it is pretty logical: you go back to the fundamentals of a business, the very reasons that made it a business in the first place.

'Artisan,' if you mean well-made, created with talent, integrity, good ingredients, novel recipes, interesting designs, emotions, a tone of voice in the branding and a unique personality. All the things that make you buy a fragrance over and over again.

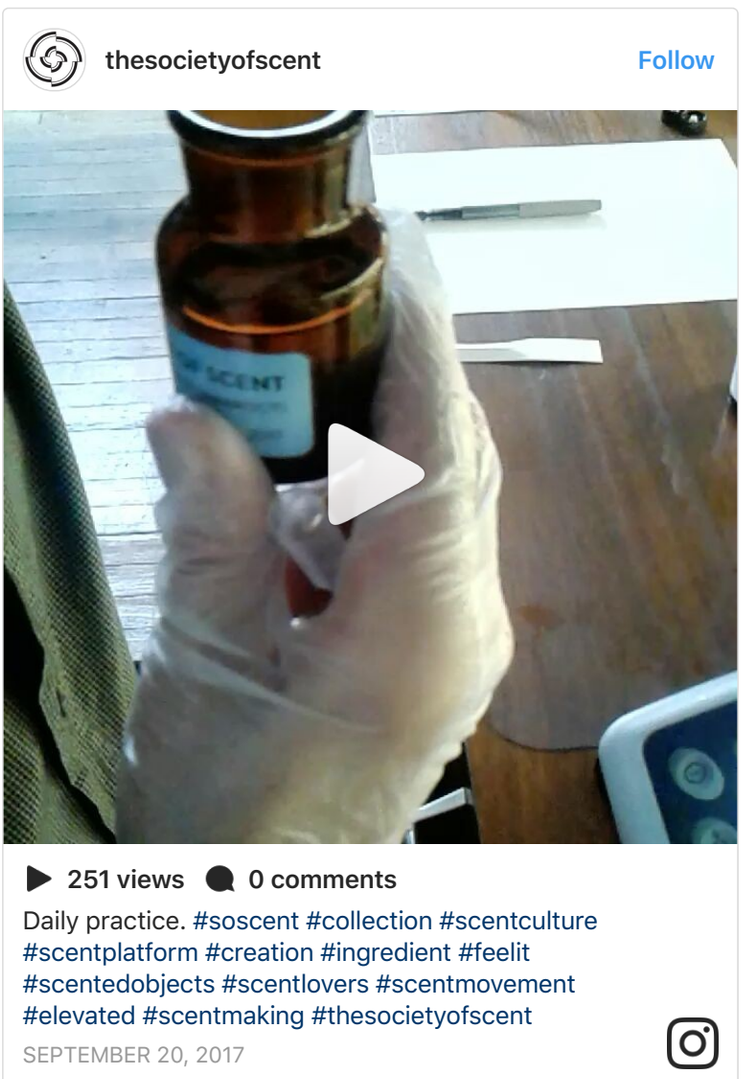
If you expect consumers to buy it a second time, what do you put in the experience that justifies for him or her to come back? You cannot rely only on advertising. As a brand, your relationship with your consumer has some flexibility like a rubber band, and sometimes very extensible, but all rubberbands break when you pull too hard.

No level of promotion and advertising can repair a broken band. For us, it is better to make a brand new one, and take great care of it, starting on day one of our relationship with our audience.

The olfactive business and sensorial territories are underestimated and under explored.

Scent is universal, no borders, representing a real economy and field of experience. The nose are until now consigned by major corporation who do not allow them to think differently and explore their own creative identity, and do not really value their work.

The future is olfactive, empowered by the development of technology in various field including health and wellness.



Why did the Society of Scent set up shop in the Bronx?
Well, I was taking earlier about a tone of voice, a clear identity: we are a cultural platform, a movement, we are building a community around the scent, we are makers, we are slightly underground, we are cool, we believe that today's luxury is about the experience and not about status.

The South Bronx reflects those values very well. We are in a landmark building, which is actually the last of the fragrance factories in New York.

We love it, it is the perfect spot for us, and it has a lot of panache.

How and when do you plant to market the Society of Scent's debut fragrances?
Our own brand dubbed SO SCENT° will launch in the first quarter of 2018 with a collection of four fragrances.

SO SCENT° will be sold majorly online although we do not exclude a few pop-up operations or any other partnership if they make sense and provide the brand and the consumer a positive experience in a space that enhances the conversation and does not reduce it down to just a transaction.

Whether online or in bricks-and-mortar, it is all about the experience and how you make it a positive journey from A to Z..

You cannot pass on any step and from the discovery to the story to the education to the product and more, every detail count. And why not?

As consumers we are all already convinced of this, why do we suddenly change hats when we go to work? 'The consumer me is the one designing the experience for the consumer you' is the way we like to think.

Why was it important to allow for consumer interaction in the fragrance creation process? How does this play on the experiential trend?
The world of perfumery is surrounded by secrecy and fashion imagery or branding diktat. It is time to initiate a fresh start for the scent community actors and lovers, based on truth, authenticity and fluidity.

The Society of Scent is proposing via The Institute and The Lab some tools to discover and explore the alchemy of scent and raw materials. We are seeking to initiate shared conversation and transversal experiences with our community.

The interaction with members, scent lovers, scent collector or scent users or even beginners, all start by the access to a physical Lab, located in the South Bronx, and an on-going experiential journey on our digital platform.

We engage on a long-term relationship with our audience surfing in between physical location – including a 'nomadic lab' – and digital convenience of online shopping.

We do not believe in trends, but rather in decoding and exploring aspirational lifestyle, and intuitive 'shifts.'

The experiential trends are still part of a vertical strategic vision. We are in fact looking for collaborations and conversations with a transversal vision, that allow us to embrace transformation, diversity and creative collaboration for the benefit of our consumers.

The Society of Scent's lab in the South Bronx. Image credit: The Society of Scent

Where do you hope to see the Society of Scent in three years?
We hope to see it as a healthy business that we can control – as opposed to a speculative one that quickly puts your independence on the line of fire.

As stated earlier, there is a noticeable correlation between quality products and at least some sort of financial independence. This is for the most part because public companies have a hard time making long-term plans and commitments, and instead are structured to focus on the short term gains that shareholder expect.

They also operate from a mindset that cannot resist shaving a dollar here and a penny there, which really is a curse for any brand in any sector.

There is virtue in building a brand with the consumer in mind, and if you do, you need to stay independent for consumers' sake! And your own probably too.

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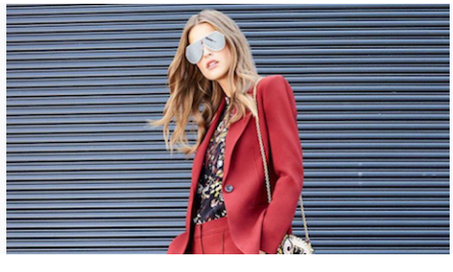

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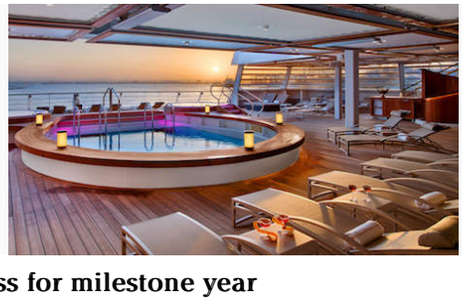

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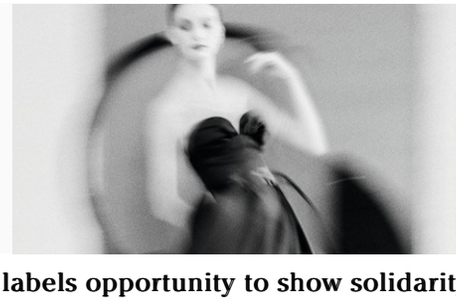

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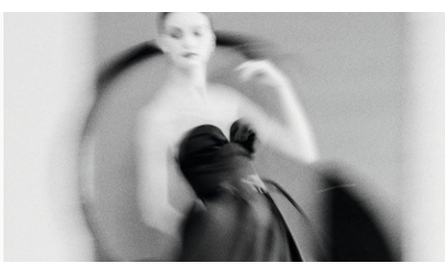

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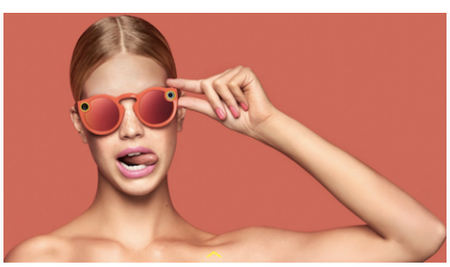

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