Selling Smells

I'm really pleased to be here with this work in progress, which is part of my AHRC funded CDA PhD called Chemicals and their users in the British home, 1930 to the 1980s.

Today, I want to look more closely at smells of freshness generated by cleaning, by showing advertisements from the 1940s and 50s for some different products that promised to help to improve the smell of domestic spaces. I have been looking at adverts because I am interested in how the user learns about what to expect from the product and how to use it. In this talk, entitled Selling Smells, I want to see which smells are targeted and which smells replace them.

Suellen Hoye notes that in the United States, products for freshening and cleaning the air began to multiply in the 1950s. Marten and Scott in their survey of the British magazine Good housekeeping, observed this explosion of products too. That's not to say that people didn't care before the 1950s;

[show Ozonol slide]

This Ozonol advert from 1940 promised to freshen and purify air in specifically in lavatories, but the manufacturers saw an extra application, which was the Air Raid Shelter. Although it says that it will make the space fragrant, this advert doesn't actually indicate what kind of smell we can expect, other than promising sweet, germ free air. If the air is fragrant, a positive smell-word, it can't therefore be bad smelling. There's an illustration of a slim box, with what might be decorative holes to allow the air to interact with the chemical inside. We aren't given any indication of what this chemical might be, but it was developed in a lab which is an assurance of a scientifically developed and suitably effective chemical purifier.

This advert gets straight to the problem of the smell of toilets. MJ Daunton wrote about the developments of water closets and their migration into the Victorian home, with bad smells from either from the ineffective clearing of the bowl by the flushed water, or the escape of sewer gas into the house. When the toilet design that we are familiar with today came into use, in 1890, and building regulations for newly built houses stipulated that WCs be indoors, managing the smells from a toilet became especially important. Victoria Kelley quotes Phillis Brown the author of Victorian household manuals as saying that 'water closets need constant attention... the condition of the water closet is a more certain sign of the character of a housekeeper than is any other part of the house'.

Sixty years laters, in the 1950s, cleaning the toilet bowl was still very much designated an every day task, at least in adverts for the toilet cleanser Harpic. There was no attempt to shame anyone, but there was certainly a push for everyday cleaning, because the lavatory is used every day.

[show Harpic advert]

Here we see that it the daily stay bright way, and here every single day.

This would certainly use up cleanser faster, but had another advantage too. When the packaging was opened, the active ingredient of the cleanser would quietly react away in the container. If an infrequent user felt disappointed in the cleanser then it could have been that the amount of active ingredient left was too small to cope with the amount of soil. So, using up the product protected the manufacturer, as well as ensured a satisfactory result for the user.

This advert directs the senses, and sight seems to be prioritised over smell. The words clean is used a lot which is to be expected for a cleanser and we are told the toilet will be bright, shiny, that it will sparkle. Smells are introduced by the word deodorise and only near the very end do we see that there is now also a fragranced version. This is quite a low key introduction of a new product variant.

Fragrance was only added to Harpic toilet cleaner in 1950. There were technical challenges associated with this, as the there were a very limited number of perfumes which would stand up to the acidity of Harpic. Reckitts, the manufacturers, had been keen to improve the aesthetic value of this product by giving it a pleasant smell of its own for some time, shown by their trying to gauge the importance of fragrance to customers in a market survey of 1935. In the reasons for using Harpic, the smell that resulted from its use was not an answer that was given by respondents, only that they found it a good or satisfactory cleanser, or simply from habit.

Even though a lot of behind the scenes effort went into developing a perfume blend for Harpic, this aspect is not elaborated on in their adverts. Perhaps the lack of detail about a fresh smell is because its hard to explain, or they didn't want to set up expectations by further defining the fragrance and it not being interpreted by the users in the way the company intended, and the mismatch causing disappointment. Words are important in the interpretation of smells, as demonstrated by Rachel Herz's experiment where the same odorant was labelled either parmesan cheese, or vomit. Words help to anchor our interpretation, expectations.

I would be interested to know how the consumers responded to this introduction, who I imagine that as far as they had been concerned, probably had already been making the space smell fresh. Harpic continued to be fragranced, so it must have been well accepted by the majority of people who liked the additional masking or freshening qualities, or simply the novelty of the smell of this modern product.

Adding a smell also signifies that the work has been done. It can act as proof that work has been done, so not only does something look clean, it also smells clean, and people can't help detecting it with the always active nose. Having housework "noticed" by the other members of the household is a theme which Jessamyn Neuhaus pulls out in her examination of housework and housewives in American advertising and it is one that Zal really hammered home in their disinfectant adverts.

[show zal ads]

They used dramatic, novella-like adverts. A Zal-experienced person, persuades a non-user that they should use Zal, that in fact not using Zal is harmful to their personal relationships, not just the safety of the home.

Grown up daughter Linda won't bring fiance Noel home to meet her family. She works at a Beauty Parlor where they use Zal everyday, everywhere, making everything smell lovely and piney fresh. This aligns the product with professional, paid work, not just to improve the cleanliness and safety of the domestic home. Linda is embarassed about the stuffiness of the house, she points out that her mother doesn't notice the problem because she's at home all day. When she arrives home, she notices it dreadfully, it smells so stuffy as if it wasn't really clean but she knows that her mothes does keep it nice. Once her mother starts using Zal, Linda's embarrassment because of the stuffiness or perhaps lack of pine smell that she associates with being properly clean, dissipates and she can bring Noel to the family home. Stuffiness can also suggest that the existing cleaning routine and any products used were old fashioned. In using Zal, the routine is updated and modernised.

Stuffiness could be solved by airing of the house, perhaps cracking open a window. However, that wouldn't sell very much Zal.

If we think about when airing the house might not be so effective, air pollution could be a factor. Motor cars, domestic solid fuel, industrial activities and the weather combined to create choking smogs. In 1952 there was a smoke fog episode that killed thousands of people, and in 1956 there was a smog that was deemed even worse, stretching from the South Coast up to Yorkshire. Smog wasn't just an outdoor problem, it seeped into people's homes, the particulates settling on surfaces, and the gases generally contributing to poor indoor air quality. Perhaps keeping your window shut and bringing pine fresh smells in was the better option if there was a threat smog. (However, these adverts were from 1950, not from the especially bad smog years, and none of them mention eliminating smells or threats from outside the house, only the ones generated inside it.)

Another advert in the series has Jacinth's mother enlighten her about the product, perhaps again showing that the daughter was uninvolved in housework while living at home. Newly wed Jacinth had recently moved into her own home and was faced with husband Derek staying out later and later. During a tearful telephone call, her mother enlightens Jacinth to the solution. (again, a modern convenience - when did telephones become common?). She brings Zal to the house and together they cleanse the sink, drains, floors and paintwork - the adverts are careful to list all the places that the product can and should be used - and the daughter is educated by her mother into doing things that she had just not noticed while living at home. In this advert, there is no denial of the physical work has to go into making the entire house smell pine fresh, in the Harpic advert the emphasis was very much about the cleanser doing all the work. With the smelly germs banished by Zal, the relationship between Jacinth and Derek is improved: Derek is always home early now and he praises Jacinth for keeping the house fresh and lovely. As well as making sure everyone knows about the piney smell, we are also shown images of modernity: the telephone and the furnishings. Zal is positioned as used by modern people, although it and the piney smell were not new.

In these last couple of adverts for Zoflora, we see a woman squirting disinfectant in two different scenarios: in the toilet, and in a living room. Where Zoflora is used in the toilet, the advert doesn't name any target smells, instead highlighting lurking infection as what the disinfectant eliminates. This is a familiar use of the disinfectants but in the other advert, although the product is still disinfectant, it's used to combat cigarette fumes. We can see the bottles and glasses out on a tray as the housewife sprays disinfectant containing that hot, modern commodity DDT to protect against moths. There isn't an exact description of what Zoflora smells of, but the name indicates that the perfume is floral and the border further refines that to roses.

In this dash through this selection of adverts, we have seen how smell has been used, as well as not used, to sell products. Toilet cleansers and air fresheners in toilets delicately do not mention the smell that they get rid of. Disinfectant kills nameless but inherently smelly germs. The new, clean smells can be described precisely as in the case of Zal, hinted at through the name and imagery in the case of Zoflora, or we could only have a vague idea of the smell such as Harpic or Ozonol .

Adding a scent to the required modern chemical techniques, and using these complex, branded chemicals to scientifically speed or ease the task, conferred modernness to the user and their home. These adverts have conveyed the idea that smells are important in interpersonal relationships, such as something that you can't quite put a finger on in the case of the Zal adverts, or rectifying the aftermath of a jolly social occasion.

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While I was wondering how I came to be writing about smells and toilets it dawned on me that I spent six years of my working life walking around the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester.

The Underground Manchester gallery is a perennial favourite especially with young visitors. This gallery displays the domestic health issue of clean water and sewerage. The centre piece is a length of mocked up sewer, complete with stuffed rats and sewer smell (actually "farmyard manure" by Dale Air).

There's also a good selection of privies and bathrooms through the ages, a noisy tippler toilet and laundry equipment, including soaps. The subject matter gives a really great range of opportunities for the use of smells, but the convoluted, sometimes hot and stuffy basement atmosphere can get somewhat claustrophobic and could be sensorily overwhelming. What struck me was the focus on the unclean, rather than the clean smells. It could give a completely different meaning to the gallery, but the joy of smells is that they can be temporary, meaning that they can be used to tell different stories.