

Smells like Christmas spirit: Researchers tie simple scent to increased retail sales

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Scientists and business people have known for decades that certain scents—pine boughs at Christmas, baked cookies in a house for sale—can get customers in the buying spirit. Eric Spangenberg, a pioneer in the field and dean of the Washington State University College of Business, has been homing in on just what makes the most commercially inspiring odor.

Spangenberg and colleagues at WSU and in Switzerland recently found that a simple [scent](#) works best.

Writing in the *Journal of Retailing*, the researchers describe exposing hundreds of Swiss shoppers to simple and complex scents. [Cash register](#) receipts and in-store interviews revealed a significant bump in sales when the uncomplicated scent was in the air.

"What we showed was that the simple scent was more effective," says Spangenberg.

The researchers say the scent is more easily processed, freeing the customer's mind to focus on shopping. But when that "bandwidth" is unavailable customers don't perform [cognitive tasks](#) as effectively, says Spangenberg.

Working with Andreas Herrmann at Switzerland's University of St. Gallen, Spangenberg, marketing professor David Sprott and marketing doctoral candidate Manja Zidansek developed two scents: a simple

orange scent and a more complicated orange-basil blended with [green tea](#). Over 18 weekdays, the researchers watched more than 400 customers in a St. Gallen home decorations store as the air held the simple scent, the complex scent or no particular scent at all.

The researchers noticed that one group of about 100 people on average spent 20 percent more money, buying more items. They had shopped in the presence of the simple scent.

In a series of separate experiments, WSU researchers had undergraduate students solve word problems under the different scent conditions. They found participants solved more problems and in less time when the simple scent was in the air than with the complicated one or no scent at all. The simple scent, say the researchers, contributed to "processing fluency," the ease with which one can cognitively process an olfactory cue.

The research, says Spangenberg, underscores the need to understand how a scent is affecting customers. Just because pine boughs or baked cookies smell good doesn't mean they will lead to sales.

"Most people are processing it at an unconscious level, but it is impacting them," says Spangenberg. "The important thing from the retailer's perspective and the marketer's perspective is that a pleasant scent isn't necessarily an effective scent."

Provided by Washington State University

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