

Why retailers need to pay attention to the smell of their stores

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Retail stores overflowing with merchandise can make consumers feel claustrophobic rather than ready to spend. But the recent move towards open, minimally stocked spaces can leave them feeling just as anxious.

The solution to this shopping conundrum may be smell, as new research from Concordia University shows.

In a study recently published in the *American Journal of Business*, researchers from the university's John Molson School of Business (JMSB) suggest that, when diffused in retail environments, certain scents can reduce the level of anxiety experienced by [consumers](#).

"Our research shows that scents are best at fighting anxiety when they create feelings of openness in crowded retail environments or coziness in minimalist retail spaces," says marketing professor Bianca Grohmann.

Grohmann and her co-author Tina Poon, a graduate of Concordia's Master of Science program in marketing, conducted the study at JMSB's Laboratory for Sensory Research.

To test how scents diffused in the environment affect anxiety levels caused by overly crowded or open spaces, the researchers invited consumers to a lab that was either jam-packed or nearly empty.

In each case, the lab—a simulated retail environment—was infused with one of three ambient scents:

1. A [scent](#) reminiscent of enclosed spaces, like the smell of firewood
2. A scent evoking open spaces, like the seashore
3. No scent at all

Consumers evaluated several products, as well as the space in which the experiment was conducted. They then indicated their level of anxiety.

Grohmann and Poon found the following:

- In crowded spaces, consumers said they felt least anxious when smelling something that evoked spaciousness.
- In an almost empty space, consumers felt much calmer when exposed to an ambient scent evoking closed spaces.
- Overall: anxiety levels were highest among consumers in an open space that was infused with a scent related to spaciousness.

"Our study shows that retailers need to carefully consider how they pair shopping space and ambient scent in order to decrease consumers' [anxiety levels](#) and improve their shopping experience," Grohmann says.

Ultimately, retailers who contend with small, crowded spaces, either due to limited store size or the volume of merchandise they stock, can prevent feelings of claustrophobia by using space-enhancing scents. However, those following the minimalist trend may want to consider using scents that bring a sense of coziness to the environment.

Provided by Concordia University

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