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May 2021

Positivity for Fragrance in a Post-Pandemic World: NPD & TFF



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The NPD Group is one of the world's largest market research companies. This week, Fragrance Foundation President Linda G. Levy joined Larissa Jensen, Vice President, Industry Advisor, Beauty, The NPD Group for a wide-reaching and optimistic conversation about the state of the fragrance industry.

Highlights from the discussion centered around consumer behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how much of the change in purchasing priorities and patterns is expected to endure as the world returns to offices, travel, and social interaction.

The pair kicked off by talking about the incredibly strong performance and momentum that fragrance has shown in retail over the past year. Consumers have been purchasing higher ticket items such as larger sizes, high-concentration juices, and luxury brands throughout the pandemic. Remarkably, this has happened despite the shift to online purchasing. "I never thought that fragrance could be soaring the way that it is considering the pandemic where the vast majority of sales are done online," Levy says, predicting that even though brick-and-mortar will always be important to perfume purchasers, the shift to digital will continue to be substantial as a percent to total now that consumers are comfortable maneuvering in that space.

Home fragrances became incredibly important during the pandemic, as people rediscovered how scent can enhance an atmosphere and lift a mood. The category diversified, with candles, diffusers, and plug-ins becoming an essential part of creating a home sanctuary—and the market exploded. Similarly, fragrance came to be regarded as self-care, a beauty and wellness accessory that helps everyone feel good. Because the sense of smell is so intertwined with memory and emotion, consumers found that scent could provide them with an important sense of escape.

“In many ways we believe that fragrance has become the new lipstick index,” Jensen says, noting that an NPD survey showed that the number one reason people have been purchasing fragrance—at 50 percent of those who responded—is as a treat for themselves. Fragrance is an affordable indulgence, and, she says, “It really has become a luxury that people are buying for themselves.”

Not that they aren’t buying it for others as well. Holiday was a huge moment for fragrance in 2020, and Mother’s Day 2021 saw fragrance sales soar. According to NPD, 19% of Mother’s Day gift buyers purchased fragrance, double the rate of other beauty categories. During the two weeks leading up to Mother’s Day, fragrance sales posted a remarkable 33 percent growth rate over 2019. Levy points out that rose scents and florals in general were wildly popular, as well as categories such as candles, perfume oils, and hair mists. She predicts that “bridal registry is the new holiday,” now that people are gathering for events and celebrations and will want to share their love of fragrance.

Consumers have clearly awakened to a newly powerful love for fragrance. “Pre-pandemic, people looked at it as frivolous,” says Levy, “but now it is seen as important, part of their personality and how they feel every day.” She predicts that growth will continue as the market recovers overall. Ultimately, “it’s about understanding market dynamics and the consumer behavioral shifts,” says Jensen. “And companies that are able to do that are really going to win in the end.”