

New Car Smell....It's the Fragrance of Fresh Beginnings

News Article



A breath of

It's the fragrance of fresh beginnings. The redolence of riches. A perfume of promise. It's that sweet, sweet, new car smell.

Your nose is a powerful marketer, delivering scent straight to the parts of your brain that process emotion and memory. Companies know this and are getting more sophisticated about the way they use smells to sell you things.

But like so many of life's little joys, car sniffing comes at a cost. That smell is basically pollution. It comes from volatile organic compounds (VOC) that are off-gassed by parts and adhesives in the car's interior. Many of those VOCs are linked to health problems like allergies and headaches, and at much greater exposures, birth defects and cancer.

Having caught whiff of these risks, some automakers like Toyota and Ford are trying out new materials, such as water-based adhesives and foams made of soya, that off-gas less. Drivers will surely benefit. But the new car smell could soon be a fond memory.

What's that smell, exactly?

Chemistry educator Andy Brunning breaks modern new car smell down to sweet-smelling aromatic compounds like styrene, toluene, and ethylbenzene—which scientists are known to enjoy a whiff of in the lab—and alkanes, which can smell like ink, gas, and money.

Cars aren't the only things that off-gas: New buildings have plenty of similar materials that do the same, so there's overlap between new-car smell and new-stuff smell more generally. But cars are especially fragrant. One 2001 study found VOC levels as high as 64 milligrams per square meter in new cars, compared to 20–40 in new buildings.

This aspect of the scent is incidental, but some companies control smells more deliberately. "When Rolls Royce became more technologically advanced, they started using plastic instead of wood for some parts of the car—and for some reason, sales started going down. They asked people what was wrong, and they said it was because the car didn't smell the same,"

Why we like the smells we like

If the traditional new car smell does go extinct, there's no need to hit the panic button. Our love for certain scents is based on the emotions we attach to them, scientists say, such as the joy of purchasing a new ride. And so as the smell of a new car changes, we'll probably still find it delicious. What weird scent are you addicted to? Chlorine? Shoes? Sunscreen? Same idea here; fond memories, such as going to the beach, are tied to those smells.

That's because when smells enter our brain, they're routed through the centre of emotion (unlike words, which travel through regions devoted to thinking). "After a smell enters the nose, it travels through the cranial nerve through the olfactory bulb, which helps the brain process smells," NBC's Meghan Holohan writes. "The olfactory bulb is part of the limbic system, the emotional centre of the brain."

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Scent is primally powerful. "Our chemical senses were the first that emerged when we were single-cell organisms, because they would help us understand our surroundings, find food, and reproduce," Scent Expert, Olivia Jezler says. "Still today, emotionally driven responses through our senses of taste and smell make an organism react appropriately to its environment, maximising its chances for basic survival and reproduction."

The most popular pine

If there's any conifer people can identify, it's the one dangling from the rear-view mirror of taxi cabs and old cars—those pine-shaped air fresheners.

Little Trees were born 66 years ago in Watertown, New York, from a meeting of two men: a Jewish-German chemist named Julius Sämann and his milkman. Sämann, after fleeing the Nazis, had studied pine-tree aromas. His milkman had considerable experience breathing the aroma of spoiled milk. Sämann was intrigued by the problem and started experimenting with pine oil and paper. Two years later, he filed a patent for what would become the iconic Little Tree freshener—a paper infused with "odour-destroying, air-perfuming substances."

His timing was perfect, as car ownership and smoking were on the rise. Billions of Little Trees have been sold, and the company now has about 40 fragrances, from bourbon to linen to new car scent (which one tester says smells of "cream and kumquats").

Hold your breath

As it turns out, it's probably not a good idea to hotbox yourself inside a new car. According to Jeff Gearhart, research director at the nonprofit Ecology Center, fresh interiors are "chemical reactors" and "one of the most hazardous environments we spend time in."

Most materials are petroleum-based plastics and vinyl, from which pollutants essentially evaporate into the air.

These include nasty chemicals like ethylbenzene that cause headaches, dizziness, and even cancer (if you inhale a lot of them for a long time), though there's no evidence that new-car smell causes any serious, long-term damage.

Which vehicles might give you the worst vertigo? According to a 2012 study by Gearhart and a team of researchers who tested 200 cars, the Honda Civic, Toyota Prius, and Honda CR-Z had the fewest off-gassing chemicals, whereas the Mitsubishi Outlander Sport 2, Chrysler 200 SC, and Kia Soul had the most. (It's always the fun cars...)

The researchers also noted that cars are becoming safer on the whole. Toyota has replaced solvent-based glues with water-based alternatives, for example. Other automakers have tried swapping synthetic seats for soya cushions. But until we're all driving vegan cars, take advice from experts—when you buy a new ride, roll down the windows.

Not for every market

Like peanut butter and jelly, new car smell doesn't have the same appeal everywhere. Chinese drivers prefer their cars unscented, Reuters' Adam Jourdan reports, which he describes as "a cultural divide that's testing car makers ... in the world's biggest auto market."

Chinese drivers seem to care *a lot* about odour—in fact, they rank "unpleasant car smells" as a concern above engine issues, road noise, and fuel consumption, Jourdan writes. Some automakers have gone to great lengths to ensure their cars don't stink, such as storing their seats in perforated cloth bags instead of wrapping them in plastic.

Source - Quartz Obsession.

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