

A perfumer's business card

By Shannon Peter

A small rectangle of card the colour of custard cream biscuits and as soft as brushed cotton was thrust into my 14-year-old hand and a single spritz landed on its centre. Instantly, I became enveloped in a cloud of sweet, creamy aroma. The crisp black letters that spelt 'Dolce & Gabbana The One' blurred as the liquid melted into the paper, taking the pigment with it. The warm comforting scent filled my body, and the velvet touch of the card in my palm made me feel swaddled in cashmere blankets.

"Shannon!" My mother's call shocked me back into the cold present of the fragrance hall. I quickly pushed the card into my coat pocket and walked the entire way home holding it tight. Later, I slipped the bent card between two pages of my diary. I sniffed it every day until I had hoovered out every last fragrance molecule. Each time I saw it reminding me of that overwhelming olfactory moment, each touch transporting me there.

A perfume blotter, a tester strip or an odour card - whatever you call them - you've probably never given them a second thought. You probably discard them before you've even left the shop. But for me, that little piece of scented card is the apex of the entire fragrance buying experience. It gives something as intangible as scent a physical presence, something you can actually see, touch and understand. And there's a science to getting them right.

Over the years I've come across plenty that have ventured beyond the norm (Avery's incredible feathers are my all-time favourite) however most brands opt for the most affordable: paper. The optimum weight remains a manufacturer's secret, but I've held so many (and have taught myself to guess a paper's weight) that I've deduced an EDT takes best to 120gsm – soft enough to absorb the scent but rigid enough to store it for later. An EDP suits a stiffer stock, perfume oil even thicker still. I remember being enamoured by the 200gsm board used at a perfumery I found in Rome, but utterly disappointed when the liquid simply dripped straight off it.

Texture is another consideration. I have 11 years' worth of perfume blotters dotted around my house, in my drawers, in boxes under my bed, and it's the ones made from rugged watercolour paper that have held the scent the longest. 4160 Tuesdays founder Sarah McCartney favours it too: "It's very absorbent – the perfume spreads and allows the alcohol to evaporate so you can smell the fragrance accurately."

I adore the slice of navy ribbon that accompanies Narciso Rodriguez For Her. The mildly corrugated texture translates the scent's musky base and gentle citrus spikes into a physical sensation. But then colour has hurdles of its own. Firstly, ink is scented, so takes rigorous testing to ensure it doesn't contaminate the scent of the perfume. "Printing solid colour also affects the card's absorbency," Andy Hudson, co-founder of Maximise, a fragrance tester stick specialist, tells me. "And often we must use technical printing procedures to ensure the colour doesn't run." The D&G blotter from all those years ago instantly enters my mind.

The shape, size, texture, finish and touches like foiling or embossing have more of a psychological importance. "It's a perfume's business card," Hudson explains. It's a signal, a teaser to the main event, that helps build a perception of what we're about to smell. I have become obsessed with the

paper porn that is Tom Ford's Private Blend Series fragrance blotters. Its raised gold-foiled lettering against the slick clean card indicates the scent means business. Whether it's White Suede or Tobacco Vanille, I know the fragrance will be opulent, but still refined. I keep one in my wallet.

We can't see a smell. Nor can we touch it. So a fragrance blotter gives us something to physically connect to, the touch, sight and smell capturing our imagination in equal measures. It might seem disposable, but if kept, it's enough to build an unwavering desire to own the real thing. Particularly if you're a teenage girl desperately saving your coppers to buy your own bottle of D&G.