Washroom malodour:
Experiences, perceptions and implications of smell for businesses
Over the past few decades, there have been a number of studies on the impacts of scents and scenting in retail and hospitality. These studies have connected the effects of scent on everything from our mood to memories – and even our perceptions of a brand. From hotels and spas to car showrooms and designer boutiques, the power of odours and what they mean to us cannot be overstated.

Somewhat less has been made of the impacts of washroom air care. Initial’s State of Air Care 2017 study has found that consumers perceive a business more or less favourably depending on the state of its washrooms (77%) and if the odour of a public washroom can reinforce or change perceptions that strongly, it makes business sense to pay attention to what consumers want.

The truth is that the presence of malodour in a public washroom can negatively influence perceptions of the environment and business. From concerns about cleanliness and hygiene to evoking fears of sickness, unpleasant smells in public washrooms can create discomfort or anxiety, and cause people to actively avoid future visits to the business/organisation responsible. Furthermore, the effects can even go beyond emotive responses and directly contribute to unhygienic behaviours.

“The odour of a public washroom can change perceptions of a business. It makes sense to pay attention to what consumers want.”
Good air care: The solution

9 in 10 people have encountered unpleasant smells in public washrooms.

The importance of air care in washrooms should not be underestimated. No one wants to experience an unpleasant smelling public washroom, in the same way that no one wants to experience one which is not clean, or missing important amenities (e.g. soap, toilet paper, hand dryers, etc.) However, air care is not simply a case of installing an air freshener and hoping for the best. Washroom malodour typically stems from dirt and bacteria build-up in urinals and toilets, lack of air ventilation and waste which is not removed frequently enough. Ineffective ‘air fresheners’ that attempt to replace one smell with another are simply not sufficient.

Good air care solutions can remove malodour, effectively ‘cleaning’ the air by neutralising bacteria that causes bad smells. Good air care also filters, cleans and intelligently fragrances the air – targeting and neutralising airborne bacteria – so that fragrance particles are not simply concentrated in one area, but leave behind a pleasant, gentle fragrance throughout the washroom, reassuring users that the space is clean and cared for.

While many businesses are still unaware of the sophistication of modern air care methods, the necessity for effective washroom odour control, and the risk of unpleasant first impressions is more easily understood.

1 http://www.asm.org/
For over 76% of respondents, ‘disgust’ was the prevailing feeling when encountered with unpleasant washroom smells.
The state of air care in public washrooms

With this in mind, Initial commissioned a study into the state of air care in public washrooms in five markets: UK, France, Italy, Australia and Malaysia. For the purpose of the research, Initial focused on any washroom that can be used by members of the public, including in restaurants, bars, shopping centres, train stations and public buildings – as well as looking specifically at the experiences, preferences and behaviours of office workers.

Unsurprisingly, smell tends to be one of the first things people notice when entering a public washroom, and when people notice the smell they can immediately connect it to an emotion or perception. Dr Andy Myers, Research Director at consumer neuroscience consultancy Walnut Unlimited, says that our sense of smell is the one most strongly linked to emotion and memory and that it is also highly discriminating. "The olfactory system\(^1\) has been found to have around 1,000 genes that encode distinct scents, compared to vision that only has four." It is therefore unsurprising that unpleasant smells overwhelmingly become associated with uncleanliness (85% of respondents), poor hygiene (82%) and bacteria (69%). Contrastingly, the absence of smell, or a pleasant-smelling washroom is a strong indicator of cleanliness for over three quarters of global respondents (76%). This rises to over 80% for men and women in Italy and Malaysia.

Almost all participants (92%) in the global study have encountered an unpleasant smell in a public washroom and whilst a small margin felt unaffected (4%) by this, for over three quarters (76%) of people, ‘disgust’ is the prevailing feeling. Understandably, washroom malodour causes emotive responses, but businesses should take note of how serious this can be for first impressions.

However, simply having a pleasant-smelling washroom isn’t enough. Customers will notice the washroom general appearance of cleanliness first (46%), even when the smell is fresh. Likewise, customers will notice a foul-smelling space, even when it is spotless. A washroom, just like a restaurant, a retail store or a public street is a multi-sensory experience, so it’s the combination of both smell and appearance which people desire.

Dr Myers agrees, and points out that the compatibility of scent and other sensory experiences is essential to maximising\(^1\) the effect of aroma. "Because all experiences are multimodal and multisensory\(^2\), the impact of one sense (such as smell), impacts our perception of another (such as sight). Therefore, aroma can help to influence the perception of other senses."

The fact that appearance (46%) is one of the first things people notice in a washroom, but they connect an absence of smell (or a pleasant smell) with cleanliness, indicates that to achieve harmony in washrooms both are a necessity. Thinking about the type of scent, roughly a third (29%) would prefer clean air, but no smell, whilst light scenting was the most preferred approach to air care (59%). Contrastingly, heavy scents have caused nauseous or sick feelings amongst nearly half of respondents (47%).

\(^1\) Wikipedia: The olfactory system, or sense of smell, is the part of the sensory system used for smelling (olfaction).
\(^2\) Oxford Dictionary: Multisensory experiences involve one or more of the senses.
Washroom malodour, the perception of cleanliness and the risk to everyday hygiene

According to the World Health Organisation, hand hygiene is “the most important measure to avoid the transmission of harmful germs,”3 and the Centre for Disease Control estimates that people not washing their hands often or well enough may transmit up to 80% of all infections by their hands.4 Despite the seriousness of basic washroom etiquette, such as handwashing, the Initial study makes a direct link between bad smelling washroom and unhygienic practices, drastically compounding the situation. Ironically, the study has found that when people think a washroom is dirty, they are considerably more likely to behave in a way that contributes to the spread of germs and bacteria.

If a person’s first impression of a washroom was a pleasant smell 68% of respondents said it gave them confidence that the washroom was clean, even with no proof that this is the case. Similarly, the presence of air fresheners reassures a further (44%) of people.

Contrastingly, malodour immediately impacts how people behave. Respondents admitted that when they encounter an unpleasant smell they try to get out of the washroom as quickly as possible (88%), which unfortunately results in unhygienic behaviour. Nearly a third of respondents (28%) say they would ‘miss something out’ to make their washroom trip faster, including not drying hands (17%). Others admitted to not washing their hands at all, or not using soap.

Dr Myers says the findings make neurological sense: “The strong association between smell and memory means that smell is a powerful gateway to our emotions and to core emotion processing regions of our brain. Core emotional processes such as the fight or flight response could be triggered in response to unpleasant smells as our brain triggers a survival response. These reactions can occur at a level that is outside of our conscious control but key to how we make decisions.”

A separate study by Initial reinforces these findings. The 2016 Habits of Hygiene study found that amongst office workers, nearly half (45%) did not always wash their hands. The washroom environment was also found to be the biggest contributory factor, with 50% of respondents blaming an aspect of the washroom driving them away. In fact, 16% avoided washing their hands when the smell in the washroom was bad. With washroom malodour causing fear of sickness amongst a quarter (26%) of respondents (much higher for French people at 39%), for facilities managers, the findings of both studies suggest that organisations can – and should – play a greater role in the state of air care to avoid fostering unhygienic behaviours and the spread of germs.

In the case of public washrooms in the office, nearly half of respondents (47%) felt that their company should do more to control the smell of the washroom in the buildings they work in. Malaysian respondents especially felt that employers had a greater role to play, with 27% believing that reducing cross contamination amongst co-workers was important for health and safety.

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3 World Health Organisation
4 CDC
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Nearly a third saying they would ‘miss something out’ such as not washing or drying their hands.
80% leave with a negative perception of a business with unpleasant washroom smells

10% would post negative feedback online after experiencing unpleasant washroom smells

46% of people would not return to a place with an unpleasant smelling washroom
Washroom malodour and the risk to business reputation

Research by Nielsen suggests that as many as 92% of consumers believe recommendations from friends and family over all forms of advertising. Unfortunately for businesses, fostering unhygienic behaviour is not the only issue caused by the reality of unpleasant smells in washrooms.

The findings of the multi-market study from Initial have shown that an unpleasant washroom smell leaves nearly 80% of people with a negative perception of the business, and nearly a quarter of others would feel compelled to tell friends or family, about their unpleasant experience, highlighting that the ramifications for reputation can last long after the washroom experience itself.

This is backed up by previous Initial research which looked specifically at women’s needs in washrooms. In this study, almost all (84%) said they would tell their friends and relatives about a generally bad experience, suggesting ‘word of mouth’ is commonplace.

However, the impact of poor air care isn’t just the rumour mill. The likelihood that consumers will negatively review a business online also came through, with roughly 10% of respondents saying they would post negative feedback after experiencing a washroom with an unpleasant smell.

Whilst this reflects a significantly smaller group, the implications are no less severe. Shopify reports that 90% of customers say that their buying decisions are influenced by online reviews, and importantly, 67% of consumers will read six reviews or less before they form an opinion about a given business.

For organisations in the retail and hospitality sector the findings are prudent, with 49% and 36% of people having experienced unpleasant smells respectively. In these sectors, the chance of reputational damage as a result of poor air care is therefore higher. However, sophisticated air care solutions, combined with ‘no-touch’ dispensers can help increase user perception of an establishment.

In offices, business reputation is similarly at risk. Over a third (35%) of office workers have had an experience when they have felt embarrassed/ashamed by the smell in their company’s washroom when directing clients or external people to their facilities, rising to 45% for the UK and 46% in France.

The principle of word-of-mouth equally applies to offices.

1 in 4 have refused to use a toilet in a shopping centre.
Unpleasant washroom odour and the risk to repeat custom

67% of global respondents say that an unpleasant smell in an organisation’s public washroom would make them less likely to shop there.

While the intangible implications of poor air care – like hygiene and reputation – are serious, the results of the study suggest a connection between unpleasant washroom experiences and custom.

The Initial study revealed that an unpleasant smelling washroom could impact consumer purchasing behaviour. 67% of global respondents say that an unpleasant smell in an organisation’s public washroom would make them less likely to shop there and, furthermore, that 60% would leave immediately or not return at all. Meanwhile, in shopping centres (retail) nearly one in four people (23%) have refused to use a washroom due to an unpleasant smell, highlighting the wider implications for the retail and hospitality sector.

With the high street already facing a decline in footfall, losing repeat custom due to an unpleasant smelling washroom is bad business practice, especially when you consider that consumers are sensory-driven. Research published by DMA⁷ has found that 60% of consumers make a brand choice if it engages four to five of their senses. In other words, if facility managers can cater to consumer expectations and invest in positive washroom experiences, they can avoid the negative response that would inevitably come if a customer’s senses are engaged with poorly.

⁷ DMA
In conclusion

While almost everyone (90%) has experienced an unpleasant smelling washroom, this does not mean they have become indifferent to malodour. Unpleasant smelling washrooms, understandably, evoke emotive reactions from people, but the issue for businesses lies in how they act on those emotions.

A bad washroom odour creates the impression of uncleanliness, and whether this is justified or not, it’s this impression which ultimately puts businesses at risk. Malodour impacts the overall perception of the business, it breeds undesirable and unhygienic behaviours which aid the spread of germs and impacts whether people will return to a business – if not leave immediately. The potential fallout of these actions should be top of mind for facilities managers.

New and improved technologies using micro droplets can not only mask malodour, but eliminate it altogether. The droplets are dispersed into the air uniformly to eliminate unpleasant smells using an odour neutraliser. A tiny and safe amount of fragrance is released simultaneously, which is disseminated evenly and lasts for up to 12 hours.

Businesses have a duty of care with public washrooms and facility managers specifically need to consider air care within their day-to-day maintenance plan. When scientific air care solutions are combined with the ongoing efforts to maintain appearance, with regularly cleaned and easy to use washrooms, harmony can be achieved; it’s this which will ensure the pleasant washroom experience people want – and deserve.

“Odour creates the impression of uncleanliness and impacts the overall perception of the business.”
About Initial

We are committed to keeping you healthy by providing high quality hygiene products and services that minimise your risk of exposure to bacteria and other infectious micro-organisms.

We take pride in delivering the highest levels of service to enable you to keep your organisation looking good, feeling healthy and most importantly hygienic.

Why choose Initial?

At Initial we believe in the smart use of hygiene so you’re covered in all key risk areas, not just the washroom. Our broader approach will assist you in establishing good hygiene practice throughout your organisation, creating a healthier, more productive environment for everyone. You can choose from a convenient delivery of hygiene supplies to a complete rental maintenance service.

For more information, visit: www.initial.com