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## PERFUME EDITOR : A NEW CONCEPT FOR CREATORS

by

**Frédéric Malle**

Founder, *Les Éditions de parfums Frédéric Malle*

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### Overview

Lack of briefs and marketing tools behind the major brand names, as well as very strong financial constraints have made the perfume industry a sector where there is an overriding feeling of frustration felt by a large number of people. This is felt by the makers (the 'noses') whose potential is underexploited; the clients, who are presented with banal products; and finally, for Frédéric Malle, an expert who has been in this field from a very young age. *Les Éditions de parfums*, a new business concept which goes against the trends of the times, aims to give back a degree of creative freedom to the most famous 'noses'. Its objective is to simplify the distribution circuits, remove briefs, marketing tools, payment date deadlines and cost prices in the creative process, and focus instead on a close collaboration between an 'editor' and his creators. Frédéric Malle devised a creative model which is similar to that of a literary editor. It has started to change people's ideas in this field to such an extent that even some groups today are attempting to reproduce his model, but perhaps unsuccessfully.

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## **TALK : Frédéric Malle**

After I graduated from New York University (NYU), I started working for Roure Bertrand Dupont in 1988, where I collaborated with the best known, contemporary perfumers. I became a perfume consultant in 1994 and my clients included Christian Lacroix, Chaumet, and Hermès International. As artistic and marketing director, my job consisted of developing very specific perfumes for certain brands which have very strong 'personalities'. I was an intermediary between the brands and the perfumers, acting as a sort of translator of both the marketing language and the language spoken by the 'noses'.

### **In the perfume industry's Garden of Eden**

At the beginning of the twentieth century, perfume was bought from a perfumer like Guerlain or Piver, who in turn bought their ingredients from manufacturers in Grasse. The structure of the profession changed when Mademoiselle Chanel (and then others) became perfume brands. The makers in Grasse then simply became suppliers of various extracts, and this transformed their profession. Brands such as Dior and Givenchy asked laboratories to make their perfumes for them. These laboratories, which also carry out research and invent perfume prototypes, develop manmade molecules whose formula is a secret. These are the captive molecules. They can also choose to sell them to rival laboratories.

At that time, perfume brands launched new fragrances approximately every five years and sold their products via distribution channels, which were not very well organised, and independent perfume shops (perfumeries). These perfumeries had the advantage of being run by sales staff and managed by their owner. The client was asked what perfume he/she normally chose to wear and, having made a initial analysis, the shop assistant suggested a perfume which matched the client's tastes. This enabled the brands to create perfumes which were much more distinctive and creative, because they knew that the perfumery would have a client who would like their product.

Due to this distribution circuit, brands could therefore launch specific perfumes, firstly in France, and later in 'little Europe'; if the product was successful there, it could be launched in the United States and then the entire world after two years. This targeting, which was both geographic and personalised, diminished the risks but also created perfumes which were much more specific, recognisable and powerful.

### **A revolution in the distribution circuit**

At the end of the 1980s, there was a revolution in perfume distribution. The Germans launched the idea of 'self-service perfume' with their Douglas stores. The customer was no longer served personally and instead chose his perfume himself. Sephora and Marionnaud developed this idea in their perfume shops in France. There was no longer a role for the shop assistant who had welcomed customers into the shop, listened to their requests and discovered their preferences for either flowery or spicy scents. As a result, perfume creators had to keep to new rules of volume retailing and create perfumes which pleased everyone. The creative machine became jammed and brands limited their risks by marketing perfumes based on a multitude of flower scents, with many extracts and relatively short life spans. Today, customers are no longer offered perfumes which suit them, but just products to create an event. Initially, the client is attracted by the brand, then by the packaging with increasingly innovative bottles, and finally, by the perfume itself. Previously, a successful perfume was one which was bought several times. Today, this is no longer the objective : one launches a new product with the profits from the first sales. As a result, there are more and more launches. Whereas before one created a perfume every five years, today the big brands have two product launches every year. However, in my opinion, a perfume which is created for a well-known dress designer and which is

intended for an affluent clientele cannot be sold in a shop like Sephora. This sort of product would not succeed if it were distributed in this way.

I came to the conclusion that either my view of the profession was outdated, or that there had to be another way of selling perfume. This was the origin for my idea for *Les Éditions de parfums* originated.

### *Les Éditions de parfums*

#### *A new role distribution*

Starting from the idea that I had to find a different distribution circuit, I also wanted the noses to be brought to the fore. Today, Hollywood starlets become role models and see their lives completely changed because they are wearing a new perfume. However, what goes on behind the scenes and the name of the products' creators are totally unknown to the public. I wanted to right this wrong and to give creators back their rightful place. On the one hand, the noses are people who are close to me because we have worked together for a long time, and on the other hand, I think that their story is more interesting than that of the usual publicity show which accompanies a product. The basis of my idea was to look at the origins of this recent change in mass retailing distribution and to try to sell very specific products. Brands invest a great deal of money, firstly in publicity which accompanies the launch of a new perfume, and then in the packaging which is increasingly original. Paradoxically, the poor relative is the perfume : perfume bottles cost one hundred Euros and less than one Euro of this is spent on their contents ! The idea that a company which spends no money on publicity but which allocates all of its budget to the product, started taking form in my head.

#### *The noses – back at the top of the billing !*

In our 'publishing house' where our 'writers' are the noses, creators are given total freedom in terms of the budget and product development. There is no market research and no tests. The most important people are the creators and their job of creating perfumes.

The perfumes are extremely good quality because the perfumers have all the time they need and, as in the 1980s, working with a pen and a clean sheet. Their names appear on the perfume bottle for the first time, and all the most famous noses have agreed to play along with me.

#### *Former glory*

Since my name and those of the noses were totally unknown by the general public, I knew that if we were lucky enough for the customer to test nine of our products, he would find eight which were awful. As well as having a different vision of creation, we knew we had to go back to the drawing board to review our sales process, and to open old-style perfumeries, giving very personalised advice and trying to understand customers' tastes and their lifestyles before suggesting a product to them. We launched the company in 2000 and opened our first shop on rue de Grenelle in Paris. We modelled it on perfumeries dating from the beginning of the twentieth century but adapted it according to today's creation techniques. The written press congratulated us for having revolutionised the profession even though, as far as we were concerned, we considered we had simply created a perfumery as we thought it ought to be.

#### *An avant-garde setting*

Today, our 'smelling booths' almost seem to be our logo. These cubicles are tall cylinders, made of glass and looking like telephone booths. Perfumes are sprayed into them and customers are then invited to open the door of the booth to discover how they would smell if they wore the perfume. In department stores, perfume tester cards (on which one sprays

perfume) are to perfume what the contact print was in its day to photography ; in other words, instruments which are not very well adapted to the sale of the products, giving only a very vague idea rather than an overall idea of the scent of the perfume. In most cases, people have absolutely no idea what the perfume will smell like when it is worn. In laboratories where I worked, I noticed that perfumers often sprayed perfumes in shower cubicles which were a kind of closed vase which allowed one to smell the perfume. I took up this idea and installed smelling booths in my shops. Apart from an initially playful aspect, customers have a real idea of the perfume which they are buying.

### **The revival of high-class perfumery**

#### *A well-trodden road*

Serge Lutens was my predecessor in high-class perfumery. He launched the *Salons du Palais Royal* with the perfume 'Shisheido' a few years before me. The market at this time included both well known brands as well as a few small brands which had managed to survive and which often operated outside the usual perfume distribution circuit, such as the perfume Annick Goutal.

#### *The American Eldorado*

I was sure that perfume distribution in the United States had not changed. Sephora had not gained a following there, and the main distribution circuit is still the department store, with salespeople to assist customers. The American population demonstrated that it was very fond of luxury goods. Therefore, I took the risk of entering the American market, regardless of the circumstances, and adopted a serious business approach. The press immediately took up this story. It was not easy for the journalists because perfumers are important sources of publicity and this may often put beauty journalists in a difficult situation.

In a situation where four hundred perfumes are launched every year, many of which are increasingly mediocre, we caused a certain amount of enthusiasm. After we launched our shop in June, buyers for American department stores were in Paris in July for the haute couture fashion shows, and they came to our shop. In addition, six months before we opened our shop, we had made a deal with Barneys (the New York department store) and so we knew that our future in the United States was relatively safe. Finally, in terms of the French clientele, we benefited from the adverse reaction of customers to mass market perfumery. The American model became popular in Europe where there has been a resurgence of independent perfumeries. In France or Italy especially, we have found ideal settings for some of the high-quality perfumeries in each large city.

#### *A step backwards in international development*

Both Serge Lutens, perfumers who have existed for some time, and I, are witnessing today the return of niche perfumeries. Some are managed by young entrepreneurs ; others are good perfumeries in small towns which have decided to stop selling major brands, and have left it up to volume retailing to sell products which they find mediocre and which have small profit margins.

Our model was successful from the start. Our products were displayed in a very specific way in these shops, placed separately with a photograph of the creators, and kept in cold storage.

Today, our perfumes can be found in about fifty shops throughout Europe. We have shop-in-shop<sup>1</sup> contracts inside department stores whose size is about half that of the Parisian department store 'Bon Marché', but which are judged to be up-market. In these shops, we have installed our smelling booths. Although we are perfumers, we are lucky to be situated next to fashion designers to which our sector contributes a significant amount of their revenue.

It is a source of pleasure to me that as a result of Serge Lutén's initiative (which I continued), there is a real revival of the luxury perfume industry. It is a movement which encourages us to create products which are increasingly luxurious. We are considering developing products in the field of body perfumes or perfumes for the home. Abroad, there is an increased appetite for luxury goods. We opened a shop in Moscow at Christmas, and perfumes sales have exceeded those of our New York shop, thanks to a population which on average is very highly educated, well informed about the product, and exercises real judgement. The Asian population, which is also very knowledgeable in this field, shows an appetite for luxury goods, and has great spending power. The Asian market should therefore help us to grow even more.

## DISCUSSION

### Investing in perfume

**Question :** *How many shops do you have ?*

**Frédéric Malle :** We have three shops in Paris which account for between 15 and 20 % of our sales, and we will soon be opening a shop in New York. In Europe, Japan, Russia and the United States, the shop-in-shop contracts allow us to present our smelling booths and our entire range. Financially, we have broken even for the last two years, but in order to grow we reinvest all our profits. We are in the middle of an expansion. Every year, we market a boxed set with our entire perfume collection. This is also our way of taking stock of our creations.

**Q. :** *The cost of developing a perfume is very high. How much does a launch cost ?*

**F. M. :** With respect to development, the laboratories pay for everything, just like the major brands. Perfumers give me their time for free. What is expensive when one develops a brand like mine is the initial cost of the bottles (which we make ourselves from moulds), the packaging boxes, the shops and accumulation of stock. In terms of creation, there is no investment.

### The alchemy of the perfume

**Q. :** *Of the five senses, smell is the only one which cannot be quantified. What, then, is a perfume ?*

**F. M. :** You are right, perfume is not quantifiable. There is not even a primary colour in perfumery. We hardly know how the olfactory mechanism works. There is not even a vocabulary for talking about perfume. There is a sort of technical gibberish we use within the profession, but we borrow vocabulary from cooking, music and even the visual arts. This vocabulary is common to all the noses who studied at the École Roure Bertrand Dupont in Grasse, where I also studied for a short time. Most of the people with whom I work also studied here, so we manage to understand each other within our little group.

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<sup>1</sup> *Shop in shop* : a franchising concept whereby a sales entity is located inside a department store and occupies a limited space. The use of this space, as well as the products and services on offer to customers, is defined by contract.

With respect to creation, there is no real logic either. We work in a totally empirical way. We extract essences or absolutes from plants, wood or other materials using steam, solvents and gases. Today, we are even able to fractionate the product by molecular distillation which allows us to correct the natural products by removing, for example, some 'notes' of the perfume which are unpleasant. Today, good perfumers work in two stages, like sculptors. Firstly, they look for a theme by working with large volumes. Once they have found their theme, they sift off the defects and at the same time try to let the perfume keep its personality. This second stage is extremely long and delicate because one has to keep measuring or replacing each raw material in order to arrive at an end result. We work by feeling our way along, without any rationality, because we rely on what we feel.

However, having been raised in this field, I understood very early on that there was a sort of logic to perfume, and each perfume corresponds to a mood or a type of person. Perfume is a silent language : I am extremely timid myself so I understand people with whom I talk by looking for signs and smelling their scents. If one can interpret scents, this helps us to know something about a person by the way in which they choose their perfume and how they wear it. People in our profession use this characteristic in the opposite way. They adapt themselves in an extremely precise way to sociological trends. The current trend is towards the trivialisation and standardisation of products. Perfumes follow such trends. The trend for cooking light dishes is now prevalent in the perfume world, where light fragrances made with manmade products are replacing heavy scents like patchouli oil.

**Q. :** *Do you make a distinction between perfumes intended for men and products reserved for women ?*

**F. M. :** As far as I am concerned, there is just one rule : one wears a perfume to say that "I am here and this is who I am". In a very animal way, it is a sublimated scent of skin. For me, there are three sorts of perfume. Firstly, there are 'non perfumes', which simply say that one is clean. These include the eaux de Cologne and very fresh perfumes which are worn by men and women from the age of seven to seventy-seven. They have no sensual characteristic. Secondly, there are other perfumes, which have very flowery scents and give no indication about the sense of one's skin. These perfumes are worn by women who want to remind themselves of their childhood or correspond to some sort of desired disguise or dressing-up. The third group of perfumes are more abstract, and give the idea of a sublimated skin. These are the cyprus and spicy perfumes. They give the scent of the skin by giving out a distinctive smell. They are also a sort of allusion to sex. Most of these perfumes can be worn by both men and women, even though the brands often suggest masculine or feminine variations.

### **A differentiating process of creation**

**Q. :** *How do you work with the noses ? Do you have 'carte blanche', or do you keep to certain conditions or specifications ?*

**F. M. :** When I worked as a consultant, I had to adapt myself to each perfumer. Today, I still work according to each perfumer's personality. With some noses, we really work together and I smell each test (my record is 690 tests for a single perfume). Others like to work alone, and so I inspect the final product. If I like the product, we launch it ; if not, we do not. Sometimes I make suggestions : I give the perfumer an initial idea which I think is adapted to the project in question. For me, it is a way to exercise my profession in the way in which I like. For perfumers, it is a recreation, and for the laboratories it is a way to emphasize the work of their noses.

**Q. :** *Is it the absence of constraints given to the noses which differentiates your approach from that of the well-known brands ?*

**F. M. :** Competitions for about four hundred launches of new products per year make the perfumers work in a sector which is very well documented. The brands give the concept to which the perfume should conform, as well as its colour and even its publicity image

which, with the bottle, exists even before the perfume was created ! We ask creators to produce something which will correspond to the necessary conditions and specifications. In terms of its olfactory definition, the message is more and more vague ; for example, it might be 'Make the perfume for the modern woman.' The markets are also specified because creation clearly depends on the geographical location of the consumer, and different nationalities have different olfactory tastes. As far as the constraints are concerned, some creators need them and so we work together. Others keep perfumes in their drawers for years ; these are often products which are extremely good but which have not found a clientele because they are too specific, too expensive or are the opposite of current trends. This is what happened to one of the perfumes which has now become one of our best sellers. Some noses, especially some of the youngest, prefer to work with extremely precise constraints because they have always worked for important brands which imposed constraints on them. The noses who are in their fifties started in this profession with a clean sheet and a pen : these people work best without any precise brief.

### **New actors for a new distribution**

**Q. :** *In the wine sector, customers appear to be more and more sophisticated. Is this true of customers in your field ?*

**F. M. :** The idea of a dying culture is one of the motives which guided me in my project. It is the reason why we try not to be too expensive. Before Serge Lutens and myself, the perfume sector had become increasingly banal, and there were some negative feelings about perfume. For young people today, buying perfume has become a gesture which is so banal that one may well wonder whether lesser known brands, such as mine, can interest this age-group. From an educational point of view, we would like to make them realise that perfume is not what they think it is : a few years ago, it was a very luxurious product, but today it has become a product for the masses. We live in a society where we have access to everything for relatively little money and with little effort. On the one hand, there are people who have little time, little money and access to everything ; and on the other, there are those who are more sophisticated, more curious, independent and difficult to please. A brand like mine keeps alive the possibility of a good quality perfume for this sector of the population, whereas the consumer who lets himself get dragged down in advertising campaigns is lost to this type of product. Contrary to what you may think, our clientele is not rich. The prices of our perfumes range from sixty to two hundred Euros, and many of our clients come to us in order to treat themselves.

**Q. :** *Do you think that if perfume Internet sites existed, they would attract clients who are interested in niche perfumes such as yours, and who have a critical attitude to perfumery products ?*

**F. M. :** Of course, Internet sites have this fabulous characteristic of bringing a certain breath of fresh air. However, everyone can give his point of view and they are all correct. Luckily, there are more and more people behind these sites who are connoisseurs of the perfume world. Even though their impassioned criticisms are often justified, they are often manipulated by brands who pay for the advertising space... I know that these sites are important for our profession but I am still quite wary of them.

**Q. :** *Today, many shops create their own identity by using lighting and musical effects. Very recently, olfactory 'worlds' or specific smells linked to specific shops have appeared. What do you think of this trend ?*

**F. M. :** I believe in the architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's aphorism 'less is more'. It seems to me that all these olfactory associations just add to the general noise. These days, every hotel has its own smell. Everything is perfumed. Even car manufacturers have asked me to create olfactory identities for their cars. What is paradoxical is that perfumes have less and less smell, and the bottles are more and more bizarre, and we cover the banality of

shops and hotels with various so-called 'olfactory identities'. Of course, this aspect will grow, but personally, I am not in sympathy with it.

### **Is there a Frédéric Malle style ?**

**Q. :** *Why is your company called 'Les Éditions Frédéric Malle' ?*

**F. M. :** There are three reasons for this name. Firstly, when my uncle, Louis Malle, started making films, my father, who was a banker, created a family production company for him which was called 'Les Nouvelles Éditions de Films' (NEF). When I developed this project, my brother, who was also a banker and an associate of mine for a long time, suggested I do the same thing, and we called the company 'Les Nouvelles Éditions de Parfums'. Later on, I discovered that a close friend, who was a publisher, was in the same profession as myself. He works with authors, rewrites certain passages of novels from time to time and takes chapters out here and there. Finally, I convinced myself that one could publish a perfume like a work of art.

**Q. :** *You deliberately emphasise the noses and yet the company bears your name. How do you structure your editorial line and the uniqueness of all these creative talents ? Is there a Frédéric Malle style, and what are its characteristics ?*

**F. M. :** Each company has a certain style. Companies such as Guerlain and Goutal always adhered to a specific style. Guerlain makes many oriental scents unlike Annick Goutal which specialises in fresh, flowery perfumes.

My ideas are different because I worked with perfumers in laboratories for brands which asked us to create perfumes which were all very different. I also have very eclectic tastes, and the perfumes which we sell reflect this. However, I have very fixed ideas about regard to the production of our perfumes. As in painting, there are elegant gestures with perfumes, and like books, good perfumes do not just tell one story about a specific theme. All our perfumes, even though there are many different types, come from short and very simple formulas. There are some products which I hate and some combinations of smell which will never see the light of day in my company.

I find that perfumes from major brands are created by too many people. The relationship between a perfumer and a creator is very important and should maintain a certain intimacy. In any case, this way of working results in a certain style.

**Q. :** *You explained that each personality has its own olfactory identity. Can you give us an example ?*

**F. M. :** The perfume 'Carnal Flower' is a key product in our collection because it is made from a tuberose (a plant with a tuberous root and highly fragrant white flowers) which, in our profession has become very important. It is like judging a chef by his recipes. The first perfume made from the flower of a tuberose was created in 1948 by Germaine Cellier and was called 'Fracas'. It was a secret recipe which certain types of women transmitted to each other. A great number of perfumers were inspired by the formula.

When we created a tuberose, we knew that we were going to be compared to this perfume and this gave us the opportunity to reassert our principles. The idea was quite exciting, but emerging after the legendary 'Fracas', it was like repainting the 'Mona Lisa'. The tuberose is a flower and is symbolically the image of a certain degree of innocence, but at the same time it has an animal smell. In spite of this idea of extreme femininity, one immediately enters into a sort of false innocence and a world of rather torrid seduction. It is a product which was devised for women who behave with a lustful and powerful, but clean charm. Two types of women can identify themselves in this product : those who define themselves as belonging to opulent seduction, and others who are more interested in the natural side of things.



## Towards a new model in the perfumery world

**Q. :** *Does the fact that you rely on noses, who are readily available to you, not make your model slightly fragile ?*

**F. M. :** There are about fifteen famous noses in the world, and two hundred people who can create good perfumes. The noses earn a great deal of money, and the laboratories negotiate for them like football players. However, the perfume houses do not put them in the spotlight. The creator of 'Poison', for example, was not even invited to the perfume's launch ! Despite this anonymity as far as the public is concerned, these noses are extremely well known within our profession.

The laboratories work on a very archaic system. They do not charge for the service of creation. In other words, the development work for an extract, which is extremely expensive and is very risky for laboratories, is not paid for by the brands. The famous noses are employed by these people who treat them like princes and who allow them to work for someone else from time to time. Even though the major laboratories do not charge for their costs of creation, they sell their extracts (whose manufacture remains a secret) by making a large profit margin. The winner takes all and the loser loses a great deal. It is very rare for these laboratories – and especially for the very well known noses – to work for a lesser known brand.

I have access to them because I come from this *milieu*, and these people are my close friends. Because we had a great deal of publicity and currently the major brands are run by product managers who do not know the profession very well, but are obsessed by media criticism, it is very important for a perfumer to be singled out and brought to the fore. Today, we are the brand which promotes them the best. We are therefore the way the laboratories can cast the spotlight on their creators.

Furthermore, longstanding perfume houses, such as Chanel, have in-house noses and have created more exclusive lines of products in the same way as my products. I think this is very positive because it creates a market and shows laboratories that one can generate a reputation for a perfumer by working with houses such as mine. There will be an increasing number of attempts like this, even though there have already been some which have not succeeded, because it requires the investment of a great deal of time and money, and one must be honest.

**Q. :** *Your experience is very similar to that of French producers who have worked hard to allow film makers to become recognised as authors. It took ten years for the New Wave to achieve this, whereas you succeeded in getting the noses recognised as 'authors' much more quickly. If you are the force behind all the creations of your perfumers, do you not risk having to delegate your editorial line as you get bigger ?*

**F. M. :** That depends on the way in which one develops. It all depends on distribution. Every salesperson in our shops receives a very rigorous and strict training and this aspect is part of our contract with department stores. We manage to control distribution because we are growing at our own pace. Our main virtue is to be poor. When one launches a perfume house with a very large budget, one has to break even and distribute broadly, which is not well controlled. We do not have the financial means to grow like this, and it would not be in keeping with the spirit of our products. It is our financial resources which allow us to control the expansion of our network : we only launch a perfume when we have the means to do so. There are also places where one has to tread carefully, like the Middle East, which is a paradise for the perfumer but also for the black market.

Currently, we are working on a completely new perfume which seems strangely familiar. I do not know where we are heading, but I think we are doing something interesting. I do not know its target market either. What I do know, is that we are going to create an event for its launch, and, given our distribution system, we will not sell it simply because it is the last perfume in our catalogue. Our sales force is trained to tell certain clients that the perfume does not suit them. A perfume such as 'Carnal Flower' may make our company grow very quickly : it is a steam train, but one must also take the risk of adding on coaches from time to time.

Presentation of the speaker :

Frédéric Malle : he is the grandson of Serge Heftler, the founder of Parfums Christian Dior, the company where his mother was development director for nearly forty years. He was raised in the world of perfume and perfumers. He graduated from NYU. In 1986, he started working for Roure Bertrand Dupont, the prestigious creation laboratory, where he strengthened and refined his sense of the olfactory balance as well as a wide-ranging knowledge of raw materials and techniques in the industry. During his time at Roure Bertrand Dupont, he established very strong professional and social ties with the best noses of our time, and laid the basis for his future role as a perfume editor. He was a consultant for well-known exclusive companies for a long time, and, in his quest to restore the image of perfume in all its glory, he decided to found his own company, *Les Éditions de Parfums Frédéric Malle* in 2000.

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