

## **Marketing Sensory or a Revised Role for Sensory Managers**

*D. Minkner, British American Tobacco (Hamburg International) GmbH*

**Keywords:** *sensory manager, role profile, competencies, skill set, added value*

### **Introduction**

While the sensory community has massively increased their scientific reputation many sensory departments within the industry are still facing a rather unremarkable presence. This seems even contradictory as nowadays most FMCG companies are aiming to increase the role of the product within their Marketing mix and to establish more consumer oriented product development processes.

Even though this should lead to an increasing role and importance of sensory within a company, the sensory departments very often remain static or are even not considered to participate in the above objectives.

From Marketing and Market Research the sensory manager are most often still classified as technical experts leading a scientific department rather than being appreciated as strategic partner adding value to their objectives.

In order to change this, it may be helpful to reflect and revise current role profiles of sensory managers. Most often it's dominated by achieving the required expertise and scientific approaches while the "management" part is neglected.

But to grow the significance and value of sensory within a company it requires both parts and terms like "stakeholder engagement", "company plans" and "brand strategies" shouldn't be foreign words for sensory managers.

### **Classic Definition & Consequences**

For a sensory manager it's obvious to have sensorial, scientific and technical competencies and to be an expert with respect to methods, statistics and data evaluation. This is fully aligned to the classic definition of sensory as

***"Science to use Human Senses for the Purpose  
of Investigation and Measurement"***

and was fine in those days where sensory was "just a measuring tool" integrated in the lab environment.

Even though the fast growing sensory community has proven that sensory can deliver much more in terms of adding value to many other important areas (i.e. Product Development, Marketing, Market Research etc.) many sensory departments remain static or are even not considered to participate in cross-functional objectives.

One reason can be that sensory manager intensively focus on gaining more and more knowledge and building their excellent expertise (*the scientific behaviour*) while disregarding to sell and promote their capabilities, respectively the added value their department could offer (*the management behaviour*). While establishing in-house reputation as sensory mastermind they are astonished how rarely they are approached and their knowledge is actively requested or utilized.

But how should THE COMPANY or the OTHER DEPARTMENTS approach them, not knowing what enormous potential might be sitting next door? It's not enough to have the expertise and reputation, it's more important to transfer the expertise into business potential and to demonstrate how this can generate value.

## **Evolving Definition & New Direction**

Sensory should be described as a

***“Special department for consultancy and support regarding consumer relevant product questions and decision processes with respect to (strategic) important company objectives and decisions”.***

This *“business definition”* is representing the new direction and initiates the journey from being a *„method-driven“* specialist (focused on optimizing methods, statistic data evaluation, training etc.) to become an *„objective-driven“* consultant (which company relevant questions does sensory has to answer).

Breaking new ground leads to less *„client-driven“* working and delivering project related results only, though more *„consumer-driven“* working and finally cross functional consultancy for company decisions and sensory becoming a management element.

But evolving **from a service department to a strategic partner** accounts for a new self-conception as well as new role profile as it requires new principal accountabilities, revised competencies and key success factors.

## **The Sensory Manager Competencies (Excerpts)**

- Scientific and technical competencies  
Statistical skills, Product knowledge.....
- Sensorial competencies  
Theoretical knowledge in the field of sensory analysis, methodology, sensory data collection and analysis methods.....
- Management competencies  
Organizational and planning capabilities, knowledge of the business, cross-functional understanding, holistic view.....
- Communication competencies  
Contact with other departments and clients within and outside the company, report writing skills, ability to communicate to experts as well as to generalists.....
- Leadership competencies  
Good decision making, ability to drive changes....

It requires

- a) familiarisation with the basic functions of management, namely planning, organizing, leading/motivating
- b) managing the sensory department as business, incl. formation of a business policy and defining the sensory mission, vision, objectives, policy and strategy
- c) own key result areas in management, leadership, relationship and even innovation, incl. a sensory business plan and operational & strategic planning to achieve the targets.

## **Mandatory and Supportive Elements**

Amongst the wide range of potential activities three main areas should be actively focussed:

### **1) Stakeholder Engagement**

A wide sphere of potential activities to approach, engage and convince new stakeholders, but here simplified to improve, respectively develop relationships with all current and forthcoming sensory stakeholders within the company. This will enable

- a) to promote sensory within the company

- b) to build credibility and increase awareness by demonstrating the benefits, added value, consumer relevance and increasing importance of sensory for the company
- c) to identify the current and forthcoming stakeholder needs as basis to develop tailor-made solutions matching their requirements and/or to acquire new clients.

## 2) Added Value

Demonstrating added value should comprise a scope from holistic aspects (for the company or main departments) to specific aspects for individual stakeholders. It should be highlighted how sensory supports strategic business objectives and adds cross-functional value to the key result areas of individual managers.

The examples can combine sensory support in certain areas and projects (i.e. product modifications, launch decisions, material and supplier qualification) up to aspects of effectiveness and efficiency (i.e. amount of money saved using sensory results vs. consumer research, sensory role in cost reduction program, speed of delivering results etc.). Most often it's easy to set up a surprisingly long list once initiated thinking in that direction. As a free benefit such list might also be of help in times of "cost saving environments".

Those investigations will also allow a reconciliation of interests between a) what is sensory currently delivering and how does it matches stakeholder requirements or b) to identify what has to be offered to support their key result areas more effectively. In order for this reconciliation to happen, it's self-explanatory that the sensory managers have familiarized themselves with their stakeholder needs, their day-to-day business and relevant success criteria.

## 3) Communication

The ability to present effectively is a critical leadership skill, especially when it's the responsibility of the sensory manager to communicate about his business to his business.

A sensory manager needs the ability to communicate to experts as well as to generalists. What sound easy is in fact mostly an underestimated issue. In the majority of cases sender and receiver of information communicate on complete different levels. While the sensory manager is an expert in his field, he easily tends to use expert language, but needs to simplify his messages to a comprehensible level. As a rule of thumb: "*less can be more*" and focus on added value and results rather than on methods, statistics and issues. It's mandatory to communicate at a peer group level, using an interactive style rather than a teaching style.

Additionally complexity arises as it might require complete different communication levels for each stakeholder. Communication to Product Development might differ substantially from communication to Marketing and again differ communicating to Market Research.

The positive aspect is that this can be learned and trained as it's a common problem and therefore many tools and experts are available to support.

## 4) Supportive elements

Again a wide range of possibilities, but to name a few: developing a branding/logo of the sensory department, offering open office days, setting up newsletter or highlight reports etc. can significantly support cross-functional awareness and acknowledgement and in consequence interest and new collaborations.

## Tools and Support

Once starting the journey and knowing the direction it's easy to get required support, especially as areas to enter newly for sensory managers are in fact well established, broad documented, easy accessible and - even better - already available in the company. It's quite easy to get excellent books about management (skills), stakeholder engagement and further areas mentioned.

It's worth contacting Human Resources, Marketing or Public Relations department to get input, support or even coaching & training. Asking them for help is in fact also a good way to raise their interest and to open doors for further collaborations supporting them in return.

To understand stakeholder and to gain cross-functional experience it's always recommended to volunteer for secondments to deep dive and understand their way of working and communication.

## The Journey

To initiate the required process necessitates own engagement, enthusiasm and passion as nobody will drive that except the sensory managers by themselves. Even though it sounds rational, it's not happening as a matter of course. As described above, it's a JOURNEY which will take time and where many things will pass the way: from pros to cons, from unexpected support to obstacles and drawbacks.

Growing of one department may threaten another, i.e. Market Research (often not familiar with sensory they might feel threatened by sensory entering their ground - not identifying the value but seeing more the competition).

But the goal is achievable and all obstacles manageable. Once convinced it's easy to prepare for an evolving role and to cope with the new challenges successfully.

## Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank British American Tobacco's sensory managers as well as many other sensory managers for sharing experience and feeding into above summary.

---

### Appendix: **Some Pivotal Questions**

- How much money did your company earn or save based on results provided by your sensory department?
- How much money did your company spend on sensory?
- How does sensory contribute to your company plan?
- Do you know the brand strategies within your company?
- How many stakeholders do you have?
- Do you have a stakeholder map?
- Do you have a stakeholder engagement plan?
- Can you describe your function in 2 sentences?
- How often do you present/report to your top management?
- How often do you collaborate with Marketing and/or Market Research?
- Do you know the consumer research projects currently in field?
- How many new working areas did you explore the last three years?
- How often is your input requested in product decision processes?
- Are you acknowledged on cross-functional group peer level?
- How do you generate value for your company?
- Are you seen as business partner or as service centre?
- How is the general awareness of sensory in the complete company?
- Do you have a sensory mission/vision/strategy?
- Do you have operational and strategic plans for your sensory department?
- Do you report your added value on regular basis?

Reflect your answers and identify what you might have to initiate to evolve your role!