

# Heaven scent

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CASE STUDY AJMAL PERFUMES





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“Heritage is a double-edged sword,” suggested Abdulla Ajmal, deputy general manager of Ajmal Perfumes. “On the one hand you have the trust and the grounding and the foundations, but on the other hand, you are old, especially in this part of the world, where novelty is so important.”

The multi-million-dollar, family-owned business is one of the region's leading

manufacturers and retailers of perfumes and beauty products. But, after nearly 60 years in existence, it was time to closely examine the brand, explained Ajmal, the third generation of the family to be involved in the business.

“Over the last few years, we've been doing a lot of soul searching; questioning where we stand as a retailer and as a brand,” Ajmal explained.

1. The new concept was piloted at the Burjuman Centre.



By-products of this soul searching are a refreshed image and a new retail concept, which was recently unveiled at Ajmal's Burjuman Centre store. Once it has been fine-tuned, the new concept will be rolled out across some 200 stores around the world. "It's an AED50 million project over the next three to five years," Ajmal revealed.

The company, an established local player, also has global aspirations, which further accentuated the need for a revamp. Essentially, Ajmal required a retail concept that would be accessible to a global audience but not so far removed from its roots to estrange its predominantly local customer base.

"When we say we want to be a global player, we truly want to be a global player. That means, wherever we are, local clientele should feel comfortable and should want to pick up our products. We needed a concept that wouldn't be too alien or intimidating, because the Arabic perfumery tends to be very different and quite alien, if you like."

#### ETHNIC CHIC

In terms of brand positioning, the company has adopted the mantle of 'ethnic

chic', with a brand promise that centres on innovation, creativity, quality and value. "Our industry is such that you've always had the large players who have invested heavily in brand equity and marketing, and they've lost sight of the fact that what consumers are really paying for is that liquid in that bottle. We have never lost sight of that."

For the design of its pilot store at the Burjuman Centre, Ajmal appointed Portland Design, an established British retail specialist that was able to answer Ajmal's call for a 'retail concept designer' rather than just a 'store designer'.

Ajmal was also looking to partner with a company that could bring both

local and international experience to the project. "The first thing we said was, it has to be 'ethnic chic' but still very international. If it opened in any part of the world, in any locale, it shouldn't stand out like sore thumb standing next to its counterparts in that market.

"On the other hand, we didn't want it to be just another Sephora; it had to be different because our business model is different," Ajmal explained.

"Basically, the brief was very very brief. They took the time to understand our operations. They took the time to understand our vision, where we are going, what we want to be in five year's time. We did not dictate how the store should

#### AJMAL: THE HISTORY

Ajmal means 'most beautiful' in Arabic; it is synonymous with captivating perfumes and beauty products, as well as high-quality traditional Arabic fragrance products for the body and home.

The company was founded by Ajmal Ali in the early 1950s. Since then, Ajmal Perfumes has grown from a modest trading house into a regional corporate entity. Today, the multi-million dollar family-owned business is steered by the second and third generation Ajmals.

In 2004, Ajmal Perfumes set up a new state-of-the-art manufacturing plant in Dubai in order to keep up with the region's increasing fragrance demands. Strategically located in Dubai's industrial area and built at a total cost of \$10 million, the 150,000ft<sup>2</sup> facility houses manufacturing units, a fully automated packaging division and an extensive Research and Development (R&D) wing, built with an initial capital of \$1 million.

2. The new store is divided into three distinct areas.

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be; all we said was that it needed to offer a different experience and obviously that it couldn't be ridiculously expensive – which actually it was, eventually, but pilot stores tend to do that!"

The Ajmal business model can be divided into three core components – branded perfumes, oils and the traditional Oudh, or resinoid, which is one of the prime elements of oriental perfumery. In the new store, each of these elements is given its own space.

"You've got the brands on one side, the oils on the other and then you've got an inner sanctum for the traditional Oudh. That is the more premium side of things," Ajmal explained.

With the new space, the company also wanted to explore new ways of doing business. "Typically, in this part of the world, everything is counter based. The customer comes to the counter and the sales person shows them something. We wanted to move away from the typical salesman/customer relationship."

3. Gold still dominates, but in a very 'dignified' way.

4. Ajmal has never lost sight of the fact that customers are paying for 'that liquid in that bottle'.

The store has been divided into two parts. One section is self-service, where customers are able to interact directly with the products. "Of course, a sales person is always there to answer their queries but the customer can feel free to just wander about and try out samples and testers, without feeling any obligation," Ajmal detailed.

In a further attempt to offer the customer greater independence, perfumes have been colour coded. On the counters, fragrances go from light to strong as they move through the store. Customers will find the lighter, more contemporary, more modern fragrances at one end and the stronger, more traditional fragrances on the other.

"It is self guided. Nobody needs to follow the customer around. This places a lot of independence and control in the consumer's hand. They are able to gauge their own tastes. After a couple of samples, they can get their own idea of where they fit," said Ajmal.

### BROADENED APPEAL

A lot of these new features also serve to make the store more attractive to an expatriate audience. In the region, the company's customer base is 70% local and 30% expatriate – a considerable shift from a few years ago when it was 95% local.

A move away from window displays is also intended to make the shop more accessible, particularly to expats. "There are no window displays. We wanted to give it a very open feel so that when anyone walks past, it is very inviting. Nobody has done that before in our industry," said Ajmal.

"The other thing is as much as window displays can be a selling tool, given that our brand is trying to attract a lot of expatriates and we are trying to enter new arenas and target segments, it can be a stumbling block. If you've got a new product that's just been launched and it is very Arabic or oriental and you've got that displayed in all the windows,

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a westerner or expat walking past will think this is not a store for them.”

### CRAFTING MEMORIES

As part of its new brand personality, Ajmal has also adopted a new motif. The company was keen to incorporate an oriental feel into its overall brand identity, so Portland Design created a striking geometric motif influenced by traditional architecture.

“This geometric design has been picked up from Arabic architecture and has been given a floral form. The concept is that it flows and as it gets further and further away, it fades, which represents fragrance and smell. When you’re close to it, you are enveloped in the fragrance and as you move further and further away, it fades away.

“We also consciously started thinking about what it is that we actually do. We needed to clearly define that in marketing terms. So we have taken on the tagline ‘crafting memories’. The most intense form of unlocking a memory is fragrance. It’s a fact.”

5. Effective lighting ensures that focus falls in the right places.

When it comes to crafting memories, a retail experience can play a big role, Ajmal continued. “If you want to craft a good memory, you have to give the consumer a good retail experience, because that’s what they walk away with.”

In order to craft the desired experience, the interior uses Erco LED lighting and semi-transparent Corian counters that are gently infused with light. The

kept simple, so there’s nothing gaudy,” Ajmal reiterated.

“We are not trying to create the Taj Mahal here. We are not trying to sell the ambience. The ambience has to aid the sale and make the retail experience comfortable, convenient and functional, which is very important,” Ajmal noted.

“It shouldn’t be over the top. We’ve moved away from the typical harsh

“We are not trying to create the Taj Mahal here. The ambience has to make the experience comfortable”

ceiling and floors have been kept simple and focus falls directly on the products.

“We are trying to give it the feel of a gallery. Typically, if you walk into any of our competitors’ or any of our older stores, the ceiling would be quite ostentatious, with a lot of design elements. The idea with the new store is that these are functional elements that need to be

lighting and lots of wood and gold. Although our concept is based on gold, it is subdued; it is a lot more dignified, if you like,” he added. “It is a modern interpretation of what one would consider ostentatious or luxurious. At the end of the day, we are in the luxury industry. But we need to create a luxurious feel without being too ‘in your face.’”

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