

Abdulla Ajmal, General Manager of Ajmal perfumes

Explains the benefits and pitfalls of being in a family business

I started in this business as an embryo. I am the first child of the third generation of our family. As I was growing up, I learned business at the dining table. You were told or trained or brainwashed that you were going to grow up and take the banner of the business, because obviously I am the eldest child of the eldest child. My father is the eldest amongst his siblings, so all uncles were guardians, they said 'when we have our kids, you will be their leader, you will lead the family', so being part of Ajmal was not exactly an option, it was mandatory. But being part of the family business isn't just training from the family from a young age, but it also means a passion behind the business and for me it wasn't just about the perfumery, it was about the brand. I want to take the name Ajmal as far as I can within my capabilities. Today I tell people that this is in my blood and really it is.

When I was born we were still quite a modest family; not as poor as my

grandfather or as poor as what my father has seen, but yes quite modest in the parts of Mumbai we lived in. The only refrigerator we had in the apartment, where 20 of us lived, my granddad had to store big sacks of saffron in it, so the water was laced with saffron and I grew up drinking that water and I hated it. So I say the family business is in my veins and I can't get rid of it.

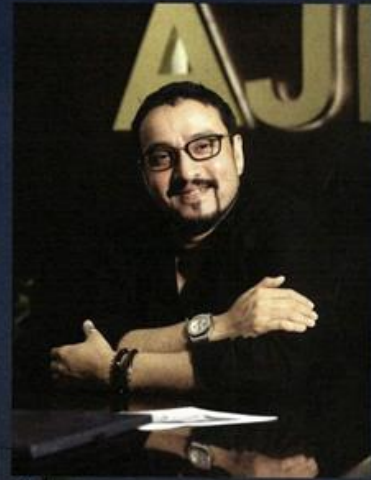
I properly joined the business in late 1996, so it has been 19 years in October this year since I joined. I started at the bottom. We don't follow that any more in the sense of starting at the store level, but that is how my training started because again I was the first. When I joined the business after my education had finished, I came back and had to start at the store level, spending time at the stores, then I did stints in all parts of the company. I can say now that I have reached this level, I have been in every department there is in this business, except of course doing

hardcore work in functions like accounts or finance. I have been on the supply side for many years and am now looking at sales and marketing and strategic growth.

The most obvious benefit to being in a family business is that yes, you do get a few liberties, although in my case it wasn't so much, because my father is quite strict, quite particular about the discipline of work. Me, who was then a young guy coming back from education in the UK, late nights, partying etc, even that was ok as long as I got to work on time. If I left a bit late he would just look at the clock.

In a family business the expectations are very high. You are expected to work that much harder, that much more. It doesn't necessarily mean hours, but hours is what you have to give in order to learn that much more. Again coming back to the positive, even when you join a certain section of the business, the entire business is open to you, so you can learn all the facets

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much faster, which is what we have done for the new generations coming in. I formulate some of their training programmes because I have been through it.

I think the downside of being in a family business is that; one the expectations are very high. I believe that as a family member, there is no point in being in the business unless you can add value, not just do your job, but add value, real value. You come, join and what more you can do for the business. It is very important.

Another downside with being in a family business is that you get looked over because you are a family member. However it can go either way depending on who your boss is, a parent or an uncle. With my uncle it was far easier, he was my mentor. He passed away a couple of years ago. He was a perfumer of the company, the nose of the business, so he taught me whatever little I know about hardcore

perfumery. We were more like friends as our age gap was not very much. It was a good working relationship and I had more liberty with him. My father is far more strict and disciplined, expectations are far higher as well, which is good. Expectations are what drives you to work harder. Getting overlooked is the part that is difficult.

How I added value to the business was bringing a lot of focus on occidental – that is a very technical term, I am showing off my jargon right now – it is Western fragrances. When I joined, 95 to 97 per cent of our clientele was local Arabs. I realised that our target segment was very, very small. Even today after almost 20 years, there are just over a million Emiratis and half are under the age of 17, so they are not our clientele. I realised that we needed to start working on fragrances that can be worn by western expats. Secondly I have tried to bring in more modern marketing practices. I was the one who brought in the advertising, the PR. I was the one who

brought in the concept of PR. I am proud to say today 50 per cent of the turn over comes from our western-type fragrances. Moreover, now our reliance on the local segment is only 70 per cent.

The focus on western fragrances started in about 2000. 2001 was the turning year, it was the year we turned 50, so we put a lot of effort and thought into what to do to make an impact and how to make an obvious shift in what we do. One thing we did was a very subtle change; our logo used to be red and blue, so we moved to gold. That is when we started putting a strong focus on how to evolve. Now the vision is global expansion, going international. Everything is underway, by the beginning of 2016 we should be present in Europe in the leading department stores, whether it be Harrods in London or Galleries Lafayette in Paris. So in the leading markets to begin with, then from Europe to America. I want to make the brand truly international. FME