

A Fragrance to Empower Women: The History of “Charlie”

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During the 1960s and early 1970s, popular media images reflected the changes taking place in women’s lives. A most significant change was that women were portrayed as having a life outside the home, with concerns and aspirations other than being a wife and mother. The purpose of this research is to explore the role that a specific fragrance, “Charlie” by Revlon, had, not only on the perfume and advertising industries, but on the way in which women viewed themselves.

In 1973, Revlon Inc. introduced “Charlie” perfume, with its advertising campaign featuring model Shelley Hack striding confidently alone across pages of magazines and television screens. Although “Charlie” was developed partially in response to the women’s movement, she in turn, helped to popularize the image of the independent woman.

In the years between 1963 and 1975, fragrance companies experienced strong growth in sales, encouraged by social changes in America, such as the “youth culture,” “women’s liberation” and the “sexual revolution.” The maturing of the perfume industry coincided with the following three events:

- Firstly, Helen Rubenstein, Elizabeth Arden, Coco Chanel and Charles Revson all died during this period. The result was intensified competition and a wave of corporate mergers leading to a handful of large corporations dominating the perfume business.
- Secondly, French perfume companies saw a decline in market share and a loss of dominance in the face of aggressive marketing by American fragrance companies, such that American companies dominated the industry by the end of this period.
- Lastly, a much wider spectrum of American women than ever before were buying perfume.

American perfume companies began shifting to a lifestyle orientation in their advertising. “Charlie,” Charles Revson’s last new major product introduced in 1973, exemplified the intersection of changes in society and in the perfume industry. It broke with industry traditions in its name, packaging, positioning, advertising and timing. “Charlie” succeeded at becoming the first American fragrance to achieve the status of an international bestseller. In large part, this can be attributed to astute timing and marketing. Revlon captured the spirit of the women’s movement and capitalized on it with “Charlie.”

New perfume introductions typically occurred in early Fall to capture interest and sales at Christmas. In the late 1960s more than 75% of all fragrance sales were Christmas gifts. By 1973, this figure had dropped to 60% as more women bought fragrances for themselves all year round. Revlon took an unprecedented step and introduced “Charlie” in February of 1973. One of the advantages of this strategy was that “Charlie” did not have to share the limelight with any other new fragrances.

Another departure from tradition for Revlon lay in the target market for “Charlie.” Revlon’s two major fragrance successes were “Intimate” and “Norell,” both of which were targeted to the 35-plus age group. These brands featured the traditional luxurious image of most French perfumes. Revlon created “Charlie” for a contemporary and younger woman. It epitomized the lifestyle approach and trend towards a more casual, everyday fragrance. “Charlie’s” advertising theme featured a liberated woman model, Shelley Hack, in a pant suit, confidently striding down a New York street, epitomizing a chic New York woman, interested in fashion, but not its slave. She had her own style and was her own woman. This advertisement was a major departure from classic perfume advertisements featuring glamorous women in evening attire. The common perfume appeals of romance, glamour and status

were nowhere to be found in a “Charlie” advertisement. Importantly, the “Charlie” girl had self-confidence, with interests and a life of her own. She was not longing to attract a man. “Charlie” was aimed at women who see fragrances as a fun and pleasurable item, not a sex appealer. The fragrance reflected the social trends of the early- to mid-1970s, embracing both the youth culture and the women’s movement. It ushered in an important new trend: the lifestyle fragrance.

Revlon developed a 20-point profile of the “Charlie” girl and projected these points in its print and television advertisements. The profile of the “Charlie User” was:

- Irreverent and unpretentious
- Breaks all the rules
- Is not a Jewish princess
- Is Jane Fonda in look and attitude or could be Carole Lombard
- Doesn’t mind being a little outrageous or flamboyant
- Makes her own rules in having fun or getting something done
- Has her own integrity based on her own standards
- Can be tough, believes rules are secondary
- Is a pacesetter, not a follower
- Can be very soft, but is never passive
- Flings herself into everything with enthusiasm and heart
- Eats at Yellowfingers
- Believes she is different from any other girl
- Is very relaxed about sex
- Has outgrown sharing a summer house
- Is bored with typical fragrance advertising
- Wears pants to work even though it’s against the rules
- Mixes Gucci and blue jeans
- Loves roller coasters, hot dogs and Fortunysilks
- Has a sense of self and a sense of commitment

Revlon’s introductory television commercial for “Charlie” featured popular New York singer Bobby Short, singing a song written for the commercial. The lyrics began:

“They call it Charlie.
A different fragrance that thinks your way...
The kinda fragrance that’s gonna stay.
And it’s here now...Charlie.”

The simple packaging for “Charlie” contrasted with the elaborate ones for most designer and French perfumes. It was in a plain glass bottle with a slim gold or silver screw cap, rather than a stopper. Its curved, yet simple, shape made it functional rather than ornamental. The signature “Charlie” script across the bottle appeared casual and friendly, rather than formal and fashionable. This unimposing package made the product appealing to a wide variety of women.

One of the important contributions “Charlie” made to the perfume industry was to make women more aware of and interested in fragrance. It encouraged the expanded usage and “democratization of consumption” of fragrances. “Charlie” never tried to have an exclusive image; nor did it depend on the cache of a designer’s name. Revlon wanted “Charlie” to appeal to all women who thought of themselves as liberated.

Revlon launched “Charlie” with great theatrics at Bloomingdale’s, including saleswomen dressed in “Charlie” clothes: a white tailored pant suit. Other promotional devices included buttons, balloons and umbrellas with the “Charlie” motif on them. There were even “Charlie” haircuts, horoscopes, and of course, the “Charlie” song. The fragrance soon became widely available at mass merchandisers all over the country. Priced below prestige brands, it was well within the reach of millions of women. In its first year, Revlon sold \$10 million worth of “Charlie,” making it the single biggest fragrance introduction up to that time.

By the 1970s, perfume companies had succeeded in accomplishing two missions they had begun in the 1950s: women now bought perfume and fragrances for themselves, and these sales continued all year long. The companies encouraged this trend with year-round advertising and new fragrances specifically designed for daywear, such as "Charlie" and Estee Lauder's "Alliage." Women were no longer content with just one brand and were now buying a "wardrobe of fragrances" for different occasions and times of the year. These trends led to much higher overall sales and consumption of fragrance products. With women working in greater numbers, they could afford more perfumes and had occasion to wear them in their new lives.

Revlon's "Charlie" represented the most successful entry into this lucrative business and became the bestselling fragrance in the world. It was built around a lifestyle image which appealed to the modern woman and was supported by the aggressive marketing efforts of Revlon. It combined an elaborate product introduction with massive in-store promotion and extensive advertising in a variety of magazines and on television. The advertising image of a young, liberated woman striding confidently across the page appealed to women of the 1970s. "Charlie" had become an integral part of "women's liberation."

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