

“We believe in working for depth of the market, not width”

Abdulla Ajmal, Deputy COO, Ajmal Perfumes, charts the significant changes during the crisis, perfume trends and important memories about his early development in perfume making

What are your main priorities and goals in your role? Since you've taken over what changes did you see in Ajmal Perfumes?

The vision that we have set out for us is to make Ajmal a global brand, a symbol of excellence that people can aspire towards.

There has been a progression in the way we operate over the years that we have been in business, as they say change is the only constant. As our consumers have evolved over the years, so have we. At our core we remain a traditional brand rooted in Oudh and its derivatives. Over the years we have created many references that have become global benchmarks as fusion blends. One such reference is called Amber Wood, a fragrance held in high esteem around the world. Today, we have over 300 references that we retail through our stores and through distribution partners around the world.

We have always placed a great emphasis on Research and Development so that we are able to remain ahead of the curve and create new and exciting blends for our consumers to sample and cherish.

The past two years have been a challenge for us, being a retail brand with over 200 outlets across the Gulf countries. We learned how to adapt and being process owners of the entire chain from manufacturing to retailing, we were able to deploy changes quickly and efficiently in order to minimise the impact and maximise output.

Tell us something about your early development in perfume - what stands out as an important memory for you?

There are a few milestones that remain

with me from my formative years in the family business.

The one memory that's important to me personally is the celebration of our 50th year in 2001. I was training under my uncle, who was the COO of the company at that time, and he had given me the responsibility to chart out some initiatives for the whole year. It was a very significant year for us because we had conducted a lot of activities that saw great involvement of our consumers and the general public.

Putting in place the farm to flacon bottle strategy, another highlight due to the long hours of discussions with senior members of staff and the management teams that allowed me to observe, learn and grow.

And off course, who can forget their first exposure, induction into an organization. My uncle the Late Nazir Ajmal, may he rest in eternal peace, was my mentor. He took me under his wing and helped me understand the creation part of the business as he was our chief perfumer at the time. It might seem simple, but I had to smell raw materials every morning I came in, it was memorable because it was strenuous and a shock to the system. I learned a lot from my uncle on perfumery ingredients and the perfume blending process.

How do you define success and what drives you to succeed?

Being able to put a smile on the face of our consumers our stakeholders both internal and external, is success to me. It is an ongoing process, where we need to strive at creating the right environment so that we are able to pursue excellence in all that we set out to do. Success is often measured in numbers, we

believe if we are able to keep focus on our consumers and stakeholders, the numbers will come as well.

This year, 2020, has been quite remarkable in terms of the difficulties that have faced businesses all over the world. What has been most significant for you as a perfume maker in these times?

This is the first time Ajmal Perfumes has seen a situation of this magnitude. The most significant achievement for us during these trying times has been the satisfaction that we have been able to retain every single employee in our company. Sacrifices were made at the board level, where the directors decided to take cuts so that the others were not affected too much. We have undertaken some measures internally too, but didn't let go of any person. It has increased the faith people have in the management that we are not here only for profits. Products, performances, ratios, and P&L, come and go, but for us our people are most important.

Once business opened, we saw footfall in the stores but nowhere close to the level that we were used to. Our e-commerce business however went the other way where we saw a substantial increase in offtakes and business growth of over 5x. Being a retail brand, having the right omnichannel approach is work in progress, that is one area that we aim to strengthen over 2021.

What challenges do fragrance makers and business owners face now and in the months ahead?

Getting back to parity is our current objective, parity being where we were before the crisis took effect. We fall in the lifestyle products sector and that



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gets affected the most during any crisis because we are not a necessity but a luxury. Our consumers have however continued to bless us with their patronage and that has helped us in gaining confidence that it will be business as usual sooner rather than later.

What new trends are emerging in the perfume industry?

In terms of raw materials and the olfactory trends, oud mania as I term it - by which I mean the trend of oud-based fragrances - is here to stay! You can find in the current markets washing powders, hand sanitizers and

shampoo based around the notes of this precious ingredient. Another trend that is picking up at a rapid pace is sustainability, the source of the raw materials and their impact on the environment.

Are there fragrances you like, apart from your own?

Being a perfume creator and evaluator, it is extremely difficult for me to say that I prefer one reference over the other. I am constantly in a state of analyzing any product that I sample. For me, I prefer brands that experiment with raw materials. The richness of the materials used is also what attracts

me to the products. From the Ajmal range, it is always the next launch of Ajmal that is my favorite as that is the product that I will spend the most amount of time with before it reaches you, the consumer.

What opportunities or plans for growth do you see in 2021?

2021 will be a year of business consolidation, we will be putting all our efforts into retaining existing consumers and markets. Growth will come from within as we believe there is more that we can do in markets where we have presence. We will be working for depth of market, not width.