

Confessions of a fragrance guerrilla

By N.O. Stink



The story of a determined battle over fragrances in workplace restrooms.

Keywords: fragrances, restrooms, lavatories, toilets, activism

When I first got MCS in the early 1990s, restrooms were usually not directly fragranced. They had liquid soap dispensers on the walls, but if you didn't use them they were not a problem. If there was a urinal in the men's section, it would usually have some scented "cakes" which could be strong if they were freshly put in, but they faded over a couple of days.

Then in the mid-1990s they started putting fragrances in the restrooms where I worked. It was a plastic container placed on the sink. It had a dark green liquid inside and a big wick sticking up the top. The liquid was slowly evaporated by the

wick. They were not as bad as what came later, but my sinuses still didn't like these stupid things. I quickly figured out how to defeat them.

I poured out half of the stinky green liquid and then filled the bottle up with water. The green dye was so strong it still looked as if it was full of the green fragrance. Every couple of weeks I added more water as the content slowly evaporated. That diluted the fragrance even more, so eventually there was nothing left.

This went on for years. The bottle stayed the same deep green, as the dye didn't evaporate. Nobody noticed; nobody replaced the bottle with a new one. That tells you how important those fragrances really are.

The fragrance industry came up with new and more powerful ways to pollute the air. The next thing was a device that was glued to the wall. Inside it had a stinky gel cartridge and a tiny battery-powered propeller to move air across the cartridge and out into the room.

That was much worse.

When I got there in the morning I would visit the restroom before I needed to use it. I'd take a paper towel, wrap it around the gel cartridge and dump it. I took great care not to get any of it on my hands.

When I needed the restroom later in the day, it was much better. It could take many days before there was a new gel cartridge in place.

But the janitor wisened to what was going on and was more diligent checking, so those cartridges were replaced much sooner. Stronger measures were needed.

I started throwing out both the cartridge and the two D-cell batteries, as a clear sign of opposition to this chemical onslaught. But both the batteries and the cartridge were promptly replaced.

Alright, then I figured out how to remove the propeller. I left the batteries and the cartridge in place, but pulled off the little propeller so the air wasn't pushed out of the device. If you opened it up, you had to look closely to notice the propeller was missing.

It was not as good as throwing out the gel, but it was still better with the propeller off.

That fooled my opponent for quite a while, but eventually there was a new propeller installed. And if I removed it, a new one would promptly be there again. Time for rethinking.

The propeller didn't run all the time, as that would use up the batteries too fast. It had a tiny circuit board with a timer that turned the propeller on and off. My next step was sabotaging this circuit board with a pair of pliers, so the propeller never ran and you had to look very, very closely to see any evidence of tampering.

That worked for a long time, but then a whole new dispenser was installed. The devils at the chemical companies had invented something worse yet. The thing had a spray bottle inside, with a little motor on top that pushed down on the spray button now and then, so a brief spray of fragrance was sent out into the room. The thing was mounted high on the wall so it was hard to get to, and the spray could land on your head if you were unlucky.

The spray bottle had a label that said it should only be used in well-ventilated areas. Geez, if they ventilated restrooms adequately there would be no need for fragrances to overpower the occasional natural odors.

I tried a few measures, such as taping over the nozzle, but I still had to use a respirator in there. Throwing out the spray bottle just resulted in a new one put in place, and there was more risk of being sprayed directly.

At this point my MCS had gotten so much worse that I had to stop working anyway.

This story was first published in the spring 2024 issue of *Ecologic News*, the newsletter from HEAL of Southern Arizona.

More stories

For more stories go to www.eiwellspring.org/facesandstories.html

For more activist stories, go to www.eiwellspring.org/activist.html.