

The whole thing stinks!

By Ruth Ostrow

It isn't just olfactory bombardment but total sensory rape

IT'S a perfect day. The sun is shining, the birds are singing. Around where I live, the smell of summer, of trees and nature, wafts in and out of open veranda doors.

I'm doing a little domestic tidying up, getting last night's perishables into the compost bin, taking the rest over to the garbage bin. No garbage bag, so I tear open a new packet and empty the rubbish into it.

An hour later I am feeling poorly. My eyes have started watering, my sinuses are playing up. I swear I can smell some horrid, lemon smell seeping out somewhere. It's some artificial deodorant, playing havoc with my senses.

It had happened to me the week before. During a bit of a hay-fever attack, I reached for some toilet paper or a tissue at a friend's place and suddenly had the sickly, sweet smell of cheap deodorant in my face, which made me swell up.

I open the garbage bin and sure enough the smell is vomitus. I read the packet and in tiny print it tells me that the bags are now lemon scented. So people can smell the garbage and a sickly, lemony, chemical smell over the top, just like they can smell their own excrement with a dash of lavender aerosol tang. The fact is there is an ever-increasing olfactory fascism in the air.

Walk into any supermarket and there are more smelly things wafting up at the unsuspecting consumer than you can poke a stick at. Horrible, cheap, nasty smells that puff out at you from behind shelves, and worse -- surreptitious smells that make their way into your products to sweeten the proverbial pill and make your bum smell like a rose garden.

And it isn't just olfactory bombardment that we consumers are now having to put up with, but total sensory rape.

Bad enough that television viewers have to suddenly deal with significantly amped-up volume when the commercials come on but it may soon become impossible to avoid loud advertisements in the street.

According to a friend who has just returned from Sydney, there was a talking billboard jabbering at her.

"I felt really incensed. It is as if my freedom has been taken away," says my friend, a respected journalist.

"Studies have shown that people's stress levels rise when they feel they have no autonomy over their surroundings. Now a person can't even stand at a station and daydream or stand in the street and just amble along without being babbled at by some talking sign. People are going to get more and more violent and angry if this keeps up," she predicts.

I tell her that sensory bombardment finally drove me out of my beachside apartment in Sydney into the hills behind Byron Bay.

Having tolerated appalling aircraft noise for the better part of two years, I was completely outraged at the appearance of advertising helicopters outside my window each weekend and over holidays.

Sitting on the balcony staring at the peaceful sky, the last thing I wanted to see was the helicopter dragging some logo behind it.

And the sound was outrageous, the hideous propeller overriding the crashing waves. And what of those poor, tired souls lying staring up at the sky from the beach, trying to get some respite from their busy week? To relieve their aching eyes with a soothing, endless blue and to rest their weary ears?

Already bombarded with the sound of other people's radios blaring more ads than songs, and the insufferable sound of water jet-skis lopping the heads off dolphins or some hapless swimmer, they had to contend with the helicopter going back and forward, back and forward.

There is pollution -- visual, aural, nasal -- everywhere. In this consumer society we are awarded no peace for our weary souls. We are not respected as delicate beings in a delicate ecological system.

Having no control of our environment is indeed a cause of stress. And the way we live in cities can make the most strong-minded of us feel powerless: houses and apartments back to back, neighbours with their barking dogs, loud music and bad perfumes stinking up the stairwell, after a day in the office where the aircon is on too high and the neon light is too bright for our eyes.

People come home from a day of traffic lights, road blocks, office politics and have to deal with other people's cooking smells and the man downstairs whose smoking habit is so intense as to permeate the entire building, and the sound of skateboarders riding the pavement, which shatters the nerves until the louder noise of other people's radios drowns them out.

Do companies really feel we want more assault on our senses?

This is one consumer who is saying "No". Please think again. Please don't create any more smells, or noise, or visual pollutants like junk bits of paper from felled trees that invade our bank statements and letter boxes. We are going into sensory overload. And the beings of this planet simply can't cope.

www.ruthostrow.com

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