

Welcome, Amanda Carr

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GROSSMITH: BEAUTY REPORT

By Amanda Carr, WGSN, 20 December 2010

The revival of Grossmith, one of the UK's oldest perfume houses, is perfectly pitched for today's luxury beauty market. WGSN talks to new owners Simon and Amanda Brooke.



The Grossmith Baccarat Presentation series uses crystal flacons made using the original 1919 moulds

A chance discovery

Grossmith, launched in 1835, was the ultimate luxury beauty brand of the 19th century, with extensive sales of perfume, face powders and other beauty products across the globe. But by the 1970s, the brand was defunct and the company name mothballed. A chance discovery by Simon Brooke, a property executive whose hobby was genealogy, led him to unearth his connection to the brand - he is the founder John Grossmith's great great grandson.

Extensive research, including trawling eBay for vintage examples of Grossmith product, convinced him that the redundant house had a heritage worthy of any of today's luxury brands. Serendipitous discoveries of the original perfume formula books and a desire to connect the brand and family back together again resulted in Simon and his wife Amanda buying back the company.

WGSN FACT FILE

- Grossmith is one of the UK's oldest luxury perfume houses, started by John Grossmith in 1835
- The brand sold more than 100 types of perfume around the globe, including a royal warrant for Queen Alexandra and the royal houses of Greece and Spain
- Grossmith was the only English perfume house to be awarded a prize medal, for perfumes and essential oils, at the Great Exhibition of 1851
- The brand stopped producing in the 1980s and was brought back into family ownership by the Brookes. It re-launched with three perfumes in 2009
- The brand now sells its three perfumes to 35 perfumeries in 14 countries
- The company has no plans to open stores. Instead it sells through top-end, niche, luxury perfumeries
- The company doesn't use distributors, selling is done personally by the Brookes, who seek out potential stores they can build close relationships with
- The perfume is made in France by Robertet and sits in the luxury perfume market due to its quality
- A BBC documentary on the Brookes and Grossmith launch is due to be released in 2011



Grossmith Baccarat Presentation series in case



Grossmith Eau de Parfum 100ml bottles

A heritage story

With no previous experience in perfume, what motivated them to consider launching it as a business? “We found a stunning heritage company,” says Simon. “A large, successful house that once made perfume of a great quality. At one point Phul-Nana was one of the UK’s top-selling perfumes. We realised we had everything that luxury brands strive to attain - a family-owned, successful house of considerable reputation with a great story.”

The Grossmith family worked in Grasse, France - home of the perfume industry - to innovate new formulae and set trends in scent. At its peak in around 1900 to 1914, Grossmith was exporting around 100 different perfumes across the world, including the royal households of Greece and Spain and a royal warrant to supply Queen Alexandra. In 1893 it was commissioned to develop a bespoke perfume for the wedding of King George V and Queen Mary.

The house also used a Baccarat crystal bottle for its perfumes. The Brookes persuaded Baccarat to search its archives for the original bottle mould, which it found, and Grossmith was given permission to use the design again.



Grossmith packaging of Parfum and Eau de Parfum



Grossmith packaging of Parfum and Eau de Parfum

A business plan

What the Brookes lacked in perfume experience, they made up for with business acumen. “It was crucial that I’d been a property professional with business exposure,” continues Simon. “I was an advisor for corporate real estate, paid to construct financial models. In fact, the last big transaction I worked on eventually became the model for launching Grossmith production!”

The brand is entirely self financed - a holiday home in Devon and investments being sacrificed for funds. But Amanda says: “The risk we took here was very calculated. We had a very detailed three-year business plan.” After launching in 2009, the Brookes expect to be in profit in year three (2011), and after just one year the brand is sold in 35 top-end luxury perfumeries in 14 countries, including Fortnum & Mason, Harrods, Campo Marzio 70 in Rome, Luckyscent.com, Al Hawaj in Bahrain, and Saks Fifth Avenue in Dubai. “We are delighted with where we are,” says Simon.

The perfumes

Hasu-no-Hana, originally launched in 1888

Marketed as the “scent of the Japanese Lotus Lily”, it is a bright, radiant floral composition with pronounced chypre and oriental facets on a woody, dry, sensual base.

Phul-Nana, originally launched in 1891

Hindi for lovely flower, a fresh, sweet floral composition with aromatic fougère overtones on a soft, warm, woody base.

Shem-el-Nessim, originally launched in 1906

Launched as “The Scent of Araby”, this perfume was named after an Arabian springtime festival celebrated in Egypt on the Nile. The fragrance reprises the original orris formula, using Florentine iris, known for its rarity and expense, costing three times more than gold bullion.

All three perfumes are available in perfume (10ml and 100ml) and eau de parfum (50ml and 100ml)

The Grossmith Baccarat Presentation series, containing specially concentrated perfume, uses crystal flacons made using the original moulds from 1919, which have been etched in pure gold using modern interpretations of original Grossmith designs.



Grossmith original packaging for perfumes

Grossmith original packaging for perfumes

The importance of experts

The couple surrounded themselves with experts, mostly volunteers, to compensate for their lack of experience. Renowned perfumer Roja Dove was an early fan. “His enthusiasm was essential. We embraced it and got really revved up by it,” claims Simon. Dove suggested using the French perfume company Robertet to reconstruct the scents, as he knew it would match the quality expectations.

There were even advantages to launching in the recession. Andrew Doyle, chairman of packaging design agency Holmes & Marchant, heard about the launch and offered to design the new packaging. Simon continues: “It turned out that one of Andrew Doyle’s first jobs in the industry was for Grossmith, so he felt connected. We were very open about the fact we had no money - at all! Holmes & Marchant agreed to do it on speculative time with an arrangement where payment was deferred to the first nine months of the revenue stream.”

A similar story emerged over production of the glass perfume bottles, normally a huge expense. Simon explains: “The glass manufacture is Stölzle in Yorkshire. Normally bottles are a big expense, but again we had the recession, and the company was keen to keep the kilns working, so we agreed we could have a smaller volumes and pay for the glass on a draw-down basis. It was a very important moment.”



Grossmith original perfume formula books and Bacarat bottle design sketches

The product

When Simon searched on eBay for vintage Grossmith product, the three scents that kept turning up were Phul-Nana, Shem-el-Nessim and Hasu-no-Hana. The Brookes focused on these three and decided that quality of ingredients should drive the revival, to ensure a luxury product.

“They were classics then and they’d survived for years. There seemed no reason for them to change. In terms of our foundations, it was important we stuck faithfully to the past. It doesn’t mean we always will, but they were among the finest perfumes in the world. We would have failed if we had gone downmarket reproducing them.”

The Brookes briefed Robertet to use the best-quality ingredients, natural where possible, an unusual brief for the house in a climate where value and bottom-line cost usually drive the formula. “We gave Robertet samples of the old scents we had acquired and the formula to reproduce something as beautiful and as close to the original as possible,” said Amanda. “The first attempts we found disappointing, but we didn’t know if we were allowed to say that or not! Roja Dove then explained

that it's an interchange, a constructive process where you have to criticise and challenge."

With the original formula book stuffed full of vintage scents, the Brookes have the potential to expand.

Simon explains: "We have a lot of formulation we can draw on, many unknown to the perfume-loving world, but we've also got some latitude. We will innovate in style. We don't contemplate moving into more toiletries products, but we do see, in time, an opportunity to develop the brands into the broader world of fashion.

"Our preoccupation for the next two years is to grow the capital base so we can do things in a more measured way, but we want to assess what the opportunity might be to develop the brand. It's too early for a time scale, but we're not in a rush."

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