



## After Making His Dollars in Scents, Steve Tanner Gives Back to GSU

Steve Tanner has what's probably the best-smelling warehouse in America. And while you can't buy any of what's inside, you've almost certainly got some of it in your house right now.

Tanner, a Georgia State alumnus, is the president and CEO of Marietta-based Arylessence Inc., a manufacturer of fragrances for everything from air fresheners to colognes to household cleaners. They've also branched out into composing flavors for sauces, beverages and even beauty products such as lip gloss. Tanner is quick to point out that he didn't get into the business on the chemical-engineering side – that was the domain of his brother, a product-development chemist who founded the company in 1977. But Tanner's business acumen helped grow the company from only 14 employees when he joined in 1986 to more than 100 today, supplying fragrances to more than 1,000 companies around the world.

Tanner credits Georgia State's business school with giving him the fundamentals for that expertise back in the 1960s. His appreciation is evident in his support for a wide variety of programs at the J. Mack Robinson College of Business.

### A Grateful Alum Shares the Wealth

Long before Tanner joined the fragrance industry – or, by his own admission, even knew there was such an industry in the first place – he needed a “solid foundation” in the business world. He found it at what was then called Georgia State College. “Understanding management and having the opportunity to apply those techniques, that was a big advantage,” he says. “You've got to know where you are from a financial standpoint. Simply being able to read your financials is extremely important, and a good basis to carry forward.”

Even before he began his career in business, though, Tanner says the management skills he learned at Georgia State proved beneficial over the course of a five-year Army career that took him as far away as Germany and Vietnam. That's what inspired him to endow the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) program at Georgia State.

*“I have a lot of respect both for the people who serve and for those who provide opportunities for our former service personnel,” he explains. “There are people who come to Georgia State and decide that maybe they want to go further in their military career, and there are a number of us alumni who want to support them in any way that we possibly can. And we're honored to be able to help them with their educational efforts outside what would normally be available to them.”*

In addition to the ROTC Endowment, Tanner has also made significant contributions to the GSU Fund for Business and the Herman J. Russell Center for Entrepreneurship. But his support isn't limited to dollars: He takes a hands-on role educating and mentoring business students both in the classroom and at his own company.

*"We have programs going with the Institute of International Business," he says, "and since we're looking at international markets for expansion, why not have some of these MBAs come in and help us, and we'll help them at the same time. We've done mentorships from time to time, and I enjoy going in and talking to classes about entrepreneurship, what you can accomplish with the right basic strategies, and how they can use the skills that they've learned to make a successful enterprise."*

### Creating Smells that Sell

Those skills are just as valuable in the fragrance industry as they are anywhere else in business. It's not as easy as mixing some chemicals together and coming up with something that smells passably like a rose – smell is perhaps the most complex of the five senses, and the one for which the human brain has the deepest memory. "It's the most powerful of our senses in that it has the power to take us back," Tanner explains. "It puts us in situations – maybe in your grandmother's house, maybe in your garden, maybe at the beach. In the moment, it has the ability to give you a total recall of the experience."

Appealing to a sense as complex as smell is a complex task itself. Tanner says Arylessence has more than 1,700 different substances on hand, in quantities ranging from tiny bottles to 55-gallon drums. Anywhere from 20 to 40 of those substances are mixed to create a single specific fragrance. None of those fragrance formulas, however, are patentable. "It's all trade secrets and confidential information," Tanner says with a grin. "There's no patent on the Coca-Cola formula, so they have to keep all of that a secret, and we do too."

Once Tanner's chemists come up with a winning formula, though, they can't just pat each other on the back and call it a day. Fragrances are just as subject to changing trends as the fashion and home decor industries to which they're closely tied.

"If something's a certain color, your expectation is it should smell a certain way," Tanner explains. "If the popular color is turquoise blue, for example, then you have an expectation of fresh air, water, things of that nature. If it's a deep natural green shade, it's going to be herbs, grass or evergreens or things like that. If it's red, only certain things are acceptable, and so on. But if turquoise blue is the trend for a candle, then we need to have that candle smell like summer air or coastal waters or something that truly relates to the color – it can't smell like a lemon or it won't create a connection with the consumer."

*"When someone's pushing their cart down the aisle at the grocery store, they have an instant to make a decision on a fragranced product. People do it all the time – they give it the old sniff test. If we've done our job right, it goes in the cart. If we haven't, they'll put it back."*

For that reason, Arylessence has on hand both five professional perfumers – out of fewer than a thousand worldwide – and five full-time marketers working 18 months to two years ahead to determine what the prevailing trends will be. It's a competitive industry, and one Tanner never expected to be in when he first entered the world of business. But he says he's proud to be part of a company that, in its own way, can make a meaningful difference in quality of life.

*"That's the beauty of what we do – we work to make things more pleasant and memorable than they might be otherwise," Tanner says. "Our creations go beyond consumer products too. With a lot of things in life, the experiences are not good – let's take an assisted living facility or an oncology floor in a hospital or something like that. If you create something that can take away from the base odors that might be there, and truly make someone feel more comfortable, then you've really accomplished something to be proud of."*