

How GOOD is your brand name?

GOOGLE...
THAT IS A STUPID
NAME FOR A COMPANY



BEAKBANE
Brand Strategies & Communications

Tips on picking names that can grow into strong brands.

Sometimes our agency is asked to develop marketing programs to increase the sales of a newly created product or an emerging company and, while the offering itself has potential, the name they have picked is an impediment. If the original creators of the name had made a better choice, we think to ourselves, the task of building the brand would be a lot easier.

Picking an effective name is a critical step in the development of a successful business. Why do managers often pick bad names?

Coming up with excellent names requires creativity, which is hard work and difficult, but that is not the main challenge. Even when there are viable names to pick from managers often make bad choices because intuition and common sense are poor guides. In most situations managers can rely on gut feel and experience to illuminate decisions, however, when choosing brand names other approaches are necessary.

Why you should ignore common sense

It is an unavoidable fact about human psychology that when we hear a word it has immediate associations. Existing words have established associations. So when you see a word like “salmon”, in your mind’s eye you see a fish in a river, a serving of food on a plate or whatever. And your associations are linked with degrees of liking or disliking. Similarly, when the mind encounters a newly coined word it immediately searches for associated feelings. These feelings are impossible to ignore and become the dominant force in making decisions about the word, however, they are absolutely not the most critical factor when selecting a name.

When someone hears a brand name how does it make them feel? That is a pivotal question that marketers are always asking. A new name often leaves a void of feelings which is disconcerting. But the immediate associations, or lack thereof, is not critical because people learn new meanings quickly and without effort. After all, marketing is all about changing the meaning of names — that is how we create “brands.”

Why aesthetic associations of a new name are unimportant

Put yourself in the situation of never having heard a brand name before so it is just a word without the subsequently established meaning. “Gap” would mean a narrow opening or a discontinuity. “Caterpillar” would mean a slow crawling butterfly larva. “Blackberry” would be an often bitter soft fruit. Of course, now when one hears the name GAP one immediately pictures their distinctive logo and retail stores. Caterpillar is a brand of heavy equipment. And Blackberry, once upon a time, was the dominant smartphone with a name evocative of their mouse-sized keypad.



Contrary to common sense sometimes a brand benefits from having a name that is contrary to what is expected. “Urban Decay” is not a name like any other cosmetic, and deliberately so. Their first magazine ad asked, “Does Pink Make You Puke?,” a question that defined a contrarian stance that made them stand out enabling them to build a brand in under two decades, a brand for which L’Oreal paid \$300 million.

The reason why so many brand names are the names of people (Cadbury, Guinness, Mercedes-Benz, Disney, Gucci to list a few of the many) is not because the words themselves have intrinsically appropriate associations but because from the start they represented the founding entrepreneur and their values. No one would have said, “Gucci – that is a yucky name for a fashion business!”. Why not? Because it would have been insulting. Indeed, Guinness would be a fine name for a chocolate bar and Cadbury a dark beer that makes you strong.

One cannot entirely discount pre-existing associations and the aesthetics of a name. It helps if the name looks good in the context in which it will be used. Also, multinational corporations need to avoid names that mean something rude in a foreign tongue.

However, three other factors are vastly more important than pre-existing associations. One needs to evaluate whether the name is:

- 1. Talkable & memorable?
 - 2. Ownable & findable?
 - 3. Strategic?
-

The name has to be talkable and memorable

The first question you should ask is, is the name easy to say and easy to spell? If the name is long with multiple syllables, a tongue twister or has an unexpected spelling then it will be less likely to stick. Prostokvashino is the dominant dairy brand in Russia – it means Buttermilk Village – but try saying it. English speakers are unlikely to learn the name and mention it in their conversation.

Shorter names and those that play off familiar phonetic patterns are easier to remember and say. Also, it helps if the name is reminiscent of things that are real, physical or connote action. Avoid names that are apparently random. For instance, GoDaddy is easier to remember than IOSN.



The phonetics of a name are critical. For deep neurophysiological reasons names that have explosive first syllables (Coke, McDonalds) are easier to remember. The reason is that when we say names like these, unbeknownst to us, the muscles in four dispersed parts of the body; the chest, larynx, tongue and lips perform a dance of microsecond coordination. When we say the name, more areas of our brain, including the cortex and cerebellum, participate and can later help recall the name. A word like “amah” is softer and rolls from the chest and, as a result, it is unlikely you know what it means or will be able to remember it a few minutes from now.

The way in which phonemes sound evoke feelings. The word “Nike” doesn’t mean anything but, nonetheless, it sounds trim and fast. And how the phonemes combine together is significant. Those with a poetic beat are easier to say and more appealing (like Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola).

The name needs to be ownable and findable

Once you have a list of potential names you need to check that they are not already registered as a trademark.

Start by checking prior usage by typing in lots of slight variations of the word in Google. Trademarks can be checked by searching government databases. The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO) website is here <http://tess2.uspto.gov>. The Canadian Trade-Marks database is here <http://www.cira.ca/>. The Internet reaches across

borders so check availability in jurisdictions beyond the ones you plan on entering. If the name is unavailable in other jurisdictions it will reduce the potential upside value of the brand. If you find other companies using the name for similar products and services drop it from your list of contenders.

Check on the availability of the URL. Find names where the web address is clean and short and with a root domain (.com, .org, .edu, .ca, etc.) that is appropriate for your business.

Once you have checked whether the name is ownable it is an advantage if the name is easy to find. Unique words win out over descriptive or generic names. If you were launching a company that made internet routers a name like “Router Technologies” or “FastNet” are at first encounter more appealing because they help answer the question, “What does your company do?”. However, “router technologies” is a phrase used in everyday communication and when searched on Google gets over 14 million results.

When Cisco was named the word was virtually meaningless. A small town in California and a species of fish share the name, and yet it is easy to say, easy to spell, memorable, ownable, findable and therefore an excellent choice.

Remember, just because you can trademark a phrase does not mean that you can defend the trademark. If others can show prior usage it is difficult to stop them using the words.

The name needs to be strategic

When you are evaluating a name take into account that it will often be used in context. Often it can appear as a logo, which can be used to help aid pronunciation and memorability, or it will appear on the product itself making it unnecessary to explain what it is. Angry Birds is an app that appears on devices and application marketplaces along with the logo that make it self-explanatory.

When generating a new name it is helpful to be clear on the strategy that will be employed to differentiate the product from competitors'. You need to define the intended target and the personality that will help set the brand apart and communicate its advantages.

Most businesses would not use a word like FCUK, but for the UK based fashion label French Connection, the name fits with their youthful, provocative image.

When Apple chose the name iPad many criticized it because it sounded like a feminine hygiene product. However, it made sense strategically as it was a natural extension of the already wildly successful iPod and iPhone, plus it fitted Apple's “just watch us” contrarianism and level of



confidence. These names are now part of our everyday lexicon proving the point that it is easier to change the meaning of a name than overcome the deficiencies of a name that is hard to say, hard to spell, hard to remember or difficult to defend.

Conclusion

Imagine you were launching a search engine in 1998. Would you pick a zany coined name like Google? It is a misspelling of googol (1 followed by 100 zeros) and at the time it was



unique and therefore ownable and easily findable. Most executives would have picked a safer name that helps explain what a search engine is — a name like “Smart Search” or “Find Solutions”. How valuable do you think their company would be now in comparison to Google?

A business model which has an amazing advantages and a strong management team but a poor name will almost certainly falter in the long run. Once a business has commenced using a name it is expensive and risky to change it. Therefore, pick a strong name at the start.

If you need help developing a sound name, or you have one that you need to promote, please contact us.

<http://www.beakbane.com/contact/>

Resources:

Interbrand, list of global brands with estimates of their value:

<http://www.interbrand.com/en/best-global-brands/2013/Best-Global-Brands-2013-Brand-View.aspx>

United States Trade-Marks database:

<http://tess2.uspto.gov>

The Canadian Trade-Marks database:

<http://www.cipo.ic.gc.ca/app/opic-cipo/trdmrks/srch/>

Search of domain name ownership through Internic:

<http://www.internic.net/whois.html>

Search for .ca domain names:

<http://www.cira.ca/>