

Taking Names:

“Can I interest you in a 207XZ?” Hello?

Betsy Caszatt
Adfinity Marketing Group
info@adfinitymarketing.com

It may be Project QAQ-450² in-house. Lock the doors and keep it there. Out in the world, it'll be toast. When customers can't remember a product name, attach a mind-picture to it, or even pronounce it, they're not likely to be talking about it either.

Of course, we can all name the exceptions. Ever hear of Xerox? But it takes serious advertising dollars to turn a less-than-familiar collection of letters into an industry colossus. Consider the resources Nike expended to teach the world's runners that it didn't rhyme with “hike.”

For both business-to-business and consumer marketers, a good product name is like a mover on the sales team; the alpha-mover, in fact. Your attitude, personality and differentiation are fronted by it. In food inspection, *Sorter Model 3000-A* wouldn't say “hi-tech vision” the way *Optyx*[®] does. And a generic juice is hard pressed to cut it in the cooler beside *Tropical Tornado*[®], *Baha*[®] *Red* or *Naked*[®].

Equipment manufacturers, particularly, have long carried the torch for letter-number conventions because they give order to numerous permutations. Michael Mace, however, a strategist with Rubicon Consulting, says, “Every company that has half a brain somewhere in its marketing department wants to use real names for its products rather than numbers. Names are easier to communicate, and easier for customers to remember.”

So Much to Say, So Little Space...

Coming up with a concise, powerful, trademarkable name is being handed more and more to linguistic specialists, market researchers and psychographic mappers, not to mention creative professionals who live for the “aha moment.” Landing on a winning name – whether straightforward, clever, fun to say or a buzz to the tongue (a high-scoring communication attribute, by the way) – is both science and art.

Gurus will tell you there are, more or less, four species of names: **descriptives** (*Martha Stewart Cooking*, for example); **cooked-up** (*Zonkers*, *Fruitopia*); **experience reminders** (*Cracker Barrel*); and **attitude positioners** (*Green Giant*, *Rock Star*). As parameters go, these aren't etched in

stone. Personally, I find that cooked up names can leak over into “experience” territory or exhibit a whole lot of ‘tude. Experts tend to steer companies to name the desired positioning (a mind picture) for a product rather than simply describe its function.

All the Good Ones are Taken...

A typical stumbling block is that there are only so many words in the English language (ones that don’t mean something startling in French or Chinese). Rivkin & Associates, publishers of the *Naming Newsletter*, conducted a survey showing 3,000 new trademark applications are added every week to the nearly 4 million already on file. “A new name has to hit the trifecta,” notes founder, Steve Rivkin. “It has to be available, it has to be distinctive, and it has to be memorable.”

Scarifying math aside, with focused thinking and strategy, there are still unique, on-target names to be mined. My colleagues and I have learned not to break out the champagne too early in the brainstorming though. It’s incumbent to do a measure of due-diligence from the beginning to confirm that a front-runner – so brainy, original and promising – hasn’t already been trademarked by an outfit in Escondido. We check the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office’s online database and gather what I call “Surf Reports” from the Internet for any potential conflicts. Client companies will unleash their legal departments on the final choice before stepping out in public.

Whether working internally or with consultants, keep these touchstones in view. A name should:

- plant your stake in the market (you’re going to dominate the category, right?)
- demonstrate that you’re different (originality is a hot property)
- support your brand positioning (technological? emotional? edgy? healthful?)
- be easy (say it out loud; does it get tangled in the teeth? could it be misconstrued? can anybody spell it?)
- have legs – (will it survive time and intercontinental use?)

And the winner of the last word goes to *Patents, Copyrights & Trademarks for Dummies*: “Holding a public or employee contest to coin a name makes as much sense as practicing medicine by popular vote. It’s haphazard at best. Have a company picnic instead.”

And that’s the game of the name. It beats herding numbers every time.

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