



What's In A Name?

A Lot When It Comes To Brands, Profits And Overall Corporate Success

WHY IS IT THAT sales professionals, seldom at a loss of words in pursuing an order, so often seem unable to find the right ones when it comes to naming their businesses?

Few distributors—or suppliers, for that matter—would christen their businesses “We’re Just Like Everyone Else Promotional Products Co.” But that’s what the nameplates of so many firms seem to be saying.

PLAYING THE NAME GAME

Your company name is your brand. Most companies want their brands to differentiate their firms from the competition. Do this and you have a better chance to match former soda pop baron Roberto Goizueta’s boast, which was essentially: *Take everything away and just leave me the Coca-Cola trademark; I’ll still be able to raise billions.* Hardly an exaggeration since the physical assets of Coke amount

to about \$24.5 billion—but the company’s brand value is estimated at a whopping \$70 billion. Your firm’s corresponding figures may be slightly less, but you get the picture.

Despite the fixation on creativity, firms in advertising and marketing don’t seem to show any more imagination in naming than those in other industries. Consider these sparkling appellations of ad agency holding companies: Interpublic, Omnicom, WPP Group. Leave you bedazzled, don’t they?

“Well,” says Lisa Tollner, president of Cintara Corp., “That’s because ad agencies tend to be managed by financial people focused on big media budgets not by creatives who may be more attentive to how they’re expressing their own brand.” Cintara, based in San Jose, California, is in the naming business—a growing industry because so many businesses are having trouble finding the right words. >>

BY RICK EBEL

THE NAME-IT-AFTER-ME PRACTICE

Promotional products firms should pay more attention to naming, contends Hal Meyer, CEO of Naming Systems in Wakefield, Rhode Island. Since so many distributors operate at a transactional level, they need something in a name that distinguishes them from their competition. And this need for differentiation applies also to branding promotions and suppliers' products.

For many distributors, differentiation means simply posting the owner's name on the door. About 30 percent of distributorships are named after founders, either exactly or in a derivative form, including initials or the truncated combinations known as portmanteaus.

"We call those functional or descriptive names, which in general tend to have little value in all industries, although there are exceptions where they are appropriate," explains Jay Jurisich, co-founder and creative direction of San Francisco-based Igor International. "With so many companies doing this, you completely disappear."

These eponymous nameplates, the ones bearing the founder's moniker, are often ego-driven. That's understandable. *My money, sweat*

and risk, my name on the marquee. An ancient tradition in much of the world, the name-after-me practice is not likely to disappear. But framing the company name in terms of your customer's needs is better according to Jurisich. "If your company is named after you, then you're automatically sending a message saying this business is all about us."

And if you're involved in an ownership change such as adding or dropping a partner, think about all the signage and letterheads that need to be changed.

AAALPHABET SOUP

Another familiar naming convention is to get your company the best seating at the front of the yellow pages by prefacing the name with the letter A—or maybe two or three As for good measure.

Hackneyed as the practice may be, Hal Meyer doesn't dismiss alphabet primacy as lacking merit. "If you have a good name that happens to start with an A, this could bump it up to a great name," he claims. "But if you have a lousy name and it is prefixed with an A, you're not going to save it. Phone and directory advertising are only part of the marketing mix."

Case in point: Miningco.com was a popular website reference on various subjects but, says Meyer, "management recognized they never really got the branding right." The new name, About.com, denoted the nature of the business, was shorter and easier to spell, and advanced the alphabetic positioning from M to A. The website advanced too—from around No. 80 to No. 8 in its category in terms of hits. "It's probably one of the most successful rebrandings ever," opines Meyer.

DESCRIPTIVE VERSUS SYMBOLIC

How important is it that the name state or denote the nature of

A Naming Taxonomy

Different types of names serve different purposes.

Functional/Descriptive Names. Functional names are purely descriptive of what a company or product does.

Invented Names. There are two kinds of invented, as in made-up, names: those that are built upon Greek or Latin roots, and those poetic constructions that are based on rhythm and the experience of saying them.

Experiential Names. Experiential names offer a direct connection to something real, to a part of direct human experience.

Evocative Names. These names are designed to evoke the positioning of a company or product rather than the goods and services or the experience of the goods or services.

—Courtesy of Igor International

the business? Does “promotional products” have to be in there somewhere?

Descriptive names are effective, but they often aren’t very creative, says Tollner. If a balance can’t be achieved, she suggests leaning less to descriptive names and instead to ones that are metaphorical or symbolic.

If you can find the right word or combination of them, you can convey the connecting image. With a name like FITS (UPIC: FIT00001), the Lenexa, Kansas-based supplier of uniforms has nicely encapsulated its product line. And Justin Case (UPIC: justinc), in Markham, Ontario, Canada, connotes that its

with a tag line such as, “Technology that makes your life easier.”

Since most distributors focus on a single business activity—promotional products—they don’t need ampersands to connect a stable of dissimilar enterprises like Bob Newhart’s comical Alice B. Ferguson Airline & Window Sash Co. Suppliers, however, often have a diversity of product types, and this presents an identity issue. But this can easily be addressed with the line name. The IRIS Companies (UPIC: IRISLTD) in Fleetwood, Pennsylvania, furnishes an example. IRIS (for Image Recording &

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line of first-aid and automobile safety kits are nice to have around—just in case.

It took all of about 10 minutes in 1984 to come up with a name for Phoenix-based distributor Commotion Promotions (UPIC: IDEASTAR), according to Karen Kravitz. She credits the name to her husband and partner, Ken. “It was his idea,” she declares. “We kind of make a little bit of fuss. We’ve always had a lot of energy, so I think that’s what we were trying to convey: this high level of energy, excitement about promotional pieces and enthusiasm about really being creative.”

The commotion connotation wasn’t lost on business prospects. “This really did help us get in the door with clients and generate that excitement,” reports Kravitz.

Innovative companies, Tollner observes, tend to pick names that are creative and then use tag lines to describe what they do. She elaborates: “Let’s say your company name is Breeze—just a generic word. Let’s say your products are all about making things easy and effortless, maybe because they are based on technology. You really want to leverage the concept of ease and the convenience and comfort factors for your customer. Do that and you could pair your company name, Breeze,

Identification Systems) may be cryptic, but the supplier’s line name, Attachmentville, seems to be an apt descriptor for the badge holders, pet leashes and neck lanyards the company sells through distributors.

MERGING COMPANIES, MERGING WORDS

Merger mania has spurred much of the demand for naming services. When two large West Coast distributors, Wood Associates and Made to Order, linked up, Cintara was called upon to find a name for the new company. After gaining input from management of the consolidating companies, Cintara concentrated on finding the right word to describe an organization in the business of brand building. Tollner and her associates proposed juxtaposing the verb *brand*, meaning “to make a mark or establish ownership” with *via*, from the Latin word for “way.” The result was Brandvia (UPIC: brandvia).

When the right word doesn’t pop up, some companies coin their own. Igor shies away from these neologisms, and Jurisich says he can think of only a few good ones, among them Kodak and Xerox. “They were done many years ago when there were fewer names, making them quite unique. Now so many people do this that they aren’t exceptional,” he says. >>

Made-up names have no positives or negatives; they are just neutral, Jurisich avers. "One way to get a made-up name to work for you," he explains, "is to make sure it at least has a poetic sound, such as Oreo, or plays off known words or concepts, as Google does."

In making naming recommendations, Jurisich says his company looks for words with cultural resonance—"the most conscious and unconscious collective myth, story or history behind them." This gives you a head start on branding it in people's heads, whereas neologisms are a blank slate "and you have to

an unusual name that signified "being different." The result was Zebra Marketing Corp. (UPIC: ZEBRAMC), which has "When creativity counts" as one of its tag lines.

Zebra? "Well, there's a medical term," Padawer explains. "When scientists at St. Jude's Hospital or other research hospitals are looking under a microscope and they see something that shouldn't be there, or something that is an anomaly, they call it a zebra."

Padawer thinks the name, like the conspicuously striped African horse it evokes, will be a durable one, not to mention easily

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start from scratch to get people to remember," he says.

But what about Jurisich's firm, Igor— isn't naming it after Frankenstein's oddball assistant a little, well, quirky? Sure, the company co-founder admits, and some businesses consider names like this to be a negative.

Perceived negativity, however, doesn't faze the namers at Igor. Actually, negativity is what gives a name life, Jurisich contends, and consumers never process those negatives. He cites retailer Banana Republic. "It's one gross negative, a slam at small, third-world countries. There's nothing positive about it. Yet, no consumer ever thinks this when they step in the storefront."

Don't worry about perceived negatives being taken out of context. Jurisich insists names are always in context. "And in a website or an ad," he says, "it's never in the abstract. This context allows you to frame the brand positioning." He suggests that Igor, for example, could play off its monster-image association in advertising using tag lines such as "no job too horrifying" or "a few spare parts in a good storm."

When Ron Padawer and Laura Forbes merged their distributorships in 2000, they held a contest and challenged employees of the Memphis, Tennessee-based firm to create

remembered. "We could have picked something like Out of the Box, but that's a trend; it'll be here today and gone tomorrow."

TREND OFFEND

Name durability is a consideration, because naming trends change rather quickly. Whimsical, made-up names, which branding authority David Aaker calls the "empty vase" or "blank canvas" approach, were popular during the 1990s, because these random-association handles could mean whatever companies chose them to mean. Such flexibility is valuable for companies spreading into non-related businesses. "But," writes Alex Frankel in *Business 2.0* magazine, "the problem with these meaningless names became clear as the number of companies adopting them grew. As more and more Accentures and Covisints dotted the landscape, it became harder for consumers to keep track of the differences between them."

Hence, the current trend: real-word names that are simple, easy to spell and remember. Look no further than to the airlines. Today, people are flying carriers called Ted, Song and JetBlue.

If you insist on something faddish, Naming Systems' Meyer advises, "Try to start a fad so you're the standard bearer." He cites

eBay. Being among the first out of the gate helped the online fixture make good, but most of the e-prefix copycats didn't survive.

In the search for individuality, there is a danger in overcompensating. The desire to avoid pedestrian clichés often produces over-the-top or pretentiously cutesy names. “You don't want your company name to be a joke,” cautions Meyer. “You want people to take it seriously, do business with you and speak highly of you. If it's too cutesy, it's not going to advance this objective.”

He acknowledges that, when created with some restraint, cutesy can work for you, and he points to Krispy Kreme. Affected as the name may be, the company sells a lot of doughnuts.

Then there's Mickey Mouse—the sort-of-cute cartoon that works well for Disney in entertainment. But it probably wouldn't work for a firm in the investment business. Tailor the name to the product or service, Meyer advises. “If it's a mismatch, you're going to have problems.”

MARKS OF DISTINCTION

In addition to the name, another aspect of corporate branding is the trademark. The importance organizations attach to their marks is not lost on promotional products companies. Imprint the client's mark out of register or with the wrong PMS color, and you're going to hear about it. Some promotional products firms have their own marks—after all, they are in the logo business. But many do not. Nevertheless, few will dispute the value of a distinctive trademark.

Just as name choices can be ego-driven, trademarks can also indicate self-absorbed companies that focus on No. 1—when No. 1 isn't the customer.

Jurisich singles out the financial industry “where you'll see, alongside the company name, the images of a skyscraper with maybe a view from the boardroom of the city beyond, meant to show how big they are.” Other ubiquitous insignias are globes, maps, compasses. “One we often see in the advertising industry,” he declares, “is a coffee mug or

a coffee pot meant to show that they're all charged up and on the ball.”

At Commotion Promotions, management never gave much thought about adopting a logo. It took an experience with which distributors are all too familiar. The distributor invested a long stretch of time and talent into developing a campaign for a prospective client, after receiving assurance that the execution would not go out for bidding. So, prospects never lie? When this one did, Kravitz says she was not only “mortified” but also miffed at being dissed like a commodities vendor.

Her father had some advice. Since she considered her organization to be a creative house—attested to by an impressive array of PPAI Golden Pyramid awards—she needed to project the company's work as art. He also recommended that she convey the idea that anybody can buy pricey canvas, paint and brushes but not everybody can use them like Picasso, Rembrandt or Degas.

“From that moment, we developed an entire marketing campaign for ourselves, and we use the tag line ‘The Art of Promotion.’ Our logo has a paint brush, kind of like a Disneyland, sparkling concept thing,” Kravitz declares.

Commotion Promotions applies its art-gallery theme to its website and print collateral. On first appointments, clients are given mini-painting kits to express the pitch, “Let us paint you a picture of who we are.”

With the graphic-design resources at their disposal, promotional products firms should be able to devise distinctive marks, registered or not, without breaking the bank. But do the research; make sure the mark is yours and yours alone. A number of years ago, NBC decided to bag the peacock. After spending millions to develop a replacement featuring the letter N, the red-faced network retracted it. Trademark infringement! cried the Nebraska public broadcasting system which earlier had, for a fraction of what NBC spent, created a similar design.

TAG—YOUR THEME IS NOT IT

Picking a stand-out name would seem to be a congruous activity for firms engaged >>

in creating tag lines for clients' advertising and promotion campaigns. Perhaps the biggest difference is that company names are expected to stay aloft for awhile. Tag lines and campaign branding don't need all that hang time, although some are so successful they have earned exceptional longevity. Campbell's Soup has been "M'm! M'm! Good!" since 1935. Coffee drinkers first learned that Maxwell House is "Good to the last drop" in 1915.

In looking for a promotional products campaign theme or slogan, the answer to "What do we call this thing?" is often suggested by the merchandise. 'Fess up—who hasn't advised a client: *Let's go with the box cutter, and along with your name we'll silk-screen "A cut above the rest."* The ease in which relevant copy can be linked to the merchandise is one of the strengths of the medium. The result may not be original, but it works.

Twelve Commandments Of Naming

Thou shalt not overlook these important points.

1. Think Big. Even if you are planning a local business, plan for your future, which can include national and global expansion.
2. Avoid "Me Too." The point of marketing is to stand out and be different. Copycat schemes don't deliver.
3. Keep it simple.
4. Keep it memorable.
5. All things being equal, an alphabetically desirable name helps—a lot.
6. Watch out for undesirable connotations, both in English and other languages.
7. Watch out for trademarks that belong to other entities.
8. Try to connote what you do or offer as well as the nature of your product/service.
9. Get outside viewpoints—the more good minds, the better.
10. Allow yourself the possibility of imperfection, and consider the opinions of consumers and focus groups. Allow yourself the freedom and right to re-name or replace obsolete names.
11. Own the dot-com extension of the name.
12. Don't underestimate the value of a good name!

—Courtesy of Hal Meyer, CEO of Naming Systems

Keep in mind, however, that campaigns designed to generate enthusiasm can struggle if the creativity behind them is shopworn. Who hasn't dredged for campaign themes and tag lines in ponds like sporting events and movie titles? Hence, all those promotions tagged "Go for the Gold," "Back to the Future" or "Mission Impossible." Obviously, a lot of distributors have seen the same flicks.

Commenting on theme tag-line naming, Jurisich observes: "In industry after industry, 90 percent of the companies are saying the same things to the same people in the same way. The first thing we do in any project is map out the names, tag lines and primary messaging of all the competitors to show the client where everybody is. These are all areas where we don't want to go because everyone has already done it, and you'll just disappear."

This is the last thing suppliers want for the new products they introduce to distributors. Names can enhance marketability, and often the right name does come along.

Sometimes it pays to listen to mom. A business operated by Tom Blundell's folks marketed a stuffed doll that never became a hot seller. In 1979, Blundell's supplier firm, Bipo Inc., Oklahoma City, introduced a fuzzy pompon character to the promotional products industry. "What do we call this thing?" wondered Blundell. His mother suggested resurrecting the name of the doll. Blundell recalls, "It looks like a little person. You have the hands and the feet and you squash the body out of it. We thought, well, why not?"

Thus one of the best sellers of that year and many more to come was launched—the Weepul. Blundell figured the little-people stick-on would only be a flash in the pan, "but it just got a life to it, and it still isn't ready to die."

MAKING A NAME CHANGE

Unless reformulated, products usually die with the same name with which they were christened. Should the company name also be immutable? You may be comfortable with your business' long-standing name and confident that your customers recognize it. So why change?

Tollner says that depends on what you think the name change would bring to your company's value. She claims 50 percent of her clients are firms with established names. "What happens," she explains, "is their market or capabilities have changed, or there are major shifts in the direction the new leadership is taking the company."

Tradition is an obstacle many business owners can't get past, even when to do so is in their own best interests. The typical status quo defense: *We've had this name 50 years. Why should we change?*

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"People say this all the time," reports Meyer. "The biggest regret most of these companies have, once they change names, is they didn't do it sooner."

Suppose the day comes when you feel the need to embark on a name search. What do you do—gather some of your colleagues and ask them to submit lists of their top 10?

Not surprisingly, naming professionals tend to discourage this. "A lot of companies think naming is a pretty casual thing that almost any middle manager can do. A lot of marketing flops show this is not the case," contends Meyer. In-house naming searches can experience a number of problems, among them "political logjams" caused by factions with contending preferences. "Sometimes the name that has the most merit doesn't get picked," he says.

Naming agencies, Tollner explains, use methods that permit them to explore a broad-

er, more diverse range of possibilities. Many naming agencies have their own versions of the three-step process Cintara uses:

- Research. Input is solicited from client management to ascertain their vision of the organization and the primary impressions they want to convey.
- Name generation. Here naming teams examine perhaps thousands of words and word roots, which are not necessarily restricted to English.
- Trademark research.

There is also naming software on the market that enables do-it-yourselfers to crank out name possibilities to their heart's content. But this option doesn't impress Meyer. "You can get a lot of stones" he says, but that doesn't help you "separate the glass from the diamonds."

If asked, naming agencies may differ as to the kind of handle they would recommend for

your company, but there are some precepts upon which most would agree:

- Short is better than long.
- Easy to spell is essential.
- Memorability versus the head scratcher is a no-brainer.
- Clarity beats ambiguity.
- Relevance is not bad.
- A one-of-a-kind trumps me-too every time.

Tollner adds a couple of guidelines for the process. Do the legal research, she advises. Naming professionals or trademark attorneys can be invaluable here. One thing more: keep an open mind, she urges, and have the courage to break new ground. **PPB**

Rick Ebel, former marketing communications director for PPAI, is principal of Glenrich Business Studies, a business research and writing firm in Corvallis, Oregon.