

What defines a successful name?

By The Naming Group, April 2011

At The Naming Group, we focus on one thing, and one thing only. That's creating strongly communicative, strategically grounded brand names. It's that specialized expertise that makes us a magnet for questions about names. What makes a good one? How do we do it? Does a name really matter? The answer to all three questions is simple: it's complicated. And we do not dare suggest that we have an airtight answer that holds up in every scenario for every brand in every market. Virgin would've debunked it years ago. But there are certain things we can assert about the importance of a name. And it informs everything we do.

EVERY NAME IS AN OPPORTUNITY

With a sea of products constantly flooding the consumer mindset, names serve as the buoys that keep brands visible at the surface. They are the shortest, most direct route to brand recognition and therefore – when effectively communicative – embody the emotional and functional personas of the product or company they define.

The greatest opportunity is not establishing likability or even memorability, though both can add great value to a brand's success. Rather, it's the capacity of a name to serve a strategically advantageous function that determines how successful it is. While empty vessel names (names which impart no semantic relevance to the typical consumer) have proven successful time and time again – Apple, Starbucks, Sony, etc. – they succeed in their ability to provide their brands with a blank slate on which to shape the meaningful associations consumers make with the names. In these circumstances the onus is fully on the brand leaders to assist consumers in creating this meaning.

Apple is one of the most powerfully evocative and recognizable consumer brands in this country, though it is virtually devoid of semantic relevance to the company and products it defines. Priming, exposure, single-minded commitment to innovation, and repeatedly successful product launches are what made Apple such a dynamic brand. Its name does succeed in being simple, memorable, and accessible, and the brand has taken great care in pursuing an identity of clean, intelligent simplicity – ideas that align nicely with the Apple name. But these associations were not automatic, not pre-loaded into the name from day one.

But building that meaning into a brand takes time, money, and access to consumers that isn't always feasible – especially in a competitive space or with limited marketing budget.

Built-in challenges may not be a brand's death sentence, but they are surely a setback. A far more intelligent approach is to realize the inherent opportunity in every name to (a) avoid those

"Does the name elicit a reaction? Does it communicate something?" asks Nina Beckhardt, president and creative director of The Naming Group. "I look at the name as a communication platform where it tells people what you do, or in the case of tech companies, sparks interest."

From "[Are All the Good Tech-Company Names Taken?](#)"
CNN.com – October 5, 2010

built-in setbacks, and – more importantly – (b) *create* built-in advantages, constructing a brand on a strong foundation from the start.

When thinking about naming, it's important to distinguish great names from great brands. While they often go hand in hand, they are not inseparably linked. There are great brands that have overcome challenging names, and there are great names that have defined unsuccessful brands.

A great name does more than serve as a blank slate. It adds value to the brand. It makes the most of its opportunity to serve any number of benefits, such as...

Providing a memorable mnemonic to keep a brand top-of-mind (Yahoo!, Google)
Crystallizing a unique or differentiating positioning strategy (Visa, Progressive)
Forging an emotional connection with consumers (Huggies, Kiss My Face)
Encapsulating descriptive functional benefit (Softsoap, Silk)
Suggesting an experiential or emotional benefit (Jaguar, Dove)
Creating a term that defines a category (iPod, TiVo...or Dumpster)

A great name can do any or all of these things, leaving less need to explain, prove, or defend the meaning of a brand. That's the opportunity given to every brand – not a mandatory, but a chance to build advantage into its most basic identity.

WHEN THINGS GO TERRIBLY WRONG

The opposite of a great name is a bad name. A bad name is bad because it actively creates a distraction – actually *adding* communication challenges to the marketing of a brand. This would constitute a name that offends, confuses, misleads, can't be owned, is impossible to say or spell, or measurably causes monetary damage to the brand it defines. These tend to be visibly apparent, newsmaking, and potentially disastrous. And given the toll a bad name can take on a brand, careful planning and precaution tends to be taken to avoid them. HTC recently made news with the need to change their ChaCha brand name to "ChaChaCha" in Spanish markets – averting an unintentionally offensive, and surely distracting, connotation.☹ This would have been a "bad" name as no amount of marketing assistance could overcome an unavoidably negative association – a concrete roadblock to success.

"If your marketing dollars are limited, opt for a more descriptive or suggestive name," says Nina Beckhardt, president and creative director of The Naming Group LLC in New York

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In the end, the most successful names are the ones that are easy to say and spell, and summon an image or meaning that can last as the business grows, the experts say. Once you've narrowed the field, make sure to test the candidates out in a real-life setting. Ms. Beckhardt suggests pretending to answer the phone using the name, and typing it as a url. "HomesExchange.com could be HomeSexChange.com," she warns. "Take those precautions and get comfortable with it because you'll have to live with it for a long time."

From "And Now, The Tricky Part: Naming Your Business"
Wall Street Journal – June 29, 2010

The Naming Group applies rigorous linguistic and cultural screenings to every name we present – serving to mitigate any risk of a name that will pose such challenge in any market where it will ultimately live. Deep trademark and common law screenings protect against competitive confusion or challenge to a mark's ownability. And consumer testing can provide a further level of comfort that a name will not stand in the way of a brand's success.

These steps should be mandatory of every naming process, and, when done correctly, they can effectively prevent a bad name from being chosen.

THE MOST COMMON RISK

It is in the space between the **great** name and the **bad** name that the real risk lies. It's the risk of opportunity cost – or, more specifically, the cost of missing opportunities for a name to work harder, speak clearer, and create more value.

Opportunity cost is difficult to pinpoint and impossible to calculate. It is not disastrous, and it may even be hard to prove any missed opportunity at all. It's definitely not offensive, because it's not even memorable. It is bland. Forgettable. Generic. Blends in. Sounds like every other name. And most importantly, it doesn't capture what makes the brand different or better.

There's a lot of risk in being neutral, because it represents the possibility of lacking a well-defined identity – and opens the door for competitors to speak more loudly or more clearly. The risk is specific to every brand and requires focused strategy to ensure that the name works to its fullest potential.

AVOIDING THE RISK OF A MISSED OPPORTUNITY

Every brand is (or should be) distinct – unique, ownable, and distinguishable from its competitors. A strong brand takes a strongly defined position that only it can defend, with its products, its voice, and its vision.

From "[The Best \(and Worst\) Business Names](#)" AOL Small Business – May 5, 2010

"Your name needs to captivate and form some connection with your customer -- preferably a strong emotional connection," says Nina Beckhardt, president of The Naming Group, based in New York.

The Best Business Names

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Accenture

"The new name for Andersen Consulting, derived from the phrase 'accent on the future,' captures the pioneering spirit of this leading IT consulting firm," Riley says. Beckhardt agrees, noting the name is "'strong, sellable and pronounceable."

Twitter

"It's a great name because it's a real word and it's fun to say," Beckhardt says. "It's also extensible in that people think of twittering like a bird, which ties in with their logo. It's a huge plus when you can reinforce your name visually or graphically through things like your logo or even the way the letters fit together."

The Worst Business Names

Dimdim

"This Web conferencing company used an adjective that means dark, lusterless, indistinct, or slow, as in intelligence, and repeated it," Beckhardt says. "Dimdim tries hard to defend their name as 'whimsical,' but in reality, it is such a bad name that it has turned people away from using it. Well, it turned us away. We considered using it in our business, but asking a client to 'Join us in a Dimdim meeting' just felt too unprofessional."

Amedisys

"What does that 'A' mean?" Beckhardt asks about this home health care and hospice provider. "Were they trying to come up first in an alphabetical list? The name is extremely sterile, technical, and unapproachable. The emotional impact is nonexistent. For a company based on providing human services, the tone of their name is certainly lacking in the human touch."...

As we've stated, every name is an opportunity, and that opportunity is specifically related to a brand's unique features. Names must therefore be evaluated with a similarly unique purpose – against specific, brand-relevant criteria.

Map the competition. A unique and distinguishing name is extremely effective at carving an ownably differentiated position amidst its competitors. In an industry of cold, technical brand personas, RIM entered, leveraging a visually evocative and uncommonly accessible icon in *Blackberry* to set its brand apart from the field. It's a great example of a name that intrinsically served a differentiating benefit – supportive of the fun (and compact) products they delivered so successfully.

Know the product. Many times, the name of a product precedes the strategic positioning that will ultimately define its marketing strategy. Force fitting a name to a positioning identity poses unneeded challenges. The name should support and reinforce what you hope to say with your brand. Going beyond descriptive benefits and capturing the intangible essence and persona of the brand – is it rebellious? Is it soothing? A name that contradicts the emotional experience of the brand is difficult to overcome.

Speak to the consumer. Obviously, different brands target very different consumers. A brand's name is an exceptionally convenient opportunity to position itself for the right crowd. Appeal to the right ears. And evoke the desired emotional response with the right consumers. Strategically naming with a tonal point of view can achieve this goal, but is often overlooked.

Look ahead. A hastily named brand may quickly date itself. Whether by hampering the brand's capacity to expand to other markets, by following a trend that ultimately becomes dated (1-800-PetMeds), or by capturing a persona that doesn't ultimately fit the brand. Naming should never be done in the absence of a strategic vision. Instead, it should support and advance the strategic vision.

As Marty Neumeier eloquently sums it up in his bestseller *Zag*,

"It's an ironic fact of marketing that a brand's most valuable asset is often the one given the least attention – its name. Maybe this is because new products, services, and companies are often christened before marketing teams are in place. Maybe it's because the founders believe it's their entrepreneurial privilege to name their own children. Or maybe it's because they aren't aware of the widening costs of a poorly named brand, or the streamlining effects of a well-named one."