

The Naming Group Whitepaper

Mind the Namescape

How product names should work together in branded harmony

Most companies go about naming their products with a product-specific strategic vision: developing names that are fit-to-concept, that resonate with the target audience mindset, that distinguish from the competition. Often overlooked, though, is one of the greatest opportunities that every name represents: its potential to align with and strengthen the meaning of the brand that created it. Naming is about more than labeling the offering itself, but its central role in defining the overarching brand.

Meet the **namescape**: a corporation's portfolio of named offerings and how they interrelate to support one another and the parent brand. It's greater than a brand architecture or nomenclature system in that it does not focus merely on structural organization of names or name conventions/taxonomy within a brand portfolio. That's part of it, but a namescape is also about the *collective* effect of a family of names: treating individual names as catalysts for desired brand expression, and ultimately, bullhorns for *unified* brand meaning. As such, the namescape is as much about the corporate culture as it relates to naming – the process and attitudes that go into every decision – which comes through in each name, shaping the brand as we know it.

Every company has a namescape, but few approach it as strategically as they should. It's vital to approach naming rooted in a corporate namescape strategy: with an eye on the role of every named offering – products, services, technologies, varieties, promotions, apps, internal initiatives, and so on – in defining the brand. Understanding the namescape's importance to a brand is the best way to ensure that each new name captures its inherent opportunity to serve a strategic benefit greater than itself.

In fact, it's very possible that names contribute more to consumers' understanding of a brand than any other asset. Names forge the first impression at every brand touch point. This is precisely why naming should engage brand leadership and be conducted in the same room that the biggest brand decisions are made. The shift in thought that needs to occur is simple. Brands need to stop developing names with the question, "how does this single name fit within our brand?" and start looking at it as, "how should our brand be articulated through all of our names?"

Take Ben & Jerry's. Defining the brand personality – its character, its distinguishing essence – would be hard to do without the names of its flavors to assist you. More than advertising, more than packaging, the very existence of *Chubby Hubby*, *Cherry Garcia*, and *Imagine Whirled Peace* as iconic product brand names has defined Ben & Jerry's joyful, irreverent, and tree-hugging identity. It's that identity that best distinguishes Ben & Jerry's from its competition, and it's driven by naming.

And it's not just the individual names themselves, but their aggregate effect. A brand offering *Chocolate*, *Vanilla*, *Strawberry* and *Karamel Sutra* wouldn't be as well defined in the consumer mindset. It takes the cohesive interrelationship of the entire namespace to shape a brand.

Strong Namespace = Strong Brand

It's a simple equation, with many supporting proof-points. A strategically cohesive namespace serves numerous brand benefits. The following four are perhaps the most common – and valuable – outcomes of a well-executed namespace strategy:

Clarity – Names are arguably the best way to assist consumers in navigating a brand's offerings. The hierarchy and interrelationships of entries within a brand architecture can often be confusing. Looking at tiered naming systems as a way to creatively elucidate those relationships is one of the greatest naming opportunities. But even more important is doing it in a way that reverberates the brand voice (not just *Silver*, *Gold*, and *Platinum*; or *1*, *2*, *3* – all ubiquitous, diluted designations – rather, approaches like Southwest's *Business Select*, *Anytime*, and *Wanna Get Away*. They clarify the airline's product tiers in a brand-reinforcing way.) Again, it's not simply about creating a brand architecture, which is the hierarchical and structural way brands fit within a portfolio. And it's not simply about a nomenclature system, or pattern of naming conventions. *Gold*, *Silver*, and *Platinum* accomplish both of those tasks: rank and order. But because they're the designations used by countless brands, credit cards to car washes, they don't impart distinctive brand meaning – and miss the namespace opportunity that Southwest more adeptly seized.

Brand Strength – A cohesive set of product names helps each individual product relate back to the parent brand more clearly. *iCloud* is far more distinctly an Apple brand as a result of the name's similarity to other brands in the portfolio (*iLife*, *iPad*, *iPhone*, etc.) And in its ability to quickly link a product to the brand that created it – as well as other products in the family – *iCloud* serves as another supporting piece of a picture that's bigger than itself, one that has emboldened Apple's ubiquitous brand understanding in the market, and facilitated cross-selling.

As with Southwest - it can catalyze and strengthen the focus of a brand identity, voice, or USP. IKEA is another great example. Their product names (*Malm*, *Droömmar*, *Skärpt*, *Karlstad*, etc.) clearly impart the brand's Swedish design influence. A distinguishing factor that's imaginative, arresting, wholly unique, and has come to be expected and appreciated by their loyal customers – all due to a disciplined, brand-level naming strategy. Similarly, the more distinct and pervasive a naming convention is throughout a brand, the less likely competitors will be to emulate the approach. And if the brand is to the point where it is being copied by competitors (a la the "i-" trend), well, then you have a good thing to worry about.

Consumer Enthusiasm – This benefit is two-fold. Humans appreciate patterns, and are predisposed to anticipate the next in a series. A psychological phenomenon known as the "Mere Exposure Effect" has been shown to demonstrate measureable consumer preference for the familiar: a potential hurdle for innovative ideas to pass through consumer testing, but an ultimate benefit to brands that can foster a sense of comfort and familiarity through product consistency. Satisfying consumer yearning for their expectations to be met. It's why countless blogs were predicting the name of the iPad

before it was even announced: iSlate? iTab? Apple had created a culture of familiarity – and anticipation – with its cohesive approach to naming. But secondly, consumers like shortcuts. And when brand-naming conventions can help a consumer quickly identify the brands they love by the names that reflect them, it makes life a lot easier.

Expedited Naming – A namespace strategy paves the way for future naming decisions – an internal benefit of efficiency and cost-savings. (1) It creates crystallized guidelines by which it's easy to abide: limiting the creative variables before naming begins. By establishing conventions of "i-" prefix hardware names and wildcat-names for operating systems, for example, Apple's name development process is far more clear and efficient. (2) It paves the way to trademark ownership, often making it easier for a brand to defend a concept that relates to other protected assets in their portfolio.

And, beyond making it faster and easier to select names, a good namespace strategy can actually reveal new opportunities to create brand-strengthening names, channeling brand meaning beyond product names to branded flavors, varieties, initiatives, promotions, retail locations – all with a point of view that resonates brand meaning. Take the naming of Apple's *Genius Bar*, or Dunkin Donuts' *Dunkin Run* social app, or Starbucks' off-mocked but universally-known size conventions (*Grande, Tall, Venti.*) It's a trend that is increasingly beneficial in a fragmented marketplace – embedding ownable brand meaning through the articulation at every touch point.

Namespace-Minded Naming: Making it work

Understanding the value of and making it work for your brand are two different things.

The former requires brains, the latter: discipline, alignment, and investment in a long-term process of creating and maintaining a namespace strategy. The following guidelines illustrate the basics needed to develop a brand-strengthening namespace strategy.

Strategy Before Naming

The fastest route to a disorganized, strategically-deficient namespace is to develop names without considering their bigger-picture role. Before any product is named, a well-defined namespace strategy is essential. It should not only encompass how intended brand messages and personality will come through in each individual name, but how it is articulated by the aggregate of all names. A namespace strategy should include:

- Guidelines for naming: ideally, structural or thematic conventions that give logic to names' roles in the namespace
- Pre-determined decision criteria, outlining what the right names will look like – even before they're ideated
- A standardized naming process: who within the organization is involved and when, and the steps that should be taken to carry out the development and final decision
- A work plan, including adequate time for development – and a strategic prioritization of naming initiatives: it's important to approach naming with enough time to do it properly, and with a sense of how launch cadence and frequency will affect how the namespace takes shape in the market – always naming with a full picture of where the brand is headed and how each name will fit within the plan.

Namescape Culture

If every name is to impart a brand-advancing message, it cannot be created in a vacuum: by a project team below the radar of senior brand visionaries, or, more likely, isolated from other parallel-pathing project teams. Naming must be elevated as a brand-level decision – engaging key brand visionaries in strategy development AND decisioning processes. It requires commitment from the top down: approaching naming with a unified vision, a unified process, and a conscious shift in corporate culture to treat naming as a vital brand-shaping process.

Most respected brands have well-articulated, published standards, illustrating in fine detail the missions, visions, logo treatments, fonts, colors, tones of voice, and philosophical underpinnings that comprise the brand. They define how brands should be presented in advertising, depicted to the media, how customers should be engaged, and where innovation should be focused. Seldom, though, do these brand handbooks contain a page about how names should be developed to catalyze the mission. This is crazy. And this must change if brands are to capitalize on the naming opportunity. Creating a solid namescape strategy means adding that page to a brand's handbook, and living by the mandates as a tangible component of brand definition.

Whether managed internally or with the assistance of an outside agency with expertise in developing namescape strategies (a valuable way to ensure that all parties are engaged and that naming transcends internal, structural barriers) it's essential that the vision reach across campaigns and be woven into the fabric of innovation, product development, brand planning, and internal decisioning processes.

Patience & Dedication

A brand's portfolio of products is rarely launched all at once – and frequently contains the black sheep heritage names that no longer suit the vision but retain far too much equity to replace. In these cases, it can require years of adherence to a grand plan to reach the point of a well-manicured namescape. Dodge is a great example of a brand that has accomplished a very cohesive portfolio of model names – Nitro, Charger, Challenger, Avenger, Caliber – all resonating the brand's muscle heritage and edgy persona. Their decisions included retiring names like Stratus and Intrepid in favor of new names like Nitro and returning to heritage brands like Challenger. It represents a global vision and a long-term commitment to it. And the result is a well-aligned brand position that distinguishes Dodge from all other major automakers.

Clairvoyance

...or the next best thing: flexibility. Without the benefit of a product pipeline – particularly common in rapidly changing industries like technology or finance – it's essential to set forward with a namescape strategy that is extensible and can nimbly adapt to changes in the product – or competitive – landscape without sacrificing the core brand essence.

For brands that release many products, investing in these internal process improvements, cultural shifts, and the long-term planning required to create and maintain a more strategic namescape will surely pay off. Apple, Starbucks, IKEA, and others among the world's most admired brands can attest.



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About The Naming Group

The Naming Group is an NYC-based name creation and decisioning agency. We partner with leading brands to create brand-empowering names – and provide the guidance needed to inspire informed decisions. Our focus on namespace strategy ensures that naming decisions are guided not only by what's best for the offerings we name – but also for the strength of our clients' brands as a whole. For more information about our philosophy, approach, and work for brands such as GM, Capital One, Sony, and Nestle, visit us at thenaminggroup.com