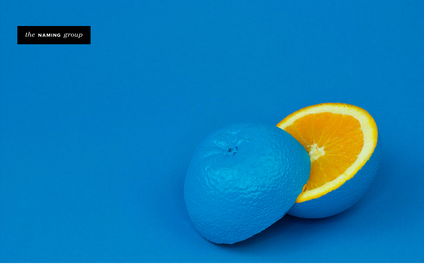
the NAMING group



SUGGESTIVE NAMES

A WHITE PAPER BY THE NAMING GROUP

All too often clients issue a troubling directive: "We need a name that requires no explanation, because our marketing dollars are limited."

It's a fair and valid request. But in the subtext commonly lies the assumption that "requires no explanation" equates to a name that uses expressly descriptive (and therefore generic, often hackneyed) language, with no tolerance for even the minimal leap of imagination required for less expected creative concepts to capture intended meaning.

This white paper investigates the strategic roots of our typical response: "*It is far more costly to gain ownership of a hackneyed concept than it is to explain an unexpected one.*"

Too many brands fear the cost of building a dynamic brand. The investment in creating something new. ("*But Apple has had years and years and millions of marketing dollars to build brand understanding. We don't have that luxury.*") And yet – in any category where differentiation is paramount (i.e., every category) – brand-building is the process that propels most industry leading companies. There is no doubt that it is much more difficult to build top-of-mind awareness and understanding in the absence of a strong brand (i.e., a *distinctive* identity.)

And above any other brand asset, the name is most essential to pave the road to distinction. Because unique names – *unexpected* names – *interesting* names – not only stick with us, but also frame our expectations for the broader brand experience. The name is the entry point, and it's an opportunity that is all too often missed by marketers who, in the spirit of conservatism, are actually perpetuating a costly myth.

The answer is often a type of name known as "suggestive": one which goes beyond *telling* you what the brand is and does – and instead *shows* you. Evocatively, experientially, memorably. Understanding the possible types of names, and why suggestive ones could be the most powerful, is an important first step to selecting the strongest brand name.

KNOW YOUR TYPE

The Name Type Continuum™ is a tool that The Naming Group utilizes on every project to align clients around an intended strategic path for name creation. It considers communication objectives, the competitive field, the level of existing category understanding, and the spectrum of name types to be considered in creating name candidates.

DESCRIPTIVE

On one end of the Continuum sit descriptive names. These can range from generic, unprotectably literal names (think: *Personal Banking, Fruit Smoothie*, or other names too specific to trademark) to unique but nonetheless literal names (e.g., *Netflix, VirtualWallet*). The beauty of these names – and why they are far and away the most commonly embraced name type – is the fact that they require little thought, little explanation, little effort to build understanding of what the offering actually is. What is too often overlooked, though, is the fact that in their simplicity, they pave the way to daunting brand challenges: competitor encroachment, loss of trademark, lack of distinguishing identity, and the hidden killer, consumer apathy. A name that does not challenge us, does not excite us or tell us something new is a name that's far more likely to blend. And blending is the antithesis of branding.

EMPTY VESSEL

At the opposite end of the Continuum are the polar opposites of descriptive names: the names that mean nothing and/or say nothing about the offering. Called *empty vessel*. This can happen in a number of ways, including: invented (*Zynga, Kodak*), abstract (*Apple, Google*), alphanumeric (*XJ6, 5*), and heritage (*Heinz, Charles Schwab*) names. This is not to say that meaning cannot be built or derived; of course, "Charles Schwab" has come to represent a lot of meaning in our minds. But the name did not intrinsically facilitate that meaning. Here is where the "too much to explain" concern is valid. While distinctive, and often very evocative, empty vessel names tend to lack the linkage of relevancy between product and name. Essentially, they ask consumers to memorize a definition without any type of helpful mnemonic – a much more taxing process for passive brand participants.

SUGGESTIVE

Between *descriptive* and *empty vessel* lies some of the richest naming territory, filled with opportunity to create unique, evocative, and deeply meaningful names. We call them suggestive: names that suggest meaning rather than asserting it. Suggestive names open the door to creativity, originality, and differentiation, without losing sight of essential communication objectives. The ways to do it are limited only by the imagination, making the taxonomy of this name type a moving target, and one that evolves with the world of brand names themselves.

THE POWER OF SUGGESTION

The world's largest brands have all types of names. This invites the compelling case that it's not the type of name that matters, but how they're marketed. To an extent, it's true. But when thinking about marketing, *suggestive* names ultimately require the least amount of support. Contrary to the myth that "more descriptive = easier to support."

Why? Because *suggestive* names work the hardest against two fronts: defining and distinguishing.

Here's how:

THEY PROVIDE AN ASSOCIATION

Whether through metaphor, visual mnemonic, symbolism – they represent something bigger and more accessible than the brands themselves. Making them more memorable, relatable, approachable, and likable. This can also pave the way to a voice and personality that set in motion a more compelling brand identity.

THEY MAKE YOU THINK

A 2005 Wharton study about consumer preference of different types of crayon color names in a simulated purchase-decision demonstrated that consumers place real value on atypical names, attributed to the experiential enjoyment of solving naming mysteries. Why was it named this? What does it represent? A curiosity that makes us think about brands on a deeper level – a level where more descriptive names never invite us to go.

> *"…consumers will react favorably to unusual color or flavor names (e.g., blue haze or Alpine snow) because they expect marketing messages to convey useful information. If the message is not informative or does not conform to expectations, consumers search for the reason for the deviation. This search results in additional (positive) attributions about the product, and thus, a more favorable response…"*

THEY FIGHT

In a crowded competitive landscape, particularly one with parity products, the brands with uniquely suggestive names routinely outperform their peers. Suggestive names are an intrinsic leg-up on the competition in the way that they establish instant accessibility and likability, while simultaneously paving the way to understanding. A first-to-market product may have more luxury to do more defining and less distinguishing, but if a brand finds itself in a field where multiple competitors use consistent marketing language, the power of suggestive naming is a brilliant opportunity.

THEY DEFINE

Here's the most comforting fact of all. Consumers prove, over and over again, an ability to understand (or seek and learn the root of) naming concepts that aren't literally apparent. Barnes & Noble's Nook is a great example. Minimal explanation, pairing the name with more descriptive terms like eReader in launch advertising, quickly educated consumers that "Nook" is Barnes & Noble's eReader. We accept this readily, and it required NO translation of why Nook was chosen as the name. It's obvious, even with its suggestively associative leap. The name distinguishes the product in a dauntingly competitive space, even alongside other evocative names like Kindle, iPad, and Playbook.

SUMMARY

There is no one right type of name for every brand in the world, but in many cases a myth prevails that prevents companies from selecting the name that will do the most for them – and with less effort and money expended!

If, during a naming process, the understandable pang of anxiety comes from considering a name that does not feel descriptive enough, remember the power of suggestion. A good name makes the connection easier than we often assume. And the benefits are long lasting. When it feels like an expensive proposition, just remember that investment in a powerful brand name is well worth it. And it's far more costly to build interest in uninteresting ideas.

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