

Nina Beckhardt

The Name Game

*interview by James Perkins & Christina Lessa
photography & styling by James Perkins*

*This 25 year-old CEO of **The Naming Group** has named everything from the Capital One Venture card to cars for General Motors.*





CHRISTINA LESSA : *Can you tell me about your background?*

NINA BECKHARDT: I don't know where to start. I feel like so much of me is the way I was raised and the influences of my family. I have a really varied background so for me its important to collaborate with people who have a varied background. I want to work with people who maybe started as engineers and then decided they wanted to work in fashion. I studied fashion for a while in London. It was really amazing but I realized that I didn't eat, drink, sleep, live, breathe what fashion was.

My dad is a psychiatrist I studied psychology. I like to get into things, I like to over analyze, so I wanted to do something that would let me over analyze everything and it would be totally cool. Of course, I also had a really strong passion for art and for creating, specifically crafts. So art with a purpose was important to me. I've painted, I've drawn but I needed it to have more of a purpose. So I got into more decorative arts. I tried knitting woodworking découpage-ing, all of this was part of my

internship at Martha Stewart living. I worked in her crafts department. It was perfect. I was sitting there applying gold leaf to Christmas ornaments and tying Sailors knots that would then become drawer pulls and I thought, "OK this is it". But the thing that didn't work at Martha Stewart was that I felt no matter how good your ideas were, no matter how late you stayed, no matter how hard you worked, if the boss above you didn't go on maternity leave or if they didn't see something amazing in you, you weren't going to move up. Even if there were good ideas at the lower levels because of the bureaucracy, moving up just wasn't going to happen.

So I didn't stay at Martha Stewart, because they didn't ask me to stay, I was crushed. I just knew that I wanted to be in New York. I knew that I had to be in the city because I grew up in the Boston area, I went to school in DC, I studied abroad in London, but the energy here in New York City, it fuels this part of my creativity that no other place in the world does. My aunt lives in New York City and when I used to visit her I would walk up and down Broadway and just

say to myself, "this is amazing, I have to live here". With that goal in mind I got myself a job at the naming company. It was a job for an administrative genius and I was thinking, "um, all right, I can do that". Two interviews and 24 hours later they hired me. Over the next two years it became the perfect fit for me in a way that I can't even put into words.

JAMES PERKINS: *In my Perkins Picks, I talk about the Conan Effect, where Conan O'Brien wasn't able to advance because there was a baby boomer in the way who wouldn't make room for him. That frustration seems to be similar to what you must have felt at Martha Stewart.*

NINA BECKHARDT: I don't know if anything is ever totally perfect, if you can avoid having some negative emotions on some level wherever you go. Having complete and utter bliss is unrealistic wherever you go. But when you compare the Conan effect and the experience that I had at Martha Stewart, the worst feeling that you feel there, is frustration, whereas in my current role at the naming group where I am

doing what I am doing, the worst feeling that I feel is fear. I feel that the difference there is that fear can push you in an amazing way into new directions." Do something that you fear everyday" is really just accepting uncertainty. This has been so hard but has become my main task now.

JAMES PERKINS: *Balancing uncertainty with certainty is almost the equation of risk and is really what our generation has to do now - its about the uncertainty of becoming entrepreneurs and put it in the context of the certainty that you have to provide a living for yourself, there is a timeline where that can and cannot happen for you.*

NINA BECKHARDT: You bring up something interesting there for me because I never think about "can I make a living doing this", or will I be able to sustain this company now that it has grown and I am responsible for other people as well: that is not where my fear comes from or is about. My fear is really about not meeting my own standards which I know are really high. I have this perfectionist, artistic visionary thing where it has to be the product that I want it to be and know it can be. And to realize that with the other people who have built this company with me we have created a culture and a community I'm just overwhelmed with gratitude that I've found other people with whom I can share my passion.

CHRISTINA LESSA: *Can you tell me two naming stories personal and professional?*

NINA BECKHARDT: I was in art class in high school ceramics class and they were doing California crazy as a theme which means that if you had a burger shack the entire building would look like a burger or if you had a veterinarian clinic the entire building would look like a dog. So this one girl Jen had made a surf shop and the roof of the shop was a surfboard. And she came into art class and she said I need to put a sign on the front what should I name it? And I thought about it for awhile and then I said let's name it, "CowaBungalow!" I know it's a tiny thing but that was a naming moment for me. I grew up in a family where my parents never stopped reading and never stopped playing with words and making up jokes and puns it's something that we always do as a family.

Professionally, the name story that comes to mind is about the Sonic ..

When you're not a luxury brand, you can't rely on the brand name and you shouldn't. Don't try to be what you're not. If you think of cars as people which is what we have to do in order to name them and give them a personality - we have to think of them as alive. You don't want to treat somebody as a number. They're not in jail! Especially with a lot of American car

brands where the goal is to appeal to American consumers, you want to form these different approachable but cool personalities through the names. The car that we named 'Sonic' really does that because its a small car but it packs a punch. It has this - just the word 'Sonic' has lightning to it. Its exciting and it brings that excitement to a small car whereas small cars are often seen as economy models and not so exciting.

JAMES PERKINS: *Working on Wall Street as an analyst for many years I covered the defense, industrial and Automotive Industries and each time there was always this manufacturing story that was just broken, there were no new ideas being brought to the table and there was no new young energy. So I wanted to ask you about some of the new and innovative ideas that you and the naming group are coming up with...*

NINA BECKHARDT: Some of our innovation comes from the youth of the people who are working at the naming group but I also feel that we have a fearless mission to promote creativity within a distinctly corporate environment. That is the most fun thing that we do! When we are starting off a project we get a lot of marketing information, very technical information, lots of numbers and lots of graphs: who's the target demographic, etc and that is all very important and we have to absorb all that information and take that in, but we have to really get into what the heart and soul of the vehicle that we're naming and also the person that's going to be driving it what is their alter ego? What is the ideal way that you want them to feel when they're driving that car?

I've been on calls with corporate clients and had to listen to dead silence after we'd ask them some of these questions things like if your product was a person what would it be like? I was working with a software vendor and we were naming their software and I said to them if your software came up to the bar and sat next to you what would it be like? And there was just silence on the line. And I fought back the urge to say ok let's move on to the next question and I just let it be silent. This was a person who was always very active in meetings, always knew what to say, but when you stop them, make them slow down and think in a new way -maybe make them feel uncomfortable for a while, the result was material that was much more helpful. So much of what naming is about is hitting an emotional chord. You have to get a response from somebody - evoke a response a. Most of the innovation behind naming is seeing where you can really push the envelope. Sometimes it's not just what will consumers identify with and what will make them feel comfortable. Sometimes it's what will make them feel a little uncomfortable. We think of ourselves as verbal en-

gineers, we have conversations all the time with every single project that we do where we're being given a new projector or credit card to name, and we say to each other how are people naming projectors or credit cards now and how can we turn that upside down? In a way we are...

JAMES PERKINS: *You are word fashionistas*

NINA BECKHARDT: Right! When you come up with a name that is either a real word or it draws from real words you are dependent on the associations that are present in all of the consumers' minds. So that is what we are trying to do.

JAMES PERKINS: *With all the problems that the automotive industry had in the recent years, what do you think Detroit has to look forward to in the near future?*

NINA BECKHARDT: After having gone to the auto shows in both L.A. and Detroit I see there is a huge push towards smaller cars. It is interesting to see the pendulum swing like this - the Hummer brand doesn't even exist anymore - you still see people driving them on the road but the sense of 'bigger is better' has left us. It will be really interesting to see the change in our country as the pendulum swings towards these smaller cars and people start to realize that this is ok to have a small car. I can be cool and that I can still pick up my kids at soccer practice even though I don't drive a jungle-ready SUV. It's also interesting to see the brands that get carried overseas and how the world will accept these new offerings. China is going to be critical and how cars sell there is going to be critical to the success of the automotive industry. It is interesting to consider how the Chinese culture is all about control and controlling the message - it is interesting to watch how American brands like Chevrolet who have all this freedom in America to inspire and get emotional and have incredible ads like the one where they show footage of all these tremendous failures like Evil Kneival crashing and wrestlers getting knocked out - I loved that ad because it was a departure from the chest-beating flag waving normal Americana ads. It wasn't feminine but it was much more compassionate. I think that in this country brands can take chances like that and it will be interesting to see how once they go abroad how they will be able to maintain or not that kind of freedom to spread their brand message. Being at the auto shows - I was at the Audi booth and their tag line was in German, and that's all it had to be. They were able to come to an American show and say, we aren't going to try to become American and your going to like it. Is it going to be an American brand coming in and saying just, "we're American" or will they try to balance that with the markets



they are trying to reach? You have to be careful. I think it was Emile Durkheim and what he wrote, which is "How do you view yourself, How do you think others view you and how do others actually view you?"

Thank you for letting us dress you and interview you and I think it would be great to go out for a few drinks sometime and find some new names for things!

Epilogue: Approximately one week later, James and Chrissy were hired by The Naming Group to contribute their naming ideas for an undisclosed automobile branding project.

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