

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

FANTASY INFLUENCES VEHICLE NAMES

Chances are that you haven't given much thought to the strategy of naming a car or the effect that a name will have on a brand. However Nina Beckhardt, president and creative director of The Naming Group, has made an entire career out of it.

Beckhardt influences consumer product names for big-name clients like Capital One, Nestlé, Sony and General Motors. Her firm specializes in working with large corporations to build brand-advancing naming strategies and subsequent titles. Consider some of her work: the Capital One Venture card, Sony PROFORMA or the new Chevrolet Sonic.

When naming a consumer product such as a car, many factors come into play. On the most basic level, a good car name is going to build a strong emotional connection with consumers.

"A car is very different from all other types of products because it's one that a consumer has a real relationship with," Beckhardt said. "Once a consumer decides to buy a car, they are entering a multi-year relationship. It has to be comfortable. There's a big opportunity for the selected name because it can create almost an alter-ego for the customer and figuratively transport them."

Beckhardt cited one recent trend: naming truck and SUV models after places, mostly out west in mountainous regions.

"The vast majority of the people driving those cars are not going to be offroading in Yellowstone Park," Beckhardt said. "But in the name, there's a flicker of fantasy there. 'I am just going to pick up my kids from soccer practice, but I'm doing it in my Tahoe.' There's a momentary feeling that you're doing something great."


When it comes to naming a car, The Naming Group focuses on two aspects: decisioning, which includes a thorough review of strategy and product goals, and namespace, or how offerings within a portfolio relate to each other and support and reinforce the brand.

For the new Chevy Sonic, Beckhardt's team had discussions with GM's marketing managers to discover the soul of the car, which is small but packs a punch.

"Sonic is a really good name choice for that car, because the word 'sonic,' when people hear it, is associated with a loud, large booming noise. When it's paired with a relatively small car, you have an interesting juxtaposition." While she didn't have a hand in it, Beckhardt cited Dodge as a brand with a particularly strong namespace.

"In recent years, Dodge developed their brand to be strong, masculine and edgy, and they have channeled those emotions in their names at every chance. Names like Avenger, Challenger and Charger have created a cohesive message, and all carry the weight of the brand's meaning."

One trend in car naming that doesn't go over as effectively among consumers, according to Beckhardt, is the alpha-numeric modifier system you often see with luxury cars. Think Mercedes SLK350, Audi Q5 and BMW Z4, among others. In those cases, the focus and name experience is shifted to the brand itself. Does it really matter if SLK350 doesn't mean anything to you, when the name Mercedes definitely does? Cadillac and Lincoln were the first American brands to continue the alphanumeric naming trend, but Beckhardt said that it's proven very difficult for humans to form associations or ties to alphanumeric product names.

"It is harder to remember or form any associations to those names," she said. "The reason many non-alpha numeric names stick with the consumer more is that there's often a base level of familiarity. Those names often have the potential to create a visual image."  — Jennifer Baum

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