



## The Art and Science of Naming Brands that will Resonate in the “New World”

*Insights from John Grace*

Creating names that can be trademarked has become increasingly difficult and is now both an art and a science. In the U.S. alone, there have been over 2 million trademark registrations in the past 15 years. And most words in the English language are trademarked in most categories. Add this to the requirement to secure trademark registration in countries around the world, and it is easy to see why there are so many new “invented” names. Further, most companies would like to have a parallel use of a trademarked name as their URL (domain name), and this becomes a greater challenge because anyone can register and own a domain name for about \$7.00 and there are millions of domains already owned.

### What is Changing?

#### Shift in what type of name works

The “New World” brings with it an emphasis on a name type that will invariably influence naming into the foreseeable future. As we have written in an earlier insight paper (*7 Rules for Branding in the “New World”*), there will be a natural gravitation towards **descriptive names** that are clear and easy to understand. As in many other parts of the changing world, there will be less tolerance for contrived names that attempt to be cute, catchy or high on over-promise. Given the inherent skepticism in business today, for names to resonate they will have to say what they mean, and mean what they say. This presents new problems as the more common and descriptive a name is, the harder it is to protect.

Obviously, there are some categories where fanciful names are critical to create a differentiated perception such as cosmetics, fashion, automotive, food and confections, etc. But in the main, the trend will be to find names that are clear in their meaning and less image driven, especially in corporate naming.

#### Types of names

There are broadly four different types of names. Each name type contributes to shaping a brand in a different way, and each has a degree of difficulty in securing and defending a trademark.

**Functional names** actually state the function and purpose of a product. **EZPass**, **LinkedIn** and **Facebook** are purely functional names. These names are the easiest to create and the most difficult to trademark and protect because the language is usually common and generic.

**Descriptive names** describe something about the function, but can go a bit beyond. For example, **Whirlpool** describes an action of water moving (and implies strong rinsing/cleaning action). Today it is both a product and a corporation. **Twitter** and **iPhone** are also descriptive. Descriptive names can also be hard to trademark and protect.

**Connotative or Suggestive names** are not literal, but suggest an aspect of what the product does. In many cases, a connotative name implies a benefit for the function of a name. **The North Face** is a good example suggesting

mountain climbing. **Red Bull** suggests power and strength. The shift from Esso to **Exxon** demonstrates a corporate name suggestive of its predecessor.

**Imaginary names** often have very little to do with the literal function of a product, and evoke an emotional or fanciful image. **Starbucks**, **Häagen-Daz** and **Prius** are successful imaginary names. These are the easiest to trademark because in many cases they are completely invented words. Corporate names like **Altria** and **Kodak** fit into this category.

Deciding on name types is not easy. It requires synthesizing management's vision of the business, analyzing the competitive naming framework, understanding what the customer or consumer needs to hear, and understanding the legal issues surrounding what is being named, and where in the world it will be used. The new wrinkle is the built-in skepticism in names because of the puffery that companies have emphasized in the past years. So in addition to all the functional requirements and creative criteria to developing a new name, one of the drivers must be developing names that help consumers and customers understand what is being named, and not be viewed as a "trick" in some way. As one respondent said in some recent research ... "Just don't try to fool me, I can smell it coming".

Also, management must consider whether there are sufficient marketing resources available to instill and support a new name. Particularly as names lean towards the imaginary end of the spectrum, there is a requirement for greater amounts of investment to be sure important audiences become aware, understand and remember a new name.

## **Creating names you can "own"**

Given the blinding number of names registered today, and the ever-increasing number of applications, it is imperative to have a formalized naming process. We know of many organizations that have tried to use name competitions among employees, or more targeted brainstorming with smaller teams, and most often they come up with some interesting ideas that, in the end, are difficult to trademark. This creates unnecessary frustrations and timing delays.

The most important step is to develop criteria that guide development and evaluation of names. This takes the emotional element out of evaluation and let's management look at name candidates based on what the name is trying to accomplish. Most professional firms have their own processes. We use some computer word modeling, but in the end, it always seems that the human mind is the best processor for creating strong name candidates. To develop a wide range of creative ideas, we believe that naming professionals should represent different cultures, ages, life experiences and perspectives. Frequently, we employ primary name root tools such as Latin and Greek and other word and language sources.

Also, it is important to encourage mind stretching, not compression. Instead of confining naming to rigid evaluation early in the process, we find that letting the process percolate always results in interesting new concepts. At early name reviews, we try to see the potential in names generated before we begin to eliminate them. So the process becomes one of creation and building, elimination, and then more creation and building. Because of the difficulty of creating names that can be owned, we find that today we need to have hundreds of candidates to end up with a manageable number of names to evaluate and submit to the attorneys.

The naming process has become more difficult. However, the shift towards more descriptive names will keep important audiences tuned in rather than tuned out.

If there are team members in your company that need to generate names from time to time, you might want to share these thoughts with them.

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