

STRATEGICALLY DESIRABLE BRAND NAME CHARACTERISTICS

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Inherent brand name characteristics leading to memorable names which support the desired product image are presented for the manager. This exposition of strategically desirable brand name characteristics is based upon a review of relevant psychological, linguistic, and marketing literature.

Introduction

A naming decision is made hundreds of times each year by marketing executives in association with new product launches, newly formed companies, and renamed existing companies. In the opinion of some, such a naming decision may well be "the most important marketing decision you can make."²⁷ If such a decision is indeed so critical, what guidelines do

marketing executives have to follow regarding the choice of a "good" name?

The management team responsible for such naming decisions has available a voluminous amount of literature advising what a "good" or "poor" name might be. However, the great bulk of this literature is anecdotal in nature. That is, what are usually presented are examples of names associated with successful and unsuccessful product launches. The assumption often made is that a successful product must have had a "good" name. This view of course ignores any effects caused by a variety of other marketing mix variables. Rarely is the executive provided with objective, theoretically based criteria upon which a brand or company name can be judged as "good" or "bad."

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At best, the manager is presented with a list such as: the name should be memorable, legally protectable, easy to say, and so on. Such lists are reflective of collective common wisdom but are not usually supported by objective research studies. Sometimes managers are given good and bad name characteristics based upon a particular author's experiences and opinions. While such opinions are valuable, especially if based upon extensive experience, they are not necessarily objective.

What do we know, in a more objective or theoretical sense, about good brand name characteristics? To answer this question, one must first determine exactly what a brand name is supposed to accomplish within the overall marketing objectives set for a product. It is suggested here that there are two basic dimensions upon which the strategic desirability of a brand name should be judged: (1) *the inherent ability of the name to be easily encoded into, retained in, and retrieved from memory*, and (2) *the extent to which the name supports or enhances the planned strategic positioning or image of the product*. A third important characteristic of a name (its ability to be legally protected) has been reviewed elsewhere.^{6, 11}

Characteristics Related to Memory

The Brand Name Should Be Simple

The desirable brand name characteristic of simplicity is frequently cited in the marketing literature.^{8, 10, 26} Relevant characteristics often listed in such literature include short; easy to say, easy to spell, easy to read, and easy to understand. Often consumers themselves will simplify a more complex brand name. For example, a *Chevrolet* becomes a *Chevy*, a *Corvette* becomes a *Vette*, *Coca-Cola* becomes *Coke* and *Pan American Airlines* becomes *Pan Am*. Justification for the desirability of simplicity in a brand name is directly related to the basic psychological principle that a simple bit of information is more easily learned and recalled. Examples of simple brand names are *Aim*, *Raid*, *Edge*, *Bold*, *Sure*, *Off*, *Jif*, *Ban*, *Bic*, and *Tide*,

The memory advantage of a simple brand

name is thought to be the result of two basic cognitive processes. First, the consumer has limited attentional capacity. Since less of this limited capacity is required for simple information, there is a higher probability of both attracting and maintaining consumer attention with a simple brand name.³ Attraction of attention, in turn, increases the probability of higher-order information processing occurring, and memory for the name is thus enhanced. Second, once attended to, a simple bit of information is more easily encoded into memory systems, again enhancing memory. When consumers process information under conditions of low involvement, there is very little motivation to engage in the extensive memory encoding and elaboration necessary to learn complex information. Under such incidental learning conditions, a simple brand name is more likely to be learned.

Anytime a morpheme combination approach is used to build a brand name, it is critical to establish the target market's perceived meaning of the new name.

Often, because of legal or brand positioning reasons, a "nonword" is desired as a brand name. Such names also vary with respect to simplicity (e.g., *Bic* versus *Minoxidil*). To be considered a simple name, a nonword should at least match the natural structure of language. Linguists have extensively studied such natural structures and have developed numerous "rules of construction." For example, in English there are phonotactic rules which would not permit new words such as "mlit," "lpang," or "wmelt."¹⁶ It is unlikely that a native speaker would violate such rules in constructing new words. The created word would probably be unpronounceable or sound odd. However, when one is developing international names, attention must be given to natural linguistic rules.*

The Brand Name Should Be Distinctive

Distinctiveness as a desirable characteristic in a brand name is also frequently mentioned

*Interested readers are referred to End Note 16 for a more extensive review of these linguistic rules.

in the marketing literature.^{5, 15, 23} In fact, some consider this the single most important characteristic because of memory, legal, and brand positioning advantages.⁵ Examples of distinctive brand names often cited are *Apple*, *Mustang*, *Xerox*, *Kodak*, and *Exxon*.

In terms of enhanced memory for distinctive names, there are again two basic cognitive processes which seem to come into play. First is the increased attention attraction power of the novel, unusual, or unique brand name. The second underlying cause of memory enhancement is related to a motivational component triggered by curiosity.

With respect to attention attraction, it has long been recognized that unusual, distinctive, contrasting, or novel stimuli easily capture attention.¹⁹ Note that the brand name itself need not be inherently unique to capture attention as long as it is distinctive within the context of the particular product category in which it appears. In a field of similar brands and brand names, the name that is different attracts attention and thus increases the probability of further cognitive processes which lead to long-term memory. For example, the very common word "apple" became quite distinctive when it was first applied to the product category of personal computers.

The marketer must identify the connotative meaning of names and match this meaning with the desired brand positioning.

One apparent way to create a distinctive brand name and attract attention is through the use of what linguists call plosives. Researchers have noted that a large number of the top 200 brands listed by *Marketing and Media Decisions* begin with a plosive sound^{31, 35}. Plosives are consonants such as *b*, *c*, *d*, *g*, *k*, *p*, and *t*, which, when pronounced, produce an explosive, popping sound. Brand names beginning with plosives were found to produce significantly better recall and recognition. Although theoretical reasons for the enhanced recall were not specifically addressed, researchers imply that the cause was related to the distinctive, "funny" sound created by plosives.

The second way in which the characteristic of distinctiveness enhances memory for a brand name is related to the aroused curiosity generated by the novel name. This curiosity provides the conscious motivation necessary for the more extensive mental elaboration and depth of processing found to be positively associated with memory.

Unusual, distinctive, contrasting, or novel stimuli easily capture attention.

As a final note regarding the characteristic of distinctiveness, it is worthwhile to consider the potential danger that an extremely novel stimulus may produce a "response uncertainty" effect resulting in an unpleasant feeling and a screening out of that stimulus.³ For example, most vodka brands have a Russian-sounding name *Smirnoff*, *Skol*, *Popov*, *Wolfschmidt*, etc. A vodka branded *Timberline* would certainly be distinctive within this product class and gain a memory advantage due to this distinctiveness. However, the name might be so unique that a consumer may be unsure whether to categorize it with other vodka brands, or whether or not it really is vodka. Thus, the *Timberline* brand may be excluded from the consumer's brand-choice-set even though it is more easily remembered and within the consumer's evoked set.

The Brand Name Should Be Meaningful

Other things being equal, a brand name that has some meaning to the consumer will be more easily recalled.¹³ Marketers have expressed this desirable characteristic in the sense of rules, such as that the name should be easily understood and easily used,¹⁸ or that it should be a real word rather than a "coined" word, initials, or personal surname.²⁷ A widely cited desirable characteristic also related to meaningfulness is that the name be reflective of product benefits.¹⁰ To the extent that the product benefit is actually sought by the consumer, a name reflecting that benefit would certainly become meaningful. Thus, brand names such as *Slender* (versus *Metrecal*) *Die-Hard* (versus *Delco*), *Budget* (versus *Avis*), and

Sprint (versus *MCI*) should demonstrate an innate memory advantage.

The recall advantage of a meaningful name has been found to be especially noticeable when the name was not otherwise particularly "fitting" in some way to the product class.¹³ For example, consider the following as brand names: *Bizinet* and *Promets*. Neither name is particularly meaningful. However, if the product category in question were that of briefcases, the name "Bizinet", because of its ties with the word "business," would seem more fitting than *Promets*. In this particular case, a more meaningful name such as *Executive* would have a larger recall advantage over the nonfitting name of *Promets* than it would over the more fitting name of *Bizinet*.

The brand name should make use of morephemes.

One interesting paradox which has been discovered, however, is that while "meaningful" (defined as frequently used) words are associated with better recall, nonmeaningful words are more easily recognized. Reasons for this paradox have been widely explored but, to date, have not been clearly identified.¹⁹ While a review of theoretical causes of this paradox are beyond the scope of this paper, marketers should take note of the fact that less meaningful words (defined as words with a low frequency of usage in English) may be preferable as brand names if memory is to be measured by recognition as opposed to recall.

The Brand Name Should Be a Verbal or Sound Associate of the Product Class

Natural verbal associates of the product class in question have been shown to have a distinct recall advantage when used as brand names.¹³ Once again, this desirable characteristic has been identified by numerous authors in the marketing literature, often stated as the name being a logical derivative of, pertinent or appropriate to, or compatible and consistent with the product category.^{8, 10, 23} Examples of brand names that demonstrate this desirable characteristic are *L'eggs* (panty hose), *Craftsman* (tools), *Check-Up* (toothpaste), *Alley Cat* (cat food), and *Coin* (financial services).

Even when the name is a nonword, individuals are capable of extracting some meaning.

Theoretical reasons for the demonstrated recall advantage of product-category-associated brand names relate to the categorization of objects or concepts in the mind.* Briefly, when thinking about a particular product category, a consumer has more efficient mental access to information already categorized within that product class. A natural verbal associate of the product class, when used as a brand name, has the cognitive advantage of already being stored (learned) as a representative member of the activated category. Therefore, learning that the natural verbal associate is a brand name, and mentally connecting that name with the product category, becomes easier.

It should be noted that there are not only natural lexical (word) associates of product classes but also, at times, natural sound associates. When such sound associates are present, marketers can enhance brand name memory through the use of onomatopoeias as brand names. Onomatopoeias are words composed of syllables that, when pronounced, generate a sound strongly suggestive of the word meaning (e.g., gag, pop, smack). Brand names that incorporate onomatopoeias naturally associated with the product category in some way include: *Sizzler* (steak house), *Cap'n Crunch* (cereal), *Woof n'Chirp* (pet store), and *Ping* (golf clubs).

Finally, it should be noted that even nonword brand names are perceived as more or less naturally associated with certain product categories. For example, in a comparison between the product categories of breakfast cereals and laundry detergents, it was found that plural, one-syllable nonwords (e.g., *Dics*) were more remindful of breakfast cereals and that singular nonwords (e.g., *Vade*) were more remindful of detergents.²⁵ No theoretical reasons why such product category appropriateness perceptions should occur have been presented. However, marketers utilizing nonword

*The interested reader is referred to End Note 28 for more details regarding categorization theory.

brand names are encouraged to explore the cognitive links that consumers perceive between the product category and the potential nonword name.

The Brand Name Should Elicit a Mental Image

"Image" here refers to the name's ability to generate a visual referent in the consumer's mind as opposed to a "positioning image." Words rated high in imagery value have consistently shown a recall advantage over low-imagery words, both in general and in brand-name-specific settings.^{1, 24, 29} Concrete nouns, with tangible, visual referents (e.g., "dog") more easily elicit these mental images than abstract nouns (e.g., "justice"). Therefore, concrete brand names such as *Dove*, *Mustang*, *Rabbit*, and *Apple* should inherently be more easily learned and/or retrieved from memory than abstract names such as *Pledge*, *Tempo*, *Ban* or *Bold*.

With a nonmeaningful name the marketer begins with a "clean slate."

Theoretical reasons for the superior recall effect of high-imagery words and names has been, and continues to be, debated in the literature. However, it appears that the additional mental representations associated with easily imagined words (whether those representations are truly pictorial or merely lexical) allow easier mental access to a learned name at the point of attempted recall from memory. That is, an easily imagined name generates a larger, more extensive, and more elaborate set of cognitions than an abstract name. Therefore, when attempting to recall a high-imagery name, the consumer has more cognitive access points to the name and the probability of recall is increased.²⁸

The Brand Name Should Be an Emotional Word

Increasingly, academic researchers in both psychology and marketing have become interested in the interactions of emotion and cognition. Both psychological and marketing studies

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within this growing stream of research have concluded that memory is enhanced for affective, highly emotional information, words and brand names.^{1, 14, 28} Practical marketing literature seems to recognize the desirability of emotional names by referencing "good" name characteristics such as the name having strong positive associations or connotations, engendering good effective feeling, arousing pleasant emotions, being pleasant sounding, and having strong symbolism.^{5, 15, 21, 26} Examples of such emotional names are *Joy*, *Caress*, *Kiss*, *Love*, *My Sin*, and *Opium*.

An emotional word used as a brand name seems especially advisable when the product category itself is an emotional one. For example, the psychological phenomenon of "state-dependent memory" predicts superior memory for events that match an individual's current emotional state.² That is, one is more likely to recall happy thoughts when in a happy mood, romantic memories when in a romantic mood, and so on. Therefore, when a customer is thinking about an emotional product category such as cologne, it should be easier to recall matching emotional brand names, such as *Kiss* or *Love*. In a related area, researchers did not measure recall but did find increased preference for brand names that emotionally matched the feelings subjects ideally wanted to experience when using the product class.²²

It does not, however, appear that the memory advantage of emotional names is confined only to emotional product categories. For example, research has indicated that in order to observe recall effects associated with high-imagery words (see above), emotional values of tested brand names first had to be controlled for, even in relatively unemotional product categories such as computer software packages or board games.²⁹

Finally, it should be noted that emotion is a very basic response. It has been stated that "emotional connotations of a product, or of

any stimulus, represent the lowest common denominators of cognitive response to that product or stimulus."²² Further, any emotional response generated by a name tends to be highly automatic rather than under conscious control.¹ This fact implies that the emotional reaction to a word cannot be suppressed and requires little or no processing capacity or conscious attention. Thus the recall advantage of emotional names should appear even under the common, low-involvement situations found in the marketplace.

Characteristics Related To Support Of The Desired Brand Image

Marketers generally recognize the importance of selecting a brand name that supports the marketer's desired brand image. The marketing literature has expressed this desirable characteristic in a variety of ways, including beliefs that the brand name should be reflective of product benefits or desired positioning, should be suggestive of the product's use or attributes, and should be compatible with or extendable to other company product lines, brand names, and promotional efforts.^{10, 15, 23} Brand names often cited as successfully supporting a desired brand image or positioning strategy include *Lean Cuisine*, *Odor-Eaters*, *Cling-Free*, *Sunkist*, *Accutron*, and *Underalls*.

The emotional reaction to a word cannot be suppressed.

Thirty years ago Martineau stressed the importance of the "psychological label" on the product and noted that the brand name could set the stage for the critical symbolic interpretation of products.²⁰ Martineau was concerned with what a brand name connoted (meant) rather than denoted (designated).

The task facing management, therefore, is to identify the connotative meaning of potential brand names among the specified target market. Once such meaning is measured, the brand name is selected so that the name's meaning matches the desired product image or positioning strategy as closely as possible. There are

The name that is different increases the probability of further cognitive processes which lead to long-term memory.

both overt and nonovert methods of measuring the connotative meanings of potential brand names.^{26,28} Additionally, the linguistics literature reviewed below will help to guide the manager in selecting names with the inherent potential of generating a desirable meaning. First, however, it should be noted that most of the desirable name characteristics already presented in conjunction with enhanced memory are also desirable in the sense of supporting a brand image.

Memory Characteristics Also Related to Desirable Image Support

Before reviewing linguistic perspectives, note that several of the desirable brand name characteristics already cited will contribute to the consumer's perceived brand image and, therefore, can be used to support the marketer's desired positioning image. For example, a distinctive brand name lends support to a unique image, implying the brand is a one-of-a-kind product. Also, a "meaningful" name with existing connotative meaning in the consumer's mind seems a more fertile starting point for creating a desirable image of the product. That is, for a given promotional budget, it would be easier to attain a desired image by building upon the base of existing, meaningful perceptions rather than starting with no such perceptual base. Of course, the advantage of a nonmeaningful name in terms of positioning support should not be overlooked. With a nonmeaningful name (e.g. *Exxon*), the marketer begins with a "clean slate" and can generate product images without interference from existing perceptions. While this is less efficient in the sense of using existing perceptions, in an international market, or in a market of very diverse consumers, a nonmeaningful name may stand the best chance of not generating any undesirable images.

Brand names capable of generating emotional reactions or mental images also provide an existing perceptual base upon which to build

the desired product image more efficiently. For example, the mental images generated by the name *Mustang* naturally support a product image of strength, independence, and power. Without such a rich emotional or mental image base, an additional burden is placed upon promotional material designed to establish the desirable brand image.

As was indicated above, the marketer must identify the connotative meaning of names and match this meaning with the desired brand positioning. When the name in question is a real, recognized word, such meaning is naturally present and evoked in the mind of the consumer and can be measured in a variety of

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ways. However, even when the name is a nonword, individuals are capable of extracting some meaning. Exactly what overall meaning is derived from the brand name is therefore dependent upon both cognitive associations of the brand name (including any symbolic meaning) already stored in the consumer's mind and, in addition, consumer cognitions generated in response to several linguistic characteristics of the name. In the case of initial exposure to a nonword brand name where very little or no prior meaning exists in the consumer's mind, it is the more general linguistic characteristics of the name that contribute heavily to the overall meaning generated. It is these linguistic characteristics and their associated meanings that are reviewed next.

The Brand Name Should Make Use of Repetitive Sounds

Alliteration, assonance, consonance, rhyme, and rhythm are all linguistic characteristics reflecting the nature of repetitive sounds (or cadence) in a brand name. The presence of such repetitive sounds is usually pleasing to the ear and helps to generate a general pleasant feeling which contributes to the connotative meaning established for the name.^{5, 34} Alliteration refers to the repetition of consonants (e.g., *Coleco*) while assonance refers to

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the repetition of vowel sounds (e.g., *Ramada Inn*). Consonance is the repetition of consonants with an intervening vowel change (e.g., *Hamburger Helper*) and rhythm is the repetition of a pattern of syllable stress (e.g., *Better Business Bureau*).

There are numerous brand names incorporating some type of repetitive sound. Some examples of such names include: *Cascade*, *Solo*, *Crispy Critters*, *Rolls-Royce*, *Pampers*, *Deep Dish Danish*, *Max-Pax*, *Lean Cuisine*, *Gloss 'n Toss*, and *Shake 'n Bake*. To the extent that such names produce a pleasant sound, the overall connotative meaning of the brand name will support a desired brand image of "pleasantness." At best, however, this would create a very general type of meaning. More specific meaning is likely to be generated by the linguistic characteristics reviewed in the next section.

The Brand Name Should Make Use of Morphemes

Most linguists regard a morpheme as the smallest linguistic unit having consistent meaning, although some argue that phonemes are also capable of conveying consistent meaning, as will be discussed in the next section. There are more than 6,000 morphemes in the English language, ranging from full words (e.g., "man") to small parts of words such as the ending "-ly," including prefixes, suffixes, and roots. Theoretically, then, a brand name could be created that naturally supports the desired brand image by connecting morphemes whose combined meaning matches that image.

Such a morpheme-based approach to generating brand names has indeed been used^{4, 5, 33}. For example, the brand names *Compaq*, *Sentra*, and *Lucite* were developed using English morpheme combinations. However, anytime a morpheme combination approach is used to build a brand name, it is critical to establish the target market's perceived meaning of the new name. While linguistic scholars may uniformly agree that the Greek root *Nike*, for example, means

“victory,” there is no guarantee that a consumer exposed to the running shoe brand name *Nike* is going to incorporate the concept of “victory” into his or her meaning perceptions.

The Brand Name Should Make Use of Phonemes

Phonemes are linguistic units smaller in size than morphemes, such as individual letter sounds. Most mainstream linguists do not regard phonemes as conveying any consistent meaning.¹² However, the issue of phonetic symbolism (meaning) continues to be raised by researchers. Current evidence suggests that there is a very low correlation between the phonetic structure of existing words and the meanings of these words. However, if presented with nonwords *and* a semantic dimension upon which to place such words, subjects can show substantial agreement in their meaning assignments. For example, when asked to place “mal” and “mil” (differing only in the vowel phoneme /a/ or /i/) along the semantic dimension of size, about 80 percent of subjects agree that “mal” represents a large object and “mil” a smaller object.³²

The brand name should be a verbal or sound associate of the product class.

From a brand name perspective, then, phonetic meaning is more likely to be present and consistent when (1) a nonword brand name is used, and (2) consumers are given a semantic dimension upon which to generate meaning. This, of course, is quite common in marketing situations where an advertising theme or slogan serves to generate an appropriate semantic dimension upon which marketers wish (rightly or wrongly) a brand to be evaluated. For example, the slogan “we sell the biggest burgers in town” encourages evaluation along the semantic dimension of size. If the desired brand image is one of big burgers, a brand name such as *Mal Burgers* is more likely to support that image than the name *Mil Burgers*.

Keeping in mind the two basic requirements necessary for consistent meaning interpreta-

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tion, the following phoneme meanings have been suggested in linguistic and marketing literature:^{4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 17, 30, 32} (1) **Size:** high, front vowel sounds (*i, e*) connote a small size while low, back vowel sounds (*a, o, u*) indicate a large size (e.g., *Zee* versus *Koss*); (2) **Movement:** high, front vowel sounds indicate dynamic movement while low, back vowel sounds are associated with slow or “heavy” movement, and the consonant combination *sl* indicates a gliding or slipping movement; (3) **Shape:** the acute sounds associated with the high, front vowel sounds indicate sharp, angular shapes while the flat sounds associated with low, back vowel sounds indicate roundish shapes; (4) **Luminosity:** high, front vowel sounds and the consonants *k, s,* and *l* indicate light while the low, back vowel sounds and the consonants *d, m, gr,* and *br* connote darkness; (5) **Youth:** the consonants *j, g, ch,* and the semi-vowels *y* and *w* connote youthfulness and joy (as in *Joya* and *Jovan*); (6) **Gender:** masculinity is associated with plosive and guttural sounds (as in “tiger” or “cougar”) and with the low, back vowel sounds, while femininity is associated with the soft sibilants *s* and *c,* weak *f* sounds and the high, front vowel sounds (e.g., *Silk-Ease, Zepher,* and *Cerissa*).

Brand Image Support Characteristics Also Related to Memory

Just as several of the desirable memory characteristics given above are related to image or positioning support, repetitive sound, morpheme, and phoneme characteristics may also enhance memory. For example, to the extent that repetitive sounds generate an emotional, pleasant feeling response, memory for the name should be strengthened. Also, because morphemes and phonemes are capable of conveying meaning, their judicious use can result in more meaningful brand names. As was previously pointed out, this meaningfulness characteristic results in enhanced memory for the name.

Summary and Conclusions

Managers faced with the task of selecting a "good" name for a product, service, or company should be guided by the following generalizations:

1. The brand name should be a simple word.
2. The brand name should be a distinctive word.
3. The brand name should be a meaningful word.
4. The brand name should be a verbal or sound associate of the product class.
5. The brand name should elicit a mental image.
6. The brand name should be an emotional word.
7. The brand name should make use of the repetitive sounds generated by alliteration, assonance, consonance, rhyme, and rhythm.
8. The brand name should make use of morphemes.
9. The brand name should make use of phonemes.

The above generalizations are based upon the premise that a "good" brand name will support the desired image for the product and

will be easily recalled by the target market. There may be other criteria upon which to judge the worth of a brand name (e.g., whether or not the selected name is legally protectable or if the name "fits in" with the array of names already in use by the company) and the manager must also consider these alternative criteria before finally selecting an appropriate brand name. Of course, the manager must also make full use of available research which may be more specifically tied to the target market being faced.

The brand name should be a distinctive word.

It should be finally noted that brand names lacking the characteristics described in this paper may still be successful in the marketplace. A substantial, well-planned and well-executed promotional campaign may go a long way in negating the effects of a "bad" brand name. However, the point that must be made is that, for a given marketing budget, results, in terms of brand name recall or perceived product image among consumers in the target market, will be more substantial with a "good" brand name. Alternatively, given a target recall rate or a target image, fewer marketing dollars will have to be spent with a "good" brand name in order to reach that target.

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