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White Paper

Descriptive to Distinctive: The Science (and Sanity) Behind Brand Naming

Wild Plum

Take it from these brand marketers, naming is a complex task. Developing a strong brand name involves more than just personal preference. You may also need to manage the opinions of stakeholders who may not understand the objective qualities that make a brand name effective. Heck, sometimes Marketing isn't even involved in a branding discussion until your stakeholders tell you, "We're launching a new product and it's going to be called….". They're super excited! You're super terrified.

Everyone loves to name the baby. We all have nifty ideas about what's clever. But like an inside joke, you risk alienating the portion of your audience who isn't in on it. And like naming a baby, branding a business or a product can be immensely personal. Sometimes brand names are chosen for one reason. It may be the way it sounds, a personal meaning to the word or phrase, or you think it makes sense and fits the market. All those reasons are legitimate. But when choosing a brand name, it can be helpful (even critical) to consider other factors to ensure you find a brand name that will work for you, your prospective customers, and your company in the long run.

Brands are meant to create distinction, not definition.

Some of you reading this may think, "No way! I need my customers to understand what this is." Yes, but that's the job of the plain language description of goods or of the business itself. Need proof? The Trademark Office won't entertain registration applications for something that is descriptive. After all, isn't your brand meant to set you apart from the competition, not present like a "me too" or a follower? Yes! This nugget of information alone should prime your team for thinking out of the box and not going down the same pathway as your competitor.

Apple is one of the most recognizably distinctive brands. Their name isn't "techy" but it's simple like their value proposition. They promote a simple user interface and user experience. And their name matches their brand promise.

Do you really need to brand your product?

By default, products already have a brand – the company brand. And depending on the market and competitive landscape, it can take years to develop a new brand. Yes, it may take months or years for your target audience to know a new brand name and associate it with your company and value proposition. It can be sped up with a lot of effort and investment.

Before you start thinking of new brands, look at your existing brands. What was your strategy with those brands that you should follow? What kinds of things are branded (products, services, programs, events, etc.)? How do other product brands relate to the company brand? Does this new good or service fit under an umbrella of a brand you already have?* Does adding a brand to this new thing imply it will not work with other goods or services you offer with different brand names? And what is the company willing to invest in building the brand? If there's no budget, there should not be a new brand.

Insider tip:
This is called your "brand architecture". If you don't have one and your brands are populating like rabbits, call us!*

The only person who will know your new brand is you. On the day you announce your new product or service, that should be the first time the market has heard its name. And not everyone will get the memo. Marketers know that it takes 7+ attempts of telling your audience one thing before they start to remember it. This is true for your brand. Nobody will be searching for your brand name in their browsers. So be sure that giving your new thing a nifty name isn't your launch strategy.

**If you do not have a brand architecture, first list and sort existing brands. Next examine what things are branded and the style of those brands. Then, ask if your new thing fits into an existing brand category.*

If you're looking for a brand, think of 100. And give yourself 3 months.

There are a lot of great ideas. But it turns out, you may not be the only one who has those fabulous thoughts. Brand naming requires detailed thinking, but big volume to get to "the one". In our experience, 75 to 100 is about the right number of candidates to have to find a few or one suitable brand name. Why? There are a lot of criteria and considerations that wean them out.

verizon

Many big brands including Starbucks, Amazon, Accenture, and Verizon have stories about their exhaustive naming process. Verizon was chosen from no less than 8500 options after the merger of Bell Atlantic and GTE in 2000.

Here are some of the things that can put a candidate on the cutting floor.

1. **All or part of the word is already used by a brand in the same or adjacent space.** Even if it's a product or company that doesn't do the same thing or isn't a substitute for your solution, if they have a like-name they market to the same audience, it can cause confusion.

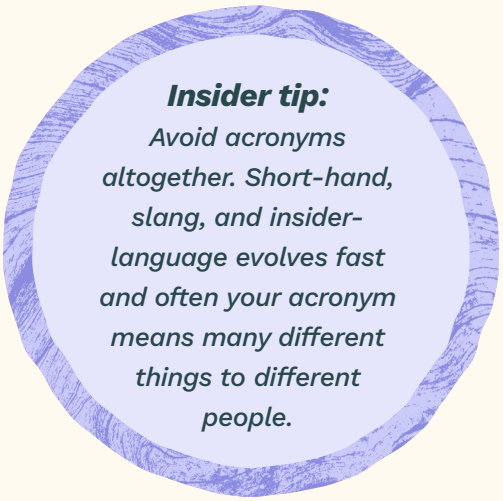
   That fact alone will likely make a trademark registration impossible. The United States Trade Mark Office (USTMO) has the job of advocating for businesses and consumers and works to ensure there is clarity and fairness.

   This aspect may rule out >2/3 of your ideas.

2. **Common words or phrases take more marketing investment than you have** to gain visibility in the market. Imagine naming your new line of bicycles “Chocolate”. If a prospect tries to find your product by brand name, they may have to scroll through dozens of search results unless they’re savvy enough to include “chocolate bicycles” in their search term. And even then, they may find bikes colored brown before discovering your brand. Overcoming this may take a fair amount of digital advertising to help prospects discover your brand.

3. **Another company (that you don’t want to be associated with) is using it.** Even though their business is not related to your business, you may not want to show up side-by-side in a prospect’s search results.

4. **It’s lost in translation. There may be cultural barriers to candidates.** Perhaps the word doesn’t translate well or translates terribly (to something undesirable), that may be proper language or slang. Other ways brands may not perform across cultures are through associations to social, political, or historical sensitivities, attitudes, values, and norms, or ease of pronunciation. Acronyms fall into this category. Inherently, they rely on local language, in-industry people (and sometimes within the company) culture understanding.



How do you build a list of 100 brand name candidates?

To build a robust list of ideas, seek inspiration from a lot of places and people. But steer the ship! Establish alignment up front with your colleagues and volunteers so they can contribute meaningfully. Here are a few ideas about how to approach setting up your team for fruitful brainstorming.

Start by framing the effort based on your company’s approach. If everything has the company name, then the new product will, too. If only “special” products or technologies are branded, ensure your group has clarity on the criteria for what “deserves” a brand name. Product groups may need to rank priority product lines, prove market differentiation, or presume quota criteria for branding investment.

If a brand name that helps story tell is desired, ensure you’re fully briefed on the value proposition, application, and competitive landscape. While brands themselves are not descriptive, you might explore other categories of things that demonstrate the qualities you’d like associated with your company or product. For instance, if your product is “flexible”, brainstorm around the idea of being flexible. What things are flexible? What does

being flexible mean to the customer? How does the customer benefit from flexibility? Take all ideas down because the odds are, you may brainstorm for several weeks, scaffolding ideas to get to some truly unique candidates.

Explore root words, other languages, prefixes, and suffixes. Invite a small group of contributors to workshop together and independently. Ask them to exchange ideas and lists to advance concepts. The iterations are key. As mentioned earlier, of the 100 candidates, you may find that Googling the candidate plus a keyword that describes the thing will rule out a majority of the list.

Yes, it's a lot of work and time. And in our experience, at least three months to properly cultivate and evaluate options.

Making a new brand name decision

Congratulations! You've done the hard work, and now it's time to name the baby. First, start by showing the brand in context. For most of us who don't do something every day or are involved in things when we may not be the expert, it helps to see things in context. When you get to your short list of Legal-team-cleared candidates, give them an exercise.

- Speak the name. "BRAND – DESCRIPTION OF GOODS" or "BRAND – VALUE PROPOSITION".
- Show a mock-up advertisement with your company colors, logo, and graphics.
- Write a short paragraph about the brand using its name in the narrative.

Seeing things in context helps us recognize their degree of potential and can often elicit a visceral response.

Welcome to Two Bees Lavender

Based in Virginia's Northern Neck, we're a family-owned lavender farm providing fresh and dried flowers and handmade lavender goods from local craftspeople.

Visit us, the two bees - Stacey and Kevin, at our shore-side farm stand or check us out online at www.twobeeslavender.com. See what the buzz is about!

Two Bees is: Playful, Active, Youthful, Cute, Clean, Simple, Approachable, Happy, Light, & airy

Here's an example from our client Two Bees Lavender. As a business name, Two Bees was selected prior to having a brand system was built. So, we gave each name a personality through word and tone choice, personality characteristics, attributes, and mood boards.

And when it comes time to vote, establish a methodical and objective approach. We recommend the following.

1. Identify who gets a vote (Marketing, Sales, Product Management, etc.)
2. Establish a scoring system. We recommend evaluating candidates against many criteria such as:
    - Fit with brand architecture (does the name look and sound like it came from your company)
    - Culture checks (especially important if you'll do business outside of one region)
    - Easy to speak and write
    - Length if it needs to fit on a particularly small item
    - Memorable
    - Uniqueness from competitors
    - Does it complement what you want to communicate about your product?
    - Gut reaction (this allows you to consider people's personal preferences without steamrolling your process and objectivity)

	Fit	Culture	Ease	Length	Memorable	Uniqueness	Complement	Gut Reaction	Average Score
Product Name A									
Product Name B									
Product Name C									
Product Name D									
Product Name E									

Create a table with your criteria to rate and rank your product name options

Influencing the septics and naysayers

Speaking of gut reactions, there are always people who will remain subjective. That can be troublesome when it's a senior leader who may assert their right to make the brand name decision. Our advice is to confirm who the final decision-maker is before the work begins. Once there's a request for a new brand, besides gathering the business context as to why they're asking, also clarify who should be involved in the brand naming process and who makes the final decision. With that understanding, you can adapt your approach and communication style accordingly.

In conclusion

The process is rarely straightforward. Even when you've considered every angle from sound, meaning, market fit, cultural resonance, and more. There will be rounds of feedback, revisions, and unexpected opinions. Sometimes, the best name is a compromise, balancing uniqueness with accessibility, personal vision with collective understanding. It's essential to set clear criteria and remind stakeholders of the objectives: to create something memorable, ownable, and lasting. Navigating this landscape requires patience and tact, as well as an openness to diverse perspectives, ensuring that the name not only captures the spirit of the brand but also builds bridges across backgrounds and viewpoints.

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