

NAMING: A SUBJECTIVE PRIMER

Stanley Moss

The understandable quotient of high anxiety connected to the process of naming cannot be overstated. Like all things branding, the question of naming begs to be taken in context. Organizations have specific needs at unique times in their own histories. Organizations seeking to name must write their own unique rule book every time the process occurs. The anxiety is real, since the complexities only increase in a fast-moving world.

When to name?

Naming does not always take place at the outset of a new business, the time when the traumatizing process typically happens. Classic scenarios for renaming might also overlap with those of a brand relaunch. The dilemma may arise at a moment of corporate soul-searching; at instances of new ownership, acquisition or merger; following bad news; at a time of radical change in competency or category; or coincidental to a significant product launch. Naming does not exclusively apply to startup ventures.

Naming, in retrospect

Before the Industrial Era only two types of name existed for organizations, those of individuals or places of origin. The earliest examples of organizational naming seen in the Western world might be The East India Companies of Britain and Holland, which prefigured the age of mass-production, the proliferation of formalized business organizations, and the earliest need to differentiate between purveyors or vendors. With a multiplicity of mass-produced products, the quest to distinguish organizational vision and values became a critical part of operational strategy. Thus names gained increasing importance as levers of commerce. Early in the Industrial Revolution, the proper names of the founders proved most popular in organizational nomenclature: Proctor & Gamble; Fortnum & Mason, Breuguet. By the end of the nineteenth century, incorporating competency into organizational names had gained popularity: Colt's Patent Firearms Manufacturing Company; Ford Motor Company; American Telephone & Telegraph.

Into the 20th century, proper names of founders and location proved less interesting to organizations, and less important, as consumers sought credibility through indications of competency and category. This gave way to more specific names: International Business Machines, General Electric, National Broadcasting Company. This trend led into the use of initials, mnemonic reminders of what the words might stand for: NBC, IBM, SCM, MTV, CNN. In the product category, names like Kleenex, which had a euphonic connection to function or utility also became popular. More latitude in naming is traditionally allowed in products.

Since the 1960s the art of naming has evolved into a lucrative subdiscipline of branding, with whole businesses founded on name-creation. Firms like these promoted the popularity of fusion names like Microsoft (microcircuitry+software), Transamerica, MetLife (the former Metropolitan Life Assurance Society of the US), Unisys, Alcatel. But names of this type tend to root companies in the era they were founded. Microsoft, for example, has the sound of an old-style organization, with a traditional personality, certainly a step behind the times. Other names obscurely reference attachment to category or competency by esoteric association: Activision, Netflix, PlayStation, Facebook. This trend of fusion naming led into the craze for invented hybrid names which "sounded like things" but could not be found in a dictionary: Accenture, Lucent, Diageo, Viacom, Novartis.

There was also the consequent backlash with nonsensical, nonrelevant or faintly contemptuous names like Google, Yahoo! (note the exclamation point), GoDaddy, Zynga, Xoom and Yelp! A surprising and daring construct from the apparel industry, French Connection United Kingdom, shocked the commercial arena by displaying its acronym across the marketplace in capital letters (FCUK), tantamount to screaming on the internet; while the name attracted attention, it's uncertain whether the strategy promoted an uptick in sales. The latest wave of names apply a kind of random fusion reflecting abbreviation, truncation or newspeak spellings to further differentiate in the marketplace: Instagram, Airbnb, Tumblr. Some names have a private meaning to the organization only, and don't communicate more than a neutral label to the outside world (Starbucks). Consequently, the successful company gains ownership of the random association.

A name can bear a meaning, a sound, or a visual reminder and no coherent point of reference. A product-inspired name, nonsensical name or a legacy name can migrate into a generic association like Xerox, Google, or Jacuzzi. But a measure of caution is suggested in a crowded landscape, where the modern business needs to consider the concurrent availability of domain names, many of which have been claimed by opportunistic name-hoarders.

What a name does or doesn't do

While a single name cannot achieve all of the following, any aspect that can be emulated adds value to an organization's inherent equity. A name may

- Associate with a founder
- Associate with a place of origin
- Associate with a competency or category
- Associate with a parent company
- Serve as reminder of some brand vision or value
- Differentiate from competition
- Poke fun at the marketplace
- Suggest a radical or new attitude
- Recollect, hijack or pirate an established brand
- Provide an irrelevant or incongruous perspective

The 4 ages of a name

Our relationship with organizational names changes over time. Think of this as a process of evolution, proceeding from a beginning where nothing is known about what the name represents, and transiting a procession of familiarity or adoption, until a level of acceptance is reached. It can be regarded like a narrative, as some degree of friendship or relationship is created. It's an elastic timeline, but ultimately coherent.

Chapter 1: *"Never heard of you."* The process begins from a position of ignorance. The name is not recognized, and may come with some irrational prejudices attached. At this stage, if differentiation in a crowded market is required, a name can produce a powerful distinction from competitors. It's a challenge to get noticed, to interest the stakeholder. The task at the outset is simply to gain attention. Shorter names can be more memorable. Names containing a graphical twist, eccentric spelling or a mnemonic trigger may act as temporary commercial levers. But the advantage is quickly lost as familiarization evolves. After this stage, reputation is tested.

Chapter 2: *"Now I recognize you."* At this juncture in the narrative the name begins to mean something to the stakeholder. It's no longer a case of gaining attention or introduction, having now moved into a repetitive process of cognitive recognition. The element of surprise has

passed; the organization must prove that it either stands for something, or has a product or service to which it can be positively attached. This is the first portal of adoption and advocacy, where the beginning of a relationship is built. The name decreases in importance. The vision and values of the organization need to step forward and establish themselves by reputation and action.

Chapter 3: *"You belong to me, or you don't."* Once recognition has been achieved, the stakeholder crosses the threshold of adoption, constructing a personal set of assumptions or expectations about what the name represents. Now the name becomes part of the user's identity, vocabulary, self-concept, and a statement of the user's values.

Chapter 4: *"I no longer see your name. I see only your essence."* At this juncture the name achieves invisibility. It's become so familiar to the user that no conscious effort for recognition is necessary, embedded in the user's awareness as a familiar meme. This is a radical transformation from the outset of a relationship to the name, when nothing was known. This is the zone of inherent expectations where the name is barely considered.

Choosing your name

The first real challenge in name-creation comes with the necessity to achieve embedded meaning within the organization. If, within the organization's walls, a sense of the logic (or illogic) for a name is understood, the first great battle has been won. The marketplace will accept nearly any name chosen as long as it does not communicate derision or contempt. On a superficial level, the traditional idea that a name carries some statement of category or competency is outdated. A name can be as vague or abstract as a Dada artwork. Ultimately, within the organization, the name can work as an object of pride or emblem of vision and values. That would be the ideal internally, a banner or clarion call to better understanding the context of the business. Thus, a name is a simple tool of differentiation at worst, and a cleverly crafted signal of an organization's *raison d'être* at best.

How important is a name?

Consider the metaphor of the cocktail party. The marketplace is like a room full of loud conversations and a multitude of costumes. Whom do you wish to talk to, whom do you remember? The loudest voice may not be the best candidate- bombast, arrogance, noise pollution do not win friends. Nor are you interested in the wallflower sitting silently at the sidelines. The dullest grey suit doesn't interest you, nor does the screaming electric orange necktie, nor the excess of décolletage. Confidence mixed with a modicum of humility, a happy bearing, an air of generosity, and a combination of good taste and interesting visual presentation attract you to an individual. Much the same is true with an organizational name. The individual you discover behind the signals is the ultimate proof of the entity. A name isn't really all that important. What counts is the vision, values and conduct that stand behind the name.

Stanley Moss is CEO of The Medinge Group, a Stockholm-based think-tank on international branding. A writer and brand guru, he is founder of Diganzi Group, a consultancy. See www.diganzi.com

DiGanZi