

What's in a Name?

Brand names play an increasingly key role in helping companies separate themselves from the pack and gain early market share

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By **John Obrecht**



Naming new brands is one of the most nettlesome marketing tasks. But now it's getting even more challenging, taking up additional bandwidth among time-strapped marketers.

That's the conclusion of a recent survey of CMOs by Lexicon Branding, the agency behind such names as Pentium, Sonos, and Swiffer. Lexicon queried 75 CMOs across a wide spectrum of industries — comprising automotive, consumer products, healthcare, finance, technology, and entertainment — for **its report**.

Among the key findings:

Ninety-three percent of CMOs surveyed agreed that naming is harder now than it was five years ago, and nearly 50 percent expect it to be much more difficult in the next five years.

Among eight major marketing elements, naming ranks highest in importance to success. The other elements, in descending order of ranked importance, are positioning, paid advertising, PR, social media presence, logo design, package design, and tagline.

A plurality of CMOs (22.7 percent) consider naming the most difficult of the eight marketing elements to get right.

There was no consensus as to the leading factor making naming more difficult. The top response was creative process (23.6 percent), followed by trademark (21.2 percent), URL availability (20 percent), language/localization (20 percent), and gaining organizational consensus (15.2 percent).

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Brand names play a key role in helping companies separate themselves from the pack.



Part of the problem with naming is consumer overload. "Consumers are more distracted than ever before," says David Placek, founder and president of Lexicon. "I like to use the phrase 'dramatically distracted consumers.' We have news, information, entertainment 24 hours a day, seven days a week. ... Getting someone's attention for just a few seconds has never been more difficult."

However, the effort to cut through the clutter is worth it, as marketers who get the naming process right have much to gain. "Within the next couple of years, clients — particularly the more conceptually thinking clients — will realize that names can play a larger role in helping to launch a brand and gain early share," Placek says. "In addition to being more important, names will be more difficult to develop, select, and legally protect."

Naming Strategy Paramount

So how can marketers overcome the challenges to creating effective names? The first step is to focus on marketing strategy. "Naming has been widely seen as a creative and a tactical exercise, but the digital economy, with all its innovations, has changed that," Placek says. "It has elevated naming from the tactical to the strategic."

Hayes Roth, principal and founder of HA Roth Consulting and former CMO at brand consultancy Landor Associates, says: "All good branding starts with sound strategy. You have to have a strong brand strategy from which you can logically and strategically evaluate the different names that get generated."

Roth says the more branding parameters that can be put around the naming process, the more creatively focused naming professionals can be. "What qualities do you need to emphasize? What image does the name need to evoke?" he says. "Mister Softee isn't going to work very well for a steel company."

Steve Manning, director of naming and founder of Igor Naming Agency, whose clients include EA Sports, The North Face, and WarnerMedia, says, "It's essential to take as much subjectivity out of the name evaluation process as possible. This is done by creating a job description for the name, as well as a list of positioning points that the name needs to convey. Judging potential names based upon agreed criteria, and not on personal likes or dislikes, is essential."

The next step is a competitive analysis. "This is critical for refining brand positioning," Manning says. "It tells you exactly where you need to be name-wise in order to dominate the competitive landscape."

Bryan Harpine, director of global new products at Church & Dwight Co., parent of Arm & Hammer, stresses that it's important to establish the selling process from the get-go. "If you build out the selling process first, you've got a better chance of getting a fit for the right name," he says.

Stumbling Blocks

With a sound strategy in place, name generation begins. Naming experts agree there are some approaches to be avoided.

Jasmine Tanasy, executive director of naming and verbal identity at Landor Associates, says to beware of the "romantic idea" that if you get a bunch of people together over pizza and a glass of wine good names will follow.

"That's just not reality. What happens in that session is all the stuff that's top of mind rises to the surface," Tanasy says. "It's frustrating to our clients. They didn't nail it because they treated it like a creative exercise, and that's not enough."

Roth, who has been involved in brand naming for more than 30 years, says an especially misguided approach is to open up the process to nonprofessionals: "Let's do a contest — employees, the public, everybody can join the fun!" he says. While such an effort might be good PR for the company, it rarely results in good and/or memorable names.

Roth recommends tapping several people with training and demonstrated skill for generating names. "Sometimes you need to generate thousands of names," he says. "You start off with a very broad-stroke generation process. You usually want to tap into several people who have some propensity for this."

Marketers also need to brace themselves — choosing new names can be a laborious process. Arm & Hammer, working with Lexicon, reviewed 75 names for its nonstick cat litter before choosing "**Slide**." Another Lexicon client, Plenaire, chose its name from among 20 the agency presented. The direct-to-consumer digital beauty brand, founded by Unilever marketing veteran Namrata Nayyar-Kamdar, is set to launch in September.

After the initial roundup of names comes the winnowing process. Roth says an experienced naming person can usually knock out more than half of the names generated based on knowledge of the field.

The names are weighed against established criteria, which Roth says include: "Are they strategically relevant? Are they on brand? Are they pronounceable? Are they linguistically viable?"

After the choices are narrowed, the names are put through a preliminary legal screening. This trademark knockout search prevents "an endless exercise in seeking" and helps avoid "falling in love until you know what you can have," Tanasy says.

There are also global branding considerations. Roth says that at Landor names would generally be run by the agency's foreign branches to answer the question: Does this word mean something nasty or stupid in your language? "Those are very easy to miss sometimes, even when you've done your homework," Roth says. "You can still get surprised." He adds that after running the global gamut, "If you're lucky you end up with one or two names at the end that may both pass client approval and formal legal clearance."

Suggestive, Not Descriptive

In naming Arm & Hammer's new nonstick cat litter, which debuted in 2017, Harpine says he was guided by three principles. He wanted a name that would pique consumers' curiosity and lead them to seek more information about a product that promised easy cleanup. He wanted it to be "short, poetic, and memorable." And he preferred that it be "suggestive" rather than "descriptive." "Slide" hit the mark.

"No one in the category had come up with a single-word name," Harpine says, citing prominent brands in the cat litter market such as Double Duty and Tidy Cat. "Slide was a single-word name that we found stood out on the shelf."

Harpine says the selection of the suggestive name rather than a descriptive one such as "Nonstick Litter" helped drive what proved to be a \$100 million launch. "If we had gone with Nonstick, it probably would have been a \$15 (million) or \$20 million launch," he says.

For Plenaire's Nayyar-Kamdar, the challenge was to come up with a compelling brand name that would make her beauty products startup stand out. The process didn't go well initially, she says. "I was given some pretty terrible advice to name my product an acronym — which felt sad and desperate — or, say, even worse, a series of numbers like skyn 411," she says.

Nayyar-Kamdar's goal was to find a name that would capture her vision of a clean beauty products brand focused on generation Z consumers. She turned to Lexicon for help.

After interviewing Nayyar-Kamdar and reviewing her market research, Lexicon presented 20 choices from which she chose Plenaire. The name is a variation on en plein air, a French term used to describe painting in the open air.

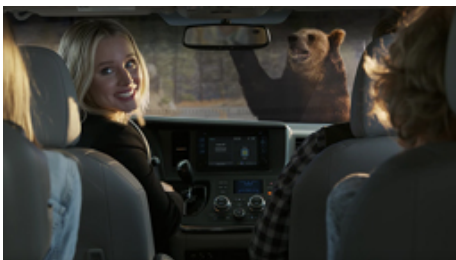
"Plenaire is an analogy for a new beauty narrative which is outside, far away from fake advertising shoots and big, old-school beauty," Nayyar-Kamdar says, adding that she knew immediately it was the right choice. "It was like finding a puzzle piece that fit perfectly."

Fear Factor

Branding experts say marketers need a certain fearlessness when it comes to deciding on a name.

"A lot of name decisions are made based on fear," Tanasy says, noting that the most comfortable name in a particular category is likely already taken by another company. "The next level has risk in it," she says. "It's really hard to say, 'This is uncomfortable.' You have to accept the discomfort."

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The macro challenge is to create a unique name that is going to grab attention in the marketplace. "Those names are typically not comfortable. There's some risk," Placek says. "As humans, we like to be comfortable. It's counterintuitive to approve something that you're not comfortable with. The phrase we like to use is 'surprisingly familiar.'"

Placek says the more traditional view of naming is: "Our new name has to have meaning. It should differentiate us by offering a benefit."

He cites as an example the Craftsman tool brand, introduced in 1927. "'Craftsman' says: 'We're making really good tools.' Those highly suggestive names are pretty much gone now."

By the very nature of its newness, a name such as Swiffer or Pentium raises consumers' expectation of innovation. "Truly distinctive names make us think,"

Hitting All the Right Notes

Placek says. "They're not just sort of describing something. They're saying, 'Gosh, what is a Pentium inside this computer?'"

Placek also stresses the importance of memorability in choosing a name and offers these tips: "The first step is to abandon the need to be logical and comfortable. The second step is to understand that there is a science behind memory. All of us more easily remember what we can understand and what we can visualize."

Placek illustrates this with the astronomy concept of a black hole. "I don't really know what a black hole in space is, but at a certain level I can visualize it and understand it," he says.

THE NAME GAME

Renaming vs. Naming

Planning to rename an existing brand? Expect a bit of drama. While the basics are similar to those for naming a new brand — determining a strategy, generating lists of potential names, assessing potential global pitfalls — naming experts say rechristening legacy brands creates a whole new set of challenges.

"The key difference is you're moving away from something people were comfortable with," says Jasmine Tanasy, executive director of naming and verbal identity at Landor Associates.

She adds, "There's a little bit of mourning involved in renaming, and I think it's helpful in getting people to move on. That's the big difference. You need to have that sort of moment where you thank that name and you can move on."

David Placek, founder and president of Lexicon Branding, says, "The question we ask about rebranding, in addition to why you're rebranding, is where are you going? ... We spend more time with who you want to be with a rebrand."

Hayes Roth, principal and founder of HA Roth Consulting, says he asks clients what's wrong with the name they have, and if it's reparable. "It's critical to first evaluate the equity in the current brand."

The process of trying to sell a new name is so painful and challenging, Roth says, it should generally be considered the last option. "You run into all kinds of emotional barriers," he says. "People get very attached to familiar names." Companies are much better off, he says, "if they can find a way to infuse fresh, relevant meaning into an existent name" via better branding, design, and positioning.

—*J.O.*

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Hayes Roth

August 17, 2019 12:06pm ET

Very thorough and thoughtful article on a much misunderstood topic, John. Nicely done and thanks for reaching out!

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