

Biggest Naming Mistakes

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As the year wraps up and people start tabulating their “top 10” lists, I thought it would be a good time to share the five biggest mistakes you can make when naming your company, product or service.

1. Mistaking the name for the brand.

Your company or product name is just part of your brand. Not realizing this, many novice branders put too many expectations on their name.

It is important to realize your name works in a context. Other elements such as your logo, messaging, the entire visual look of your brand, and the communication tactics you use join your name in the heavy lifting that goes into creating your brand.

Some of the leading brands in the world don't look like much when stripped of all other brand elements. Take the name ebay. Would you have looked at that word a dozen years ago and said, “Wow, a leading global brand!”? Not likely. Add the logo, the visual context, the attitude and personality, the story of the brand, the experience—then you have that leading global brand.

I've seen a number of naming projects end in failure. One client wanted a name that meant “synthetic oil”, “wear protection”, and “smooth operation”. It had to work around the world and have no more than 6 letters. Believe me, there is no combination of 6 letters in any alphabet that can deliver on those expectations! This client was simply putting too much on the shoulders of the name. Your name definitely needs to communicate, but it cannot, by itself, be your brand.

2. Looking for a “likable” the name.

Any time a client starts evaluating the “likeability” of a brand name candidate, the project is doomed. Likeability is an entirely nebulous concept that is impossible to objectively define. Likeability is in the eyes of the beholders.

Likeability can actually be harmful as a criterion of a “good” name. Years of research have shown a strong link between likeability and familiarity. People tend to like names that are in their comfort zone of the known and conventional. That means likeable names are not going to stand out as different. And being distinctive is the most important quality your name can have.

3. Lacking criteria that define a “good” name.

Since “likeability” is a poor standard for determining a good name, what standard should you use?

The best name is the one that makes the right people (your customers) think the right things (about your product). You need to define what your brand will stand for, both in a logical sense of features and benefits and in an emotional sense of feelings and associations. Your name has to suggest, inspire, or reference this brand definition.

Second, your brand needs to be different. You can't choose a name in a vacuum. You must consider what your competitors are doing. Avoid anything that even comes close to mimicking their brands. You can name a dozen other criteria for choosing a “good” name, but if you get these two, you are 80% there.



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4. Going for “memorability”.

The standard advice of brand experts far and wide is to go for memorable names. This ridiculous piece of advice is useless to most branders. The problem is three-fold:

a. First what do you know about what makes a word or name memorable? A really different brand isn't necessarily memorable. PWC Consulting spent \$110 million to change its name to Mondays, a very “different” choice with disastrous results. A short word is no more memorable than a long one. Chevrolet is more successful than Geo. Hidden Valley Ranch is a full three words and five syllables of memorability! Spell-ability isn't intrinsic to memorability. Winnebago isn't spell-able—how many folks forget there are two “n's”? How can you evaluate memorability when you don't know what criteria actually contribute to it?

b. Memorability is inextricably bound to the rest of your brand elements. Memorability is created by your communications more than by your name. Was AFLAC a memorable brand? For years, the company operated under this string of letters. You can imagine the talk internally about having to change the name something better. After all, it sounded like the quack of a duck. Bing! AFLAC became a powerful brand, not because of a great name, but because of a great duck. That said, maybe there is hope for TIAA-CREF (but maybe not.)

c. You can't see memorability by simply looking at a name. You have to test for memorability. You'll need quantitative research to track reaction over time to know if your name is “memorable” or not.

Nothing is wrong with memorability. But don't attempt to use this criteria when looking at a list of words.

5. Evaluating names yourself.

Some people do find a name to “fall in love” with. More likely, you'll consider dozens if not hundreds of names, and not love a single one. If you are good, you might compare your name candidates to your list of objective criteria and still feel you haven't found the right one.

The problem is that you are unqualified to evaluate names. Why? Because you are not the target audience for your name.

To find a great name, or even a good-enough name, you have to take your concepts to your market. Big companies spend thousands of dollars testing names with consumers. You can do it fast and cheap and almost as well by taking your names on tour yourself. Take your candidates to potential or existing customers. Go beyond that. Show them to the clerk at the dry cleaners. Ask your neighbor. Get as many reactions to your top name candidates list as possible. Don't ask them if they “like” any of the names. Ask them what each name makes them think about.

Again, you are looking for the right associations and reactions, not likability. With this kind of feedback, you'll have some idea of how to tinker with your name candidates to improve the reactions.

Naming a product or company isn't easy. It's not like naming a child. Choosing a brand name is about communication, not aesthetics. A rational process driven by objective criteria will help you identify the name that achieves your communication goals. And, who knows, with time, you may even come to “love” it.

