

PRODUCT NAMING AND BRANDING: WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

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What are the strategic considerations that should guide your product naming? What is the relationship of your product name to your corporate brand? When should a product have its own brand?

A quick review of some branding fundamentals is helpful before we talk about how to come up with that killer product name. The term “brand architecture” while sounding a bit self-important, is in fact the key concept underlying successful product naming.

Brand Architecture, which I’ll refer to as “Naming Architecture” for this blog, describes how a family of brands relate to one another. There are essentially three architectural naming models to which businesses subscribe, Masterbrand, Endorsed Brand and Individual Brand.

The Three Main Brand Naming Architectures



Masterbrand



Endorsed



Individual



From this diagram, we see that businesses like Google have a “Masterbrand” Naming Architecture in which product names are generic appendages to the corporate entity, which is where all the brand’s value accrues.

In the “Individual” Naming Architecture, sometimes referred to as the Procter & Gamble model, the corporate entity is more of a holding company and the individual product brand stands on its own and can have a unique name, identity and marketing. With Individual brands, the brand value accrues to the product (brand) rather than corporate brand.

Endorsed brands are in the middle. Microsoft Windows or Courtyard Marriott are good examples. I’ll devote less space on this as our audience is companies with either a Masterbrand or Individual brands.

By first identifying the brand model of your business, you will establish a structure to your naming conventions. Masterbrands like Google, Virgin or BMW focus on extensibility in their naming convention and tend to use generic, descriptive terms or as in BMW’s case, numbers as product names. A key benefit of Masterbrands is that they don’t require extensive and expensive unique branding campaigns for different products as all value accrues to the one brand. Another benefit is that product names under a Masterbrand are relatively easy to trademark, which is no small deal as we’ll discuss Individual brands. A downside of a Masterbrand is that if one product area in a Masterbrand’s suite is performing poorly, the entire Masterbrand may take a hit, especially if the Masterbrand only contains a small number of product sub-brands.

Individual brands are where product naming becomes interesting and challenging. Here we address “what’s in a name,” by considering product vision, short and long-term goals, customer profiles, competitor names, positioning opportunities, industry trends, desired image attributes and stylistic preferences.

Criteria for name development

While naming can be a creative process, the ability to trademark a name is exponentially more difficult the more descriptive a name is. Let’s take a look at the strength of different naming approaches. Strength is a measure of how easy a copyright is to protect. The stronger the name, the harder it is to show infringement.

Fanciful

A Fanciful name is one that is made up to designate a product or service. These are considered the strongest names. The balance is that because they are not intuitive or recognizable, one has to build a successful marketing strategy and campaign to introduce and establish these names. Frisbee® is an example of a Fanciful name. Our name AirWing® for medical device client GI Supply does not exist in the real world and is a hybrid of two unrelated words. It works because the GI surgical device opens a patient’s airways and it looks like a wing.



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Arbitrary

An arbitrary name is next in strength. It is a real word, but one in which there is no tangible connection to the product. Apple® is the classic example; there is no relationship between an apple and a computer. Camel® is another.



Suggestive

Suggestive names are next in strength. These names suggest, without exactly describing the product they designate or some attribute of the product. Examples include Purell® hand sanitizer, Microsoft® software or Coppertone® suntan lotion. Suggestive names are often easier for clients to get comfortable with because they

are somewhat grounded in reality. There is sometimes a fine line between Suggestive, which is okay to trademark and Descriptive, which is not. This is what you pay attorneys to help determine.

The above three categories are considered “inherently distinctive,” a designation of the USPTO that indicates those names that are most likely to be trademarkable.



Descriptive

Descriptive names are considered weaker. As you can imagine, they describe the products or services or some feature of them. Examples of Descriptive names would be International Business Machines (IBM) — which had no naming trouble in 1924, but today would not pass muster — or any names using descriptive terms, such as “Best,” or “Speedy.”

Generic

Generic names are the weakest and essentially not protectable. A name is considered generic if it is used to describe a literal category. If for example, one used Apple® for a business that sold apples, that mark would not be protected.

Naming, as it turns out, is a lot more complicated than all of those office competitions might have you believe! Like most creative endeavors, sometimes great names come quickly in a brainstorm, and most often it is fairly painstaking, but if built on a solid naming architecture foundation and utilizing names that avoid being too descriptive, a great name can be both an emotional triumph and a great value to your business.



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