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GUIDELINES FOR SELECTING BRAND NAMES

You know the 10 Qualities of Great Brand Names and you've reviewed your naming brief, but choosing a great brand name from a list of candidates is still tough. We've got you!

- 1 Don't rush it** From the development of a naming strategy through creative exploration and evaluation, a thoughtful naming process usually takes at least four to six weeks, not including time for formal legal (trademark) vetting and, when required, focus group research or global linguistic screening. Build in ample time, and carefully consider your options. You've heard the old saying "Never enough time to do it right, always enough time to do it over"?
- 2 Play the field** We know, we know. You thought of a name, and it was the biggest epiphany since you saw your future spouse across a crowded room. There's no other name like it in the whole world and....Wait. Hold on. Before you get hitched there's a little detail known as legal screening. And when you submit this name you're so smitten with to legal counsel, you may discover it's already taken. So do yourself a favor and select at least a couple of other names you could live with, and have them all screened together. It could prevent you from getting wedded to any name prematurely and end up in a messy split.
- 3 Don't decide by committee** Rarely is a name embraced equally by everyone on the naming team. Good names take a few risks (iPad was ridiculed when first rolled out, and now on one bats an eye), which means someone is bound to be uncomfortable. They may have a rational reason for why they don't like it, but that doesn't mean they're right. Your goal is not a name that no one objects to, but a name that expresses your brand in an engaging way. Otherwise you'll wind up with a bland, lowest common denominator name. Structure your decision-making process so that only those with veto power get to play—and make sure they're involved as early as possible in the naming process.
- 4 Don't expect your name to tell the whole story** No name is an island. Web copy, packaging, logo, advertising, and every other audience touchpoint give context and help tell your brand's story. Don't expect your company or product name to say it all. Names that try are usually awkward or dull. Besides, a story that begins and ends with your name isn't likely to hook your customers. Leave them wanting to know more.
- 5 Don't get (too) hung up on .com availability** A memorable name that needs to be modified with a descriptor for domain purposes is often a better marketing choice than a less distinctive name that's available as an exact .com domain. Unless your sales are generated predominantly online, don't squander one of your biggest branding opportunities because of overly rigid domain-name considerations.
- 6 Trust your audience's intelligence** Avoid being overly literal and rejecting a name because of an inconsequential association, even if it's slightly negative—as long as the name's other meanings work hard for your brand. Your audience will figure it out, and your other marcom will give context. No one is confused that Dr. Pepper isn't spicy. Dodge cars aren't associated with being conned or dodging responsibility. Whirlpools are usually thought of as dangerous, but no one makes that connection with the appliance brand.
- 7 Forget about "virgin" names** Don't get mired in hunting for a name that's never been used before. Most names have been around the block a few times, in different industries or contexts. That's okay. You can usually adopt a name that's similar (or even identical) to a name being used in an unrelated space—as long as it's not in your space. Think Ford Explorer and Internet Explorer or Safeway's O Organics and O (The Oprah Magazine). These brands happily coexist. So, use common sense (and check with your attorney). Many a great name is rejected out of an excess of caution, or a misunderstanding of marketing differentiation.
- 8 Get past your personal associations** It doesn't matter if a name candidate reminds you of that cousin you don't get along with or the rough neighborhood where you grew up. These are idiosyncratic, personal associations that few others on the planet are going to share. Look beyond them. Otherwise, you may reject a name that would resonate with your target audience for reasons that only matter to you. Similarly, make sure any negative association you may have is likely shared by your target audience. If your customers don't watch horror films or if they are under 30, it doesn't matter that a name candidate is the same as the title of an 80s slasher flick that still gives you nightmares.
- 9 Embrace the unusual** You want your brand to stand out in the marketplace, right? So don't shy away from ideas that may seem a little strange at first. Be brave. Sure, it's only natural to be more comfortable with ideas you've seen before in some form. But if you've seen those ideas before, chances are so has your audience, and they'll be much less likely to take notice of your brand. The best names are a little different. Would SuperKicks have gotten the same traction as Nike?
- 10 Avoid perfectionism** It's okay to want a name that's short, easy to pronounce, original, totally cool-sounding, relevant in meaning, absent negative associations, and available as a .com domain name. (Most of us would like to win the lottery, too.) Prioritize your wish list, and be prepared to go with a name that only meets your top criteria, because no name has it all. Imagine the objections raised when Häagen-Dazs was first proposed. ("How do you pronounce that?") Or Wii. (What's it mean?) And let's not get started on Virgin. The point is, every name has potential downsides and no name will seem perfect at the outset.