BRAND NAMES THAT WORK: A STUDY OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF DIFFERENT TYPES OF BRAND NAMES

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This article examines the effectiveness of the various types of brand names, using the categorization scheme employed by the Patent and Trademark Office and the practitioners in the naming industry. The study shows that descriptive and suggestive names have a higher overall liking than arbitrary and coined names. It also shows that descriptive and suggestive names are easier to recall than arbitrary and coined names. Finally, it is shown that arbitrary names are more difficult to recognize than names in all other categories. Managerial implications, based on these findings, are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

In 1991, before the start of the "*Intel Inside*" branding campaign, Intel's market capitalization was about \$10.4 billion. At the end of 1998, it was \$208.49 billion. While not all of the increase in Intel's value can be attributed to the brand, certainly some of it is tied to its prominence (Schultz 1999). A stronger case can be made in the case of *Coca-Cola*, which was valued at \$36 billion *(Financial World* 1994). This should come as no surprise since it was the strongest brand in USA in terms of awareness and favorable image (Owen 1993). Other well-recognized brand names, such as *Marlboro*, *Budweiser* and *Hewlett Packard*, carry a premium. The Patent and Trademark Office (PTO) estimates that there are approximately 2.6 million trademarks in its database (Quinn and Byars 2000). In such a crowded marketplace, consumers use brand names as a proxy for product information, because searching for information has a cost attached to it. This is despite the advent of the Internet, and the apparent ease with which it can be accessed (Brynjolfsson and Smith 1999). As a result, brands are often the most valuable assets for many companies, because they are seen as a strategic edge that cannot be duplicated by the competitors. The choice of a brand name is one important way to build brand equity for a new product (Aaker 1996).

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The role of brand names is becoming increasingly important. Today's marketplace is fundamentally different. With fewer trade barriers, the market is less restrictive, resulting in intense global competition where the goods are of higher quality, but of lower costs. Ultimately, at least in a figurative sense, the competitive forces could reduce the field to commodity marketplace players, with the lowest-cost provider winning all the battles. The only worthwhile strategy, therefore, is to create and leverage brands (Agres and Dubitsky 1996). However, brand introductions are becoming increasingly expensive. This has prompted companies to take great care in the creation, pretesting, developing, and managing of new brands. Companies carefully create brand names that convey an intended image to target consumers and are distinctive enough to be noticed. Then, they invest heavily to maintain this image. A carefully chosen brand name provides an opportunity to lend *inherent* strength to the brand.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND OBJECTIVES

Choosing the proper brand name is a centerpiece in the introduction of a new product. A wisely chosen brand name can create a favorable image and help in creating and enhancing brand awareness (Keller, Heckler, and Houston 1998). There are two broad approaches to branding. The first option is to create a "meaningful" name, so that the name itself conveys relevant product information. There are several ways a brand name can accomplish this. A brand name may reinforce the nature of the product (e.g., *American Airlines*), convey a related abstract image (e.g., *Alpine* water), or it can emphasize one or more of the attributes (e.g., *Soft 'n Dry* deodorants). The second option is to create an "unrelated" name. This includes words that have little or no connection with the product being named (e.g., *Marlboro* cigarettes), or words that have been specifically created and have no dictionary meaning (e.g., *Enron*, the electric utilities and natural gas company). Both strategies have their own merits and demerits (Keller, Heckler, and Houston 1998).

Meaningful names convey relevant product information, and can be seen as perennial advertising, with a consistent message, for the product. They facilitate identification with the product category, and enhance brand awareness. This should be tremendously helpful in the initial positioning of the products. Often, consumers do not examine much information in their product decisions, making brand names that are inherently meaningful more appealing. Besides, the different associations that result from meaningful brand names can help build equity, especially when few other brand associations exist in the memory. Forming associations between the brand, the product, and its attributes should be the foremost task for emerging brands (Krishnan 1996). Research has also showed that meaningful brand names that are visually and congruently represented are easier to remember (Lutz and Lutz 1977), and help the development of memory structures for brand related information communicated in the advertisement. The major downside to meaningful brand names, however, is that they are very restrictive. These brand names can become a burden if they are to be extended to other product categories, or if the products have to be repositioned and some other attributes have to be emphasized. As such, this approach can hamper marketing communications.

Unrelated brand names contain no product meaning, pose no constraints on the goods and services they can represent, but they often serve as poor reminders for communication effects stored in memory (Keller 1987, Keller 1991). It is, however, possible to establish unrelated brand names in the minds of the consumers relatively easily, with few exposures to marketing communications. After all, *Marlboro* conveys a rugged country image even though the name *per se* does not. If this holds true, the same unrelated brand names could be extended to other products without major difficulties. *Jeep* has been able to sell bicycles and camping equipment under the same brand name, whereas *Green Giant* gave up on frozen dinners because of its strong association with fresh vegetables (Aaker 1990), and *Oldsmobile* has had major problems repositioning the brand.

This study aims to identify what kinds of brand names are more effective. There are two issues that we need to address – how do we categorize the names in this study, and what measures of effectiveness do we examine?

There is some research on how different types of names perform. The literature, however, suggests that academe and the practitioners in the naming industry look at brand names using very different categorizations. Academic research has investigated brand names on dimensions such as length, distinctiveness, frequency of occurrence, and linguistic characteristics involved (e.g., Pavia and Costa 1993; Heath, Chatterjee and Russo France 1990; Vanden Bergh, Adler and Oliver 1987). While this is of tremendous value, the PTO, trademark attorneys, and marketing managers use a different categorization of brand names. According to this, brand names are classified in a hierarchy of five categories – generic, descriptive, suggestive, arbitrary, and coined (Melton 1979). According to this hierarchy, generic names are impossible to register, descriptive names are very difficult to register, and coined names are likely to get the strongest trademark protection. A generic brand name is the general term used for the product. An example of a generic name would be *facial tissues*. A descriptive brand name describes the product. An example would be *Newsweek* for a weekly news magazine. A suggestive brand name evokes the product or its benefits, such as *Eveready* batteries. An arbitrary brand name is a common English word with no apparent relation to the product category, e.g., *Camel* cigarettes. Finally, a coined brand name is a fictional word, unrelated to the product and product category. An example would be the name, *Kodak*, for camera film and film development (Cohen 1986). Since these different types of brand names have not been studied empirically, the objective in this study is to investigate for the first time the effectiveness of names using the categorization provided by the PTO, namely, descriptive, suggestive, arbitrary, and coined brand names. Evaluation of names using this categorization should be of immense interest to the practitioners. In this paper, descriptive and suggestive names will fall under the classification of meaningful names, discussed earlier. Arbitrary and coined names will fall under the classification of unrelated names.

Several criteria can be used to measure the effectiveness of brand names. A national survey of marketing managers found that the top five criteria in descending order of importance were relevance to product category, connotations, overall liking, ease of recognition, distinctiveness, and ease of recall (Kohli and LaBahn 1997). Relevance to the product category is a defining characteristic of the PTO classification scheme, and could be used as a manipulation check for the categorization used in this study. Connotations and distinctiveness are also related to the categorization. Therefore, in our study, we focus on overall liking, ease of recognition, and ease of recall.

This study will address three issues. First, is there a difference between the consumer appeal of different types of brand names on overall liking? Second, what kinds of names are easier to recall? Finally, what types of names are easier to recognize?

From a marketer's perspective, correct brand recognition and recall are important because, after price information, brand name is the cue used most for determining consumer choice and evaluation (Zaichkowsky 1995). Brand name confusion, therefore, is sometimes used as a competitive tactic in the marketplace. Competitors may try to capitalize on the success of a well-established brand name by purposely causing confusion. The litany of trademark infringement cases is evidence of this assertion. The effects of brand name confusion can be harmful in several ways. Consumer confusion can lead to a loss of sales for the target brand. Such confusion can also lessen the value of the target brand name. Equally important is the effect of a negative experience with an imitation brand name, which can also harm the target brand name. Therefore correct recognition and recall are critical.

While recall and recognition are both facets of memorability, brand names may perform differently on these two dimensions because they require different processes (Krishnan and Shapiro 1996). Ease of recognition and ease of recall could at times be potentially conflicting criteria. While recognition requires matching the stimulus with the information stored in memory, recall requires reconstruction of the target stimulus. Thus, it is believed that it is easier to recall common words like *General Motors*, whereas the recognition task is helped if the name is somewhat uncommon and distinctive like *Lamborghini*.

It is important to emphasize that, depending on the product category, the relative importance of recognition and recall can be dramatically different. As an example, physicians may have thousands of drugs to choose from. To reduce confusion, they often limit their range of prescriptions to no more than about a hundred. In this situation, clearly ease of recall is critical to the success of the product. That's why drug companies often use brand names that are close to the chemical name of the drug (Kohli and Thakor 1997). On the other hand, in the case of a supermarket product, where the purchases may be made based on familiar looking packaging, recognition becomes important. This explains the attempt by several private label manufacturers to make their products look similar to the leading national brands. For dominant market players, the strategy should be to emphasize uniqueness, to help in recognition. This is especially true for impulse items, where no shopping list is prepared prior to a visit to the store.

HYPOTHESES

Prior research has identified several new characteristics of brand names that will lead to enhanced recall, recognition, and attitudes with respect to the new brand. Zinkhan and Martin (1987), for example, suggest that "typical" names (names that are characteristic of the product category) are perceived more favorably than "atypical" names. Peterson and Ross (1972) conclude that new brand names, which possess congruence with names of existing brands in the respective product category, may be favored over brand names that are incongruent with existing brands. An examination of brand names registered with the PTO indicates that a vast majority of brand names are either descriptive or suggestive. Fewer brand names are arbitrary or coined. In other words, descriptive and suggestive names are seen as typical brand names. Accordingly, we expect significant differences in overall liking between descriptive and suggestive brand names on the one hand and arbitrary and coined names on the other hand. Consumers are more responsive to meaningful brand names because they often fail to see the marketing and legal rationale behind unrelated names. Consequently, they show a preference for meaningful names. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H_1: Descriptive and suggestive brand names will be evaluated more positively than arbitrary and coined brand names.

Competitive advertising in a product class creates interference that inhibits consumer memory for a target brand (Burke and Srull 1988). This can lead to difficulties in the recognition and recall of the target brand name. Confusion results from brand names that are similar. This similarity can be phonological (sound alike) or orthographic (spelled alike). This potential for confusion can be used as a strategy by the competition. Therefore, ease of recognition and recall are very desirable qualities in brand names. It is important to note, however, that recognition and recall differ in the basic type of processing task that leads to effective performance. To recognize a stimulus from among a set of distracting stimuli, information allowing one to differentiate the previously encountered stimulus is necessary. In recall, however, information allowing one to reconstruct the stimulus is required, since the stimulus itself is not present (Bettman 1979). This distinction between discrimination and reconstruction leads to different performance on recognition and recall of brand names.

Common words are those that appear frequently in everyday usage. High frequency words such as "spring" and "smart," perform better than low frequency words such as "gestalt" and "epitome," on recall (Kanungo and Mohanty 1970). Evidently, these words are better organized or cued by multiple interim associations (Deese 1960), which makes it more likely for these words to be recalled. High frequency words are simpler because they are more commonly used. This simplicity also makes it easier to reconstruct high frequency words, a process necessary for recall. Thus, descriptive and suggestive brand names, which will typically be high frequency words, should be easier to recall. On the other hand, coined names, which are typically low frequency words, should be more difficult to recall because they have a smaller association set. However, there is conflicting evidence, which suggests that the probability of retrieving any particular concept diminishes as the size of the association set increases (Anderson 1983). The recall advantage that high frequency words offer could be eliminated *or even reversed* when they are presented in the context of low frequency words (Duncan 1974; Gregg 1976). Thus, the effect of the increased association set (which can be expected from descriptive and suggestive names) on ease of recall could possibly lead to more difficult recall because of the confusion resulting from the presence of other brand names, especially the ones that are low frequency words.

There is a second factor that is important in recall, namely the association with the product category itself. A product category could act as a powerful cue for activating the brand name. Descriptive and suggestive names, by definition, have a strong association with the product category. Therefore, they should be easier to recall once the product category is cued. Arbitrary and coined names should be more difficult to recall because they do not have any association with the product category.

The effect of the two factors – commonness and association with product category – leads to an interesting proposition. Association with product category clearly favors the descriptive and suggestive names on recall, and this should have a very strong effect because of the easy availability of the product category as a cue. Commonness could favor descriptive, suggestive, *and arbitrary* names on recall, or it could work against these names. Since the first factor is expected to be much stronger, and the direction of the effect of the second factor is unclear, we propose that:

H_2: Descriptive and suggestive brand names will be easier to recall than arbitrary and coined brand names.

In recognition, however, low frequency words perform better (Schulman and Lovelace 1970). This is because low frequency brand names, because of their uniqueness, enable consumers to better discriminate them from distractors. For example, names such as *Exxon* (gasoline) and *Dannon* (yogurt) are uncommon and may be easy for consumers to recognize. On the other hand, high frequency words may be more difficult to recognize. In the context of branding, the perceived similarity between the different brand names may result in confusion, which makes it difficult to discriminate between them. As an example, when choosing an airline, *American* (common word) might be difficult to recognize (discriminate) because of its possible confusion with names like *U.S.* (*Airways*) or *United* (*Airlines*) (Meyers-Levy 1989).

By their very definition, coined brand names are low frequency, whereas descriptive, suggestive, and arbitrary brand names can be considered high frequency. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H_3: Coined brand names will be more easily recognized than descriptive, suggestive, or arbitrary brand names.

METHODOLOGY

Three product categories were chosen in frequently purchased consumer goods categories. These categories were: all-purpose cleaners, detergents for colored clothing, and flu medication. In each of these three product categories, four brand names were created, one for each type of name – descriptive, suggestive, arbitrary, and coined (Table 1). Manipulation checks were conducted on the brand names. First, the face validity of these names (belonging to the respective categories) was tested using three independent judges. The appropriateness of the names was also tested with respondents, who were asked to evaluate the relevance of the name to the product category (Table 2). The relevance of the names was expected to be in the decreasing order from descriptive to suggestive to arbitrary and coined. No significant differences were expected between the latter two types of names in terms of relevance to the product category. The results of the manipulation check were consistent with this objective.

Table 1
Product Categories And Brand Names

	Descriptive	Suggestive	Arbitrary	Coined
All Purpose Cleaner	CleanAll	Sparkle	Horizon	Alcon
Flu Medication	FluRelief	SleepEezy	Sequence	Trinol
Detergents	ColorBrite	Rainbow	Jump	Noxim

Table 2
Manipulation Check

	Descriptive	Suggestive	Arbitrary	Coined
All Purpose Cleaner	4.22	3.70	1.87*	1.76*
Flu Medication	4.30	3.19	1.64	2.3
Detergents	4.27	3.29	1.79*	1.87*

Within a product category, brand names that have the same superscript next to their scores, were *not* significantly different from each other at 0.05 level.

Data collection was done in two phases. In phase one, 90 undergraduate students from a large West Coast university evaluated the brand names on overall liking. They also wrote down the words associated with each of the brand names. Brand names and product categories were rotated to eliminate any order biases. Subjects were not informed about phase two of the study to avoid any conscious memorization of the names presented to them. In phase two, a day later, the respondents were asked to list all the names they could remember. This was a test of unaided recall. They were then given the brand names used in the study interspersed with an equal number of distractors. The subjects were then asked to indicate the names they recognized. This was a test of recognition.

ANALYSES AND RESULTS

Means on overall liking were compared for the various types of names in the three product categories. The results provide strong support for H_1 (Table 3). In all the three product categories, the descriptive and suggestive names were evaluated significantly better than arbitrary and coined names. Interestingly, preferences for the names were almost consistently in the following order – descriptive, suggestive, arbitrary, and coined. The only exception to the rule was the flu medication category, in which the coined name performed better than the arbitrary name. This may have been because the name, Trinol, even though it is coined, is "typical" of the medication category. Also, as a general rule, with some exceptions, there were significant differences in overall liking, from one type of name to the next.

Table 3
Overall Liking

	Descriptive	Suggestive	Arbitrary	Coined
All Purpose Cleaner	$3.75^{\dagger}$	$3.60^{\dagger}$	2.24^{*}	2.03^{*}
Flu Medication	3.86	3.2	1.8	2.43
Detergents	4.02	3.11	1.82^{*}	1.79^{*}

Within a product category, brand names that have the same superscript next to their scores, were *not* significantly different from each other at 0.05 level.

The results also provided strong support for H_2 (Table 4). Descriptive and suggestive names were significantly easier to recall than arbitrary and coined names (Chi-square with $p < 0.01$). The only exception to this rule was Trinol. Once again, a plausible explanation for this anomaly is that the name, Trinol, may be typical of the medication category, making it easier to recall. It is also interesting to note that approximately only 20 percent of the respondents were able to recall the brand names the following day, which is consistent with earlier findings in advertising research. Recall was lowest for arbitrary brand names, and this was consistently true across product categories.

Table 4
Recall

	Descriptive	Suggestive	Arbitrary	Coined
All Purpose Cleaner				
Recall	32	22	11	18
Chi-Square = 14.41; p < 0.01				
Incorrect Recall	11 (34%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (11%)
Flu Medication				
Recall	15	25	7	25
Chi-Square = 15.79; p < 0.01				
Incorrect Recall	7 (46.7%)	2 (8%)	0 (0%)	5 (20%)
Detergent				
Recall	27	34	13	13
Chi-Square = 19.98; p < 0.01				
Incorrect Recall	11 (41%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (31%)

Table 5
Recognition

	Descriptive	Suggestive	Arbitrary	Coined
All Purpose Cleaner				
Recognized	76	75	70	74
Chi-Square = 1.48 (n.s.)				
Flu Medication				
Recognized	82	83	58	84
Chi-Square = 39.17; p < 0.01				
Detergent				
Recognized	79	84	67	72
Chi-Square = 13.14; p < 0.01				

The results did not support H_3 (Table 5). Coined names were not easier to recognize than descriptive, suggestive, or arbitrary names. Even though the Chi-square values were significant in two of the three product categories, a careful examination of the data reveals that, contrary to the hypothesis, arbitrary names were more difficult to recognize than all other types of names, which were all on par with each other. This pattern was remarkably consistent across the three product categories.

CONCLUSIONS AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The overall liking was higher for meaningful names than for unrelated names. This seems to indicate that descriptive and suggestive names may be a better choice over arbitrary and coined words. Within the meaningful names, descriptive names received more favorable evaluations than suggestive names; similarly, within unrelated names, arbitrary names received more favorable evaluations than coined names. This leads us to certain managerial recommendations (See Figure 1A). If we were to follow the conventional wisdom that the larger companies have higher promotional budgets, and are willing to invest more in supporting a new brand name, they may prefer to use arbitrary or coined names (*in that order*). Smaller companies, on the other hand, with lower promotional budgets may prefer to use descriptive or suggestive names (*in that order*). This strategy is also a logical choice because larger companies are more likely to extend their brand names to other products, and the constraints imposed by meaningful brand names as discussed earlier would make them an inappropriate choice. Unrelated brand names would be a better choice for them.

Figure 1a
Recommended Branding Strategies When Overall Liking Is Important

Descriptive Suggestive	Arbitrary Coined
Low	High
Promotional Budget	

These recommendations, however, have to be adjusted depending on the importance of recall and recognition in the purchase process of the product. Our study found that recall was higher for meaningful names than for unrelated names. We also found that arbitrary names performed worse than coined names on recall. In fact, they had the lowest recall. This could have been because of the negative effect of commonness on recall, as we discussed during the development of the hypotheses. Equally useful and interesting, however, is the data on incorrect recall. A recall was classified as incorrect when the brand name was only partially recalled, thereby leaving open the possibility of confusion with other brand names in a competitive setting. While for all other categories, there was some "incorrect recall," it was consistently absent for arbitrary names. In summary, when recalled, arbitrary names were always correctly recalled. Suggestive names also fared substantially better than descriptive names in incorrect recall. Two processes may explain the higher incorrect recall at the two ends of the naming spectrum. Coined words are difficult to reconstruct, as hypothesized earlier, and hence the incorrect recall. Descriptive names probably had high incorrect recall because of the presence of similar (and hence, confusing) names in the distractors. This resembles what is seen in the marketplace. In many product categories, the rather descriptive names are more common, which leads to confusion and incorrect recall. In the organizer and calendar market, the names *DayRunner* and *DayPlanner* could be seen as confusing.

Figure 1b
Recommended Branding Strategies When Recall Is Important

Recall	Important	Suggestive	Arbitrary
	Not Important	Descriptive	Arbitrary
		Low	High
		Promotional Budget	

The preceding discussion leads us to some recommendations that incorporate the role of recall (Figure 1B). If recall is not important, as discussed earlier, descriptive names are preferable for companies with small promotional budgets, whereas arbitrary names are preferable for companies with large promotional budgets. When recall is important, companies with large promotional budgets may instead opt for arbitrary names, even though coined names had higher recall. This is because, if they can afford it, they can increase recall for arbitrary names that had very low (non-existent in this study) incorrect recall. They can, therefore, avoid incorrect recall that comes with coined names, which can be harmful to the product. This is particularly true for markets crowded with confusingly similar brand names, where correct recall is critical. As an example, in the magazine market for automobile enthusiasts, the choices include *Automobile Magazine*, *Automobile Quarterly*, *AutoSpeed*, *AutoFan*, and *AutoWeek*.

Recognition was high for descriptive, suggestive, and coined names. It was low for arbitrary names. Once again, this was remarkably consistent across product categories. The high recognition for the more logical names (descriptive and suggestive) could have been inflated because of respondents incorrectly assuming that they had seen the brand names. On the other hand, respondents were less likely to mistakenly feel that they had seen the arbitrary names. In light of this, the high recognition for coined names is particularly impressive. Some recommendations, therefore, can be made about the choice of brand names (Figure 1c). When recognition is important, for companies with small promotional budgets, descriptive names are most appropriate because of their superior performance on overall liking in contrast to suggestive names, and comparable performance with suggestive names on recognition. For companies with high promotional budgets, arbitrary names can be avoided in favor of coined words because of the relatively weak performance of the former.

Figure 1c
Recommended Branding Strategies When Recognition Is Important

Recognition	Important	Descriptive	Coined
	Not Important	Descriptive	Arbitrary
		Low	High
		Promotional Budget	

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study looked at how brand names in various categories used by PTO, performed on three very important criteria – overall liking, recognition, and recall. While these are very desirable characteristics for a brand name, a marketing manager may have other concerns, most importantly the registration of the brand name as a trademark. As discussed above, coined and arbitrary words are more likely to get trademark protection. Thus, while FluRelief (descriptive) may be perceived more favorably by the consumers, it may face tremendous resistance in getting registered, whereas Trinol (coined) is likely to face very little resistance. In 1999 alone, PTO registered 104,000 trademarks (Quinn and Byars 2000). That is about fifteen times the vocabulary of an average person. This clearly points to the difficulty of selecting a meaningful brand name and getting it registered.

From a methodological standpoint, the reactive arrangements of the lab setting in which this study was conducted, could have influenced the findings of the study. Finally, most studies that we reviewed were based on single exposures only. This was also a shortcoming in this study. Evaluation of brand names after repeated exposures was not studied. Future studies should investigate the effect of repeated exposure on the evaluation of brand names to reflect the marketplace more realistically.

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