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## **What's In a Name? Well, Everything**

by Graeme Thickins

**ONE HAS TO WONDER** if branding has now finally gone mainstream, with even IT magazines now sporting articles about it. Geeks doing branding? Can it possibly be the new universal job skill? Sounds crazy, but somehow, branding *is* everywhere and everybody's doing it. The media can't leave it alone, and branding consultants are popping up like dandelions on a bad corporate softball field. Everyone's expected to know what it is, how to do it, what it's worth, how to measure one's own...blah, blah, blah.

But very few out there in businessland (save us branding consultants and the Great American Hero, the entrepreneur) have actually created a brand—sat and stared at a blank piece of paper (or napkin) to go about the daunting task of inventing a brand and building it from scratch.

Just how does one do it, you ask? Well, for those of you still among the great branding unwashed out there, or those contemplating joining the above-mentioned Hero ranks, here's a primer.

### **Welcome to Branding 101**

It all starts with naming. Once you have made the decision to start a new business or launch (or relaunch) a new product or service—technology-related or otherwise—and have at least the basic resources in place, one of the biggest challenges will be deciding what to name it.

Figure out your goals. Sometimes you might be after something that is simply ear- or eye-catching: The dotcom boom saw plenty of these with the likes of Fatbrain, Foofoo and Quokka and even survivors like Google and Monster.com. (For an inside look at

how a few dotcom-bombs picked their names, read our earlier article, "What's It Mean?"). Other times the goal is to break with the past. Accenture rose phoenix-like from Andersen Consulting. Philip Morris would rather be called Altria. The consulting firm Deloitte recently redubbed itself Braxton, a name spirited from one of its own past acquisitions. And some new corporate names smell strongly of compromise: AOL Time Warner. ExxonMobil.

For a task that seems so simple on the surface, most experienced entrepreneurs will admit (if you press them, anyway) that they spend an inordinate amount of time on naming.

Sure, there are always those who'll make a flippant decision, tossing something out and worrying about the consequences later. But most business founders, especially those who've done it more than once, know just how far-reaching the naming decision can be.

Marketers have long maintained its importance. Authors Al Ries and Jack Trout (*Positioning* and several other classics), call it "the single most important marketing decision you will ever make."

No wonder, then, it gets the attention of serious entrepreneurs and corporate "intrapreneurs." And no wonder many, unfortunately, get tied up in endless, rambling hours of playing the name game.

"How hard can it be?" you think. "I've named kids and dogs before."

Then reality sets in. A business is not a dog—or at least one hopes not. And when it comes to naming, everyone's a critic: In 2001, YourDictionary.com compiled a list of the "Worst Corporate Name Changes" putting Enron and Accenture at the top of the list.

For fun, I asked visitors to my website last fall to submit new name suggestions for Enron right after the scandal broke and word leaked out the company was planning a name change. The winner? As sole judge, I ruled it a tie: Enruin and Andergone.

## So, What Makes a Good Name?

Here are some guidelines and considerations in naming a new company.

**1. Your name should be trademarkable—something you can own and protect.** Naming experts often point out that "coined" or made-up words, or alternate spellings, tend to make the best names for that very reason. Common or dictionary words can be a problem (see point number 2).

To get started, a business must register its name with the office of its Secretary of State. Most firms also need to reserve an Internet domain name. And, if the company will do business outside its own state, it should seek federal trademark protection.

**2. It should be unique or memorable.** Again, something *different* is the objective here. In fact, a commonplace name can get you into costly disputes down the line. The value of having a memorable (different) name is well documented in the literature of the marketing profession, and in the accepted best practices of branding.

**3. It should be as short as possible—within reason or availability.** This trait can be somewhat of a luxury anymore, since the majority of short Internet domain names are long since taken. But this objective speaks to the general desirability or need, in our cluttered society, to keep things simple. Minimize the number of words and syllables in your name, as well as in your Internet domain (where possible). Shorter is always easier to remember.

**4. It should be easy to say.** "Pronounceability" is critical, which gets into avoiding certain letter combinations or sounds that require too much effort to say. That is, if it so much as hints of being a tongue-twister, best to forget it.

**5. It should also sound pleasing to the ear.** Chances are if it "rolls off the tongue nicely" from the speaker (as in number 4

above), the hearer will find it sounds pleasant too. Far too many companies do not give enough attention to the spoken implications or linguistic aspects of naming.

**6. It preferably should be suggestive of a benefit or product association.** Such is the Holy Grail of naming: Begin the branding process in the person's mind, even before you say anything else. After all, the name essentially becomes your package, at least initially. And, if it's for a service company (read: intangibles), that's the case ongoing, making the name even more critical.

**7. Finally, your name should be one you can build a story around.** Be careful it's not too limiting. Rather, it should have what we call "stretch," so you can grow to the vision you have for the company, and the name will continue to work.

Seven short tips. Sounds easy, huh? Unfortunately, it's not. But keeping these objectives foremost in your mind will serve you well as you set out to build your dream.

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