How to Choose the Right Product Name

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In a time when high-tech products are produced with the frequency of baby rabbits, developers must use everything at their disposal to distinguish their products from the rest of the pack. Choosing the right name for your product can be the element of distinction that determines whether customers give your product a try.

But finding an appropriate name can be a serious test of character for a marketing team. Recent revisions in trademark law and the overwhelming number of new products entering the market have made finding a suitable *and available* name more difficult than ever. However, by following a well-organized naming plan and allowing yourself enough time, choosing a product name can be rewarding—and even fun. This article will outline the basic principles of product naming and will define a process for helping you match your great new product with a truly stellar name.

What a Name Will Do for Your Product

Once you realize that a powerful name can play a key role in launching a product in the right direction, the energy required by a serious name development effort will be easier to justify and your efforts will be more rewarding. But how does having a good name affect a product? Our views are summarized below:

• *Good name, bad product.* A great name can help kill a bad product. A great name will encourage people to try a product, and they'll thereby find out sooner that the product is bad.

• *Bad name, bad product.* This one is obvious: Forget it; save your time and money.

• *Bad name, good product.* A great product can usually

overcome a bad name, but a bad name can slow down trial and acceptance. Why burden your great product with anything less than a great name?

• *Good name, good product.* This is the best situation you can hope for, and is definitely worth the effort. We should all seek this powerful conjunction of product and name.

Characteristics of a Good Name

One of the most commonly asked questions in the naming business is what separates good names from bad ones. This isn't really the relevant question; what really matters is whether the name communicates the right messages to the right people. So, the crucial first step in creating a product name is determining exactly what you want your name to express, and to whom. These qualities will be embodied in your naming objectives, described later in this article (see "Step 2: Develop a List of Naming Objectives").

There are several basic categories of names from which to choose. (For information about these categories, see "Kinds of Names" on page 35.) But whatever kind of name you choose, it must meet all of the following criteria:

• *Good names are easy to pronounce.* An effective name rolls off the tongue. (Can you imagine having to provide a pronunciation guide in your product introduction literature? Some companies actually do that.) But even more important, the name must be difficult to mispronounce. This point can't be overstated. If you give customers an opportunity to mispronounce a product name, chances are they will. Or, even more fatally, they won't talk about your product at all because they fear the embarrassment of mispronouncing the name. When this happens, you stand to lose one of the most valuable, yet least expen-

sive, communications media available to marketers: word of mouth. The pronunciation of your product name must therefore be totally without ambiguity.

• *Good names are memorable and appealing.* When it comes to choosing one product over another, all other things being equal, the product with a name that sticks in the customer's mind will probably be the stronger candidate. Ease of pronunciation can be evaluated objectively using linguistic principles, but memorability and appeal require subjective judgments.

Some names are definitely more memorable and appealing than others. These names are not only easy to pronounce, but they also tend to be fun to say, to be spelled conventionally, and to relate in some manner to the product category or benefits. A totally arbitrary name which has nothing to do with anything, and that is unpleasant to say, will tend to be unappealing and not memorable. But a name that strikes a responsive chord, or that manages to attach itself to an existing "hook" in the customer's mind, and slips easily off the tongue, will tend to be more memorable and appealing. Some good examples of memorable and appealing names are SimCity, FinePrint, QuickDraw, Free-Hand, WriteNow, PostScript, Persuasion, and Timbuktu.

• *Good names are free and clear of legal problems.* You need to ensure that a name will be available for use in all your key markets. A name should be trademarkable, or else should be so descriptive that you don't need a trademark for it. (Names that are very descriptive often use words in common use in the language and often aren't trademarkable.) Get advice from a trademark attorney.

• *Good names should be effective worldwide.* To be effective

worldwide means that beyond being legally available in all key markets, a name should be pronounceable, have no negative meanings, and have no embarrassing connotations in the countries, cultures, and languages in which it will be used.

You should consider this issue even if you have no immediate plans to market internationally, for two reasons. One, even if you intend to market only in your home country, there usually are large numbers of potential customers who speak languages other than your native tongue. Two, if your product succeeds, you may eventually want to market it outside your home country. It is far more cost effective (and better worth the time and effort) to build a worldwide identity for your product than to change its name country by country.

There are a variety of considerations regarding what makes a name appropriate in multiple markets. As Lauri Jones of Intracom, Inc. pointed out in an earlier *Apple Direct* article, most technical product companies keep a product's original name when changing markets. This hasn't always been true of more consumer-oriented marketers, but it's becoming more common. So, it's important to ensure that as you take your name from country to country, it does not take on negative connotations in other languages. A classic example is General Motors' attempt to market its Chevrolet Nova model in Latin America. *No va* in Spanish means *doesn't go.*

A cost-effective way to check the multiple language associations of your chosen name is to review it with native speakers of various languages within your company. Quick checks by electronic mail or phone with foreign associates also work. Be sure to talk with native speakers, not just someone who happened to take a

few years of the language in college; you need to be aware of slang, archaic, regional, and street language associations as well as textbook or dictionary meanings. To be truly safe, you should consider enlisting the services of localization experts to evaluate your name in foreign markets.

Now you're ready to begin creating your name. A key consideration is when during product development to start the naming process. Set up a schedule working backward from the date the name is required; typically this will be the date of the initial product announcement, or the date you need to drop a name into product manuals or packaging. If you are a startup company, you may need the name much sooner. When talking to investors, your product concept will seem much more tangible if the product has a name.

How much time to allow for naming depends a lot on the size and culture of your company, how many people need to participate, and how many levels of approval are required. Generally, a twelve-week schedule should be adequate to take you through the naming process described in the following paragraphs.

Step 1: Organize a Naming Team

Setting up a naming team is the first—and often overlooked—step in creating an effective name. While a one- or two-person team might make the decision process easier, you'll eventually have to defend your choices to a larger group and you'll lose the time you saved. A team effort is better: It leads to increased participation in the naming process, and a more diverse range of opinions about what the name should convey. You'll end up with a happier staff and with more people having a pride of ownership in the name of their new product.

A naming team should include six to eight employees who represent a variety of viewpoints and job functions; the team should include at least one person who is likely to be a key participant in the eventual implementation of the name, such as someone from public relations, marketing communications, or advertising. Team members ideally should include a mix of mid- to high-level employees, all having some degree of familiarity with the product.

If there is someone in the company who is likely to hold widely divergent or controversial views and who has the potential to veto or slow down the process, don't put off the confrontation—include that person on your team. Believe me, this works better than isolating dissenters and then later trying to convince them of your wisdom. By having a variety of viewpoints and job functions represented on your naming team, you'll go a long way to getting the necessary buy-in from the company as a whole.

The naming team's job is to carry out the steps that follow. Team members will also play a role in explaining the project process and results to fellow employees.

Step 2: Develop a List of Naming Objectives

The team's next step is to establish a list of naming objectives. These should reflect the marketing objectives for the product, including such things as who the target audience is, how competitors are positioned, pricing, distribution plans, and relationships to existing company products.

Naming objectives define the ideas or characteristics the name should convey. In high-tech companies, objectives often encompass such concepts as innovation, efficiency, dependability, speed, or high quality. The naming team must establish a list of the most important goals specific to your name. What do your potential customers need to know to make them consider your product? What key words or concepts already exist in your product category—and do you want to leverage these or avoid them? Will the name need to stretch over any other products? These key thoughts should be embodied in the naming objectives.

Why is it important to conduct this objective-setting exercise? Because once you have agreed on a list of objectives, you can use it to evaluate the candidate names.

For objectives to be useful, they must be specific, discrete, and unemotional. Try to keep the list short, and establish a priority order. For example, a set of objectives for a new family of software utilities could be

- to suggest an "umbrella," a family of products
- to suggest utilities, tools, assistants, aides—not complete solutions
- to suggest increased efficiency, productivity, and speed

Note that these objectives are dry, rational, and unemotional. They do not overlap or contradict each other. They lend themselves to the kind of name evaluation you'll have to do later: Does the name suggest a family of products—yes or no? Does it suggest a utility or a complete solution? And so on.

In contrast, below is an example of a less useful set of objectives. They are confusing, unspecific, and contradictory; there are too many of them. They don't lead the team in any particular creative direction and they will give you little help when evaluating names:

- to be catchy, something that grabs you, or funny
- to suggest innovation, the leading edge
- to suggest the mainstream, a safe choice, reliability
- to suggest leadership, importance
- to suggest friendliness, approachability, a helpful quality

I think you'll agree that these objectives are vague, inconsistent, and less useful than those in the first list.

Step 3: Develop a List of Naming Criteria

Naming criteria function as technical specs for the name. They dictate how your name will express the ideas stated in your objectives. For example, here is a set of criteria to accompany the objectives for our family of software utilities. The name must

- fit in with other products in the existing product line
- contain no more than two syllables (must be short because it may be combined with company name and individual product identifiers)
- avoid use of terms used by competitors: *power, mate, multi, set*
- be pronounceable and legally available in the countries in which you plan to market the product (list them specifically)

As with objectives, criteria should be simple, specific, uncontradictory, and few in number.

Step 4: Initiate the Creative Work

Once team members thoroughly understand and agree to the objectives and criteria, you're ready to begin the process of creating the name itself. Don't underestimate the effort needed at this point in the process; while it can be fun, developing names is more difficult than it appears.

To give team members confidence and to help focus their creative efforts, provide the team with a synopsis of competitive naming practices, and discuss whether competitive names make sense or represent directions to avoid. Also provide the team with lists of word parts from English, Latin, Greek, or other relevant languages to give them raw materials for expressing your objectives in less obvious ways. These word-root studies are excellent springboards from which team members can explore new directions for names.

To construct the list of roots, start with key words from your objectives list and explore both where those words come from

and how other languages express those ideas. The resulting names will not all be easy to understand (not all of the roots have easy connections to English), but many will make unique and interesting name alternatives for your product. For example, from the software utilities objectives, a root study of the word *speed* would include such word parts as *agilis* (Latin for *quick*), *celer* (Latin for *swift*), *presto* (Italian for *quick*), and *tachos* (Greek for *speed*). These could all be used to construct new names.

Each team member will interpret the word parts from a different point of view, yielding an expansive list of coined but intrinsically meaningful names that are less likely to be already in use.

Also, construct a list of any names that the team and other company employees have previously suggested. Discuss what about those names made them interesting (tone, meaning, balance, character), and try to create more names in those same categories. Finally, provide your team with dictionaries, thesauruses, directories of existing products, competitive promotional literature, and anything else you think might help.

Then, turn the team lose. Ask each person to develop a long list of names. Encourage team members to continually refer back to the original objectives and criteria, to help them stay on target.

Step 5: Review Creative Work Together, Then Do More

After the team has had time to work independently, you should get together for a team meeting. How soon? Probably after team members have each devoted at least eight hours of focused effort to name development (ideally spread over three to five days). The objective for this meeting (which everyone should know before you start) is to review the creative work with an eye toward establishing preferred naming directions, highlighting interesting

ideas for further exploration, and uncovering any new revelations.

Open the meeting by reviewing your naming objectives and criteria, to ensure that everyone remembers the goals they've agreed upon. Then explore the creative work, highlighting the positive and avoiding any judgment or ridicule. Create a feeling of progress, of zeroing in on the ideal name. Agree on which ideas are promising and worthy of further attention, and which ideas have been adequately explored.

Then, send the team away for a second round of creative development. Team members should explore the preferred naming directions, exploit new information, and probe more deeply into the creative possibilities suggested by the objectives. This will lead to an entirely new list of names.

It is often this second, more focused and educated push, that results in the most interesting name alternatives. Continue the process of creative exploration-team meeting-creative exploration until you think the objectives have been exhaustively explored. You could easily end up with a master list of a thousand or more name candidates.

Step 6: Narrow the List

Each subsequent step from here is a gradual convergence on the best names from your master list, carrying forward only the best alternatives. Review the master list and select the most promising candidates. These are the names that, in the team's judgment, best express the objectives and meet the criteria that were agreed upon earlier. Though it may take a few fist fights (or some bribery), the team should agree on a smaller list of 40 to 50 names before taking the next step: a preliminary search to determine if the names are already being used in the marketplace.

Step 7: Preliminary Name Searches

The preliminary search for market presence can be done in several

ways. In the United States, the simplest and, in general, most effective method is to use an online database such as TrademarkScan that lists current, pending, and canceled U.S. trademarks.

There are a few key pitfalls to avoid when conducting these searches. One potential problem is spelling variations. Trademark law is designed to prevent confusion among products in the marketplace, so two names that are spelled differently but pronounced similarly may be rejected. You'll need to check similar spellings and plural versions of your name, as well as exact matches. A name such as *LaserWriter*, for example, could be spelled *LazerWriter*, *LaserRighter*, or *Laser Writer*. You need to think of and check all of these.

You also should consider multiple trademark classes. A trademark may be registered within one or more classes, each class representing different product types. You need to search not only the class into which your product falls (electronic goods and services, for example), but other potentially overlapping classes such as entertainment, telecommunications, and printed matter. To do this, you'll need to consider the product categories into which the name might eventually grow, not just where it is today. One example is the software that became a television program, "Where in the World Is Carmen Sandiego?" The advent of multimedia products has made it even more important to check name availability in multiple product categories.

A third pitfall is prematurely discarding name candidates. While it's true that the previous existence of a name in the market can cause problems for your candidate name, information gathered through preliminary searches is not always accurate. Many products that show up as potential conflicts may have been discontinued long ago. Their parent companies may have disappeared. The product may have never been introduced.

Some names may be for products different enough from yours to avoid any conflict. Or names may be owned by very small or nearly defunct companies, who might not object to you using their names, particularly in exchange for a small fee. Therefore, it's important when examining the results of your searches to keep a close eye on all the information provided, and investigate the companies listed as using your name candidates. Many excellent candidates will otherwise be tossed out.

Once you've put a list of names through the preliminary search process, you can learn even more about their potential availability by checking some other readily available databases. The United Kingdom version of TrademarkScan, which tends to turn up major European trademark users, is now available online. Other useful methods include literature scans, which search for articles in industry journals that might mention your candidate names; the Electronic Yellow Pages, which turns up companies of all sizes using your candidate names as company names; and the Companies And Their Brands database, which shows products whose names owners may not have bothered to trademark.

Step 8: Select Your Finalists

You now must decide which of the names that have passed scrutiny are the most worthy to pursue. By this stage, all the remaining names will have passed many tests. But you'll probably still have too many names. How do you decide which ones to take forward?

Go back to the objectives and criteria one last time; consider the names' longevity and extension possibilities, and their potential international acceptance. Some names may express one particular objective well but leave others somewhat neglected. If so, your team must decide which objectives carry more weight and

which tradeoffs make the most sense. Through this process, select a group of five to seven names, any one of which would be a good solution.

Step 9: Have an Attorney Conduct a Full Trademark Search

A full search for a name's legal availability should be turned over to a trademark attorney. The attorney will need to do a full U.S. search, as well as international trademark searches in key markets.

Review the results with your attorney. If only one of the names submitted is available, you have found your name. If more than one is available, your last step is slightly more difficult, but still straightforward: Choose one.

If you were unfortunate enough to lose all of your final candidates to existing trademarks, don't panic. Review your most promising name list (or the original master list, or even do a third round of creative work) and select a new batch of names that meet the objectives and criteria. Then submit these names to a preliminary search and continue the process through doing a full search.

Build In-House Support for Your Name

As if finding a legally available and appropriate name weren't difficult enough, you'll now need to convince your associates that you have found the best name. This task will be easier if your team was constituted as I recommended earlier; members representing various departments and interests will probably have kept their colleagues somewhat informed as to where the naming process was going, so its outcome won't be a complete surprise.

Depending on your organization, who needs to be informed, and when, will vary. The first task is to get approval for your selected name at whatever level your organization dictates (such as the vice president of marketing, for example). A formal presentation (though the definition of *formal*

varies) is recommended. In your presentation, the naming team should review the process it followed; it's important that people understand and appreciate that your name recommendation is not being made lightly. Show the steps you took, the people you talked to, the competitive practices reviewed. Spend time on the objectives and criteria—why you chose them, which ones you left out. Review any international or customer input, linguistic issues, and legal results.

Finally, present your recommended name, and demonstrate how it meets the objectives and criteria. You may wish to present some mocked-up packaging or product brochures that use the name prominently. Repeat the name in your presentation as many times as possible. Your goal here should be to help management feel as comfortable as you do, both with the fairness and professionalism of the naming process and with the name itself.

Once the name has been approved by management and before you share it much more extensively, you should ask your attorneys to file an "Intent-to-Use" application. This will reserve the name for your use.

Actual name roll-out should be coordinated with all other aspects of your product announcement and introduction plans. In conjunction with PR, promotion, and advertising activities, your new name should be prominently featured in all product introduction events.

The final step: Pat yourself and the naming team on the back for a job well done. You've done everything possible to give your product a name that will set it apart and help it reach its full potential in the market. ♣

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Kinds of Names

There are two basic categories of names: names that are real words (Apple, Sun) and those that have no intrinsic meaning (Exxon, Abex). In between these extremes are a wide variety of hybrids with more or less intrinsic meanings.

Which category of name is right for your product depends on the qualities you need to convey, who your target market is, how crowded your product category is, and the size of your marketing budget. The following paragraphs describe some things to think about as you consider what kind of name will work best for your product:

Real-Word Names Many companies use real-word names for their products. There is a single-word form of this (Apple, Radius) and a combined form (AppleTalk, ColorSync, After Dark, HyperCard). These real-word names have the advantage of being immediately recognizable and understood, and go a long way in establishing what a new product has to offer. Well-chosen real-word names use simple vocabulary, so they usually retain their meaning worldwide, no matter what language they are built upon.

The problem with real-word solutions, however, is that the more descriptive, relevant ones are often already being used by someone else. The less descriptive, less relevant ones are less desirable, because you need to spend time and money to help explain, establish, and attach an image to them. However, real-word names are worth a lot of serious creative exploration. If you can find a relevant real-word solution that is unique and effective, it will be among the easiest of names to establish it in the marketplace.

Coined Names At the other end of the spectrum are made-up or "coined" names. As the number of new products increases, finding an available real-word name solution is becoming increasingly difficult. So, companies are increasingly turning to coined names to identify their products.

Coined names can be subdivided into arbitrary/obscure and meaningful categories. Some examples of the arbitrary might include Synovus Financial, Allegis Corp., Ceridian (the Control Data spin-off), and perhaps Pentium. These are all examples of coined words which on their own mean little, if anything, to anyone. However, they can work. One way is to spend a lot of money establishing them. One example might be Exxon.

Coined names that work best, however, are those built on large enough "chunks" of language that the resulting names have intrinsic meaning. The best of these combine intrinsically meaningful, relevant roots into whole new words. Some examples are Navistar, Unisys, and Televangelist.

Why are these kinds of solutions worth pursuing? Primarily because of legal realities. As we discussed in the main body of the article, it is becoming more difficult to get legal approval for new names, and software seems one of the most difficult categories of all. We believe the latter group of names, the intrinsically meaningful "coined" ones, will be the place where many companies increasingly find candidate names that pass legal scrutiny. ♣