

# mother JONES

MARKETING by G. Beato

## Buy Any Other Name

What do you call a column about marketing? We asked the experts.

**My first notion** was simply to name this column "The Column™": With one move, I could establish myself as the default pundit of the entire universe. My editor was less than enthusiastic.

"Shouldn't a column's name communicate more than just its author's egotism?" she asked.

"Well, if the column's about the mechanics of advertising and marketing," I joked, "maybe I should just go to a naming company and have them name it for me."

"Perfect!" she cried.

"But I can't have someone else name my own column," I protested. "That would totally undermine my authority right from the start."

"No," my editor persisted. "That's exactly what you should do."

And, you know, the more I thought about it, the more sense it made. Really, what do I know about the finer points of naming—sound symbolism, psycholinguistics, optimal consonant clusters?

The demand for catchy appellations like Walkman or Yahoo! has become so intense that corporate America now spends a reported \$25 million a year on name-creation services. Last year, the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office received 188,080 applications. In some particularly crowded industries, the desire for distinction has led to names of such innovative fabrication that one might mistake Vyzynz or X<sup>10</sup>sion for aspiring second-rate rap stars rather than the high-tech companies they are. In such a climate, relying on personal preference is an option best left to parents. How could I, with my paperback thesaurus and garden-variety liberal arts degree, expect to compete with highly specialized mercenary linguists who charge as much as \$300,000 per project?

As I began my search for guidance, one company stood out amid all the NameLabs and Namestormers and ABC Namebanks: Master-McNeil. With its terse Anglophilic propriety, it seemed different from all the others, so assured in its vague blandness—this was a company that didn't feel the need to jump through hoops to attract clients. Speaking with the company's founder, SB Master (whatever the initials stand for is a closely held trade secret), only increased my enthusiasm. Established 10 years ago, she told me, Master-McNeil has named

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everything from space-age fabrics to Soviet baked goods, with clients such as Microsoft, Apple, AT&T, and the Walt Disney Company paying the company \$30,000 and up for its services. But, to me, the most compelling fact was that using the name McNeil was a product of Master's imagination. "I chose 'McNeil' largely because it had a substantial sound," she explained. "From day one, potential clients have always assumed we were big and important, even though we weren't when we first started. So it's been a very effective name for us."

Exactly the kind of ingenuity I was looking for. Everything about Master-McNeil seemed right. Only one question remained. "Somewhere, someplace," I hesitated, "someone probably got paid for naming Carnation's instant breakfast product 'Carnation Instant Breakfast.' Have you ever had any projects like that?"

"We named a color version of the Mac Classic the 'Mac Color Classic,'" Master replied. Of course. A true naming pro, Master-McNeil had the ability to recognize when a simple, straightforward name worked best, and the confidence to charge six figures for it. Unfortunately, that was also a problem—from a financial perspective, Master-McNeil was a bit out of my league.

"Is there any chance you would ever do pro bono work for an indigent columnist?" I ventured. "This is going to be the first time anyone has ever used a naming company to name a magazine column. The publicity will be enormous!"

With only that thin promise as payment, Master agreed to help me out. The team she assembled to work on my project included two M.B.A.'s, a linguist, and a classicist. We met at Master-McNeil's Berkeley office. There, in a conference room lined with such volumes as *A Dictionary of Selected Synonyms in the Principal Indo-European Languages* and *Ships of the Royal Navy*, we began talking about the column.

"Basically, it's about advertising and marketing," I started. "But as I write about the various services that people use to market their products, ideas, and companies, I'll also be applying those same techniques to the column itself."

"Will the name have to fit in with a larger *Mother Jones* nomenclature system?" asked one of the M.B.A.'s.

"No," I replied. "I think we're free to choose whatever we want."

"How about multilingual suitability?" queried the classicist.

"Not important," I responded.

"What do you think about using a neologism?" the linguist wanted to know. "A coined name like Kodak or Exxon?"

"That could be a nice PR coup," I speculated. "I doubt if anyone has ever used a neologism for a column before." Various possibilities ran through my head. Rantonika? InAcura? Dissentium?

"But," Master pointed out, "a neologism can take time to build awareness and generate meaning."

"It probably isn't a good idea, then. The column's going to have a relatively brief life span."

After questioning me for two hours, Master and her colleagues had the information they needed. "Are you sure?" I double-checked. "I have very high expectations."

Master laughed blithely; her client management skills were obviously well honed. "What we do at this stage," she explained, "is create a list of naming objectives and criteria based on everything you've told us. It makes the process objective and rational, rather than emotional and personal."

"OK," I said warily. Were they saying I wasn't necessarily going to get my \$30,000, says-everything-that-cannot-possibly-be-said-about-my-product-and-still-fits-nicely-on-a-baseball-cap dream name? But it was a good, sound strategy, of course: Getting my approval in incremental stages would limit my capacity for last-minute flip-flops and capricious rejections.

A few days later, the team e-mailed me the list of objectives and criteria; I signed off on it and they went to work. Over the next two weeks, they concocted approximately 350 names. From that list, they selected what they felt were the 29 strongest candidates.

"So," I said, scanning the list, "'The Column™' didn't even make the final cut?"

"Don't you think names that use 'the' in that manner are a little pretentious?" Master asked. "Remember how people used to call Donald Trump 'The Donald'?" I nodded glumly.

Many of the names that did make the cut featured plays on the word "ad": Ad Enough?, Ad It Up, Ad Nauseam, Ad Infinitum. For the

most part, these seemed a little too pat, although a few had interesting resonances.

"AdOration's kind of clever," I offered. "And Adz—is that a neologism?"

"No, 'adz' is a real word," the linguist said. "It's similar to an ax. You use it to trim and shape wood."

That would give the column a nice metaphorical bite—but would other junior high school woodshop dropouts like myself appreciate the connotation?

"I think I like 'Your Ad Here' best," I told them after studying the list. "It's nice and simple. Easy to pronounce, easy to remember."

"That was one of our favorites, too," Master agreed. "But you don't have to make a choice right now. Think about it for a while." Over the next week, as I assessed the possibilities, I kept coming back to "Your Ad Here." On the one hand, it's an announcement, or perhaps even an admonishment, to advertisers that I'll be analyzing their ads and other marketing techniques in this space. On the other hand, it's a shameless invitation for product placement: Assist me in this project, and in return you'll receive the sort of editorial coverage that's only occasionally for sale in the magazine world.

By jumping into the murky waters of stealth product-placement techniques and cross-promotion strategies, I knew that I was going to end up getting dirty sooner or later. Choosing "Your Ad Here" as the column's name seemed like an excellent way to announce my impending defilement.

"I've made a decision," I told Master the next time we spoke. "I'm going with 'Your Ad Here.'"

"Great choice!" she replied. "So when do we start reaping the rewards of all the publicity?"

"That's the subject of my next column. I'll let you know how it goes." ■

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