

SCOTT WINOKUR

The name of the game is the name

YOU CAN'T BUY the Greek soft drink, "Zit," or the Spanish bread, "Bimbo," in the United States. They might cause misunderstandings. Two leap to mind:

"Bring the whole gang over! We've got plenty of 'Zits.'"

"A couple of 'Bimbos,' please — the crusty kind."

And since we're talking trademark trivia here, be advised that heroin, zipper, aspirin, escalator, granola, yo-yo and linoleum had heydays once upon a time as proper nouns, replete with capital letters and the distinction due singular entities.

Today, all have become common nouns, bereft of monetary value — victims of "genericide." This term was coined by marketing mavens to denote trademark and brand names repeatedly lower-cased in everyday parlance. Usage demoted them to the humble rank of "generic descriptor."

For other household words, it's a never-ending battle to retain their uniqueness. High on the list of endangered trade names: Band-Aid, Xerox, Realtor, Jeep, Rollerblade and Coke.

Though it might seem to defy common sense, being synonymous with a product category isn't necessarily good for business. If people ask for Kleenex but blow their noses into any tissues at hand, it doesn't in the slightest profit Kimberly-Clark, Kleenex's manufacturer.

In today's business world, the answer to Shakespeare's query "What's in a name?" is, "Every-

thing."

In Berkeley, S.B. Master fully understands this dimension of commerce. She knows you can make an excellent product but get whipped in the global marketplace because of the wrong image.

"A classic naming faux pas was the Chevy Nova. This is everyone's horror story," Master told me.

"It's a perfectly nice name in English — 'bright star' — but in Spanish *No va* means 'It doesn't go.' Yet General Motors blithely introduced it with that name in Latin America."

Master has cleverly positioned herself as a purveyor of sound advice in the perilous field of international nomenclature. She is founder and owner of Master-McNeil, Inc., Creative & Strategic Naming Services.

Among her clients are powerhouses such as Visa, Sprint, Clorox, Apple Computer and the merged petrochemical divisions of the Finnish and Norwegian state oil companies. For these customers (which pay six-figure fees), Master-McNeil has produced unassailable monikers like Macintosh Classic and Borealis.

Master christens or rechristens products and companies in such a way that they will be recognized by the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, won't make fools of their owners and won't allow competitors to derive unfair benefits.

"A name is an ownable asset and in many cases an incredibly valuable one," Master said.

Her mantra is: "Pronounceable, culturally acceptable and legally registrable worldwide." It lacks the spirituality of "Om mani padme hum," but different strokes for different folks, I suppose.

I wondered what S.B. stood for.

"One of those cute '50s girls' names — and I won't tell you."

I asked about McNeil.

"I made that up. I thought it had a feeling of substance and importance."

Her audacity delighted me. As did her high level of comfort while playing fast and loose with the mother tongue.

Master started out with the San Francisco "identity consulting" firm, Landor Associates, where she orchestrated the brainstorming sessions that produced "Pacific Telesis," "Westin Hotels" and "Touchstone Films."

PACIFIC TELESIS, she said, had come very close to being dubbed BellStar before someone realized it wouldn't be too cool naming a public utility after Belle Starr, Bandit Queen of the Old West.

In 1988, Master went out on her own. She hired linguists and purchased the federal trademark data base, the 13-volume Oxford English Dictionary and a host of other resources, all on CD-ROM.

Playing The Name Game with her now is like playing chess with Bobby Fischer — Master and her human/digital brain trust have absolutely all the moves.

"It's gotten harder to name things yourself. There are too many names and it's difficult to find one that's protectable," she said.

"Since 1988, federal law has allowed people to reserve names for up to 36 months for future use. That means a lot more names are taken. There are tens of thousands of names filed with the federal government each year."

I was sorry to hear that. It meant someone might have taken my name for a new, intense ice-cream flavor — In-corrigible Strawberry.



Scott Winokur is an Examiner reporter.