What's in a Name?

AT FIRST GLANCE, you might expect naming a new product to be an easy task—requiring just a little creativity and a brief conversation with a trademark attorney. But the overwhelming number of new high-tech products entering the market each year, combined with recent revisions in U.S. trademark law, have made naming a product surprisingly difficult. The creative aspects are only a small part of the job. You must also employ planning, patience, discipline and, most of all, perspective to develop a truly effective, protectable name.

As you work to develop new product names, here are some common missteps to avoid:

Trite names: People in high-tech companies mostly tend to talk to each other, creating a common vocabulary of words and concepts. This is efficient and effective behavior. The misstep comes when these same people need to name a product, and trademark that name for their company's exclusive use. Naturally, their creative vocabulary is built upon the concepts and language they all share: power, integration, networking, multimedia, interoperability, etc. How many distinctive ways are there to recycle this vocabulary? What are the chances that including the words *Power, Net, Inter, Multi* or *Mac* in your name has not already been done? And if you manage to trademark something containing one of these terms, yours would be just one among many similar-sounding names.

Code names: You know what the product does, whom it's for, how it will be priced—and a code name comes to mean all these things. But often, companies never check the legal availability of their code name or stop to consider whether it will mean anything to their target market. Even though you may feel very comfortable with the code name for internal use, remember the product needs to have a name both legally available and appealing to customers.

Playing favorites: Until you're sure the name you've chosen is available, keep several names in play as your trademark attorneys check availability. If you allow yourself to make a premature commitment and your favorite name turns out to be unavailable, it is extremely difficult to refocus and re-energize your company to go through the whole process again.

Unintelligible names: Made-up, meaningless names or initials are the last resort of the frustrated namer. This is to be expected, given how hard it is for management groups to agree on something both meaningful and trademarkable. But if the name is meaningless to your customers, you'll need to spend significant time and money teaching them what they should think or feel when they see your name. Most companies would prefer to devote these resources to talking about product features, competitive advantages or price.

The meaningless or unintelligible name also carries the risk of corporate embarrassment or obscurity. The change from the descriptive *California Biotechnology* to the Latinate tongue-twister *Scios Nova* was unfortunate. And what about the *TOPS* (Transcendental Operating System) changed to *Sitka*, now changed again to *SunSelect*? In contrast, the moves from alphabet-soup *RTI* to the well-known product name *Ingres* or from the bland *MicroPro* to *WordStar International* enhanced distinctiveness and memorability.

Dead-end names: Names need to have the longevity and scope to take you places you may not even know you want to go. Certainly, if there is any chance that the product will become the first in a line (and who doesn't hope this about every product), the chosen name should have the ability to be extended in a logical, untortured way. The *Sim* line of products from Maxis, Orinda, Calif., is a good example. The initial product, *SimCity*, conveyed both "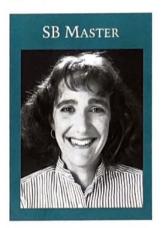simulation" and a clever, provocative reference to "Sin City." Once established, the *Sim* prefix led to and eased the introduction of *SimEarth*, *SimAnt* and *SimFarm*. Another thing to consider is the name's implications in other countries. The classic General Motors' *Nova* fiasco comes to mind.

Once you have managed to avoid all these missteps, how should you decide which name to choose? Here are some criteria to consider:

- Is the name legally available in your key target markets?
- Is the name easy to say? Is the pronunciation obvious and unambiguous?
- Does it suggest something important, interesting and appealing about your product?
- Does the name have depth and longevity? Does it spark ideas for how you will package, promote and advertise the product over time?

Poorly chosen names can undermine the best technology. Take time to choose the right one, because in the crowded marketplace, a truly excellent name can help your product stand out. ■

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