How to Name a Product: The Ultimate Guide

- What makes a good product name?
- How do you come up with ideas?
- How can you check if it's already taken?
- What are some common mistakes people make about naming products?
- Should a product name be clever or catchy?
- Do acronyms make a good product name?

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose?

By any other name would smell as sweet;" (Romeo & Juliet)

Juliet got it wrong. Names are important.

When we meet a person the first thing we might learn about them is their name, and we may pass judgement and form opinion even with that small piece of data.
"Its old fashioned, common, not a proper name for a person, its Spanish, its Italian, I have a friend I went to school with called Stacy and she was awful, my friend Toby named his dog Alfred………."

So it is with products and companies.

The product name sets the expectation for the customer experience. Will he like it? Remember it? Will he remember how to spell it? Find it on the Internet? Recommend it to his colleagues?

I have spent decades in the high technology sector naming products. It's hard. So let's look at some of the things we need to think about when searching for product and company names.

What makes a good product name?

A good product name must be memorable so in some way it must suit the product but also be catchy or evocative to get the mind share of the prospect. Note I say prospect, the person you want to buy the product. There is a great temptation to give the product a name that's understood by the product team, a clever play on words about technology or something similar but the product team are not the audience for the product – the prospect or customer is.

Good product names need to be spell-able. If the spelling is not obvious then the prospect will find it hard to locate it on the web. Ideally the name should be unique, which is very hard to do today unless the name is completely made up- or you use a suffix or prefix

with an ordinary word – like Iphone, Ipad and so forth. These names have the added advantage that they can be trademarked.

Good names also distinguish you from competitors so take a look at them. They might sound old, perhaps use older technology, they might all have a number as part of the name- this is particularly true of high technology products, take a look at names of silicon chips. If you were bringing out a new Chip generation you may choose not to have just numbers and letters as its name.

A good name can also give a product a personality, so that it becomes a PR asset. Take a look at vacuum cleaners Henry (1981) and Hettie (2007). The Henry vacuum cleaner is nearly 40 years old and is a part of a family of 13 other models.

Talking about vacuum cleaners the first was Hoover (invented in 1907) and for many years vacuum cleaners were known as Hoovers and using them was called hoovering.

Xerox brought a notable photocopier to market and again for many years copiers were generically known as Xerox (1960), named after the company that sold it, becoming a verb – Xerox it. This is great for a while until the market becomes crowded then the generic model loses its individuality and needs rebranding. We call this genericide.

Interestingly Xerox PARC (the famous Palo Alto Research Centre) designed and brought to market a family of spectacular personal computer workstations initially called Star and Dandelion which I first saw in California in 1982 (launched in 1981). To say I was stunned is an understatement as it had a bit mapped display, mouse, a graphical user interface, icons, Ethernet, networking and many other features popularly seen for the first time in the Apple Mac which launched in 1984. So the Dandelion product line should have been a huge success, like the Apple Mac – but it wasn't. Why?

Because people don't buy computers from a photocopying company (Xerox). Names are very important!

How do you come up with ideas?

1. **Run a naming workshop**
Get a diverse team into the room and start by looking at root words in your language that might describe the product or what the product does. Assign a workshop leader (scribe) who writes all proposed names down). Perhaps look at some of the words that describe the way the product works or the benefit it delivers. Make a long list. Don't throw out any ideas just yet. Get creative and have fun.

Then try putting various words together. Find a root word that appeals. When you have a long list look at the ones that generate an emotive response in the group. When you have a few candidates Google them to ensure the competition is not using them or it's not really common and used in tons of products. The word Vision or visi is a good example of a root that is very over used.

2. Look at Competitor Names

Make a list of your competitors and complete a competitive analysis (see my blog on this topic). List their competitive product names. Look at your USPs and see if there is some leverage from including a USP as part of a name. Add these to the names you have generated in the naming workshop

3. How can you check if it's already taken?
Google it. Look for products with similar names. Also look at domain names to see if there is potential for a confusing situation. Look at the trademark registry in the countries you intend to market it. Consider registering a trademark. Then put a TM symbol on the name you finally choose. When the mark gets registered change it to a

R in a circle $^{®}$ and ensure you use it every time you use the chosen name.

4. What are some common mistakes people make about naming products?
   a) Choosing a very functional name. This means it probably can't be trademarked
   b) Choosing a name that means something clever to the development team but nothing to the prospect
   c) Choosing a name everyone will misspell as it will take a huge marketing budget to give the name brand awareness.
   d) Using initials of founders as a name. This is a really common mistake when naming a company. I have a pastime when I am driving called "the white van game". In the UK it's common for tradesmen to have white vans with their company name on the side. I am always surprised that that are so many names you have no chance of remembering, names like J&P Window Cleaners (John and Paul) or S&J Plumbers (Steve and James) or B3 Scaffolding.

   Which would you remember B3 Scaffolding or The Safe Erection Company Ltd? (Yes, this is a real company in Tipton UK).

Should a product name be clever or catchy?

Yes. Best if it's both, provided it's easy to spell and memorable. Names that bring a small smile are a good idea provided it's suitable for the sector, so you would not call an oncology treatment product something clever and catchy.

Another way to make a product name catchy is to make it poetic or melodic. Google, Yahoo, Squidoo, Oreo, MoleMate, SpeedyBreedy, the last two are a couple of mine. If you can dream up a name like any of these they are great as a made-up word will probably be easy to trade mark and its probable the domain name will be available too.

Do acronyms make good product names?

Acronyms mostly make sense to the development company then have to be explained to the prospect in tactical marketing campaigns. This means they need to have a large budget assigned for this purpose. However if the acronym turns out to be easily remembered as a word, like QANTAS for example, the recipient might not care what the original acronym stood for (Queensland and Northern Territories Aerial Services Limited).

So here are my ten self-test questions for product names:

1. Is it easy to spell?
2. Is it easy to remember?
3. Does it avoid describing the product?
4. Can it be trade-marked?
5. It's not an acronym.
6. It's melodic.
7. Does it differentiate you from your competition?
8. Is it a made-up name?
9. Is the domain name available?
10. Does it have the potential to become a great company asset?

If you have answered YES to each of the above questions then your name is probably a good one. If not consider attending a Dream Ticket Workshop to learn how to build value into your company with great names and positioning.

Contact: annie@magicmonkey.eu
Annie Brooking
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