All systems go

Nine tips for developing a naming system that actually works.

Creating and managing brand value™

Interbrand

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Nine tips for developing a naming system that actually works.

By Caitlin Barrett

As naming experts, we'll be the first to tell you that naming is never quite easy. Even with a top-notch creative brief, you face plenty of obstacles: generating enough names that fit the bill, trademark approval, leadership consensus, common-law clearance and getting the green light on your linguistic checks. Exhausted yet?

The best way to take some of the blood, sweat and tears out of landing a standout name is making sure you have a rock-solid naming system to guide you. Bear in mind, a naming system isn't a static fix. At its most basic, it is an essential navigational tool, helping customers to go from, "What can you offer me?" to "This is exactly what I need." At its best, the outcome is transformational, making naming a distinct, memorable part of your brand's identity.

Your vision will set the foundation and provide a touchstone as you determine what's right and wrong for your brand.

While developing a naming system takes longer than developing a single name, the payoff is significant. With a little patience, a lot of thinking and tons of participation, you'll have a naming system that'll last longer than any one offer.

1. Know thyself.

Know your brand and know how to express it simply. A clear expression of your brand strategy and brand architecture should be the foundation of your naming system. So pin these to your wall before you go any further. They are your starting line.

2. Set your goals.

What do you want your naming system to do? Draw all eyes to your masterbrand? Create distinct experiences for particular audience segments? Articulate what success looks like. Write it out, make it a diagram, paint a picture—whatever makes it easy to understand at a glance. Then tack it up next to your brand strategy and architecture. Now you've got a finish line.

3. Get grounded.

Sure, naming systems can be complex, but some questions are no-brainers when you have a strong sense of your brand strategy, brand architecture and naming system goals. For example, if you want to drive equity into your masterbrand, try to limit excessive sub-brands (or eliminate them completely), letting your masterbrand stand tall among short, descriptive names. Your vision will set the foundation and provide a touchstone as you determine what's right and wrong for your brand.

4. Map the terrain.

Scope the competitive space. It's important to understand category norms as well as the outliers. Know what you want to mirror and what you want to ignore completely. Just remember that if you want to disrupt the way your customers navigate information, there's a glittering rule: it better be paired with a differentiated product/service/experience, or you're going to have a lot of explaining to do.

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5. Know thy customer.

Speaking of your customers, how do they make decisions? What information is important to them, and in what order? Let's say you're naming external hard drives. Your research shows that customers' main concern is whether or not the drive will keep their data safe. So you might decide that durability should be the most prominently communicated element in your hard drive portfolio. Other important details, like size or speed, will play a secondary role in the name's order of information, or be explained through messaging.

Ultimately having this system in place will help you powerfully express your brand.

6. Know a breakthrough when you see one.

We all love what's new and different, but not every change deserves a name. Even significant changes might not merit a blockbuster name to get people to take notice. What criteria works for your brand? What's your innovation story? Every naming system should address breakthroughs: how to identify them and how they're named in a way that still feels like a natural part of your brand's story.

7. Create some white space.

Not every product needs a brand, and not every brand needs to be a shout-out-loud sensation. In fact, a portfolio of heavily branded names can be exhausting— exhausting to manage and exhausting for consumers to navigate. Sometimes information is best communicated using familiar, descriptive language, or through a simple message. Sticking to what people are already acquainted with or using a more subtle approach creates enough space to allow your breakthrough offers to stand out as hero brands.

8. Do a reality check.

Be honest about the type of organization you're part of. If it's a wildly decentralized one, and no one will put their hand up to manage naming challenges, you'll want to stick to a system that's pretty rigid and self service (think binary decision trees). But if you're committed to establishing a naming center of excellence to tackle challenges as they roll in, you can develop something that leaves room for collaboration, participation and evolution. What's most important is that you adapt your system to your company's culture—or it'll never be adopted.

9. Blow the horn.

For your naming system to become the powerful tool it was designed to be, you'll need to make sure everyone knows about it, understands it and appreciates it. So rally people around it with training sessions. Assign champions throughout your organization to educate and answer questions about the role of naming. Provide ongoing guidance, course corrections and updated tools. Integrate naming training into your HR onboarding process. Consider a digital naming workflow that educates while tracking requests.

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Develop a naming system that gives you criteria for when and how to name and taps into the structure of your organization. Ultimately having this system in place will help you powerfully express your brand.

Naming systems must grow and evolve just like every aspect of your business and brand. Having insight into how they should evolve and why will help you stay true to the essence of your brand and ensure that audiences know what you're offering, why you're distinctive and why your brand fulfills the promise your naming system implies. ■

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Caitlin is an associate director for Interbrand's New York Verbal Identity department. She develops smart, insightful creative work that marries clients' brand strategies with their needs and goals.

Every brand has an authentic—and compelling—story to tell. By helping clients understand the power of language, Caitlin connects brands to consumers who truly align with their values.

Before joining Interbrand, Caitlin worked as a senior writer at Ologie, where her efforts were focused on education, retail, and finance clients. Prior to Ologie, she wrote for the retail division at Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, writing brand communications, such as packaging, advertising, and collateral. Caitlin received her bachelor's degree from Baruch College in New York City.

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