5 things to consider when naming a brand

By Rob Meyerson

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In 2011 and 2012, I was the director of strategy at FutureBrand, Southeast Asia. Based in Singapore - a country just slightly larger than Chicago - I also had clients in Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines. While conducting brand strategy work in these countries presented difficulties, my biggest challenge was creating new company and product names that worked well across such a diverse set of cultures and languages.

Source: www.pexels.com

Southeast Asia's mix of ethnicities, cultures, and languages makes it an ideal testbed for brand names. Moreover, as Asia's influence on global business continues to grow, names that work well in these countries are increasingly likely to appeal to consumers around the world.

With that in mind, here are five lessons I learned for creating great brand names while working in Southeast Asia.

1. Stick to the process

Brand naming is a creative exercise, but there is a generally accepted process for finding good, available brand names. The step-by-step process used by branding and naming firms worldwide prevents naming disasters and increases the likelihood of availability. Preliminary trademark screening - an essential step in the process - might prevent a new brand from launching with the same name used by three of Singapore's best-known brands - an airline, a balm, and a beer.

2. Consider different types of names

Brand names come in different shapes and sizes. For example, "Singapore Airlines" is a descriptive, real-word name. "Sands," the name of the company behind Singapore's landmark hotel, is also a real word but is known as a suggestive name because it implies a sandy beach vacation without directly describing the products. (In fact, there is no sand at Marina Bay Sands.)

"SonicGear" is a descriptive, compound name. "Axe" is an abstract, real-word name - axes have nothing to do with medicated oil. And Garena, an online gaming service, has an invented or coined name. Exploring many types of brand names and determining which ones make sense for a project will increase the probability of finding something

that works.

3. Double-check pronunciation

Even in English-speaking countries like Singapore, brand names have to cater to local accents and dialects (e.g., Singlish). Once, when presenting names in Southeast Asia, I was surprised when a client rejected a name because it included "ridge." Many Singaporeans and Malaysians pronounce "ridge" and "rich" very similarly, and the latter had negative connotations.

Pronunciation issues in Southeast Asia may also be responsible for an overused workaround: abbreviated names. While most locals can expound on the differences between NUS, SMU, HDB, EDB, DBS, and UOB, expats and visitors may find this alphabet soup confusing. It's why, generally speaking, professional namers recommend steering clear of acronyms and initialisms as company names.

4. Conduct linguistic and cultural checks

You've probably heard the story of Chevy Nova, which supposedly failed in Spanish-speaking countries because "no va" is Spanish for "doesn't go." That story isn't true, but similar stories are, such as Mitsubishi's Pajero SUV (Spanish slang for "wanker").

Linguistic and cultural problems multiply in Southeast Asia and similarly diverse markets. Companies can avoid embarrassment - not to mention a costly rebrand - by conducting linguistic and cultural checks on name candidates before making a final selection.

5. Give it time

Successful brand names like Diesel, Virgin, Google, and Caterpillar must have sounded crazy when first chosen. But names that seem unusual or even offensive at first can work well because they grab people's attention and stand out in the marketplace. That's why it's always best to take some time - a few days, at least - to weigh the options before moving forward with a new brand name.

Geography aside, the best brand names are distinctive and memorable. But in multicultural environments like Southeast Asia, branding professionals must pay even greater attention to pronunciation and spelling; simple, short names work best.

In addition, brand owners must consider the implications of using a language across borders (for example, how a Chinese consumer might perceive a Japanese-sounding name).

Availability, however, is often the most formidable challenge in naming. Finding a legally viable brand is a bit like trying to

find a needle in a haystack. The best solution is to make the haystack as big as possible - generate hundreds of name candidates - and narrow the list down by starting with a clear idea of what your brand stands for and how you want to express it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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