

# BUILDING A BETTER BRAND: CREATING BRAND NAMES WITH INHERENT MEANING

*Richard R. Klink, Loyola College in Maryland*

## ABSTRACT

In 1997, the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office received over 220,000 applications for trademarks, more than triple the amount from 1987. With the purpose of brands being to differentiate one seller's offerings from another, these figures suggest that creating new brands distinguishable from others is more difficult today than ever. The purpose of this paper was to explore how to create effective new brand names. Specifically, this paper examined whether a brand name alone can convey product-related information. That is, does the sound of a brand name possess inherent meaning? To illustrate, the popular press contends that the *Prozac* brand name communicates efficacy through the letter *z*.

To answer the above question, this paper consulted the research conducted in linguistics, specifically in the area of sound symbolism. Sound symbolism is defined as the direct linkage between sound meaning. While Ancient Greek philosophers first contemplated the existence of this relationship, studies performed during the early part of this century supported it by finding that certain vowel sounds can communicate an impression of size.

The present article examined whether the vowels and consonants of brand names can convey product-

related information (e.g., size, speed, thickness, darkness, etc.). Two hundred sixty-five subjects examined fictitious brand names for a variety of product categories. The brand names were presented in the form of word pairs, whereby words within a given pair differed only by a single letter. Subjects were asked to choose which of the two products seemed to possess more or less of a given attribute, e.g., *Which brand of beer seems darker? Nidax or Nodax*. Binomial tests were used to analyze the data.

Results of the study support the contention that a direct relationship exists between sound and meaning. It appears that products with brand names of a relatively higher acoustic frequency (e.g., brand names containing the letters *i* or *e* as opposed to the letters *o* or *u*) are perceived as smaller, faster, thinner, and lighter, among other attributes. The product-related information can relate to tangible features (e.g., size) as well as intangible ones (e.g., speed). Furthermore, the relationship appears to hold not only for a variety of product categories but also for services. The primary implications for marketers are to construct brand names that (a) reflect desirable product features and (b) reinforce supplemental marketing communications. Along these lines, understanding the inherent meanings in brand names should allow marketers to more efficiently position a product relative to competition.

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For further information contact:  
Richard R. Klink  
The Sellinger School of Business  
Loyola College in Maryland  
Baltimore, MD 21210  
Phone: (410) 617-5546  
FAX: (410) 617-2190  
E-Mail: [rklink@loyola.edu](mailto:rklink@loyola.edu)

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