

The Game of the Name

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Our last three articles have explored the bumpy process of changing a brand's name: [What's in a Name?](#) considers Ryerson University's review of its institutional name; [Beware the Sound your Brand Makes](#) comments on a critical, but rarely considered, aspect of brand naming; now, with *The Game of the Name*, we provide some helpful advice to guide your organization through the minefield that is renaming, and help ensure a successful outcome.

Here's something that may surprise you: the process of giving a brand a new name – whether it's for a company, an institution, a service, or product – is hard. No, not just hard. Should you decide to do this, it may well prove to be one of the most challenging things you will ever undertake. Think blood, sweat, and tears; you'll fight on the beaches, on the landing grounds, in the fields and in the streets, and in the hills. Hyperbole? Not from our perspective. As branding experts who have gone through the process numerous times, we consider naming to be one of the hardest and most thankless of branding jobs. And yet, ultimately, one of the most rewarding.

The biggest problem is that it seems like something that should be easy. As a result, the naming process often gets overwhelmed by strong personal opinions and by people who believe, on the strength of their intuition, that they can come up with something better than the recommendations "dreamed up" by consultants. Then there are the unsolicited third-party recommendations of well-meaning friends and family – none of whom are steeped in the strategic and creative intent of the program, and whose ideas also end up being considered on-par with the branding expert's recommendations. Kind of like anti-vaxxers who know better than the medical establishment.

Nonetheless, you have to welcome these opinions (even the unsolicited and unwelcome suggestions), even though it results in a weird kind of stew. While these incursions into the process make it a challenge to maintain the focus of your brand naming committee, the outcome of a properly conducted and vetted process is always very gratifying.

Your organization may be compelled to rename itself for a variety of reasons that have been imposed by circumstances, or it may choose to do so for reasons all its own. Whatever the reason(s), launching into the creation of new name should be seen as a unique opportunity to redefine yourself and your purpose. It should be approached with strategic intent and with clear-eyed ambition to augment and/or reinforce your brand – the perceptions and positive attributes that may already be ascribed to your organization – and to make room for new stories and empowering narrative to emerge organically. You should embrace the process and approach it with anticipation rather than with trepidation.

The following is what we believe are the key considerations in the development and selection of any brand name: some of the pitfalls, challenges and opportunities so that you can go into this process with confidence and with eyes wide open. We hope this will help guide any organization through the steps involved and the issues to be considered so that the end-result will satisfy everyone.

The Rules of the Game

1. Don't Wait Until the End to Reach Consensus.

Consensus should be sought right from the very start. There may be no more important point to make than this. Everything will flow from these strategic agreements made at the earliest stages of the process. So the time to align your thinking is not while reviewing potential names, but before you start developing them. While this may at first seem counter-intuitive, we have seen numerous situations where an otherwise uncomplicated process, was made more complex by ignoring this critical step.

There are many types of names that can be developed, and reaching agreement on the strategic directions to pursue is critical if we do not want to end up with hundreds of marginal, even irrelevant name options that will simply clutter up the process.

2. Employ a Tightly-Focused Process.

Reaching early consensus means that you will have narrowly defined the strategic and creative avenues for naming. This means the name generation process will be focused on producing viable and serviceable names, and that you will also get to potential solutions faster.

Developing a set of solutions strategically framed and supported means the review and consideration of these solutions will be that much simpler for the organization. What it also means is that you will have done much of the work necessary to evolve the brand positioning into a compelling tagline that will support the vision and mission of the organization or institution. This work, if it takes place concurrently with the development of potential naming solutions, should also be presented alongside the name recommendations.



3. Aim for Both Relevancy and Distinctiveness.

One should not aim to create a new name relative to conventions observed by other organizations in a given sector, but rather relative to your organization's core value proposition or unique strengths and positioning.

The approach begins with gaining an understanding of the market landscape, so you may look for all the obvious and subtle ways in which peer organizations closely mirror each other's approach, in order to find new, uncharted branding territories where to stake your own claim. The goal is to create a positioning and a name that sets the organization apart from its peers while maintaining a strong and relevant connection to the sector.

4. Aspire to Fit In While Standing Out.

There's the dilemma of positioning, and by extension, of naming. You want to be clearly associated with the sector you're in while at the same time standing apart from other organizations within it.

To do so, you must find an "acceptable deviation from the norm" as sociologists define it. The right balance must be achieved and it is different for every sector of the market. It will be well-worth keeping this notion top-of-mind when doing the work of selecting a new name.

5. Strive For Quality, Not Quantity.

With most organizations, budget realities dictate a cost-efficient name development process. Many naming consultants however will take great pride in recounting that they generated hundreds, even thousands of names in order to "land" on the right one. To us, this speaks of waste and lack of strategic focus, and you should not favour operating in this fashion.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to generate names that are available to be trademarked, so it is important to adopt a more deliberate strategic approach to naming and reach early consensus on the key strategic objectives and criteria that will be used to develop and, more importantly, to select a new organizational name.

6. Escape the Gray Zone.

Your task should be to lift your organization out of the gray and undifferentiated conformity zone many others find themselves in, either by design or by default: move beyond bland "business-talk or bureaucratic -speak," or your sector's staple language. None of that easily allows an audience to feel an emotional connection with you, nor to be engaged by you.

7. Recognize that Names Can Be Multi-layered Entities.

It may be important to recognize that organizational names may have a few components. Institutional names in particular are often layered constructs combining: a brand-able component – the unique name by which the institution is known and can be differentiated

from others; a descriptor portion – to define the specific service or offering related to the organization purpose; and often but not always, a portion of the name that – indicates the way or context in which such a service/offering is delivered, what we call the “modal” portion. Each portion or layer of the name adds meaning to the brand idea behind the organization.

8. Put Thoughts Into Words and Words Into Images.

It is well within the capability of most branding firms to create an enticing new logo and visual identity program. You will need something more. Ideally, you will want to make your brand an expression and manifestation of your organization’s true purpose. This requires that you think of your new name in terms of the graphic impact it can achieve.

This is why you should look to work with a consultant that can bring the twin disciplines of verbal and visual branding together under one unified strategy. This is what will help you define the sector you are in, and develop the brand to own it.



9. Control the Language; Own the Conversation.

Central to the expression of your brand are words; more precisely “language”. Language frames thoughts. Thoughts express connections. Those connections are what powers your brand narrative. Through brand language, you can own the vocabulary that is used to define not only your organization, but at least in part, your sector.

This is so that you can more readily evolve the narrative to support your vision and tell the story to your advantage, shifting the value proposition toward your mission and away from that of others’. In this way, you can create a brand that opens a blue ocean of positioning opportunities.

10. Know What It Takes.

While most people can articulate a relatively well-reasoned opinion about a logo or a visual brand at first sight, the same cannot always be said for most verbal

branding expressions. In spite of what one might think, naming and taglines are not exclusively an element of language, at least not in the way one might think. We may all have a capacity for language, but language is alive and constantly evolving. With its rapid mutations, few people can leverage its ability to influence, shape, deform and reconfigure it in order to infuse it with new meaning and substance to specific ends.

From competitive analysis to brand strategy, positioning, name development, trademark pre-screening, linguistic connotation screening, name evaluation and adoption, the goal of this work is an evocative name with the power to set minds soaring, ignite conversations, spur involvement, create brand loyalty, and become embedded in memory. That is what we call “language design” and this is the tradecraft of naming specialist who are worth their salt.

11. Seek Broad and Frequent Input.

Many processes fail because they neglect to make room for frequent input, or because they lack an approach to properly and respectfully vet ideas that may be offered in an ad hoc manner by stakeholders or other team members. Your approach in this regard should simply be this: *All ideas are welcome, and none are rejected off-hand.*

While this makes for a highly inclusive approach, you, on the other hand, have a responsibility to your stakeholders/superiors, clients, boards, etc., and of course to yourselves, to run a tight process and you should not let it be derailed by the constant addition of new options. Your approach should follow the simple principle that everyone can have the opportunity to “*have their say*” but not a guarantee that they will necessarily “*have their way.*”

12. Seek to Inform and to Inspire.

Many organizations operate in sectors where conventional naming and branding equate acceptance, and where stepping outside of established or perceived market norms may be seen as challenging for stakeholders and general audiences alike.

What this mindset results in however is a preponderance of derivative, bureaucratic names that, while scoring high on accuracy, fail to capture the essence of an organization, the qualities that help to attract the talent, to inspire communities, activists and funders, and to create a memorable impression in the minds of your audience. In other words, conformist names and language will often succeed in informing, but almost always fail to inspire. Your aim should be to accomplish both while sacrificing neither.

13. Ensure an Expertly Guided Selection Process.

We believe it is always a good idea to call on a naming consultant on a rebranding program. The value of a good consultant in any sector, lies not only in the end-product, but in their ability to focus the clients' efforts, in minimizing waste and maximizing efficiency.

The essence of strategy is not simply to consider the best path one might take, but to carefully and thoughtfully discard possibilities that are less likely to produce the right outcomes. In other words, before adding options, one should look to narrow the possibilities. In this way, the naming process may be a reductive one, rather than an additive one. To do it any other way adds unnecessary time and ultimately wastes money.

This also means that you should not end up with hundreds of names to consider. The goal of your naming consultant should not be to demonstrate how prolific they are at name generation, but instead to efficiently and successfully arrive at the right solution for your organization. Their role should help streamline the process, not blow it out of proportion.

14. Perform the Comfort/Discomfort Test.

It goes like this: If a potential name makes you somewhat uncomfortable, you may be on the right track. Conversely, if a name feels immediately like you are putting on a comfortable pair of slippers, you should probably move on. We cannot overemphasize how important this point is. That "comfortable" name you like, may feel like the perfect solution precisely because it may be a relic of a bygone era.

Look to have a name that will live beyond this age. Many new valuable names were disparaged at first, or worse, shown complete indifference and passed over in favour of tried, true and predictable choices. Comfort with a new name that "stretches you" will only grow over time, and it will happen rather quickly. Human beings are conditioned to react negatively to the unfamiliar. It will therefore be important to give any potential solution a sufficient amount of time to be properly considered and not rush to judgment and dismiss them summarily.

15. Understand That It's Not a Wild-goose Chase.

A common approach many leaders default to when choosing a new name for their organization may be

construed as follows: "I'll know it when I see it" or "I'll tell you if I like it when I hear it". This is a fool's errand and a waste of time.

That is why a qualified consultant should work diligently to expand their clients' minds from the start, identify bias and remove filters that may impede their ability to make choices. Failure to do so can place very real limits on potentially breakthrough solutions and make it more likely that the outcome results in either derivative or conformist outcomes.

16. Think Diversity.

Even if you conduct your business primarily in one language, a new name would do well to be culturally "agnostic" so that it may resonate equally appropriately within various cultural markets. This is an extremely high bar to clear, however, as part of your approach, you should at least consider the most inclusive approach possible, without compromising the power of the proposed solutions.

17. Approach It Like It's The Cover Page of Your Brand Story.

Your name will be the most prominent part of the organization's brand expression and image, and, to be of greatest advantage to the organization, it should have the ability to engage someone's imagination and thought process. It should be the first word of an interesting narrative your organization wants to promote, and one your audiences would want to hear.

But you have to begin by not accepting formulaic or conformist language into your name and positioning. The key is to focus on the core and unique value proposition of your brand, and then look for names that best support that positioning in the right context, rather than be guided by what feels immediately comfortable and familiar, or by what others may be doing.



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