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What's in a name? Be careful when choosing a brand name; it will colour customer impressions

I recently received an email from someone looking to launch a chain of restaurants, starting in Dubai but spreading worldwide. (This is a laudable business objective and I receive similar proposals fairly often — but so far I can't think of any that have succeeded.)

I replied to the email with a few specific questions, intended to reveal whether the sender understood just how much consultation would be needed to fulfil their objectives.

As a result of these in-depth queries, my correspondent became indignant and let me know they had appointed someone else.

A few weeks later, I was copied in on a circular email from the same person with a questionnaire containing a list of new brand names. The intention was to get feedback on a name for the new concept.

The names listed were hopeless, but the main issue is that surveys like this are next to useless, since they depend on personal tastes.

To roll out a new brand quickly and successfully, the offer has to be unconventional

and edgy — but consumers may not know what they want from a totally new offering.

People might react against edgy ideas in a survey, then gravitate towards them in practice. As inventor of the car Henry Ford said: "If we had asked the people what they wanted, they'd have said faster horses."

So what's the best way to choose a new brand name?

There's more science to choosing names than you'd think, so there are rules you can follow; the key is to set aside enough time.

Branding expert Wally Olins is probably the world's foremost expert on the subject. Here are some comments from him on naming a business:

"Like symbols, names are emotive. Creating and introducing a new name is difficult and complex for the following reasons:

"First, names have no real life or meaning until they are put into a context, so it is extremely difficult for the people going through the process to appreciate the power of the name until after the event.

"Second, individual preferences and feelings are very important.

"Third, a very large number of names are already registered and is it difficult to find 'free' names."

Here are a few more criteria to help you.

A name should:

1. Be easy to read and pronounce, preferably in any language. Will most people be able to spell it after hearing it spoken? Will they be able to pronounce it after seeing it written? A name shouldn't turn into a spelling test or make people feel ignorant.

2. Have no disagreeable associations.

3. Be suitable for use as your outlets diversify into different activities. If that's something you're anticipating doing.

4. If possible, relate to the offer. The last two can be mutually exclusive; McDonald's is a name that does not relate to the outlet's activity, Pizza Hut does. Both are successful.

5. Be registerable, or at least protectable. This is complex and can be slow. Specialist lawyers will check the name register for a fee. Many multinational organisations have banks of already protected names and if you inadvertently use one, they may have the legal right to stop you and take your profits.

6. Not date.

7. Be idiosyncratic.

8. Be something with which a powerful visual style can be associated. If your designer needs to add a lot of graphic frills to explain what your outlet does then I'd suggest you start over — or get another designer.

9. Have charisma. Ugly doesn't sell!

Very few names will fit all these criteria but you'll find if you keep them short and they trip off the tongue nicely, you're on the right track.

Anyone can come up with the right name but it may take time. The skill is in resisting the temptation to let time pressure force a poor choice early.

If you do conduct a survey, make sure you ask people to judge the name against the criteria and not on personal taste. Chances are, if your friends like it, it's too conventional.

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Having trouble settling on a name for your brand?