

# Naming the Goodyear Blimp: Corporate Iconography<sup>1</sup>

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Attentive to names as corporate markers, the Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company of Akron, Ohio, in 2006 offered consumers an unprecedented opportunity to name its newest airship. The company's "Name the Blimp" contest, which ran in two month-long segments, elicited over 21,000 entries, including the winning "Spirit of Innovation." In the context of Goodyear history, I analyze the contest' design and results, especially its strategies for maximizing both corporate and consumer satisfaction, as a demonstration of the power of names to market image and promote customer loyalty.

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In 2006, the Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company of Akron, Ohio, sponsored a national contest to name its latest airship. From 21,300 entries, the corporation selected ten finalists, which it then submitted to public vote on its website, [nametheblimp.com](http://nametheblimp.com). The winner, announced in May 2006 to media fanfare, declared the new blimp the *Spirit of Innovation*. The ship was hailed in a christening ceremony attended by 1,500 people on 21 June, its official name emblazoned on the flank of its car.

Goodyear, which maintains its fleet solely for marketing purposes, recognizes in this first-of-a-kind contest a resounding consumer relations success, a strong return on its publicity investment, and a conviction that the winning entry aptly conveys the firm's capacity for product leadership. The contest is equally apt as illustration of the significance of names in a corporate context. Goodyear's historical attention to names and naming rituals, the popular response to its "Name the Blimp" invitation, and the oversight that guaranteed a winner consonant with corporate expectations point beyond the specifics of the contest to the theoretical underpinnings of name-based advertising.

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From its inception, Goodyear has been a company attentive to the power of names. When Frank A. Seiberling founded the company in 1898, he named it not for himself—his family had little name recognition outside Akron—but for Charles Goodyear, called the founder of the commercial rubber industry. Bankrupted by his experiments, Goodyear had died in Boston in 1860 with multiple claims against his estate. His life's work had been to transform India rubber, hard and brittle in winter, sticky and smelly in summer, from curiosity into market commodity.

The material's potential inspired an international industrial race at the start of the 19th century. In 1819, Charles Macintosh of Glasgow discovered a way to roll rubber between two sheets of fabric. The waterproof gear thus produced soon became known as Macintoshes or "macks." By the 1830s, Goodyear, in his kitchen laboratory, had arrived at the rough proportions of rubber, sulfur, and lead that, when heated, made the substance durably pliable. Shortly after, it was William Brockedon, a friend of Macintosh, who called the heat treatment of rubber "vulcanization," after the Roman god of fire. He suggested the coinage to Thomas Hancock of London, an inventor of inflatable tires and another of Goodyear's competitors. The word, like rubber, stuck (Korman 2002).

Seiberling's adoption of Goodyear's name has not proven unproblematic. The Goodyear Rubber Company in San Francisco, founded 1865, predated the Akron upstart by 33 years, and a compromise on their joint use of the name was not negotiated until 1927 (Korman 2002). Moreover, some of Goodyear's heirs considered themselves exploited by the growing Akron giant. In the 1930s, without conceding any grounds, the company agreed to provide a \$100 monthly pension for Charles Goodyear III, living in destitution outside Boston. When his cousin, granddaughter Rosalie Goodyear, failed to be invited to Akron for the 1939 centennial of the inventor's discovery, she bridled, asking whether any of his eight living grandchildren had "ever received a penny for the use of his invention and remarkable name?" Indignant, she continued, "Why are rubber companies permitted to use grandfather's name? Have they title to it except by appropriation?" (letter to Clifton Slusser, 10 March 1939, cited in Korman 2002). Additionally, Goodyear products risk being confused with BF Goodrich tires, now sold by Michelin, and

Goodrich aerospace materials. The Goodrich Corporation traces its history to Akron tire maker Benjamin Franklin Goodrich, whose fledgling business had won early financial backing from Frank Seiberling's father.

Such history has attuned Goodyear Tire & Rubber to the importance of name as corporate marker. Since 1915 it has burnished its image under the slogan "Goodyear: Protect Our Good Name," conceived by copy agent Theodore McManus and still used internally today (O'Reilly 1983; Markey 2007). Seiberling initiated promotional campaigns, and the company's ad in the 6 February 1901 *Saturday Evening Post* was the first full-page advertisement of any tire maker (O'Reilly 1983). A century later, the famous blimps, billboards in the sky, are branded with name and logo, the winged foot of Mercury, proclaiming Goodyear "#1 in Tires."

Goodyear's initiation into airship manufacture was born of entrepreneurship rather than marketing prescience. During World War I, it won military contracts for gas masks, tires, reconnaissance balloons, and blimps, the first of which emerged from the hangar in 1917. After the war, military collaboration continued, while the Germans developed zeppelins, named after designer Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin, for freight and passenger transport. Through war reparations and a newly established Goodyear-Zeppelin subsidiary, the U.S. Navy acquired two zeppelins, the *Shenandoah* in 1923 and the *Los Angeles* in 1924. After lead engineer Karl Arnstein immigrated to Akron, the Navy commissioned the *Akron*, christened in 1931 by Mrs. Herbert Hoover, and the *Macon*, christened in 1933 by Mrs. William Moffett, wife of the Rear Admiral who led the Navy Bureau of Aeronautics. Three of these four rigid ships followed the Navy policy of naming cruisers for U.S. cities, a toponymy on the seas: the *Shenandoah* (downed in 1925); the *Akron* (lost in a 1933 thunderstorm, killing Admiral Moffett on board); and the *Macon* (downed in 1935, the last rigid airship of the Navy, which had decommissioned the *Los Angeles* in 1932).

Meanwhile, Goodyear's chairman Paul W. Litchfield championed the commercial potential of what he called "aerial yachts" (Topping 2001). In 1925 Goodyear christened its first commercial blimp, the *Pilgrim*, followed by the *Puritan*, *Mayflower*, *Vigilant*, and *Volunteer*. Litchfield, a lifelong fan of all things nautical (titling his autobiography *Industrial Voyage*), here instated the practice of naming Goodyear blimps after

winners of the America's Cup yachting races. At the hands of creative engineers and equally inventive publicists, blimps grew in size and popularity. In 1929, Amelia Earhart christened the *Defender*, with ten-passenger capacity, at the Cleveland National Air Races.

Thus Goodyear's initial forays into lighter-than-air craft included both zeppelins and blimps. All steerable airships are called dirigibles, from the Latin *dirigere* 'to direct, steer', and then distinguished by their structure. Zeppelins (sometimes equated with dirigibles) are supported by rigid metal frames (Larson 1977; O'Reilly 1983). Craft without frames, smaller than zeppelins and limp when not inflated, are called blimps, a word of disputed origin. The Oxford English Dictionary offers onomatopoeic attribution to a British naval lieutenant who flipped his thumb along the side of one and echoed aloud the noise that it made: "Blimp!" Goodyear historian Hugh Allen supports rather the OED etymology as a contraction of "B-limp," the designation for a World War I craft purportedly used in England but since reported never to have existed (Allen 1934; Larson 1977).

Huge U.S. helium deposits and Goodyear's rubber technology lie behind the company's enthusiasm for blimps, since, until the advent of polyethylene, the hundreds of yards of fabric in their envelopes were coated with rubber. Helium, although only half as light as hydrogen, is inert. Thus, while Goodyear ships have been lost to storms and human error, none has ended in the inferno of the *Hindenburg*, named for German president Paul von Hindenburg, the ship whose hydrogen tanks exploded over Lakehurst, New Jersey, on 6 May 1937. Thirty-six lives and international hopes for commercial airship lines went up in flames that night as radio newscaster Herbert Morrison cried famously "Oh, the humanity!"

With the onset of World War II, Goodyear rocketed to prominence as the nation's only blimp manufacturer. By the war's end, of over 200 flown, only one had been downed by enemy fire, and of 90,000 vessels in convoys under blimp escort, not a single ship was ever lost (Rodengen 1997). The company also designed and manufactured tires, life rafts, self-sealing fuel tank covers, sentinel balloons, planes, and parts. Fifteen Goodyear plants were recognized with the prestigious Army-Navy "E" Award. After the war, Goodyear bought several of its ships from the military and converted them to advertising purposes with names such as

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the *Enterprise*, *Mayflower*, and *Puritan*, outfitted to display signs 190 feet long with letters 18 feet high. By the early 1960s, when the navy was decommissioning its last blimps, Goodyear had only the *Mayflower* left. At this point, however, a trial East Coast promotional tour proved a rousing success, so rather than abandon a diminished fleet the company expanded it, with the *Columbia* in Los Angeles and the *America* in Houston.

For its 75th anniversary in 1973, Goodyear christened the *Europa* (retired in 1986), based outside Rome. Since then, the tradition of naming blimps for America's Cup winners has waned. Instead, the company has flown such ships as the *Spirit of Akron*, *Spirit of Goodyear*, and *Eagle*, which recognized Eagle tires, the name neatly aligning product performance with the majesty and patriotism of the bald eagle. Today, Goodyear's three-ship fleet, based in Akron, Los Angeles, and Pompano Beach, carries about 8,000 VIPs a year, supports massive telecommunications platforms, and flies the computerized signs seen at the Super Bowl, the New Orleans Mardi Gras, the World Series, and elsewhere.

Goodyear tapped into all this history and symbolism, at the conscious or subconscious level, when it invited the public to name the blimp that would replace the *Stars and Stripes*, which had crashed in a storm. Instead of contracting with corporate-branding consultants, the company turned its quest into a public relations venture. What it might have paid for a manufactured name (at a cost approaching \$100,000 [Montgomery 2005]), it was free to invest in publicizing the contest and maintaining the necessary website. What is more, the real prize, although it included transportation and accommodations for the christening ceremony (with a maximum value of \$10,000), could hardly be measured: your winning name affixed to the ship and use of it for a day with eleven passengers of your choice (<http://www.nametheblimp.com>).

When 21,300 entries poured in, Chuck Sinclair, Senior Vice President of Global Communications, ascribed the response to "the passion that the American public has for our iconic airships" (Goodyear, "Ten Finalists" 2006). An unexpected marketing bonus was the fact that 45% of participants checked an "opt-in" box to receive subsequent Goodyear product notices (Markey 2007). A well-defined process enabled the company to capitalize on consumer participation while retaining control over outcome:

1. The website cautioned submitters to avoid “inappropriate language” and “the name of another company, brand, or product.” It called for “a name that is befitting one of America’s greatest icons and reflects the following elements: the storied 80-year history . . . of the Goodyear airship program; the grace and majesty of flight; the Goodyear airships’ . . . public service; and Goodyear’s innovative personality and products” ([www.nametheblimp.com](http://www.nametheblimp.com)).

2. Goodyear maintained exclusive control of the database. Other than the finalists, very few submissions were published, mainly for their humorous want of *gravitas*. Several of these capitalized on the size or deployment of the ship (“Blimposaurus,” “Old Rubber-Sides”). Many reflected the pervasive influence of Hollywood and popular culture (“The Blimpernator,” “Homer Blimpson”). Others testified to the blimps’ popularity at sporting events (“Blimpledon,” “The Great Blimpino”). A number found inspiration in the arts (“The Roadless Travel,” “Girth of a Nation,” “The Grateful Tread,” “Airway to Heaven”) (Brown 2006; Markey 2007).

3. Goodyear never relinquished its own naming rights. The field of nominations, entered 11-30 April 2006, was submitted to two stages of judging. First, Goodyear judges selected ten finalists, which then opened to online voting 7-31 May. Next, Goodyear’s panel selected the winner in a decision based 50% on results of public vote and 50% on its own evaluation, with the combined score “determined by Sponsor at its sole discretion” ([www.nametheblimp.com](http://www.nametheblimp.com)).

Ed Markey, Vice President of Public Relations and Communications, explained the intricacies of the contest. The webpage was programmed to accept only the first of each name, effectively forestalling duplicates. Protocols recognized every unique name, so misspellings, use of articles, and shifts between upper- and lower-case all generated discrete entries. Once the window for submissions closed, a blue-ribbon panel representing marketing, blimp operators, legal offices, and long-term employees, as well the public relations firm overseeing the contest, convened. Each reading a different portion of the list, panelists first disqualified any entries that did not meet the published criteria, then any misspellings, foreign words, or previous blimps’ names. Next, as a group, they clustered remaining submissions thematically and, finally, honed the list

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to ten for online voting. The ultimate decision, based on that vote and panel confirmation, easily won approval from top administration.

“Because we have so many years of history, we had a sense of what would fit,” said Markey of the selection process. So apparently did the public. Of 520 entries that he offered as a random sample, 6.5% included *Goodyear* or its product names, while another 34% incorporated positive consumer intangibles, not only the winning “Spirit of Innovation” but also “Imagination,” “Adventure,” “Reliability.” A slightly smaller pool, 26.7%, associated the blimp with patriotic qualities, suggesting “Made in the USA,” “Liberty,” and “American Pioneer.” One offered “Katrina” and sixteen others invoked 9/11, a total of 3.3% inspired by national disaster. Humorous wordplay accounted for 8.8%, with entries such as “Tread on Me” and “Aerofirma.” (Not among this sample was insider favorite “Oh, the Huge Manatee,” which Markey called “brilliant on so many levels” [2007].) Personal names comprised 5.4% of the sample (not only “Magellan” and “John Hancock” but “Harriet” and “Bub”) and place names 4.2%, most of them involving Akron as corporate headquarters. Another 4.4% adopted mythological allusions (“Aeolus,” “Leviathan”), and 1.5% borrowed military or nautical terminology (“Citadel,” “Admiral”). There were, of course, a number of hard-to-classify items (such as “matrix”), misspellings (“Halve Maen”), and idiosyncratic entries with meanings apparent only to the submitter (“Joby”), for 5.0% of the total.

Not surprisingly, Chairman and CEO Bob Keegan termed the contest results “overwhelming and gratifying” (*Goodyear*, “Winner” 2006). News coverage spiked, leaping from business pages to feature stories when Matthew Harrelson, Hudson High School chemistry teacher, was declared the winner. He had submitted his entry four minutes after the contest opened. Asked how “Spirit of Innovation” occurred to him, he replied, “When I think of Goodyear’s use of the blimp for advertising and when I think of their new tires (Assurance and Aquatred), I think of innovation. ‘Spirit’ just added to the name and made it flow better and sound more regal,” he explained, alluding to such fleet members as the *Spirit of Akron* and *Spirit of Goodyear* (2006). The *Cleveland Plain Dealer* carried the 21 June christening under the headline “Inspiration leads to ‘Innovation’” (Samavati 2006) and followed it with a quarter-page photo of his wife and preschool daughters when Harrelson claimed his day with

the blimp on 21 September (“Spiriting” 2006). He readily admitted, “It was great to see the name on the blimp” (2006). He was, after all, participating in an American legend.

Obviously, Goodyear finds reason to cultivate belief in that legend. “[A]s a recognizable image the blimps are unbeatable,” George Larson, author of *The Blimp Book*, reports. “The end result is corporate name-recognition and good will. Independent research has demonstrated that people are . . . able to remember exactly when and where they saw [the Goodyear blimp].” Sighted by more than 60 million Americans each year, “[t]he Goodyear blimps are probably the best-known corporate symbol in the United States,” he concludes (1977).

Worldwide enthusiasts continue to hold that blimps, which float without expending fuel, are the transport of the future. For now, however, Goodyear has to share the airship skies with very few challengers. It is not the only company to fly a blimp, of course. The FujiFilm blimp first appeared at the 1984 Olympics. Nor is it the only corporation to name its fleet. JetBlue displays the names of its aircraft, too, with such thematic selections as *Rhapsody in Blue* and *Déjà Bleu*. Pilotless blimp-look balloons have become an advertising staple of car dealers and shopping malls. The U. S. Air Force uses unmanned airships for surveillance, and Lockheed Martin has a solar-powered prototype that can hover for more than a year scheduled for test flights in 2010 (Wise 2006).

Still, if any object can convey the power of a name to invoke corporate image and reward customer loyalty, it is the Goodyear blimp. Welcomed at every major sporting event, willingly lent for PSAs and aerial shots at sites ranging from Prince Charles and Lady Diana’s wedding to 9/11, it both fulfills and exceeds its anchor role as advertisement. Millions of viewers would tacitly award it the status of American icon. And now, 21,300 of them can say that they helped to name it.

#### Note

1. The Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company led national production of military rubber products throughout the Second World War. This article honors Ed Lawson and all World War II veterans for their sacrifices as members of the U.S. armed forces.



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