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What's in a Brand Name? A Note on the Onomastics of Brand Naming

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This note looks at the main strategies used by marketers and manufacturers to name products. It gives an overview of these strategies, starting with the history of brand-naming and ending up with the current practice of using Internet-style strategies for naming products. The idea in brand-naming is to create a "code" of latent meanings for the product that the consumer can grasp either consciously or unconsciously.

KEYWORDS brand names, language, marketing, word magic, logos

Introduction

Brand names are as recognizable as the names of celebrities. Brands such as *Coca-Cola*®, *Apple*®, *Kleenex*®, *Calvin Klein*®, *Chanel*®, *McDonald's*®, *Ivory Soap*®, *Scotch*® *Tape*, and the like have become veritably and literally household names. Such a high level of recognition would have been impossible if they were simply called soft drinks, hamburgers, running shoes, computers, and so on. These brand names are pivotal to creating an identity for the products and, thus, a "meaning code" for them. The brand name has become so important to the marketing world that it is now fiercely protected by law. Anyone who uses a trademark or brand name acquires the legal right to prevent others from using a similar one.

The brand name is, purportedly, what allows consumers to identify specific products and distinguish them from others. But this is not all it does. Names breathe life into things. Across cultures, a neonate is not considered a person until he or she is given a name. The act of naming a newborn infant is, in fact, his or her first rite of passage into the world, becoming identifiable as an individual with a unique personality, background, and so on. The same kind of "breath" is injected into named products, transforming them into "living artifacts," so to speak — that is objects that are perceived to be extensions of physical or mental capacities, allowing one to fulfill one's deepest desires or aspirations. For marketers and manufacturers, the coinage of an appropriate brand name — a name that matches the unconscious meanings attached to a product — is the first crucial step in transforming the product into a true brand. At a practical level, naming a product has, of course, an identifier

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function, allowing consumers to identify what particular product they may wish to purchase (or not). But the name generates images and meanings that go well beyond this simple function. Consider *Armani* high heel shoes. The name of the manufacturer allows us, of course, to identify the shoes as denotatively different from other shoe brands. But it does much more than that. It taps into a code of meaning that is designed to evoke images of artistry, craftsmanship, and superior quality to the shoe product. The name *Armani*® transforms the shoe product into an "authored" work of shoe art, not just an assembly-line product for everyone to wear. Designer names for clothing and footwear are all part of a similar code, evoking images of clothes and shoes as constituting *objets d'art*, rather than mere items of clothing or footwear. This is why such names must have pleasing qualities, otherwise they will work against this perception. New York designer Ralph Lifshitz changed his name to Ralph Lauren, for the reason that it was more pleasant-sounding. Similarly, the designer Pietro Cardino altered his name to Pierre Cardin, in order to give it a more fitting "French sound." So powerful is the brand name as part of a meaning code that, on several occasions, it has been used by consumers as a metonym for the entire product type. Such names have lost their legal status as trademarks. Examples include *aspirin*, *scotch tape*, *cellophane*, *escalator*, among others.

The purpose of this paper is to describe various strategies used by manufacturers and marketers to bring a product to life, in a manner of speaking. It follows up on a previous work (Danesi, 2008) and complements the excellent study by Nuessel (2010) on naming strategies for energy drink products. Transforming a simple product, like a lipstick, into a brand entails "semiotizing" it (that is, giving it sense and meaning) by creating an appropriate name for it. As an example, consider a fictitious lipstick product to be marketed to thirteen- to fifteen-year-old teenage girls. To convert it into a brand with a specific code of meaning, we will have to start by giving it a suitable name, say, *Kiss Stealer*. This opens up a whole array of meanings that are, arguably, consistent with what a pubescent young girl today might understand (romance, kissing, looking appealing, etc.). A lipstick product without a name simply will not sell in today's world. Even a "no-name" product has a name: *No-name*, which itself entails a latent meaning code (low price, but good quality, and so on).

Historical note

The practice of brand-naming emerged around 1880 in the US, when soap manufacturers started giving names to their products so that they could be distinguished from similar ones in stores. Among the first names used were *Ivory*, *Pears*, *Sapolio*, and *Colgate*. It is not known which of these was first. The *Ivory* name goes back to 1882 and is considered by most marketing historians to be the most likely candidate. It was Harley Proctor who decided to rename his generically named *White Soap* as *Ivory Soap*® — an idea that seemingly came to him while he was reading a psalm in church. In December of that year, Proctor introduced the first true slogan into advertising, referring to his named product as "99 and 44/100% pure." The modern concept of brand was thus born. By simply coining appropriate names for their products, manufacturers quickly discovered that sales increased significantly. In some cases, the trademark itself was used as the brand name for the product. Such was the case with

the *Parker Pen*® — one of the first trademarks to be converted into a brand name in 1888 in Janesville, Wisconsin, by George Safford Parker. Parker simply decided to name each pen produced by his company after himself. As a result the Parker Pen® Company became the world's largest producer of fountain pens in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

It became immediately obvious that a product with a name garnered itself a special type of recognition, leading (as far as early marketing documents can be accessed) to an increase in sales. There were even in that era many sophisticated persuasion strategies and techniques (the use of different fonts, of color ads, etc.) that manufacturers starting using systematically to promote their products. But, without naming the product first, all these would remain largely ineffectual. A general law of marketing thus crystallized spontaneously — consumers perceive a product as something unique and possessing specific (desirable) qualities through the name it bears. Indeed, the term *brand* is really a synonym for product name. Branding was, originally, the term used to refer to the searing of flesh with a hot iron to produce a scar or mark on livestock for identification or other purposes. The Egyptians branded livestock as early as 2000 BCE. In the late medieval period, trades people and guild members posted characteristic marks outside their shops, thus establishing the concept of *trademark*. Medieval swords and pottery, for instance, were distinguished by identifiable symbols on signs hung at the entrance of shops. Among the best-known trademarks surviving from that period are the striped barbershop pole and the three-ball pawnbroker sign.

By the early 1920s, it became evident that branding was not just a simple strategy for product identification or differentiation, but the very semiotic fuel that propelled corporate identity. As Naomi Klein (2000: 6) aptly writes, "competitive branding became a necessity of the machine age," because the market was starting to be flooded by uniform mass-produced products. At the same time, the semiotic power of the name itself became rather conspicuous, embedding a product unconsciously into social life. Names such as *Nike*®, *Apple*®, *Body Shop*®, *Calvin Klein*®, *Levi's*®, etc. have, in fact, become *de facto* cultural symbols recognized by virtually anyone living in a modern consumerist society. As Klein (2000: 16) goes on to remark, for such companies the brand name constitutes "the very fabric of their companies."

Onomastic strategies

Why does naming a simple detergent, a toothpaste, an automobile, and so on create such a powerful effect? Undoubtedly, the answer lies in the ability of names in themselves to impart a life-giving force to things. In Hebrew culture, the ancient art of *gematria* was based on the belief that the letters of any name could be interpreted as digits and rearranged to form a number that contained secret messages encoded in it. The Romans, too, thought names were prophetic, imprinting this belief in the expression *nomen est omen* ("a name is an omen"). Clearly, decoding the onomastic strategies used by manufacturers and marketers will provide a valuable first insight into why consumerist culture has become so emotionally powerful.

As indicated elsewhere (Danesi, 2008), brand-naming strategies can be classified into several generic categories that belie the underlying psychology of the nomination

process — *manufacturer names*, *fictitious character names*, *descriptor names*, *suggestive names*, and *symbolic names*. In this paper, I will expand the typology, modify it, and refine it to show how the marketer and manufacturer has virtually become a kind of word magician, creating codes of meanings that are, literally, their own reward.

Manufacturer names

The manufacturer's name imbues a product with a code of connotations connected with a sense of tradition, reliability, trust, and artistry (according to product). Names such as *Armani*®, *Folgers*®, *Calvin Klein*®, *Gucci*®, etc. are examples of names that evoke this code. This naming strategy straddles all kinds of products, from cheese (*Kraft*®) and coffee (*Folgers*®) to automobiles (*Lamborghini*®, *Maserati*®) and designer clothes and cosmetics (*Armani*®, *Gucci*®, *Calvin Klein*®, *Prada*®, *Chanel*®). In the case of products such as cheese or coffee, the name is a guarantee of quality and tradition, since the maker can be easily identified and his or her track record thus easily accessed. Much like instruments named after their makers, from the Stradivarius violin to the Steinway piano, brands like these ones suggest superiority and reliability, based on the fact that they have been around for a considerable period of time and thus have withstood the test of time. Like wines, they are perceived to be of a vintage quality, hence they can also be called *heritage names*. In the case of designer clothing, jewelry, perfume, and other lifestyle products, the manufacturer name can more appropriately be called a *designer* or *creator name*, since it evokes, instead, connotations of artistry, elegance, high class, and the like. The same applies to automobile names such as *Ferrari*® or *Maserati*®. When people buy an *Armani*® or a *Ferrari*® product, they feel that they are buying a work of art authored by its creator.

Manufacturer brand names are, in effect, eponyms, since they refer to a person whose name is on the product and is thus perceived as being the authorial source of the product itself. Marketing research shows that luxury items named after the manufacturer has been producing a cult of connoisseurship, so to speak, whereby the brand is the symbolic means by which consumers convey individualism and knowledge of class and lifestyle (Klein, 2000; Wheeler, 2003). Consumer discernment of brands is now a subtle form of imaginary social status climbing, replacing membership in organizations that sustain such climbing in reality. Brands now make it possible for common people to become part of what the late French philosopher and semiotician Jean Baudrillard (1983) called a "hyperreal" world of elegance and nobility, an imaginary world conjured up by the mass media and consumer advertising, which is felt by many as being more real than the real world.

Fictitious character names

Products named after a fictitious character (*Mr Clean*®, *Barbie*®, *Betty Crocker*®) suggest specific kinds of qualities, such as cleanliness or idealized portraitures of American womanhood, represented by the character himself or herself. This is why these are also called *portrait names*. *Mr Clean*® (a detergent) is, more specifically, a *cartoon character name*, also known as a *mascot name*. Another subtype of portrait name is that of a *human effigy* (real or fictitious). The *Betty Crocker*® product, for instance, bears the effigy or portrait of a fictitious female.

Some seemingly fictional portrait names are based on real people. For example, *Duncan Hines*® is a character seen on boxes of cake and brownie mix. Many assume that he is a fictitious character. But in actual fact there really existed a Duncan Hines, who was born in Bowling Green, Kentucky, in 1880, becoming widely known for his newspaper columns. Around 1950, Hines agreed to let his name be used for food and kitchen products. Another example is the Wendy character of the *Wendy's*® restaurant chain. Dave Thomas, the founder of the chain, used his own daughter's nickname (Wendy), even though the image on the logo is not a portrait of his daughter, but rather a stylized version of a young girl.

Descriptor names

The descriptor name is a word or phrase that describes the product in some way (such as what the product allows users to accomplish with it). One type of descriptor name is the one that indicates product constitution: *Frogurt* (= Frozen + Yogurt), *Go-Gurt* (= Go + Yogurt). Another type is a toponymic descriptor, identifying the geographical location (or country) from where the product originates or where a company is situated: *American Bell*®, *Bank America*®, *Western Union*®, etc.

Most descriptors names, however, indicate what products can do: *Air Fresh*® (air freshener), *Bug Off*® (insect repellent), *Close-Up Toothpaste*® (dentifrice), *Drip-Dry*® (spray), *Easy Wipe*® (cleaning cloth), *Easy-Clean*® (cleaner), *Kleenex*® (tissue), *Lestoil*® (household cleaner), *Light 'N Easy*® (mop), *One Wipe*® (hygienic cloth), *Wash 'N Wear*® (garments). Even in relaying seemingly straightforward information, descriptor brand names nevertheless evoke codes of meaning. They identify the product not as a simple product, but as something that belongs somewhere, is created by someone, or can do various things. And often the name is linked subconsciously to specific areas of lifestyle. For example, in 1998 General Mills introduced a yogurt category called *Go-Gurt*®. The name was perfect for the pre-teen market for which it was targeted. With alliterative and fun flavor names such as *Berry Blue Blast* and *Rad Raspberry*, the brand was an immediate success, because, as Spiegel, Coffey, and Livingston (2004: 185) observe, the name informed pre-adolescents that they could eat the yogurt "on the go," and thus do it as they played sports, went skateboarding, and the like.

Suggestive names

Suggestive names are those that connect the consumer by allusion to certain lifestyles or psychological domains of meaning. Consider the name of the *Acura*® car. At a denotative level, the name is, clearly, suggestive of the word *accuracy*. But its word's structure is also suggestive of how both Italian (or Spanish) and Japanese words are constructed. The feminine nouns in the former language end in *-a* and certain Japanese words end in the suffix *-ura* (*tempura*). The brand name thus suggests, by extension, the perceived qualities of both cultures at once — artistry and scientific precision. Carmakers have used this strategy frequently: *Altima*®, *Corsica*®, *Elantra*®, *Lumina*®, *Maxima*®, *Sentra*®, and so on.

The code can take many forms. For example, using certain morphemes (such as suffixes) might convey scientific soundness. The brand names *Androgel*® and *Viramax*® for *Viagra*® products are two cases in point. In both names, the first part

(*Andro-* and *Vir-*) refers to various gender qualities (*androgyny* and *virility* respectively), while the suffixes evoke scientific connotations. Various brand names are created in similar ways, connecting them to a generic scientific lexicon: *Panasonic*® (televisions and stereos), *Proof Positive*® (eye cream), *Technics*® (stereo system), *Timex*® (watch), and so on.

Some names are suggestive of the qualities of Nature, which is an appropriate onomastic fit since they refer to cleanliness or some sensory modality — *Aqua Velva*® (aftershave lotion), *Cascade*® (detergent), *Irish Spring*® (soap product), *Mountain Dew*® (soft drink), *Surf*® (laundry soap), *Tide*® (laundry soap), etc. Others suggest lifestyle preferences or needs. For example, car models are named to suggest countryside escape, wild west living, back-to-nature feelings, and so on — *Dodge Durango*, *Ford Escape*®, *Ford Explorer*®, *Jeep Grand Cherokee*®, *Jeep Renegade*®, *Jeep Wrangler*®, *Mercury Mountaineer*®, etc. Names constructed as hyperboles imply superiority, excellence, the big picture, a forward-looking attitude, and so on — *Future Now* (marketing services), *MaxiLight*® (skin cream), *PowerAde*® (sports drink), *SuperFresh*® (grocery store), etc. These also show the technique of blending words together or combining parts of words. The endings *–tastic* (as in *fantastic*), *-tacular* (as *spectacular*), *-licious* (as in *delicious*), *-rama* (as in *panorama*), among others, are found commonly in this category of brand-naming (Cook, 2004: 68): *Snack-Tastic*® (snack product), *Pet-tacular*® (pet grooming product), *Soyalicious*® (frozen dessert), *Beef-a-rama*® (food-tasting site in Wisconsin), etc.

Suggestive names are effective semiotically, because they link products to human life schemes and cultural symbolism. Cars named after animals (*Mustang*®, *Jaguar*®, *Cougar*®, etc.) imply that animalistic qualities are entailed by driving the automobiles — a *Jaguar* brings to mind a large and powerful creature, a *Cougar*® a fast and exotic animal, and so on. A car model named *Park Avenue*®, on the other hand, suggests upscaleness; one named *Cavalier*® nobility; one named *Yukon*® exploration; one named *Sonata*® classical music sophistication, and so on. The names given to video games fit in perfectly with the mind of the game player, including his or her appetite for adventure (*Final fantasy X*®), play (*PlayStation*®), intrigue and excitement (*Grand Theft Auto*®), free-for-alls (*Melee*®), and so on. When people buy *Moondrops*®, *Natural Wonder*®, *Rainflower*®, *Sunsilk*®, or *Skin Dew*® cosmetics the suggestion is that they are acquiring some of Nature's beauty resources; and when they buy *Eterna 27*®, *Clinique*®, *Endocil*®, or *Equalia*® beauty products the suggestion is that they are getting products made with scientific precision.

Iconic names

The iconic name is a subtype of the suggestive name category. There is, in fact, considerable overlap among the onomastic categories described here. This category is treated separately because it contains brand names that possess some property of iconicity. As is well known, an icon in semiotic theory is a sign that is made to resemble its referent in some way. The Apple Computer logo is an example of a visual icon, because it portrays its referent (an apple) visually. Alliterative names such as *Frosted Flakes* (cereal) are vocal icons simulating the sounds that eating the cereal are perceived to make. Similarly, the name *Ritz Crackers*® assigns an iconic sonority to the product that is simulative of sounds that crackers make as they are being

eaten. A classic case in the annals of marketing history showing how this basic type of phonetic iconicity can be a brand's greatest asset is that of *Smuckers*® jam (named after the manufacturer), which appears at first to be a poor name, but actually turns out to be a highly effective one. The slogan of the company plays cleverly on this initial perception: "A name like Smuckers, it has to be good." The name is indeed good because, as Neumeier (2006: 83) aptly puts it, it is "distinctive, short, spellable, pronounceable, likable, portable, and protectable." And, more importantly, it is onomatopoeic: *Smuckers*® sounds like smacking lips which, as Neumeier (2006: 83) goes on to point out, is the preverbal "testament to a yummy jam."

Phonetic iconicity is just one of the strategies used in this domain. Another one involves names that imitate other names, including the names of famous personages, or else suggest names through their phonetics. An example is the name *Drakkar*® *Noir*®, chosen by Guy Laroche for one of its cologne products. The dark bottle conveys an imagery of "fear," the "forbidden," and the "unknown." Forbidden things take place under the cloak of the night; hence the name *Noir*® (French for "black"). The *Drakkar* part is obviously suggestive of Dracula, the deadly vampire who mesmerized his sexual prey with a mere glance in the *noir* of the night.

Another iconic strategy is matching the design of the product or its logo, emblem or container to some property of the name. As Nuessel (2010: 103) writes about energy drinks, this type of iconicity inheres in designing the physical appearance of a product so as "to appeal to this group [young adults] in terms of colors, images and container design." Thus, one finds containers which are descriptive of their names, as, for instance, a can with an unusual twist-off cap named *Jolt*® and one with a grenade shape named appropriately *Bomba*®.

One of the most famous of all iconic brand names is, of course, the *McDonald's*® one, which is written in such a way that the initial letter resembles arches. Such names, which are recognizable through some feature of their lettering or layout, are also called *letter names*. Another classic example of such an iconic name is the *Coca-Cola*® one. In this case, the name is written in a distinctive style (font, color, etc.), which also constitutes its logo. It is probably the most recognizable visual symbol in the entire world today. Letter names and logos constitute a relatively large onomastic category. It seems that the blending of the purely linguistic with the visual is highly effective since it taps into two forms of memory — the verbal and the eidetic.

Some *fictitious character names* (see above) are really iconic, socially speaking — that is, they have evolved into icons of a certain social category. The Betty Crocker name and portrait, already mentioned, was invented in 1921 by Gold Medal Flour to serve as the face-logo of the company. The physical image of the Betty Crocker figure was fixed in 1936 when her first "portrait" was put out by the company. Her face showed a combination of Caucasian features representing the perfect portrait of the stay-at-home American woman — an expert cook, a friend, and a friendly mother figure. By the mid-1940s Betty Crocker was the second most popular woman in America after Eleanor Roosevelt. She was even portrayed by various actresses on radio and television. Twenty years after that, a new portrait produced a new image — older and friendlier. Currently, Betty's image has been made to reflect a Latina female and a soccer mom at once.

Metaphor

Overall, most of the above strategies can actually be put under the rubric of *metaphorical names*. Brand-naming is, fundamentally, a rhetorical strategy, and thus the line between the various categories discussed above is really a fine one, since they could easily be considered to be tropological in the basic sense of that word. Many of the suggestive names above, for instance, are saliently metaphorical. Automobiles named after animals (*Beetle*®, *Colt*®, *Cougar*®, *Viper*®, *Mustang*®, *Cobra*®) are part of a long-standing perception of the automobile as a replacement of animals as transporters of people. This is why we still refer to the energy associated with motor vehicle engines in terms of "horse power." This rhetorical linkage reaches as well into other domains of meaning. A car model named *Breeze* suggests that the driver will feel a breeze by driving the vehicle and that driving the vehicle is "a breeze." A car named *Pathfinder*® implies instead that it will allow its driver to discover a new path into unexplored regions. And a model named after a zodiac sign (*Aries*®, *Taurus*®) suggests character traits associated with that sign. In a phrase, metaphor allows carmakers to link automobiles with aspects of psychological and social life: upscaleness (*Park Avenue*®, *Fifth Avenue*®, *Catalina*®, *Monte Carlo*®, *Capri*®), country lifestyle (*Outback*®, *Villager*®), social rank (*Viscount*®, *Marquis*®, *Diplomat*®, *Monarch*®, *Ambassador*®), exploration or escape from city life (*Dakota*®, *Montana*®, *Yukon*®, *Sierra*®, etc.), social advantages such as protection, friendship, security, etc. (*Protégé*®, *Sidekick*®, *Escort*®, *Cavalier*®), the artistry and elitism associated with classical music (*Sonata*®, *Tempo*®, *Prelude*®), world travel, car racing, and the alluring qualities of foreign worlds (*Seville*®, *Grand Prix*®).

Perfume and video game names are also often metaphors. The perfume named *Poison*, by Christian Dior, is an obvious one because, as Wolfe (1989: 3) aptly points out, it evokes a sense of "mystery, alchemy and the archetype of the sorceress." Names such as *PacMan*®, *Pitfall*®, *Pong*® that were common in 1970s and 1980s (when video games came onto the social scene) have been replaced with new, trendy names, such as *GameCube*, which suggests the Rubik's Cube, video game parlors, and other devices that implicate new forms of intelligence tied to technology; *Grand Theft Auto*®, which suggests intrigue, life on the margins, excitement, cool, James Bond, etc.; *Melee*®, which brings to mind violent car racing, clashes, free-for-alls; and so on.

The term "brand logic" is now used in marketing to explain the logic behind naming products in ways such as those described here. This is indeed the correct term. The word *logic* derives from the Greek *logos* meaning both "word" and the "thought" it evokes. A product is something made in factories, in shops, etc. A brand, on the other hand, is a logical construct — a name evoking an unconscious system of thought. But the "logical reasoning" used is hardly deductive or rational; it is, rather, based on a poetic sense of the meaning nuances built into words. The whole brand-naming process is essentially a "poetic" or "rhetorical act."

Symbolic names

In early 2000 some carmakers started using naming strategies that were designed to appeal to a new generation of customers accustomed to an Internet or digital style of communication. *Cadillac*, for instance, announced a new model with the monogram

name *CTS* in 2001. *Acura* also transformed its line of models with names such as *TL*, *RL*, *MDX*, *RSX*. Such names are now proliferating. They can be called, simply, *symbolic names*. They involve the use of letters, numbers, acronyms, reflecting an "Internet-savvy code": *X-Factor* (television show), *Toyota XR Matrix*® (car), *iPod*® (digital device), *X-Stick*® (snack), *Xbox*® (video game), *PS3-4-5-6*® (video game), *2BFree*® (clothes), *XM4Home*® (radio system), *Spex Appeal*® (eyewear), *Glam Gurlz*® (dresses), *Hotpak*® (heating pad), *Minds@Work*® (digital equipment). These suggest techno-savvy, tapping into a "text-messaging" style of writing words that is perfectly in step with the times (Frankel, 2004: 106–107; Cook, 2004). Actually, this strategy was used long before the Internet age. Products such as *Cheez Whiz*® (cheese paste), *Spic 'N Span*® (cleaning liquid), *Wheetabix*® (cereal), *Kool*® (cigarettes), and others were named in a similar way. The brand names *U All Kno*® (after dinner mints), *Phiteezi*® (shoes), and *U-Rub-In*® (cream) actually go back to the 1920s (Cook, 2004: 44). It seems to have always been a pattern within modern culture to use letters as symbols, suggesting a kind of primordial pictography. Rock and rap musicians, for example, have always used it to name themselves — *Guns N Roses*®, *Snoop Dogg*®, *Salt N Pepa*®, etc.

One of the most widely used symbolic practices is the use of certain letters as symbolic forms. Consider the letter X, which seems to be used all over the brand-naming landscape. In the area of clothing and footwear, one finds brands named: *X-treme*®, *MaxX*®, *X-tech*®, *X-Girl*®, *X-Cape*®, *XOXO*®. In the field of electronic products, the following names can be found: *X-cam*®, *Xybernaut*®, *NeXT*®, *XM Satellite Radio*®, *Xbox*®, *Xobile*®, *Xincom*®. In the domain of household products, foods, and drinks, one finds names such as *Xanath*®, *Xellent* ®*Vodka*†, *XuXU*®, *Xyience*®, *Xantax*®. Indeed, X-named products are found in every sector of the marketplace: *Xcite*® (herbal Viagra), *X-Lite*® (bicycle), *X-Terra*® (vehicle), and so on. Although some uses of X involve a simple substitution of the prefix *ex*, there is still a kind of "pictography of mystery," so to speak, built into all such names. In a fascinating book titled *Sign After the X* (2000), Marina Roy has traced the history of X as a polysemous sign, showing that it has had very little to do with phonetics at any period of its history, but everything to do with symbolism, standing for such referents as the sign for a mistake, the unknown, location on a treasure map, a symbol for Christ, the symbol for a kiss, and so on.

Today X stands for youth culture (*Xbox*®), adventure comic heroes (*X-Men*), erotic movies (*X-rated*) and virtually anything that is both forbidden (or mysterious) and exciting. Single-letter symbolism does not stop at X. Another example is the use of lower-case "i," a practice introduced (to the best of my knowledge) into brand-naming by the Apple Computer Company. Today it is used to name a vast array of products: *iCaps*® (eye care products), *iCom*® (computer software), *iMac*® (computer), *iMark*® (eye shadow), *iPod*® (digital device), *iZod*® (shoes), and so on. Such names reverberate with Internet savvy and technological chic. The lower case "i" suggests "imagination," "Internet," "ingenuity," and "intelligence," among many other things. A kind of mixed strategy consists in using letter substitutions (given their phonetic qualities) and various symbols: *Afrique* Fabrik®s (clothes), *Bratz*® (dolls), *DataViz*® (software), *Graphic M*I*S*® (software), *Krispie Kreme*® (donuts), *Playskool*® (toys). Many businesses have used the letter K for C to name products

since the 1920s, when this practice was adopted by young people to set themselves apart from the adult mainstream.

Alphanumeric brands are those that deploy numbers for either their phonetic qualities or their numerological symbolism: *2BFree*® (clothes), *2CE*® (computer software), *4 Ever Nails*® (nail polish), *H2Optix*® (eyewear), *XM4Home*® (radio system), As Altman (2006: 70) points out, numbers used in naming practices are magical because of their various connotations:

> Think about the difference between a "blended vegetable drink" and "V8." From the name, you know that there are eight kinds of vegetables in every container. Heinz 57 explains on its Web site that in 1896 H. J. Heinz arbitrarily turned "more than 60 products into 57 Varieties." The magic number became world renowned and now is virtually synonymous with the H. J. Heinz Company.

Using numbers in naming products has become a widespread trend. For example, in the domain of automobiles one finds names such as *Mercedes Benz' E3-20*®, the *Saab*® line of cars that all start with the number 9, the *Mazda RX-7*®, the *Pontiac G6*®, the *Corvette C6*®, the *Audi A4*®, and so on and so forth. At one level, these alphanumeric trends are clearly designed to appeal to a new generation of Internet-savvy customers as mentioned. But at different level, they conjure up the same images of occultism evoked by ancient numerological practices. Consider the number 5, used famously in the *Chanel No. 5*® perfume product. There are, of course, practical reasons for naming the product this way — *Chanel No. 5*® was the fifth perfume created by Coco Chanel (so the story goes). But the instant a product is so named, our reaction to it is hardly practical. The number 5 was associated in ancient numerological systems to the pentagon and its mystical derivative the pentagram. The Pythagoreans ascribed the power of the feminine to this five-sided figure — a symbol that blended the profane and sacred elements of life. The *Chanel No. 5*® unconsciously evokes the symbolism of the sacred feminine, of the perfection of feminine beauty, and so on.

Symbolic brand names such as these are powerful because they cast a kind of magic spell on the product. From the beginning of time, names have been thought to have special magical powers. The newly fashioned symbolic brand name also seems to work an unconscious magic on modern-day humans, making them see, for example, products as necessary for success, beauty, adventure, etc., or creating distinctions between better or worse — be it in body, hairstyle, or general lifestyle. Symbolic brand names create belief in products, in the same way that certain symbols create belief in religions.

Concluding remarks

Naming a product makes it possible to refer to it as if it had a distinctive character or quality. Some of the most basic ways this is carried out have been described here. The underlying premise is that it is easier to remember things as words than to remember the things themselves. A word classifies something, keeps it distinct from other things and, above all else, bestows socially relevant meanings to it. Brand names stick to the mind, in the same way that the meanings of ordinary words do. They

become a part of our semantic memory system. The name is so intrinsic to creating brand image that it is perhaps the reason why the term *brand* is no longer used today just to refer to a specific product line, but also to the company that manufactures it and to the social image that company wishes to impart of itself and of its products. Thus, the name *Coca-Cola*® now refers not only to the actual soft drink, but also to the company itself, the social meanings that drinking coke entails, and so on and so forth.

Brand names, clearly, do much more than just identify a product. As the examples discussed here show, they are constructed to create meaning codes for the product. As Alina Wheeler (2003: 2) has observed: "Products are created in the factory; brands are created in the mind." By naming a product, the manufacturer is, in effect, bestowing upon it the same kinds of meanings that are reserved for people. In a basic psychological sense, a product that is named is "humanized."

The histories of brand-naming, logo design, and marketing overlap considerably. The reason is a straightforward one — it is impossible to advertise and promote "nameless" products with any degree of efficacy. Brand names are signs that influence people's unconscious perception of objects as necessary referents of everyday life. The objective of marketing onomastics is, arguably, to get people to react to the inbuilt magic meanings of brands. Brand name designers are, in a fundamental sense, our modern-day word magicians.

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