



ALL ABOUT THAT SOUND

An Education Product Marketer's Guide to Memorable Brand Names

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COKE OR PEPSI?

Coke or Pepsi? Hardee's or Carl's, Jr? Nats or Astros? It's not enough to simply settle on the moniker we've been using in the development process as the one that our customers will learn to love. Shakespeare asked, "What's in a name?" As it turns out, quite a bit, which is probably why he named the play *Romeo and Juliet* and not *The Perfidy and Romance of the Veronese*. Shakespeare was no fool, and neither are we. Everything from the length of a name to the placement of the syllables to the sounds those syllables make can affect how well it will be remembered, interpreted, liked, and understood in relation to the product. Not only can these aspects be understood, they can be purposefully utilized to instill in our customers certain feelings and preconceptions of our brand before they even know what it is.

THE TOP THREE TRICKS TO A TOP-TIER BRAND NAME

1

AVOID
ACRONYMS

2

SHORT AND
SWEET

3

THE MIND
WORKS
BY EAR

SHORT AND SWEET

"Customers want brands that are narrow in scope and distinguishable by a single word, the shorter the better" (Ries & Trout, 1980).

The shorter a name, the more memorable it is (Ries & Trout, 1980). When we're in the Carl's, Jr. drive-thru, do we order "Coca-Cola" or "Coke"? French fries or just fries? A hamburger or just a burger? We have a natural tendency to shorten everything we can, and that which is already short saves us a step in remembering.

It's not just a matter of the short vs. the overlong, either. Every single syllable added to a name lessens the chance that our customer will recall it. In one study, it was discovered that the ability to recall a name dropped after the first syllable and apparently keeps dropping after every successive syllable (Vanden Bergh et al., 1984). Ford is more easily remembered than Chrysler is most definitely more easily remembered than DeLorean, time-traveling, hyper-recognizable product notwithstanding.

AVOID ACRONYMS

The information about shortened names and memory might lead to thinking that acronyms are the superior choice for brand names, however, names with meaning (such as Inspire, Achieve, or Discover) score higher in awareness (68%) than acronyms or initials (49%) (Ries & Trout, 1980).

“When [customers] have a choice between a word or a set of initials, both equal in phonetic length, people will invariably use the word, not the initials” (Ries & Trout, 1980). Los Angeles is truncated to LA, but New York is never abbreviated to NY in conversation. Our minds are attuned to *sounds*, not spellings, and we tend towards the sounds every time. Thus, we have Frisco instead of the equally short SF, Jersey instead of NJ, and Cali instead of CA.

It’s easy to fall into the trap of seeing ubiquitous companies like AT&T, IBM, GE, or GM and assume that the first step to a Fortune 500 is a catchy acronym, but the thinking there is backwards. These companies didn’t start out with their abbreviations, they *earned* the ability to be known by those monograms. Pull up a copy of a newspaper from 1960, and none of the headlines are saving ink to shorten Kennedy to JFK. He earned that when he became *the* JFK, US President number 35. If we’re not in a position to be *the*, we’re only going to make ourselves a *who* by reducing to initials prematurely.

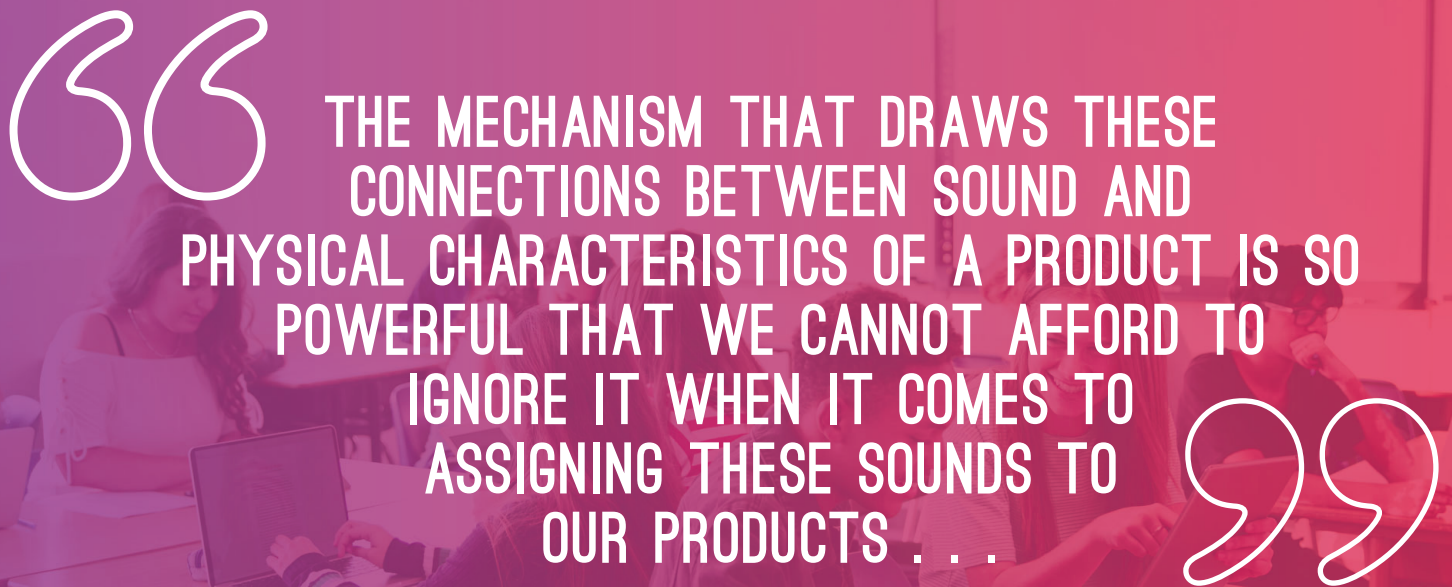
“CUSTOMERS WANT BRANDS THAT ARE
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THE MIND WORKS BY EAR

Every product name, slogan, or tagline must first and foremost be evaluated by their sound. Inherent meaning is conveyed not just by a word’s definition, but by the vowel and consonant sounds within that word. This effect is so powerful that “top brand names display different sound patterns from general brand names” (Pogacar et al., 2014). In other words, the names (or rather, the sounds) of top brands and products are so fundamentally different from their under-performing competitors that we can engineer a name that will have a greater chance of success before the consumer even knows what it is. For instance, words that begin with plosives, consonants sounded out by the blockage of airflow in the mouth, are more recognizable *and* more easily remembered than those without (Klink, 2000). Brand names that start with p, k, g, t, d, or b are at an advantage to their competitors before their product is even experienced, so much so that the top brands across markets consistently contain plosives at the beginning of their names (Klink, 2000). Pepsi and Coke start with that punch at the beginning of the word, and it puts them on the tips of our tongues.

It's not just the beginning of the word that benefits from plosives, either. Stops such as the "k" in "Coke" and the second "p" in "Pepsi" impart an unconscious perception of lightness, softness, and sharpness (Klink, 2000), all good qualities for a fizzy drink.

When it comes to naming your brand, the science of sound symbolism goes much further than plosives. Fricatives, sounds such as "th," "f," and "v" created by friction of air between the lips, for instance, are perceived as denoting a product that is smaller, lighter, and faster (Klink, 2000). Our Ford Thunderbird has a certain *va-va-voom* that our AMC Pacer very much lacks.



THE MECHANISM THAT DRAWS THESE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN SOUND AND PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF A PRODUCT IS SO POWERFUL THAT WE CANNOT AFFORD TO IGNORE IT WHEN IT COMES TO ASSIGNING THESE SOUNDS TO OUR PRODUCTS . . .

In vowels, stark differences in interpretation can be found. The "o" as in "posh" is viewed as generally positive, and is accordingly heavily represented among top brands (Klink 2000) such as Amazon. In contrast, the "u" as in "puke" and the "u" as in "ugh," are viewed negatively, and are similarly found to be underrepresented in top-performing brands (Klink, 2000). Front sound vowels, those produced with the tongue towards the front of the mouth such as a long "e" or short "i," are generally perceived as smaller, feminine, and lighter in much the same way that fricatives are, with every front sound vowel being overrepresented in top brands (Klink, 2000). In contrast, back sound vowels, such as a long "o" or double "oo," imply darker, heavier, and larger products (Klink, 2000). Only one back sound vowel is found to be overrepresented: the "o" as in "posh," which has such a positive connotation as to overcome its category. (Klink, 2000)

This effect is so strong, in fact, that it transcends language barriers (Klink, 2000). High acoustic frequency sounds across languages tend to denote smallness, such as the English "teensy," Spanish "chico," or Japanese "shiisai" (Klink, 2000). On the flip side, low frequency sounds denote largeness, as in the English, Spanish, and Japanese "humongous," "grande," and "ookii," respectively (Klink, 2000). To put it bluntly, the mechanism that draws these connections between sound and physical characteristics is so powerful that we cannot afford to ignore it when it comes to assigning these sounds to the product that we want our customer to grasp as quickly and as effortlessly as possible.

BRAND EXEMPLARS IN SCIENCE AND STEM EDUCATION

Before naming our brand, it can help to examine the names of other highly successful brands in the field of education. We might be tempted to name our product or brand something like “Beak.” Good plosive opener followed by a front vowel sound and finished with a voiceless stop. Not a bad name, but words have something beyond sounds: meanings. Unless we’re selling ornithological products, we’ll probably have to let the next guy or gal have Beak, Inc. The descriptiveness of a brand name ties in heavily to how easily it is remembered and, for low-involvement products, how likely a consumer is to assume quality of a product and purchase (Zaichowsky & Vipat, 1993). So, instead of Beak, maybe consider the names of some already-successful and successfully-named companies in education.

Achieve, for instance, benefits from both the front vowel sound and the fricative, and is a short, easily remembered word with highly positive connotations. Discovery Education, on the other hand, is quite long, but still opens with a plosive and still garners benefits from the fricative “v” and from its connotations, especially in regards to the spirit of scientific exploration that we hope to instill in our students. Discovery also has made the savvy decision to append their already-known and trusted name to their products, such as Discovery Techbook (nice and descriptive) and Discovery Streaming Plus (Triple plosive!).



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Our minds are hardwired to interpret the information we receive in certain ways. The brands in education are in no way exempt from this rule, and to ignore the data would be handing our competitors an advantage over us on a silver platter. There are distinct, tangible benefits to giving our product a name with the right sounds, right length, and right connotations. Benefits that translate into a better opinion from the consumer and, therefore, more business from them. That’s the crux of all of this: The consumer’s ears are the ones that we’re playing to. Not our own, not the CEO’s, not the engineer that developed our fantastical product the likes of which the world has never seen. The best product on Earth can’t be sold to someone who’s forgotten the name, especially when our competitor knew to give their product a name that *pops* off the tongue and puts pleasant thoughts in the consumer’s head. The MIT grad might love that his company’s name can be cleverly abbreviated to “SMRT-TCH,” but his customers will have a different, stronger response to the name: Who?

So, Coke or Pepsi? Personally, I’m a Coke fan. Whoever heard of buying the world a Pepsi to teach it to sing in perfect harmony?

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