

Choosing a Brand - The Do's

You are looking at choosing a new brand for your product or service. The first thing that most of us think about is a name which describes what the product or service is. Marketing people will often tell you that such a name is much easier to sell. In the short term, they are right. In the medium or long term (probably anything from 6 months onwards) this advice is very wrong.

A name which describes the product or service, or something desirable which might be achieved as a result of the product or service (for example FAST for a postal delivery system) is one which can easily be adopted by imitators or competitors coming onto the market. The main risk that you run is that your business will be successful, and then an imitator, who might well be a former staff member, comes onto the market with a similar name. If your original name was descriptive of some feature of the product or service, you will not be able to stop that similar name from being used, and taking a share of the market niche which you have established.

This is why nearly all of the successful long term businesses have brands which are either invented words, or words which have no relationship to any characteristic of the product or service.

Therefore, if your business is to be successful in the long term, the name which you choose for it will be very important. It is not coincidence that the three most successful internet companies are named AMAZON, YAHOO, and E-BAY, when competitors with names such as Priceline, U-Bid, and E-toys have been less successful. Whilst there clearly is an element of luck, and another element of good management, the selection of a name which is not descriptive of any characteristic of a product or service is a critical factor in the long term success of a business.

Now comes the hard part. The selection of a suitable name. As discussed, the very best names are totally invented words. The best trade marks are usually between 4 and 8 letters long, and have no discernable meaning in any language. It is quite easy to invent a few words. If you just sit down with a scrabble set or pencil and paper, and combine elements of your own name, you will soon come up with a number of invented words. The hard part is making the mental leap into adopting them as brands. Any suitable word will sound terrible. Therefore, there is absolutely no point in carrying out any market research, as the market research will point you in the wrong direction. However, you should carry out some research amongst people who speak a range of foreign languages. There is little point in making the same mistake as Mitsubishi did in the selection of the name PAJERO, which is the equivalent of a swear word in Spanish. Needless to say, they had to adopt a different trade mark in Spanish speaking countries.

When you have selected a number of suitable words, the next step in the process should involve a review those words and a trade mark availability / infringement search to ensure that the mark is available for use and registration, certainly initially in the country in which the products or services are to be sold, and with a little foresight into those countries which are seen as potential export markets.

Pipers can carry out a quick computer based screening search covering the US, UK, European Community Trademark databases, New Zealand and Australia at a relatively modest cost, bearing in mind the future investment which you will be making in the brand.

If an invented word proves too hard, you can adopt a word of the English or any other language which has absolutely no meaning in relation to the characteristics of the product. While such words do not make quite as good trade marks as invented words, they will often prove adequate. Two examples from the computer field are WINDOWS and APPLE.

Another point to consider when creating a Brand is to at all times keep in mind the image that your are wanting to project. In many cases using words or images that are evocative and carry with them an easy to remember picture work best. It is no coincidence that many strong brands are remembered just as much by their association with an animal, castle, or symbol than for the name itself.

Choosing a Brand – The Dont's

Some things to avoid when selecting a brand name or trade mark are discussed below.

It is better not to use a surname. You will find it hard to stop other people with the same name from competing against you. Consequently, you will also find it hard to register the brand in most countries.

Avoid geographical names. These cause a number of problems. Firstly, you cannot stop other people from using the name as a correct descriptive term. Secondly, if you get outside a particular geographical area, the name may no longer be appropriate. Thirdly, if you elect to source the product from a different area or place, you may be in breach of fair trading laws in many countries.

Avoid all words which simply suggest good features of the product, for example the words "best", "prime" and "superior" can easily be used by others to describe their goods or services, and therefore they are weak brands.

Short three letter brands are not particularly strong. Although some are well known, such as IBM, and BMW, these have been forced on their owners because the original words used to make up the trade mark were descriptive. Short words are quite easy to imitate, for example, it might be possible to launch a computer product under the trade mark IBE, without infringing IBM's rights.

Avoid combinations of trendy or computer type buzzwords. There are simply too many businesses around with names like comsoft, microserve etc. These names are very easy to forget, as there are so many of them. They simply lack the distinctiveness necessary to become strong brands, unless they are hugely successful for other reasons, for example Microsoft.