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ON THE JOB

Take My Word For It

Brand expert Maria Cypher knows there's more to a name than brainstorming.

BY JOAN O'C. HAMILTON

DURING THE DOT-COM BOOM, it often seemed like the two main ingredients for raising millions in venture capital were a tattooed programming whiz and a company name that sounded like it was pilfered from Dr. Seuss. For every Google or Yahoo! that made it big, however, there were a hundred—maybe a thousand—DoDots that didn't. (Not to mention the Purple Yogis and Loudclouds who switched to more serious monikers.)

According to Maria Williams Cypher, 38, co-founder and creative director at the naming firm Catchword, the practice of giving companies exuberantly inscrutable names has mostly gone the way of, well, most of the companies who coined them. "There's a backlash today against those kinds of Internet names," says Cypher, '88, MBA '95. "The trend now is toward real-world names. People want more grounded, believable, grassroots-sounding names."

Grounded. Believable. Grassroots-sounding. Such is the argot of the naming and brand-development field, in which the aptly named Cypher and her three partners toil. Their 7-year-old company is thriving in an office in the historic Tribune Tower in downtown Oakland (with partner Mark Skoultchi working in New York). Catchword has created such high-profile consumer-product names as Pepsi Blue and Spalding's Infusion line of self-inflating sports balls. It has named business-to-business products for such companies as Cisco, Microsoft and Xerox, and it has contributed memorable, if sometimes enigmatic, high-tech company names, such as Ingenio and TeaLeaf Technology.

Developing a name that works for either a product line or an entire company is a mixture of art and science, of creativity and strategy. It's also a field that demands sensitivity to cultural nuances in global business markets, and the smarts and rigor to steer clients safely through the legal minefields of copyright and trademark infringement. "We're not a bunch of poets sitting around with a bottle of wine coming up with names," Cypher's partner Burt Alper says with a laugh.

A naming project typically begins with meetings in which the Catchword team urges clients to articulate the messages they want associated with a name, as well as those they don't. Recently, for example, the team at Menlo Park-based AgileTV came to Catchword to get help naming a voice-activated TV remote control. Agile wanted the name to suggest a service, not a gadget; it wanted a friendly, approachable tone to the name, but not a cute or sci-fi name; it wanted the name to appeal to women as well as men; and it wanted the name to fit and look good on a slim remote control device.

Thus armed, Cypher tucked into her corner cubicle and began thumbing through her dozens of reference books and word-finding software tools to explore foreign words, relevant and strong syllable options, and useful Latin roots related to sound, such as *amp* and *vo*. Soon, she had developed a "master list" of nearly 2,000 possibilities, from Acousta to Zowie.



DUB HUB: At Catchword, Cypher is "very methodical in my creativity."

Caren Alpert

Catchword's first suggestions are always extensive. "We try not to self-censor early on. Sometimes a bad name actually leads to a good name," she explains.

Catchword then winnowed the huge master list of names down to about 60 and presented them to Agile in random order. Alper, 36, a Harvard MBA, says the naming process is partly about convincing clients not to react with "I like it" or "I don't like it," but rather to assess things on a more objective basis, matching up their strategic objectives with qualities a variety of names can confer. Otherwise, name baggage a customer brings to the table, such as "It sounds too much like the name of my Aunt Bertha's dog," can sabotage a perfectly appropriate name.

Another tip: don't fall in love with any one name early in the process. Preliminary research showed that two Agile favorites from the list of 60, SaySo and Mike, already had claims staked on them.

Still there were half a dozen good, unencumbered contenders. Everyone liked VoJo, for example, an easy-to-pronounce combination of vocal and journey that echoed the fun of the word mojo. Pingo, coined from ping and go, evoked sonar technology and implied reaching a destination immediately. The winner was Promptu, which Cypher believes conveys speed and immediacy and is sophisticated, but approachable. Catchword "did a fantastic job managing the process," says Scott Maddux, vice president of product marketing for Agile.

Product naming is just one aspect of branding, the business challenge that includes product positioning, logo creation, market research and advertising. Catchword helps with these services but focuses on naming. Larger branding and marketing consultants "may pay lip service to naming," Cypher says, but they don't offer the in-depth linguistic, trademark and research elements that can turn a name into a powerful asset—or prevent disaster.

Catchword partner Laurel Sutton, 42, says the creation of a "naming architecture" for companies with multiple entries in crowded categories, for example, doesn't just translate into memorable names, but also helps customers pinpoint what they want. Sutton, who is working on a PhD in linguistics at UC-Berkeley, says that's what happened for Dockers. Catchword helped Levi Strauss organize a confusing array of names for different styles into descriptive names such as "flat-front twill khakis."

On the flip side, a poorly researched name can make a company look foolish: Reebok International once introduced a women's shoe it dubbed "Incubus," apparently without even checking a dictionary. That would have revealed that an incubus is a medieval demon who raped women in their sleep. The shoe was withdrawn from the market shortly after launch.

In a glass case in a corner of Catchword's offices is a humorous rogue's gallery that illustrates another facet of the business—the need to screen translated names of globally marketed products for unwanted cultural meanings. Cypher points to one wince-producing example—a packet of chocolate biscuit candies from Asia with the brand name Collon; the cylindrical treats look like they might have been formed from a similar-sounding body part.

Catchword has a business relationship with the Paris-based naming company Nomen, and the two outfits regularly review potential names for each other's clients to check for pronounceability and cultural baggage. For example, a Nomen client recently considered using the syllable *fink* as part of a brand name for a product that would be sold in the United States. Catchword suggested they give it a little more thought.

In increasingly global markets, Cypher's background is a big plus: The daughter of a U.S. diplomat, she grew up in Asia and is fluent in Mandarin. As a Stanford undergrad, she majored in psychology and economics. She worked in finance and journalism in the United States and Hong Kong. Then at the Graduate School of Business she was recruited by a Bay Area naming firm. That's where she met Alper and Sutton, and they formed Catchword Branding in 1998.

She says the Bay Area and New York are the primary hotbeds of naming creativity. Catchword clients pay anywhere from a few thousand dollars for a descriptive product name that may take only a few days to create, to nearly six figures for a global company name that may include strategy and architecture work and take months to complete.

There's no question that a great brand name has an almost magical quality that may speak to some abstract aspect of a product or company such as reliability, or quality, or even playfulness. A low-key but excellent name, Cypher thinks, is Silk, the soy-based milk brand. "It combines soy and milk, and also speaks to a characteristic of the product." She likes the Dr. Bob brand that Catchword created for Stop&Shop's private-label soda pop. It has a retro, friendly quality and reflects a back-to-basics naming trend—building a brand around "a real person's name even if it's not a real person."

One of the ironies of naming, Cypher says, is that nearly everybody thinks they can do it. "We've all named something," such as a pet or a child, she notes. But Cypher, who does much of the nuts-and-bolts naming work while her partners work with clients on strategy, prides herself on being "very methodical in my creativity." She says it's almost unheard of for her to have an "aha" naming inspiration while walking down the street or taking a shower, although she does talk shop around the dinner table with her husband, Charlie Cypher, '87, a patent and trademark attorney. Instead, you'll find Maria Cypher "stewing in front of my computer with my thesaurus," poring through thousands of syllables looking for a combination that will spell success.

JOAN HAMILTON, '83, is a frequent contributor to STANFORD.

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