

Catchword strives to be a brand apart July 4, 2004

Eve Mitchell, BUSINESS WRITER

OAKLAND -- For Burt Alper, walking into a grocery store can be an exciting and exhilarating experience.

That's because Catchword, the Oakland-based branding company he co-founded, comes up with names to tag a variety of consumer products, including grocery items, drug products, sporting goods and clothing.

Last year, he was in a Stop & Shop store in Boston with his wife, pointing out the names of some privately labeled sodas Catchword had developed for the retailer.

"I was like a kid in a candy store," said Alper, laughing. "I was running all over the store saying, 'Look, we did this.' It was rewarding. It instilled a great sense of pride, actually coming up with those names."

Others names that have come from Catchword include the Infusion name for the self-inflating basketball, volleyballs and soccer balls made by Spalding, the sporting goods company. Catchword is also behind the Pepsi Blue berry-flavored cola and Pampers Easy Ups First Steps disposable diapers for toddlers.

Words have always fascinated the 35-year-old Oakland resident, who founded Catchword in 1998 with two colleagues, Maria Cypher and Laurel Sutton. The three had previously worked together at another branding firm in Berkeley before venturing out on their own.

As a kid growing up in Oakland, Alper loved to play word games such as password, hangman and Scrabble. The son of a father who worked in alternative energy and an artist-mother, Alper believes one of the reasons he developed an early love for language

was that he grew up in a home where just about the only TV that was watched was PBS programming.

"The limits on television forces one to read," said Alper. "My parents were both very literate and books were always around."

Before going into his present career path, Alper had first thought about working in a job involving alternative energy. But after realizing he didn't have a knack for engineering, he decided to take a job at the Berkeley-based branding firm Master-McNeil Inc. after graduating in 1991 from Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania.

In 1995 Alper left the firm to attend Harvard University, where he obtained an MBA.

"It was extremely intimidating. It was a grueling first couple of months. It's more than the nuts and bolts of how to run a business. It's how to be a successful business person," Alper recalled. "I learned a bunch about business and business management, but I learned more about myself. I came back from there much more confident."

After graduating from Harvard, Alper went back to work at Master-McNeil for eight months before establishing Catchword when the dot-com boom was in full swing. In the early days of the business, Alper and co-founders Cypher and Sutton worked out of their homes, occasionally getting together at the Rockridge Cafe and other local hangouts when there was a need for an "office."

"We were very fortunate to start the company right in the middle of that huge economic boom. Many of our early clients were dot-com technologies with start-up funding," he said.

When the dot-com boom faded, Catchword began to branch out into consumer products. Four years ago, the business moved into its present location at the Tribune Tower in downtown Oakland.

"We all contribute to the creative product. We do it manually. There is no computer-generated naming. It's a lot of work with a thesaurus and other language resources," he said. "That's why the love of language is so important. If you didn't love it, you'd get really bored."

Alper points out that two of the biggest names in the Internet world -- Google and Yahoo -- wouldn't have worked 20 years ago.

"The Internet boom and the culture that surrounded that has allowed brand names like that to not only exist but to really flourish," he said. "What they've accomplished is a sense of energy and fun that makes the Internet more approachable (and) more useful."

While Catchword exists to help businesses brand themselves, it wasn't that easy to come up with the company's own name, Alper recalled.

"It's like a doctor treating himself," he said. "When we founded the company we did a naming project on ourselves and went round and round and generated a huge list of names."

While Catchword was not the top choice of any of the three founders, it was in the top three or four.

"It ranked collectively as the highest name," he said. "Even though it wasn't the favorite name of any of us, it was the right solution. And more to the point, within 48 hours of identifying Catchword as the final name, we couldn't remember what the other finalists were."

In his free time, Alper enjoys scuba diving, traveling, backpacking, sailing and going to Oakland A's games.

"I like to cook," he said. "My specialty is improvisational cooking -- whatever is left I make taste good."

It's not surprising that Alper loves to do crossword puzzles.

"I do the crossword religiously every night. It's my going-to-bed decompression ritual," he word. "It's a double bonus. The crosswords help me do my job, and the job helps me do my crosswords."

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