The Aims of Names

Cultural Forces Driving How We Name People and Brands

"A Boy Named Sue"

Different societies tend to have distinct naming conventions, but names matter everywhere. Throughout recorded human history, infant names have been chosen to shape character, guide destiny, and create social standing. Contemporary Western cultures may be less literal about it than many others, but we always name our children with a point of view and a purpose – to fit in or to stand out, to honor traditions or to defy them. No matter how we approach this name game, the consequences are real. As Johnny Cash famously reminds us, names can have a profound effect on life experiences.

The naming of a child is the beginning of a conscious branding process. We are marketers of our children from birth, and we are looking to signal a "USP."

When Times Change, Names Change

Naming conventions are never static, and major social upheavals can have especially significant effects. With the arrival of the Norman invaders from France, the English language began shedding old Norse names like Ethelred. Later, the invention of the printing press and the Protestant Reformation inspired people to name children not only after Old Testament figures but also biblical virtues (Faith, Hope, and Charity). Later, industrial-ization, migration, and literacy dramatically expanded the bank of English-speaking first names – today numbering in the thousands. By contrast, roughly a third of all English men were named John in the 14th century.

While often meant to anchor us in our traditions, names are also leading indicators of where we are going. Like all aspects of the social media-driven world around us, naming conventions are shifting more rapidly than ever before in ways that say a lot about what we value and who we admire. Three hundred years ago, we might have named our children after kings, queens, and saints. Today, we're inspired by "Game of Thrones" royalty or by rock stars and celebrities whose esoteric naming practices have launched (among other naming trends) the rush on use of common nouns like Moon, Apple, or North. We may feel that we are in charge of the names we give our children (even if not much else), but we are nonetheless guided by the culture and times in which we live. The influence of pop stars is easy to spot, but closer analysis suggests other invisible patterns, such as rhyme-based shifts in popular names from Jason to Grayson or Emma to Gemma – an intriguing example of how parents subconsciously riff on popular names in pursuit of cautious originality.

Crosscurrents in our naming trends represent a simultaneous press toward invention and rediscovery, secularism and romanticism, recklessness and rootedness, individuality and conformity – in other words, a profound ambivalence about the world we want.

What Do We *Name* to Be?

Taking liberties with personal names signals a broader set of possibilities and dreams for our children, especially our daughters. The goal of rising above gender stereotypes and empowering women has inspired the popularity of ostensibly "gender-neutral" first names like Madison or McKenzie. Globalism has broadened our naming vistas too, encouraging us to reach across borders or back to ancestral countries for names like Claudia or Astrid. The spread of place names (from Savannah, where place names were always more common, to Brooklyn, where they were not) blurs and stretches boundaries in yet another way. Yet even amid all this improvisation, there are curious signs of romantic nostalgia – the resuscitation of long disused names like Noah, Caleb, Hannah, and Charlotte or even Norse names exhumed from Old English, like Freya. When vintage names return, it's because history is being repurposed.

Brand New – What's Trending in *Commercial* Names

Just like our babies, our new *brands* are being named based on hipper principles and fashions. There has been a documented rise in the use of fanciful names, like Zappos, and a strong trend toward portmanteaus created by combining English language building-blocks (Microsoft, Groupon, Travelocity). This is not an entirely new phenomenon. Nabisco was derived from National Biscuit Company. But today, brands are literally born as mashups of more obscure linguistic ingredients, many available for purchase. In fact, the proportion of company names containing no dictionary words has virtually doubled in the past 10 years. Company names are also getting shorter. Short and whimsical = hip and cool.

Creative *word chemistry* better fits with our notion of technology and progress. Trade names, like personal names, can influence brand destiny, and they continue to signal the cultural norms of a company's formative years well into maturity. When **National Analysts** rebranded itself eight years ago as **NAXION**, we understood the importance of trading the nostalgic word "national" for something forward-looking and fanciful – and picking up eight Scrabble points in the process. Algebraic symbols, Q, X, Y, and Z signify science and ingenuity.

Naming Rights

Naming trends also owe something to the cautionary advice of trademark experts, who advocate for the memorability and the legal protectability of brand names deemed "arbitrary." Names are such an important component of brand equity that many millions of dollars are spent in litigation each year to adjudicate their protections. "Confusingly similar" names are often the subject of pitched battles that can lead to a verdict requiring companies to change names in order to avoid source confusion. US law recognizes four types of names – descriptive, suggestive, arbitrary, and fanciful – although the lines between them are not always bright. A dispute over the protectability of the name "Booking.com" has just been decided by the US Supreme Court – unusually lofty heights for trademark challenges. At issue was whether the addition of ".com" to a brand name may render an indisputably descriptive term protectable if a sizeable proportion of consumers now perceive it to signify a single source of goods or services. The relevance of "secondary meaning,"

as it is referred to in trademark law, has helped to establish a critically important role for consumer surveys in trademark disputes. In determining what qualifies as a brand name, consumers are often the ultimate "deciders."

Arbitrary and fanciful names like Google or Xerox have great intrinsic strength, but they are not without their own vulnerabilities. The true Achilles heel of a wildly successful innovator brand is the phenomenon dubbed "genericide" – the prospect that, over time, the brand name will establish itself in our vocabulary as a common verb or noun and ultimately risk seeing its registration canceled or its value as a unique source signifier seriously diminished. Trademark rights can ultimately be lost if not zealously guarded. Google is intent on doing that. Ironically, however, the marketplace itself has offered a correction: Younger generations of internet users tend to say "search," not Google – an acknowledgment of broader options, many of them now preferred, and Google's failure to fully cherish its customers when it had the decisive upper hand. The *de-verbification* of Google is a sign we are no longer its captives.

True brand innovation comes with the ironic risk that a brand name may come to define a *thing*. The words aspirin, escalator, and trampoline were all once trademarks but have no commercial protection today.

Safe Naming Practices

It turns out that we can take speculation to a statistical level by using a company name to predict whether that enterprise might be a promising target for B2B marketing initiatives.
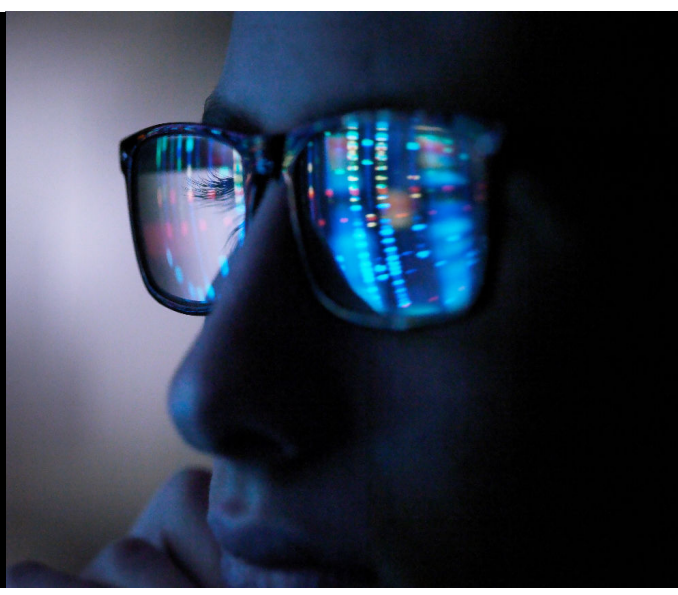
Just as you can lay safe odds that a woman (or man) named Sue is likely to be over age 55, you can look to company names for clues about their business strategy and style of operating. In a large sentiment analysis that models US business names against D&B database variables, we've found across industries that companies with names conveying negative sentiment (e.g., "Rent-a-Wreck") have significantly lower revenues and growth patterns than companies with positive or neutral names. Whether that's merely a correlate of the business judgment or aspirations of those who form the company is, of course, hard to say. But, indeed, there are some names you just can't get past. The Canadian city of "Asbestos" has just renamed itself Val-des-Sources (Valley of the Springs) to revitalize its economy with more positive connotations.

A Company by Any Other Name

Another company looking to shed outgrown imagery, much of it negative, is Facebook, now Meta. Remarkably – and spectacularly – Facebook has doubled down in the face of political challenge by renaming itself after what people have come to despise and fear about the brand, its omniversal hegemony. But just as we long ago stopped hearing the word "Facebook" in its literal sense, business names have a way of pushing back against conventional usage and deafening us to their original meanings. It's difficult to know what that word will signal to us years from now, having evolved from an unassuming Greek prefix ("among") to a New Latin scientific term ("expansion beyond boundaries") to millennial slang for self-absorption ("about yourself") to the calling card for a company that fits all of those meanings, having reshaped the modern era in the most expansive ways imaginable.

Like people, brands are named for the long haul, and the long haul is a tough road to see. The good news is that while brand names do matter, they matter mostly in the relative short-term. *A successful brand, like the boy named Sue, doesn't have to worry so much about what the name sounds like so long as it protects what the brand ultimately stands for.*

About the Authors

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About NAXION

NAXION is a broadly resourced, nimble boutique that relies on advanced research methods, data integration, and sector-focused experience to guide strategic business decisions and shape the destiny of brands. Our century-long history of innovation has helped to propel the insights discipline and continues to inspire contributions to the development and effective application of emerging data science techniques. For information on what we're currently doing and how we might help you with your marketing challenges, please visit www.naxionthinking.com.

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