

International Brand Naming And How Words Can Hurt You

It was the famous publicist PJ Barnum who said in 1855 "I do not care what people say about me but get my name right".

In today's international marketplace, getting names right is vital.

Marketers and brand managers are becoming more and more concerned that their newly created name will be inappropriate in their target markets.

We've all seen middle aged marketing executives embarrass themselves when trying to appear trendy to the youth market but things get even worse when attacking overseas markets.

What many people don't realize is that innocuous English product names often do not travel well. So called, 'bad' names, names which embarrass, offend or are just plain unsuitable, are profligate.

Bad products names, bad brand names and even bad company titles, are continuously spawned and the headlong drive towards globalization has given unwelcome publicity to all of them. There are many instances of where things have gone awry, most of them too rude to mention in this article.

It's not just names which need careful attention, straplines can go just as wrong. Take for example, Electrolux, the Swedish white goods company, who used the strapline "Nothing sucks like an Electrolux" to great effect when promoting a vacuum cleaner across Europe. Unfortunately, when they used the same line for the US launch they became a laughing stock as 'sucks' means something is 'very bad' in America.

Bad translations on apparel can also convey the wrong message. Take the slogan "I saw the potato", instead of the correct Spanish translation of "I saw the Pope," used on promotional T-Shirts for the Pope's visit to Miami.

The cost of such a damaging event cannot easily be counted. The very fact that a product might have to be hurriedly withdrawn, or quickly re-badged can have a catastrophic effect on the image, position and value of the brand and, of course its owner.

How can one put a value on that? The cost can be enormous, with the repercussions leaving careers in tatters. It seems almost ridiculous to many outside the marketing business that there are still organisations that undertake no due diligence and take a chance on it being 'alright on the night'.

Most sensible people take out insurance to cover them for almost every event and occasion, yet when instances of such obvious potential devastation occur, it is always too late to do anything about it.

Traditional remedies such as expecting your advertising agency to provide such a service is, with some exceptions, a waste of time. It's like asking your dentist to give you a diagnosis in respect of a pain in your toe.

You might expect your translation agency to offer this service but, unless they are very experienced and have regularly handled the needs and demands of checking words worldwide, again you could be wasting your money. Proper checking involves much more than whether the word means something contentious or just risible in a foreign language.

So, what can be done to reduce the risks of things going wrong? Fortunately, there are a few simple but highly effective precautions which can be taken:

1. Remember names change with speech

There's a world of difference between the written and spoken word. Accents and dialects play havoc with the pronunciation of English words and vice versa.

Most of us have had an experience of the way our own language is treated by foreigners. We sound similarly strange to foreigners when we try to speak in a language which isn't our own. Before deciding on a name, simply ask a native speaker of the target language if it sounds OK to them.

2. Avoid names that can't be pronounced easily, or at all

Although this sounds like another blatantly obvious point, it's something which many people forget completely. Many languages have an alphabet and a way of speaking which makes the reading of English words difficult or, in some extreme cases, practically impossible.

For instance, all words in Japanese end in either a vowel or the letter 'n' so it makes sense to choose a name which follows this convention. By doing this, you can be confident that your Japanese customers will be able to pronounce it without difficulty or embarrassment.

3. Avoid names that confuse

A name may meet every other criteria but due to culture, product qualities or its position in the market place, it may still confuse its intended consumer. This fault will seriously endanger product positioning and so clarity must be established.

Many years ago the then President of the USA, John F Kennedy was making a speech close to the Berlin Wall. He finished off in an effort to try to identify himself with the long-suffering inhabitants by announcing to his audience "Ich bin ein Berliner". Unfortunately, and unknown, to the President he was telling everyone that he was a doughnut; a Berliner being the popular name for a local pastry.

I am often amazed that companies spend tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars launching a product with a name which is so obviously wrong that it would have been flagged as inappropriate immediately had they undertaken proper checking.

The cost of checking is tiny compared to the damage caused by not doing so.

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