

BRANDWIDE NAMING GUIDELINES

THE MISSING SECTION OF EVERY BRAND HANDBOOK

A WHITE PAPER BY THE NAMING GROUP

A CALL FOR ORDER

Names are widely understood to be among the most important of a brand's assets. Yet, while many corporations publish guidelines for the way their brands are articulated – rules for treatment of the logo down to the pica, or the tone of voice that should be used at every consumer touch point – few brands include a standardized approach to the form and function of naming. And consequently, many leading brands have portfolios of names that do little to support one another or a greater brand meaning.

One may wonder why it's so rare for naming-specific guidelines to exist within brand handbooks. The most likely reason is that naming is typically viewed as an isolated task. Development is often led by brand managers who view it as an automatic, tactical assignment: a very concise copywriting job, even. Moreover, many of a company's names aren't even considered "names": employee titles, promotional initiatives, colors, versions, flavors, even stock ticker symbols. Yet each of these names contributes to a consumer's understanding of the parent brand as much as the entity itself. Name development should always be thought of as part of a larger strategic process at play; each name a piece of an interconnected ecosystem of names, working systematically to advance a collective brand meaning.

Conceptualizing naming as a systemic process of brand development – as one would consider a brandwide tone of voice or a color palette or even a dress code – may seem impossible. But this is simply because brands don't apply a consistent approach to naming, or don't believe they can; and they rarely engage with naming agencies in ways that garner the tools needed to think of their names in a collective way. Establishing brandwide naming guidelines is a means of articulating and implementing this systemic approach, wherein names become constituents of a higher-level strategy. And with proper guidelines in place, brands gain a set of actionable directives that can simplify – and strengthen – naming at all levels of the organization.

BIG QUESTIONS

So what do these guidelines look like? Recognizing the elements of true guidelines can help brand leaders assess whether work needs to be done to best seize the **naming opportunity**. At a high level, brandwide naming guidelines should answer the following big picture questions:

What is the process used to develop and select every name candidate?

What are the standard decisioning criteria against which all names are evaluated?

What elements (structural, tonal, thematic, etc.) of each name should relate to the named entity itself, vs. elements that serve a higher brand-level purpose?

What conventions guide our naming architecture, as well as each individual name within our namescape: name type, tone, format, structure, etc.?

What is our strategy for using naming to advance our brand?

Without these questions answered in the form of clear-cut guidelines, naming (a) will be conducted in a disorganized, inefficient way, approached differently by different members of the organization, and/or (b) will result in a weaker, less internally-reinforcing namescape.

ESSENTIAL ANSWERS

Brandwide naming guidelines are not the same as brand strategy. Rather, they are how that strategy gets applied to every name within its namescape, considering challenges unique to naming: linguistics, tone of voice, thematic associations, communication hierarchy, etc. And, it means considering the current names within the namescape, competitive naming practices, and future strategic goals for the brand.

Breaking it down, every brand should be able to articulate its stance in the following categories:

HIGH LEVEL NAMING VISION

Perhaps the most important aspect of a brand's naming guidelines is a crystalized statement of naming vision, and its supporting proof points. They serve as the basis of every name development initiative within a brand – from products to employee titles. If it is a named entity, the name should deliver against this central vision for the brand. The statement answers the key question: how is our corporate brand channeled through the names of our offerings?

If the Ben & Jerry's brand is all about making "the best possible ice cream in the nicest possible way", how does this vision translate to the way they name their products? It's about funneling brand meaning into naming rules. In practice, they've demonstrated attention to sustainability and engagement, using cultural icons (Jerry Garcia, John Lennon, Stephen Colbert) to advance their progressive image, and social names for their "euphoric concoctions" (Chubby Hubby, Magic Brownies, Karamel Sutra).

NAME CREATION GUIDELINES

With a vision for naming established, brands must establish the tactical directives that support it. How should names be constructed to realize the cohesive brand vision? What are the shared elements (both tangible and spiritual) in each and every name in the namescape? These directives can vary widely depending on factors from a company's size, to its industry, to its breadth of offerings. And they can be accomplished in some or all of the following ways:

1. Core Values

Relaying a consistent brand message across every offering requires key brand-wide values to be established – and systematically included or suggested within every name.

Herbal Essences lists defining values on its website, like, all about hair, scent obsessed, experience enablers, and totally touchable. Crystallizing these core brand-wide drivers for the context of naming creates the first of numerous filters through which every name candidate can be processed – simply, does the name impart each of these values? If it falls short in any area, it's not optimally driving the brand forward. Its consistently experiential, tactile, and hair-focused names - like Touche Me Softly, None of Your Frizzness, and Totally Twisted – demonstrate that the brand gets it.

2. Thematic (Tone/Imagery) Conventions

Beyond the values that are suggested by each name, names can abide by more concrete thematic conventions – ensuring that each name contributes to an angle that's suggestive of the values, while setting a tone or an image for the brand in the consumer consciousness.

Vieux Brewing uses toponyms (place names) for most of their beers – accentuating both the local roots of the brewery and the aspirational outdoorsiness that aligns with their attention to environmentally friendly brewing practices.

3. Naming Architecture Conventions

How are names applied differently to different tiers / sub-brands / classes of offerings? Beyond the hierarchy itself, Naming Architecture Conventions look at how naming can support clarity and ease of navigation of different divisions within a brand architecture.

Apple breaks from its 1- conventions, using alphanumerics (iOS, 4, 4S) and wildcats (Snow Leopard, Lion, etc.) to designate its generations of hardware and operating systems – further clarifying navigation of their product portfolio.

4. Name-Type Conventions

Establishing a consistent type of name is one way that a brand can drive consistency throughout its namescape: are the brand's names consistently descriptive? Consistently coined and empty vessel? And what does this relay about brand meaning?

Audi's linear system of model numbering (A3, A4, A5…) is consistent brand-wide and accentuates the focus on the parent brand. DuPont applies a convention of invented names (Teflon, Tyvek, Kevlar, Corian) to consistently position its product technologies as innovative, unique, and scientifically-advanced (fitting for the parent position: Miracles of Science).

5. Structural Conventions

Another way to drive synergy among a brand's names is to construct each one with a consistent structural formula.

Apple's i- convention (iPod, iPad, iPhone) is a particularly straightforward and well-known example of a structural naming convention, though this can extend deeper to the types of nouns (e.g., Compressed-word names vs. single-word names; usage of modifiers or descriptors; etc.)

6. Linguistic or Orthographic (Spelling!) Conventions

Getting as granular as linguistic roots, spelling conventions, inclusion of certain letters or aural cues, can subtly (if not unconsciously) drive a consistent tone within a brand's namescape.

Many names in the Starbucks vernacular (Grande, Venti, Misto, Via, Barista) draw on European roots – establishing a tone of cachet and sophistication to their products. Ford begins the names of most cars with the letter F – drawing a direct alliterative connection to the parent brand.

DECISIONING GUIDELINES

With a high-level vision and tactical blueprint for names in place, clear criteria should emerge as the basis for all future name evaluation. In adopting this systemic approach to naming, the very same guidelines developed to guide creation of the names will also serve as the decision-making criteria for the names, once developed. Implementing these guidelines at the brand level serves as a unifying, simplifying manual for any member of the organization engaged in a naming project. It eliminates a great deal of subjectivity, clarifies the decision and empowers brand managers to take risks and assert brand-consistent strategies in service of the pre-established vision. In short: it empowers brands to name more effectively.

MAKING IT WORK

Pre-defining a brandwide approach to naming requires both aspirational, big-picture vision and concrete, granular directives. Dedication and foresight is required to create rules that can be consistently applied, and, in turn, can accommodate long-term brand evolution. This is precisely why executive brand leadership – the members of the organization with the high-level vision to know what the long-term priorities even are – must be involved.

Guidelines alone are not enough to ensure a namescape that totally and uniformly communicates the intended brand meaning. A plan is only as good as the capacity to implement it. It's essential to think of naming from a three-faceted perspective within a corporation:

- **PERCEPTION:** How naming is perceived, understood, and embraced as a branding opportunity within corporations.
- **PRACTICE:** Best-practices for how naming is undertaken within corporations.
- **PRODUCT:** How the names themselves come to life and work together within the corporate namescape.

The above directives must be disseminated, embraced, and practiced any time an entity is named. They should be condensed and included as a page within the corporate brand handbook: a constant reminder of the potential of brand names to advance brand meaning, and a concrete toolkit for ensuring that every name does so in a way that's consistent with the brand plan.

It's an investment that takes time and diligence, but understanding the importance of naming on the macro level is key to creating a brand that communicates more clearly and consistently at every touch point.

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About The Naming Group

The Naming Group is an LA-based naming agency. We partner with leading brands to create brand-empowering names – and provide the guidance needed to inspire informed decisions. Our focus on namescape strategy ensures that naming decisions are guided not only by what's best for the offerings we name – but also for the strength of our clients' brands as a whole. For more information about our philosophy, approach, and work for brands such as GM, Capital One, Sony, and Nestle, visit us at thenaminggroup.com