



ARTICLE

**Product Names and their  
Influence on Success**  
**A Rose by Any Other Name?**

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## Product Names and their Influence on Success

The internet is filled with disaster stories of product names gone bad. Some of them are even true. But how much impact does “the right name” have on the ultimate success of your product? Let’s take a look at a few examples...

It seems every marketing student has heard the tale of American automaker Chevrolet and their failed attempt to introduce the Chevy Nova in Mexico, only to learn all-too-late that the Spanish phrase “*no va*” means “doesn’t go.” This classic tale of a bloated company and its blundering executives provides the perfect backdrop for Marketing professors driving home the importance of research and cultural context. Sadly, as Snopes.com points out, the story is nothing more than urban legend. In fact, product launches in Mexico and Venezuela went off without a hitch, and sales exceeded expectations.

That doesn’t mean that research is unnecessary, or that language differences and cultural sensitivity should not be weighed carefully. Quite the contrary.

In 1996, Reebok launched a new sneaker for the women’s market. The product name, “Incubus,” seemed to summon images of supernatural power. It summoned even more from women’s groups, who pointed out that the mythological creature “Incubus” was, in fact, a demon who preyed on sleeping women, draining their power and sometimes leaving them with child. Reebok was forced to discontinue the shoe.



**In 1996, Reebok launched a sneaker for the women’s market, naming it after a demon who preyed on sleeping women, draining their power and sometimes leaving them with child.**

Hard to believe? Try this...

In 2007, Woolworths introduced a line of bedroom furniture for young girls. It bore the brand name “Lolita.” That would, of course, also be the name of Vladimir Nabokov’s controversial 1955 novel about an adoptive father’s sexual obsession with his 12-year-old step-daughter – a story twice adapted for film (by Stanley Kubrick in 1962, and Adrian Lyne in 1997) and mentioned by British rock group The Police in their 1980 hit “Don’t Stand So Close to Me.”

Woolworths dropped the line in response to complaints from parents, led in part by Catherine Hanly, editor of parenting website raisingkids.co.uk. Hanly told BBC reporters that a Woolworths press officer had no idea of the word's connotations. "It has become a name that is synonymous with sexual precocity and the fact that it is tied to a girl's bed..." said Hanly, "it literally couldn't be worse taste."

Some ideas are just cursed.



**In 2007, Woolworths introduced a line of young girls' bedroom furniture bearing the same name Vladimir Nabokov had used for his infamous book about sexual obsession.**

And speaking of curses, remember a company called "Enron"? Prior to becoming the second-biggest headline of 2001, failed energy giant Enron claimed revenues of \$100 Billion. The company which Fortune Magazine had named "America's Most Innovative Company" six years straight suddenly became synonymous with "scandal," causing the dissolution of Arthur Andersen Accounting and eventually spawning the Sarbanes-Oxley Act. Though many considered their executives dishonest, few questioned their genius. But did you know that "Enron" was their second choice for a company name? Previously, these same geniuses had unwittingly settled on "Enteron" - a word meaning "intestines." Ironic.

Most product names don't really mean anything until their product defines them. Take, for example, "Kodak." In the late 1880s, New-York-born inventor and entrepreneur George Eastman patented roll-film and introduced the first roll-film camera. He chose the meaningless word "Kodak," because it didn't resemble anything else in his field, was imminently trademarkable, could be pronounced easily in most languages... and began with his favorite letter. Good thinking, George. By the time of his death, the word Kodak was recognized world-wide, and had become synonymous with film.

Nike, a name that has become synonymous with their brand essence, "genuine athletic performance," comes from the name of the Greek goddess of victory. The brand name was originally applied to a soccer cleat, after the company's first employee, Jeff Johnson, dreamt of the goddess Nike. That was 1971. Eventually, "Nike" would replace "Blue Ribbon Sports" as the company moniker. What did "Nike" mean to the American public, before it meant Nike?

Well, at the time of the 2000 US Census, only 370,000 U.S. citizens over the age of 5 spoke Greek, and I would venture that, if you added in the entire population of Greek Mythology scholars, you'd still have less than 1% of the general population. So while 99% of the population probably could not identify Nike as "the Greek Goddess of Victory," you can bet that the vast majority of U.S. adults have heard of the sneaker. That's the power of brand marketing.

The same can be said for Toyota, Honda, Subaru, Nissan, and countless other words, once meaningless to the American culture.

Of course, some foreign products are doomed to fail in the United States, just because of their names. Topping that list would be "Pee Cola," a Pepsi knock-off marketed in Ghana (where the official language is English, by the way). Then there's "Pschitt," a French soda created by Perrier in 1954. The Japanese have "Pocari Sweat," a refreshing drink to replenish bodily fluids. And in the Middle East, a laundry detergent named "Barf" (the Farsi word for "snow").



**Still, some companies have so much brand equity, they seem to be able to overcome difficult names.**

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When Apple introduced the iPad, Rob Enderle (writing for [TechNewsWorld](#) online, March 1, 2010) said folks initially hated the name. "When I first started writing about the iPad last year, I too called it an 'iPad'," said Enderle, "but readers convinced me that Apple wouldn't be stupid enough to give a device a name that sounded like a women's hygiene product."

Huffington Post contributor Eve Tahmincioglu echoed the sentiments of many women, noting, "the iPad name is also symptomatic of the lack of women engineers in IT."

But none of the bad press - including countless YouTube spoofs - seemed to slow adoption. In the end, people who wanted the product bought it.

So what's in a name? Or, to paraphrase Shakespeare, "would a rose, by any other name SELL as sweetly?" Hard to say.

Clearly, tragically misconceived or offensive product names can have a damaging effect on success. But the ultimate factor still seems to be marketing prowess.

That should take a little pressure off the naming process... and add a little to the marketing!

**About the Author:** Michael Zimmerman is Senior Marketing Strategist at MarketPoint LLC, a consulting firm providing honest, insightful and effective brand and marketing services for business-to-business, education, and non-profit organizations. Visit [www.yourmarketpoint.com](http://www.yourmarketpoint.com) to learn more.



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