

Syllables, Scrabble Letters, and Picking Brand Names - Rich Barton

7-9 minutes

The Completely Ownable, “Made-Up” Consumer Brand Wins Long Term

I wrote this as a private email in 2006 and just refreshed for the blog

“Should we call our site something literal or should we make up a new word?” This is a question I often get asked by consumer product/service entrepreneurs. In light of Microsoft’s re-launch of Microsoft MSN Live Search as “Bing”, I thought it timely to re-fresh some old thoughts I’ve had about naming, words, and branding.

It shouldn’t come as a surprise that I believe it is much more powerful long-term to make up a new word (e.g., Expedia, Zillow, or recently Glassdoor, 3 words that my teams have created) than it is to use a literal word (e.g., Travel.com, RealEstate.com, or Jobreviews.com). Why? The short answer is that when you successfully make up a new word and introduce it into everyday language, you own it. It becomes a major differentiating asset that cannot be confused with anything else or encroached upon by competitors. At the very best, you end up defining a whole new category – Kleenex, Levis, Polaroids, Nikes, Ebay. The downside to creating your own brand is that it is hard, and most of the time, very expensive and time consuming to hammer a new word into the consumer vocabulary.

The siren’s song of a literal brand or a brand that is evolved from a literal word is hard to resist. It doesn’t require much brand marketing spend because not a whole lot of explanation is needed to describe what Photos.com is. It’s already a word, full of meaning for people. However, it is for exactly this reason that I do not favor literal brands. Dreamy brand marketing folks might talk to you about brands as “empty vessels” waiting to be filled up with emotional meaning by creative marketers. This is how they sell big budget “brand advertising”. In my experience, they are absolutely right. If you pick a brand, a vessel, that is already full of meaning for people, your ability to infuse that brand with new meaning is very limited. You can fool yourself into looking at high “awareness” numbers of your literal brand and think you are doing a great job. It’s likely that you are not, you just picked a well known word, not a brand.

On the other hand, if you’ve made up a brand new word, and have launched it into the marketplace, it is very likely that your awareness numbers are going to be low for a long time. It will also take Google a while to figure you out. It took 8 years for Expedia to achieve unaided awareness numbers of over 50% in its target base of people who travel and who use the web. Zillow is a few years old, 9 million unique users visited in March of this year, and our awareness numbers are still low single digit numbers. This may dissuade you from creating a new word, but then I’d argue that you are thinking short term. If your dream is to really create a consumer product or service that stands the test of time, a brand that your grandchildren will know and love, then it’s almost a requirement to make up a new word.

Homonyms and Branding

I know you have busily been thinking of counter-examples, so I'll try to head off one of them at the pass: Homonyms. Google, Amazon. These were words before they were brands, right? Yes, they were. However, these companies simply used these words and created a new meaning for them. They created homonyms. This can work and work very well, as long as the word you pick has little or nothing to do with your use of it. Each of these words had some meaning to it that the respective companies wanted to be a "brand characteristic" of their new homonym. Google wanted to communicate the near infinite reach of its spider by referring to the very large number that math geeks know as a "googol" (10 to the 100th power). Amazon, similarly picked the largest river in the world to communicate Amazon's vast selection. So, a completely unrelated use of a pre-existing word is fair game as well.

Acronyms and Branding

IBM, NBC, KFC. These are Acronyms that, over time, and with lots of marketing spend, have turned into brands in and of themselves. This generally happens when a company name ends up becoming a brand in its own right. I do not recommend starting with an acronym, as I think they are less memorable, thus more costly. I worked at Microsoft for quite some time and had my parents using MSN from the very beginning, but my father still calls it "MNS".

In addition to acronyms, brands based on names (Golman Sachs, Sullivan & Cromwell, etc) are mostly ownable. They have the same characteristics as made up words, but they are even less memorable. They tend to work really well for professional service firms. The one risk is that you cannot own someone's name. Thus Packard Bell (a low quality, consumer PC maker of yore) can start up and borrow brand glow from Hewlett Packard and Ma Bell. Also, one of the partners can leave and start a competitor of a similar name, stealing customers and encroaching on your brand space.

Creating the Word

Making up a new word can be daunting. With Expedia we hired a firm called Interbrand to help us, and I think it worked well. With Zillow we did it ourselves and liked how it was a mashup of Zillions (of data) and Pillow (an emotional icon of a home). There's no magic formula, but I do have a few guidelines/starting points:

1. The fewer syllables the better. My first son was born on the day of the Expedia IPO in 1999. My son still couldn't say "Expedia" very well even when he was 4. Pick a word that a 4 year old can say.
2. **Use high-point Scrabble letters.** My wife and I love to play Scrabble (a great brand name, btw). The highest point letters (least often used in English) are Z, Q, X, J, K. These are memorable letters for people because they are so seldom used. Use them in your brands. Xerox, Kodak, Coke...
3. Palindromes (spells same word backward and forward) and double letters are nice, too, as they are memorable visually and audibly. (Kellogg's, Apple, Yahoo, Google, Twitter, Zillow – I couldn't come up with palindromes, but my instinct is that they would be great. Near palindromes are XeroX, KodaK,...)
4. If your service is an active tool of some kind, try to pick a word that people can turn into a verb easily. Google is the ultimate example here.

I'm sure there are countless counter-examples to my theory that made up words make better consumer brands, but, in general, I've found it to be true. When you move out of the consumer branding space, my arguments do not hold as well. Business brands can much more easily be literal, though, even if I were starting a B2B company, I think I'd make up a word for my product. Made up words are just more fun, more exciting, and much more memorable in the long run.

So, how does “Bing” do? Well, it’s one syllable. There are no high point Scrabble letters, but it is musical/onomonopaic. It can be made a verb. Any kid can say it. I actually think it has legs. Hopefully, the product is there to support the name, because, in the end, the product and user experience is really what makes the brand.