

X marks ... what? Elon Musk proves once again he's incredibly bad at naming things

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On Sunday, in a series of posts that surely won't be called tweets for much longer, Elon Musk reasoned that his company's new logo, a badly rendered letter X, embodies "the imperfections in us all that make us unique". What does he mean by that? He, of course, has no idea. This is a man with a terrible, terrible history for naming things. At Tesla, Musk would insist on a model lineup that spelled out the word "sexy", even after there was no chance of Ford relinquishing their copyright on the Model E (so he ended up with Model S, Model 3, Model X, Model Y). At SpaceX, an uninventive moniker in itself, he named his rockets like an improv audience member shouting out random words to inspire a comedy scene: Grasshopper! Merlin! Starship! Musk's failure of a tunneling concern, the Boring Company, shows he also flair for lame puns that don't quite land. Bad names run in his family, too. X is how Musk referred to the son he had with the musician Grimes after the child's original name – X Æ A-12 – was rejected for flouting a California law that limits birth certificates to "the 26 alphabetical letters of the English language". Grimes said the X took inspiration from algebra's "unknown variable", while Æ (a diphthong that echoes the long I in most English dialects) referred to the "elven spelling of Ai (love &/or Artificial intelligence)". Musk tacked on the A-12, the label for Lockheed's mold-breaking spy plane ("the coolest plane ever," he gushed to Joe Rogan). Musk's love of the letter X is particularly uninspired. In the days of Descartes, X was the preferred letter to symbolize the ineffable – a kiss, a signature, the place on a map where treasure is buried or the eyes of the dead in drawings. But in the tech world, X has become a nothing letter, used to name everything from operating systems (Mac OS X) to gaming consoles (Xbox) to the telecom company Comcast, which changed names to Xfinity in hopes of escaping its overwhelmingly negative consumer reputation. (Time magazine called it one of the worst corporate rebrands of all time.) So it fits that the first letter companies turn to when they want to sound "with it" is Musk's absolute favorite. Musk named his first company X.com, an online bank. In 2000, it merged with a competing software company co-founded by Peter Thiel – who promptly replaced Musk as the CEO of X.com and renamed the new conglomerate PayPal. (The rest is IPO history.) In 2017, Musk bought the X.com domain back from PayPal, hinting at bigger plans. Three months before purchasing Twitter, a user asked Musk if he had considered creating his own platform. "X.com," was his reply. At a Tesla shareholder meeting that same month, he revealed "a pretty grand vision" for X that "would be very useful to the world", a one-stop shop to rival WeChat – China's all-in-one messaging, social media and mobile payment service. X was the name used in the three Delaware-registered holding companies Musk used to buy Twitter for \$44bn. Today, the company is worth less than a third of that, proof that Musk isn't much better with numbers, either. Musk has had a considerable hand in immolating much of that equity – doing away with character limits, hate speech protections and other features that made Twitter special and safe. Reports say

the conference rooms at Twitter HQ were changed on Monday to include the letter X. New names include “eXposure”, “eXult” and – once again – “s3Xy”. This latest change figures to have even more longtime Twitter users pulling up stakes for Threads, Spill and other new replacements. Musk may think himself clever by consolidating all his companies into one nice, neat “Brand X”. But the name reads more like the residue of too much time spent watching product comparison TV adverts than it does proof of genuine creativity. (Also: wasn’t Brand X always the crappier option?) Still, credit where due: Musk picked the right letter to mark the death of a cartoon bird, Xs rolling in its eyes. He might not appreciate that irony until his app is itself dead and buried.