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Silly Brand Names Get Serious Attention

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By Amanda Baltazar

Wakoopa, Squidoo, Woomp. Renkoo, Eskwela, Zillow, Wega, Wii.

It sounds like an invented children's language or even a magic spell, but the fact is these words are becoming part of the everyday lexicon—for some, at least. They're brand names that don't mean anything, well, at first glance.

And then there are the misspelled names like Rokr, Razr, Flickr and Grazr, and names that are difficult to pronounce or spell like Scribd and Phrasr.

The reason for these names is often pretty simple: the URL was available. Seth Godin, the founder of social media site Squidoo, said that every six-letter word in the English language is already taken as a URL "and we're closing in on seven." In other cases, like Nintendo's Wii or Motorola's Razr or LG's ENV cell phones, the unexpected "wrong" spelling is also meant to be jarring and familiar at the same time and perhaps appeal to today's texting-happy young consumers.

Firms that specialize in naming companies and product names say such nonsense names are an increasingly sensible option. "People are being exposed to so many more brands," said Danny Altman, creative director of naming firm A Hundred Monkeys, Sausalito, Calif., which works with Jamba Juice, among other clients. "The sheer mass is encouraging people to find wacky corners."

Naming experts say their business is captive to fashion trends. During the dot-com boom, there was a mania for placing an i or an e, usually in lower-case, at the beginning of a brand or product name. (Apple is still embracing this trend, as evinced by its recent iPhone launch.) Before that, the previously neglected @ sign was hot (remember Gateway's 2000 "Gateway@Work" campaign or the cable Internet service Excite@Home?). And before that, tech firms in the '70s and '80s had a penchant for putting "compu-" and "-tech" at the front and back, respectively, of their brand names.

Now, the trend seems to be not only for made-up names (after all, Alpo, Kodak and Frisbee have been around for awhile), but ones that sound goofy. Finding such a moniker can be a serious challenge. "As a start-up we feel it's quite important to get a name that is unique and stands out in a crowd," said Robert Gaal, one of the founders of Wakoopa, a social networking firm based in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. "The name Wakoopa was just a term that sounded alright in our ears, something cheerful, yet a bit relaxing. Naming your company like this helps when trying to find a decent domain name, but also to track the conversation about our company."

On the other hand, Anthony Shore, global director of naming and writing at Landor Associates, San Francisco, noted that it is much harder to create a brand based on a made-up name than it is to build one based on dictionary-verifiable words. "We would predict it would cost more money to build a brand and create an emotional connection using made-up words," said Shore.

Perhaps that's why consumer packaged goods firms usually take a half-step by introducing brands that look weird, but are pronounced familiarly. Though there are a few examples of out-of-the-blue names like Sony's Wega TVs (which Shore calls a "spectacularly bad" name) and Panasonic's new Kuro plasma-screen TV (which is based on a Japanese word meaning "blacker than black") and others that seem to be rooted in real words like the Nestlé/Coca-Cola marketed energy-burning drink Enviga (which sounds like "invigorate"), the norm is to look odd and sound normal. Hence such names as Flickr, Rokr, ENV and Wii.

The latter, which is, of course, pronounced "we," was not an instant hit. Bloggers largely trashed and lampooned the name when it was unveiled in spring 2006. But Shore said that gave the company a chance to define itself. "It just goes to show how a name that's ridiculed initially can go on to become wildly successful," he said. "People had a positive experience and associated it with this new name, which created a virtuous cycle."

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