

What's in a Name?

"How do you do?" said the smartly-dressed man with a refined German accent, "my name is Günter". We continued with the meeting and Günter immediately engaged with intelligent, well-articulated arguments and persuasive insights. Perhaps, with hindsight, I just imagined it but he seemed unusually keen on robust, but good-natured, confrontations with his colleagues usually with a mischievous glint in his eye. We broke for coffee. "I suppose you already know Herr Dr Rommel?", said my neighbour, I found myself locked in a firm handshake with the smartly-dressed man. "Günter Rommel" he announced "How do you do?". Suddenly, it all made sense, he must be related to the great Erwin Rommel, 'The Desert Fox', the famously brilliant German Field Marshall and I had been exchanging verbal crossfire with him only moments earlier. The meeting resumed and, despite my resolving not to, I found myself exercising perhaps a little more caution than before, I was more conscious of not being wrong-footed and I confess to feeling even a trifle intimidated.



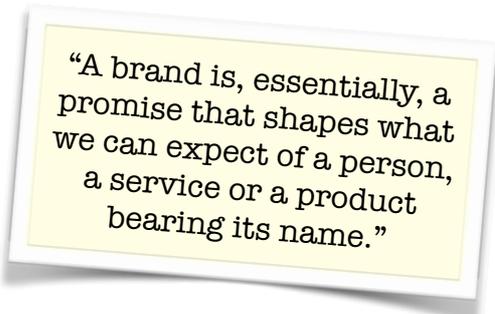
I have not seen him since and, to this day, remain unsure how, or even if, Günter is related to Erwin. But I am certain that after having assumed such a connection in my own mind, it made a difference to my interpretation of his personal standing. Even in a firm where everyone is trained to dissent equitably, names have the power to affect expectations, imply associations and remind us of past experiences, because names signify brands. And a brand is, essentially, a promise that shapes what we can expect of a person, a service or a product bearing its name.

Names are, of course, meaningless until they are imbued with particular values and associations. What would the names Apple, Google and Facebook have meant to earlier generations? Yet they currently rank among the worlds most valuable brand names. Ironically, the values your brand stands for might be totally at odds with what your name might seem to promise. 'Carphone Warehouse', for example, has carved a distinctive position for itself in customers' minds, based on its being a convenient and affordable outlet to get a deal on a mobile phone or broadband package, none of which really has anything much to do with 'carphones' or 'warehouses' (any more than 'Blackberry' suggests a personal organiser or 'Axe' a deodorant).

The naming conundrum becomes still more complicated when brand names get together, perhaps as a result of a merger, acquisition or in some kind of promotional partnership. While Disney + Pixar, Rolex + Wimbledon, Visa + The Olympics have become harmonious brand cocktails, Chrysler + Daimler Benz, AOL + Time Warner and Snapple + Quaker Oats left bitter tastes in the mouths of brand owners and customers alike, primarily because what looked good for the organisations on paper took no account of the values the brand names actually stood for in the minds of their customers. One escape is to create a new brand canopy, like 'Diageo' or 'Mondelez', and hide autonomous brands beneath it. The challenge here, though, is to create meaning from nothing, and such brand canopies usually remain wilfully anodyne and soulless for fear of standing for anything too distinctive. The most effective solution is, of course, to genuinely and deeply understand the essential **soft** value factors associated with your brand (not merely the **hard** operational factors) then seek to complement, or at least safeguard, them in any planned partnership. Even apparent dissonances like Rolls-Royce + BMW (which worked rather well on hard operational factors, but could have been a catastrophe on soft value factors) can be deftly accommodated with subtle understanding and careful attention to positioning, implied endorsement and brand architecture.

Like it or not we, and the firms or organisations we work for, all have names laden with associations - particularly among those most familiar with them. And that goes for professional services firms, charities and the civil service as well as more widely-known consumer brands. The question is what do these names trigger in the minds of their audiences and to what extent are you managing them. A brand is a promise. What's yours?

Oh and if Günter Rommel ever gets to read this, my middle name is Montgomery.



“A brand is, essentially, a promise that shapes what we can expect of a person, a service or a product bearing its name.”