

Phonetics: the underrated brand naming criterion

'Phonetic symbolism' refers to the fact that the sound of a word or name in itself already communicates a certain meaning. As long ago as 400 BC, Plato staged a discussion on this subject between Socrates and Hermogenes. Hermogenes said that the sound of a word has no inherent meaning, and Socrates disagreed. Socrates claimed that although the relation between sound and meaning may in some cases be arbitrary, in 'good' words there is always some sort of concordance between the two. This discussion was revived in the twentieth century, with Ferdinand de Saussure fighting Hermogenes' corner and Otto Jespersen holding the same view as Socrates.

Niels Schiller – Professor of Psycholinguistics and Neurolinguistics at the University of Leiden – picks up abovementioned discussion in his speech 'What's in a name? Op zoek naar de klank van woorden in het brein [Looking for the sound words have in the brain]'. Schiller states that it can hardly be called a coincidence that the Dutch words 'snakken' (=gasp), 'snoet' (=snout), 'snorkel', 'snuffelaar' (=sniff), 'snuit' (=snout) and 'snavel' (=beak) – all words with mouth-related or nose-related meaning, like the English words 'snout', 'sniff', 'snore', 'snort', 'snot' and 'sneeze' – start with the 'sn' sound, the production of which is a joint effort by nose and mouth (and that words like 'glans' (=glow), 'glimp' (=glimpse/glimmer), 'glitter', 'gloeien' (=gleam/glint) and 'gluren' (=glance) all relate to light or sight). Also note that this transcends language boundaries, as Schiller's observation applies in both Dutch and English.

Two US scientists - Lowrey and Shrum – subsequently studied phonetic symbolism in relation to brand names. Their research starts off by referring to the so-called 'tee to tin to toot' continuum. When pronouncing this string of words, your tongue will constantly change positions: on 'tee' the tongue is in the front of the mouth; on 'tin' it moves back to the middle, and on 'toot' your tongue will be at the back of your mouth. Vowel sounds that are produced in the front of the mouth are associated with smaller and quicker dimensions. Back vowels, on the other hand, are associated with larger and slower dimensions. Research from 1929 already showed that when confronted with fictional words to denote the concept 'table', 80% of respondents associated 'mal' with a large table, and 'mil' with a small table (the 'a' is a back vowel, while the 'i' is a front vowel).

Subsequent research also looked into the effects of consonants:

- Fricatives: these are sounds produced by forcing air through a narrow channel past lips, tongue or teeth (such as for the letters 's', 'f' and 'z').
- Plosives: sounds produced by closing lips, tongue or teeth to block airflow (such as for the letters 'p', 'k' and 'b').

This research has shown that fricatives sooner conjure up associations with small, light and quick than plosives. Another way of categorising consonants is as follows:

- Voiced consonants: produced with a slightly vibrating sound ('b', 'd').
- Voiceless consonants: not produced with a slightly vibrating sound ('p', 't').

Voiceless consonants are associated with small, less powerful, light and sharp.

In the previous we already noted that phonetic symbolism is also suspected to have played a part in the development of everyday words. After all, it can hardly be classed a coincidence that the word 'little' contains a front vowel in so many languages (Dutch: 'klein'; French: 'petite'; German: 'kleine'; Italian: 'piccola' and Greek: 'mikros').

The implications of *phonetic symbolism* for brand names are obvious. If sounds alone already evoke certain associations, we can draw on that knowledge when thinking up brand names. Research from 2004 showed that the fictional brand names 'Frish' and 'Frosh' conjure up wholly different experiential associations when used for an ice cream brand. Frish contains a front vowel, while Frosh contains a back vowel. And as we have seen above, back vowels tend to be associated with large, heavy and slow. Frosh was indeed associated with smoother, fuller and creamier ice cream, and turned out to be a better name for ice cream than Frish.

A wholly different aspect of this issue concerns the positive or negative feeling certain sounds can evoke. The 'u' sound, for example, is often used for negatively charged words ('blunder', 'puke', 'clumsy' and 'muck'). Brand names for products with a positive purchase motivation should therefore preferably not contain the 'u' sound (phonetic: 'yoo', as in Yahoo). This hypothesis was tested using the voice preferences of Americans. In 1998, Grant Smith analysed presidential election results from 1824 to 1992. He designed a comfort index, assessing vowel sounds, consonant sounds and rhythm of the names of presidential candidates. His analysis showed that in 83% of cases the candidate with the highest comfort index won the elections. He stumbled on similar results in local elections, as well as in elections for the senate and house of representatives.

Lowrey and Shrum's research extended the abovementioned 'Frish' vs. 'Frosh' ice cream example into other product classes and other product features. One experiment saw respondents judge brand names for two different products from two product classes:

- A two-seater convertible vs. an SUV;
- A knife vs. a hammer.

Based on the theory outlined above, you would expect brand names with front vowels to do better for a two-seater convertible than for an SUV (after all, the desired associations for a two-seater convertible are: small, fast, light). And also in the case of a knife, brand names with front vowels were expected to do better (whereas the brand name for a hammer would need back vowels). Apart from that, the researchers also looked at positive or negative associations that are tied to certain letters (as illustrated above with the letter 'u').

The outcome of Lowrey and Shrum's research was that 63% of consumers preferred a name with front vowels for two-seater convertibles, while 70% preferred a name with back vowels for SUVs. Similar figures emerged for the brand names for a knife and a hammer respectively: in the case of a knife, 66% preferred a name with front vowels; for a hammer, the same number of respondents preferred a name with back vowels. These researchers also found that this effect is cancelled out completely by using letters with a positive association in a brand name. And they also reported that when respondents are told that certain characteristics – such as large and slow – can have a positive meaning for the product in question, their preference shifts from a name with front vowels to one with back vowels. The conclusion the researchers draw is that sounds can communicate a meaning in their own right, and that consumers subconsciously let that influence their appraisal of a brand. It is up to brand name experts to take that into account.

Reference(s)

Schiller, N. (2004), What's in a name? Op zoek naar de klank van woorden in het brein [Looking for the sound words have in the brain]'. Inaugural speech, University of Maastricht. *

Lowrey, T.M., Shrum, L.J. (2007), Phonetic symbolism and brand name preference. *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol.34, no.3, p.406-414. *

* : Available in the EURIB library.