

Research: Oscilloccinum – good brand name or not?

Before we delve into Song and Schwarz's research into hard-to-pronounce brand names, first some background information on the brand name Oscilloccinum. This homeopathic medicine was discovered by French army doctor Joseph Roy (1891-1978). When the Spanish flu hit in 1917, he examined the blood of patients and discovered a peculiar micro organism. This bacterium consisted of two differently-sized and oscillating balls. Roy named this bacterium 'oscillococci', a contraction of the words 'oscillate' (moving from side to side) and 'coccus' (spherical bacterium). Joseph Roy thought this bacterium caused not only the flu, but also eczema, rheumatism, tuberculosis, measles and even cancer. But oscillococci were never found in human blood by any other scientists. Various online sources even claim that the effect of Oscilloccinum (with duck liver extract) was never proven scientifically.

Song and Schwarz recently conducted research into the effectiveness of brand names that are hard to pronounce. They draw on the frequency – affect relation propagated by the American scientist Zajonc to explain their findings. Zajonc found that people have a preference for known stimuli in a range of different areas, because unknown stimuli are associated with insecurity and risk. This also means that we tend to go for things that *feel* familiar. Nonsensical words that are correct in a grammatical sense, for example, feel more familiar than nonsensical words that do not comply with the rules of grammar. For new names you could therefore assume that a name that is hard to pronounce – because it deviates from common grammar of our language - conjures up greater feelings of insecurity and risk than a new, easy-to-pronounce brand name.

Song and Schwarz ran two studies that showed that food ingredients with difficult names are considered more likely to be harmful than those with an easy name that rolls off the tongue. With food ingredients, the emphasis is on risk avoidance. But what effect does a hard-to-pronounce name have when risk is exactly what we are looking for, such as in the case of a roller coaster ride at an amusement park? In a third study, Song and Schwarz showed that roller coasters with hard-to-pronounce names were considered less boring and more adventurous than the ones with easy-to-pronounce names.

Back to the Oscilloccinum; a hard-to-pronounce name, so hard, in fact, that the website contains a sound fragment with the right pronunciation. Song and Schwarz's research can lead us to conclude that when risk avoidance is at play

– such as in the case of an illness – an easy-to-pronounce name, such as Panadol, is preferable to Oscillocochinum.

But their research leaves one important question unanswered; it may very well be that a hard-to-pronounce name turns out to be more effective in situations where a risk is experienced. Unusual brand names could trigger a belief in a brand as a powerful - unfamiliar - product that can cure an ailment. We submitted this question to the researchers. Norbert Schwarz responded:

I think you're right and difficult names can have advantages in some conditions. For example, if you're looking for some strong medicine, where you may even tolerate some side effects, the more risky one may be preferred. Also, if you tried everything else, the new and unfamiliar one may make a new promise. And a complicated name may also indicate that more expertise and effort went into the product. In general, the effects of ease are highly context sensitive and the same experience can take on very different meanings, depending on what's on your mind.

Schwarz concluded his answer with the statement that they would possibly include the brand 'O' in future research. Conclusion: whether Oscillocochinum is actually an effective flu buster, we don't know, but it won't depend on the name.

Reference(s)

Song, H., Schwarz, N. (2009), If it's difficult to pronounce, it must be risky (fluency, familiarity, and risk perception). *Psychological Science*, vol.20, no.2, p.135-138. *

* : available in the EURIB library.