

jonathan bell

BRANDING EXPERT

Interview by Steven Heller

What's in a name? Well, if you're a major corporation—or even a minor one—you put considerable time and money into conceiving and implementing the right name, then creating a credible mythos around it. During the prebranding days of the early to mid-20th century, A words like Ajax were popular because they could be found on the first few pages in the phone book, but these days, it's not so simple. Corporate names must represent values, epitomize philosophies, and telegraph unique virtues. In the emerging global marketplace, names are increasingly more complicated to conceive; many are curiously ambiguous, made-up monikers, designed to have a distinct identity. Jonathan Bell, founder and managing director of WANT, New York, is a brand specialist with 16 years' experience in developing corporate and product brands. Bell helps create brand identification via research, strategy, and positioning; corporate and product naming; and brand identity, or graphic design, but brand naming is his most frequent service. Bell's work spans virtually every industry and business sector. He has helped name Coca-Cola's Fruitopia, Citra, and Surge; Gillette's Mach3; Sirius Satellite Radio; CDNow; Cingular; Road Runner High Speed Online; TechTV; Nexium; and more. He has launched naming initiatives for some of the world's biggest brands and emerging start-up ventures. In this interview, he talks candidly about the real issues surrounding the pseudoscience of naming, and whether the proverbial rose by any other name is successful.



HELLER: Is brand naming a chicken-and-egg scenario? **BELL:** The answer is yes and no. Would Yahoo! and Google have been as successful if they'd been named "WebZone" and "SearchNet" respectively? Probably. However, Yahoo! and Google are great names that have helped to create an aura and mystique and added an intangible component to the brand. **HELLER:** Sirius is one name that has kind of perplexed me. Did you intend to make it sound, well, serious? And did you want Cingular to be the "single" most successful cell network? **BELL:** Sirius is also known as the dog star—hence the dog in the Sirius logo—and is one of the brightest stars in the galaxy, so there was a rationale behind it. The client wanted to use the name Orbital, but once it was discovered that it was owned by another company, our attention turned to other star-related names. As for a connotation of "serious," well, you can find negative connotations in every name if you look hard enough. The idea with Cingular was "single point of contact," and "cellular," which provides a reference point back to cellular telephony. The fact that the name

Cingular was selected over AT&T when the firms merged is testament to its status as a great name. **HELLER:** Is there a difference between naming in Europe versus the United States? **BELL:** Not really. In the U.S., the spoken language is fundamentally English, so by and large it's okay to focus on creating more Anglo-Saxon-derived names. Of course, due to the massive number of nationalities living in the U.S., one has to be culturally sensitive to make sure an English name doesn't mean something negative. In Europe, you wouldn't spend much time focusing on English names but rather create pan-Euro names—i.e., names that are potentially romance-language-derived. We just named a Germany-based technology consulting firm Circeon, which is an example of a made-up, suggestive name. The word "circa" is Latin-derived, so it communicates—albeit subtly—across borders, whereas "con" is Greek-based. The value of a name like Circeon is that it can navigate the trademark obstacles across Europe, where there are more trademarks than in the U.S. **HELLER:** How important is the right name? If a

product is revolutionary (or merely good), will it survive with a poor name? What is “poor” or “bad”? **BELL:** Of course, it sounds self-serving, but a great name is really, really important. Great names don’t need advertising. They are advertisements. Had Apple called its iPod the “Apple Music Player,” it would still have been as successful, but the snappy appeal of the name helped to make the product more desirable and cultish. The

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iPod has quickly reached iconic status and has become the most important product brand in the past 15 years. I was at a birthday party the other week, and someone got a non-Apple MP3 player. As the recipient opened his package to reveal the gift, someone said, “Oh, it’s an iPod . . . thingy!” What’s a poor or bad name? One you can’t say or that is just pure nonsense. Ford named an equipment spin-off company Covisint, which is an abomination and has no redeeming qualities whatsoever. I hated all those names created at the height of the Internet bubble where a color was merged with another word, like “Blue Kangaroo.” Acronyms are bad unless

you’re a company that’s been around for 50 years, like GE or IBM, or you have a significant marketing budget. If you create a company name today using letters, no one will remember who you are or care much about you. In most cases, I tell clients to avoid descriptive names because they are weak and limiting, e.g., Analog Devices. Novelty can be interesting short term, although I can’t think of a novelty name that has stood the test of time. One novelty name I regret the client not using involved a project I did for PepsiCo a few years back. They were launching a combination Taco Bell, Pizza Hut, and Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant. At the briefing, the client mentioned that they had launched one test restaurant on the campus of the University of North Carolina. I asked what the students called it, and the client said, “KenTaco Hut.” I suggested they use that name, but the client refused, saying the name “broke the branding guidelines,” which disallowed bastardization of the corporate names. We ended up calling it “The Taste Zone,” which of course no one ever used. Sometimes, you gotta break the rules. **HELLER:** Walk me through the process of name creation. **BELL:** Before we start any naming project, we develop a “Naming Blueprint,” which serves as a creative brief for the assignment. It’s a way to set up parameters for our copywriters and to try to eliminate personal subjectivity, which is inherent in naming. Then we begin name development with our copywriting team. We also harness our “NameBank,” built from 15 years of name development. So, for instance, if we’re naming a drug that has a rapid onset of action, we can pull up some of our sports-car name ideas and maybe get one or two gems. Once we identify a shortlist, we do some preliminary trademark screening in the U.S. trademarks database to ensure that the names are potentially viable. Google checks are also useful. Any ideas that appear viable we keep in the running, then assess

different strategic areas. At the first presentation, the goal is to find a shortlist of names that fulfill the Naming Blueprint and give the client something to respond to. It’s important to show a breadth of ideas at this meeting. After that, there’s a second round of name development, shortlisting, then full trademark checks before a final name is selected. **HELLER:** What would you say is the most recognizable brand name of all time and why? **BELL:** It’s hard to separate the name from the brand, of course. Coca-Cola is the most famous brand in the world, so its name is the most recognizable. However, if we focus purely on name, then I’d say Google, because it’s more distinctive and has become a verb. **HELLER:** Do you ever consciously try to make a name into common parlance—for example, Kleenex or Frigidaire? **BELL:** With a brand-new type of product, marketers often ask for a category-defining name like Kleenex or Hoover. Lawyers, however, hate such names because they can erode trademark protection. Bikini, linoleum, jungle gym, granola, escalator, yo-yo, and zipper were all trademarks that became generics. **HELLER:** What’s the next big name on the horizon? **BELL:** It’s going to be a combination of a great, cool, interesting name coupled with an amazing piece of technology or some kind of product that invents or reinvents a category. Imagine if Ford invented a car that could fly and they called it the Catapult, versus something boring and expected like AirCar or Eagle. Any name where the client takes a calculated risk and eschews the naysayers. People have to understand that there’s always a negative connotation in every name. Thankfully, David Filo and Jerry Yang ignored the person who said to them, “You can’t name the company Yahoo!”—it sounds like it’s run by a bunch of yahoos.” As for great new names, there’s a technology firm out there that makes wireless communications devices. The name? Danger. The tag line: Get away with it. **P**