Zinzin

Naming & Branding Manifesto

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Set your brand free.

Zinzin is a naming agency that creates powerful product and company names to propel and differentiate brands beyond their competition. We help companies rise above the generic brand chatter that clogs cultural discourse.

This Manifesto represents a distillation of our core philosophy about naming and branding. Welcome to the conversation.

1.

Let there be names.

T.S. Eliot wrote that the world will end with a whimper, not a bang. Perhaps. But it began most evocatively with a Big Bang. Did the Big Bang know itself by that name as it was happening? Doubtful – the name came much later. In our world today, however, everything begins with a name. As you embark on the adventure of naming your company or product, you have the opportunity to create a Big Bang or a little whimper.

Do the right thing – make a Big Bang.

Grunts, squeals & crude vocalizations.

Communication began with grunts and squeals, crude vocalizations, painted images and a lot of hand waving. From this names evolved to identify the bison to be hunted or the ideal cave for shelter and ceremony. Names are the beginning of language, and from language sprang culture and civilization. But it all began with a name, and it's a good bet that the first name was probably "I". I am hungry. I want you. I need a new name for my cave painting business. The first "iBrand."

Name, rank and serial number.

For too many people and companies, a name is merely an identifier, a functional string of letters or numbers with little brand value. This is the baseline, primordial meaning and function of a name. As Wittgenstein puts it, "A name cannot be dissected any further by means of a definition: it is a primitive sign." The question is, what more can a name do for you? Quite a few things, actually, once you move beyond the primitive notion that names are merely descriptive, functional signs.

us aliens from a far off galaxy

4.

Language is alive and on the move.

The way we write and speak today would have made people living in the 17th century, never mind Neanderthals, think us aliens from a far off galaxy. Things change, culture changes, languages are born and die, names come and go – today's "Google" is not your grandfather's "International Business Machines."

If you're looking for stability, go somewhere else. Language is on the move. It is a living, breathing organism, always changing, morphing, evolving.

Don't fear this change – revel in it.

Language is dirty.

Language is messy. It is governed by rules that are often broken and riddled with exceptions that give it life. In order to create the best possible name for a company, product, baby, horse, character, or other, you have to be willing to do anything and go anywhere with language. Nothing is sacred. Language is alive, and life is messy.

When mucking about with language, don't be afraid to get your hands dirty.

Language is dead, long live language.

Language is the fruit fly's view of evolution – rapid change, mutation, morphogenesis. It is capable of being influenced, molded, formed, deformed and reformed before our eyes and ears. It is a mutant made to be torn asunder and reconfigured.

As William S. Burroughs wrote, "Language is a virus from outer space." We all have the capacity to be language biologists, creating new life from the wreckage of old text.

7.

Born of science, transformed into art.

Great names are born from a specific process approaching science in its rigor, but the result is pure art. From competitive analysis to brand strategy, positioning, name development, trademark prescreening, linguistic connotation screening, name evaluation and adoption, there's much more to successful naming than pizza, beer, a thesaurus and frenetic whiteboard scribbling. The goal of all this hard work is an evocative name with the power to set minds reeling, ignite conversations, spur involvement, create brand loyalty, and become embedded in memory.

Does the carpet match the drapes?

We talk a lot about brand positioning and how important it is, so let's define our terms. Simply put, the positioning of a brand is the set of core messages the brand demonstrates to the world, through tone, personality, emotion and narrative. So a better way to think about your task is in these terms: you are not naming a company or product – you are instead naming the *positioning* of a company or product. Once you determine the brand positioning, only consider names that map strongly to that positioning. In fact, any names you consider *must* support the brand positioning in order to be successful.

Slay dragon, heal earth, reach nirvana.

What feelings do you want your target audience to associate with your company or product? Do you want them feel that they are creative, "outside the box" individualists (Apple)? Part of a large, connected tribe (Facebook)? Empowered to push themselves beyond what they think they are physically capable of (Nike)? Which archetypes – The Hero, The Great Mother, The Mentor, The Guardian, The Herald, The Shadow, The Trickster – does your brand most closely align with? Discover the epic ideas behind your brand and they will lead to your unique story and positioning.

10.

Show me, don't tell me.

Great names demonstrate your brand positioning. Weak names force you to explain your brand positioning, and that's called advertising. It is very expensive, and not nearly as effective as demonstrating.

Bear this in mind when considering the cost of a naming project; money saved now may cost you much more in future advertising expenses.

Don't explain.

Demonstrate, demonstrate, demonstrate.

Don't be hogtied by arbitrary filters.

If the perfect name for your product is "Blue," but you have a naming convention that only considers geometric shapes and sounds, not colors, then you have an arbitrary filter in place that is limiting the names you can even consider. The only filter that matters is the *Supports The Positioning* filter – all other filters, like "the name needs to be serious" or "it should start with a letter A" are arbitrary, exclusionary, and will lead you into a morass of bad name choices.

You can get it if you really want.

Clients often say to us that they got stuck when trying to name a company or product themselves because they are "not creative enough." We tell them, no, you are just as creative as us or anyone else, but your problem is that you have the wrong filters in place. The key is to focus on the *positioning* of your brand, and then look for names that best support that positioning, being careful not to filter out potential naming directions or, conversely, to allow anything and everything through.

When was the last time you enjoyed naming?

While there are definitely parts of a naming project that can be hard, challenging work – trademark screening, due-diligence research, linguistic connotation screening, domain checking, etc. – the actual name generation, discussion and deliberation should be…

engaging, thought-provoking, cathartic, stimulating, argumentative, enlightening, and just plain fun.

You are creating a name that ideally will function as a very concise poem and catch fire out in the wider world. It's a rush.

And yes, naming should be fun.

Misery is no mother.

Just because naming should be fun, doesn't mean it always is. But it's important that you have an open mind and allow yourself to be alive to the possibilities of what a name can do. You have to set a positive tone for this exercise right from the start – if you're stuck in a miserable naming rut and the experience seems like torture, realize that you are doing something wrong, and change your approach. Companies and products are not born from misery or ennui, and neither are the best names.

In celebration of all the milquetoast mousey wimps.

When naming, it never works to act out of fear. If you want to blend in with the competition and go unnoticed by the public at large, that's easy enough to achieve. But if you are positioning your company as a bold, adventurous risk-taking revolutionary, and you are afraid to adopt a name that supports such bold positioning, then your brand is in trouble — the public will see through your attempts to be "bold" if you lead with a weak name. So don't wimp out; let your name be as powerful as your vision.

16.

The risky business of risking business.

When naming, companies often make a fundamental mistake about the nature of risk. The faulty assumption is that they need a descriptive name in order to

"describe what they do,"

or what their product does, because they "don't have a huge marketing budget" to do this describing. In other words, an evocative name that doesn't "describe what they do" is considered too "risky."

This kind of thinking is prevalent across all industries, and it's also completely wrong. That's because a powerful name will create brand awareness, get the press to write about it, generate word-of-mouth buzz, engage with your audience and convert them to fanatic devotees of your brand. The generic descriptive name, on the other hand, will drown in a sea of sound-alike clones, and you'll end up having to pay a lot more money for advertising in a vain attempt to get the brand noticed by your glazed-over audience.

It may seem counter-intuitive,

but it's true: in terms of the bottom line, "safe" names are risky and it's the "edgy" names that are actually a much safer choice, because of what they can do for your brand and the value they'll create.

Own the conversation.

The greatest brands are emotionally engaging, thought-provoking, absolutely original and tend to upend industries. They are not me-too wannabes, struggling to get a word in edgewise. Rather, they own the conversation in their market. This kind of dominance is what product developers aspire to, but sadly the naming of a revolutionary product or company often gets short shrift. Don't let that happen to you. A name can and should dominate an industry as much as a company or product. Aim high.

Let your freak flag fly.

It's a very simple calculus: if your competitors are all doing the same thing, then you will stand out if you do something different. And the first and most visible point of differentiation is with your name. That's why every naming project should begin with a thorough understanding of the competitive landscape. Look for all the obvious and subtle ways in which your competitors do and say the same thing, and then find a new, uncharted place to plant your flag.

If you want an uncommon name, surround yourself with uncommon sources.

19.

Burn your thesaurus.

Consulting a thesaurus is the first stop on the naming train for most people, who think that finding the right synonym will lead to the perfect name. It won't, because it's already been done to death. Go deep instead – immerse yourself in art, read poetry and literature, study science. If you want an uncommon name, surround yourself with uncommon sources of inspiration. Each competitor of yours that chooses a boringly "appropriate" name from a thesaurus is doing you a great favor.

Turbulent seas.

We live in a culture with so many signals coming at us so quickly, that most messages, including brand names, just get buried in the avalanche of tweets, calls to action, toll-free numbers, friend requests, dinner conversations, infomercials, podcasts, IMs, talking heads, talking points, advertorials and webinars. Everyone is in a hurry all the time, with advertisers and content providers often accelerating their signals to stay "up to speed" and lodge their nuggets of information into our minds before competing messages can take root. In this cultural feeding frenzy, individual messages can easily be lost. Notice an opportunity here?

Shelter from the storm.

The key to getting noticed in the turbulent sea of cultural messages is not to speed up, but to slow down. If your name can disrupt someone's ordinary routine, they will stop and pay attention. Perhaps only for a few seconds, but sometimes that's all it takes to create an initial engagement with a brand. In a world where everything is fast, it's only natural that slowing down perception can be a major point of differentiation.

22.

A word that paints a thousand pictures.

Old cliches never die, but they can often be turned inside-out. So while it's true that a picture might be worth a thousand words, a great name is a word or two that can paint a thousand pictures in the minds of your audience. If you want proof of this, hand a few leading names over to your graphics team to play around with. If they come back to you with, "We had so many ideas for what we could do with this one," it's likely a strong name.

I yam what I yam.

Keep your names, messaging and language real. Don't talk down to people. Don't insult the intelligence of your customers by condescending to them. Be real, genuine, honest, transparent, helpful, understanding, and authentic — you can't fake it, and you can't advertise it. You must *demonstrate* these qualities, and since a name is the most prominent part of a company's brand image, you have to begin by not accepting empty, phony language into your company or product names.

Difruhnt, but not *that* different.

If your name is different for the sake of being different or extreme in any way just for the sake of being extreme, then it is doomed. The most powerful names are those that best support the brand positioning, no matter what, and depending on the circumstances, a name might be "extreme" or it might not. If your name is trying too hard to be different just in order to stand out, it won't — it will blend in with all the other names that are also trying too hard, and failing, to stand out. *Vive la différence*.

1.39 million very unique solutions.

When creating a brand name or any collateral messaging, avoid vacant, overused words like "solutions." A quick web search will confirm that you can find a solution for nearly every problem, except perhaps for the problem of having too many "solutions." Other empty vessels include "network," "business," "business solutions," "leading provider" ("leading" anything, for that matter), or the ultimate, "a leading provider of business solutions." Search that last phrase in Google, in quotes, and weep (1.39 million tears).

Beware of geeks bearing gifts.

Beware "experts" who cloak their methodology in the jargony garb of fancy proprietary "black box" naming "solutions." Naming is hard work, and to do it right requires focus, passion and persistence, but rocket surgery it is not. If a consultant has a rigorous process for creating names, they shouldn't be afraid to share that with the whole world. You're better off hiring a couple bright high school students than an MBA wielding a Magic 8-Ball.

27.

Visualize your arch-rival's smirk.

When evaluating the names on your shortlist, perform this little thought experiment: imagine that your fiercest competitor has just re-branded, and their new name is one of the names you are considering (try it with each name).

Which of the names would drive you most crazy with envy when, as you visualize it to the fullest, the smug CEO of Arch Rival, Inc., unveils their amazing new name to the world, the press writes stories about it, the blogosphere lights up, and the social media channels buzz like caffeinated honeybees? Conjure up as much painful detail as you can – really wallow in it.

This exercise will very quickly point the way to the best name on your list. And if none of the names would bother you if launched by a competitor, then go back to the drawing board until you have a name that does. It is often easier to imagine a competitor choosing a particular name than your own company choosing it, because the arch-rival name adoption fantasy is divorced from your own internal debates and politics.

28.

Focus groups can't save you now.

Many a troubled naming project began with a brainstorming session, but it's possible to do brainstorming right and add value to your naming process. Use this opportunity to get outside of yourself and hear divergent opinions; avoid being restricted by internal naming filters, preconceptions, or office politics; consider suggestions as concepts as much as potential names; and don't get emotionally invested in any given name before it has been properly trademark screened. A well-run brainstorming session can give everyone on your team the discourse and information needed to propagate, nurture and support strong names.

Like snowflakes in a blizzard.

Invented names made from morphemic mashups are often praised for being "completely unique, unlike anything else that is out there." While this might be technically true, such names are only unique in the same way that every snowflake is unique; in a blizzard, however, the uniqueness of an individual snowflake disappears. The same thing happens when "unique" mashup names join the real world *brand blizzard* – they vanish from sight, indistinguishable from one another.

Sibilants, plosives & fricatives oh my.

The lesson of snowflakes is to never confuse structural uniqueness – the "genetic code" of an individual name, its unique sequence of letters – with semantic uniqueness, its "uniqueness of meaning." Any name has meaning on some level – witness the linguist's parade of sibilants, plosives and fricatives that often accompanies a new name unveiling. The trick is to create names that are *meaningful*, not just names that have meaning.

31.

Measure your ingredients carefully.

One issue to resolve when looking at a product naming strategy is when and to what extent does it make sense to engage in *ingredient branding* – naming individual technology components, such as GM's "OnStar" navigation system, or PCs with "Intel Inside." This is a tricky and nuanced area of branding to get right, and to avoid brand dilution it is important to strike a balance and only name ingredients when it makes sense to turn them into powerful sub-brands. Don't go on a naming spree just for the hell of it.

Frozen in the amber of brand equity.

When a successful brand has years of positive history and stories behind it, that is known as *brand equity*, which is something to be treasured and nurtured. But if a brand has been struggling, has grown tired, or has been damaged, its brand equity might better be described as *baggage*. If you have a successful brand in spite of a poor name, a new, powerful name can only help, and your customers will gladly follow your lead. But if your brand has fallen on hard times, then you have no real brand equity to worry about – you've got nothing to lose, and you're free to reinvent the brand.

Got them domain domination blues.

Don't be discouraged by the difficulty of securing a domain name, and don't let domains dictate your choice of names. It's far better to have a great brand name with a compound word modified domain than a weak name with an exact-match domain. Thanks to Google and social media, your brand can be easily discovered regardless of its Web address. The brand should always have priority over the domain name; the only exception being Internet pure-play companies, where the brand and the domain are one.

We don't need no stinking demographics.

It's not enough to just "produce" products for "consumers" to consume. You need to foster engagement with your audience. Live in the big world and be a part of it, treat individuals with consideration, and be open, transparent and helpful. That includes creating brand names that respect your audience's intelligence, are entertaining, memorable, and add value to the culture. Never forget that it's individual people, not demographics, who buy your products. People like you.

Rise up, zombie mall rats, rise!

The word "consumer," meant to describe your audience or the people who buy your products, is demeaning and should be banished. In the old days it made sense: you put out a product, advertised it, and then the "consumers" would come along, shell out their money, and consume your product. Today, the pool of people who mindlessly "consume" brands is ever shrinking. With so much competition, people expect a deeper emotional connection and dialog with brands. Ignore this at your peril.

36.

Tell a good story.

Stories are how we connect with each other, and how people become emotionally engaged with brands. Successful brands tell the most and the most compelling stories. Since your name is the face of your brand, names that tell stories are much more powerful than names that don't. Part of that story value comes from what is inherent in a name before you adopt it, and part of that value comes after, with the stories you create and invest in your brand.

Storytelling never ends — it's how you turn a name that might belong to any company or product into a *brand* that can only belong to you.

Epilogue. Coda. Last words. And a call to action.

Great names are not a given. They don't just happen. They have to be created, advocated for, argued about, pushed through corporate resistance. They tend to polarize naming committees, who are adept at coming up with powerful and persuasive arguments why they should be rejected. All valid reasons why there are so few really outstanding brand names. But also an opportunity.

We created this Manifesto to empower everybody who is interested in creating powerful names. It is a living, breathing document that we will revise and update whenever we have more to say. We invite you to join the conversation and help bring great names into the world.

To be continued...

We believe that creating great names is both a science, for which we have a rigorous, battle-tested process, and an art, for it is the art and poetry of great names that separate brands from their uninspired competition.

We'd love to discuss your specific naming project with you – drop us a line, give us a call, or join the conversation on social media.

Zinzin
1025 Carleton Street
Suite No. 9
Berkeley, California 94710
415-857-5775
contact@zinzin.com

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