Preliminary Observations on Japanese Brand and Business Naming Practices

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In my 2002 book, *A Theory of Genericization on Brand Name Change*, I devoted an entire chapter to genericization of Japanese brand names, and to contrasting these names with those of English. As that analysis showed, the actual process of genericization was very much the same as it is in English. Yet, as the focus was on a single lone aspect of naming (how brand names become generic terms), little mention was made of some of the differences that do exist in Japanese business and product naming practices. These differences, often as a direct result of domestic legal statutes (or lack thereof) and product development teams and individuals who can only be described as ‘unique’, are quite apparent when one actually takes a walk through any department store or supermarket. In this brief paper, I will set out to look at a number of these naming strategies and practices and what they mean for both companies and consumers. Yet, as this is a discussion note of preliminary observations it will be discussed in a less-technical colloquial way, avoiding for the moment the use of citations and footnotes beyond those already mentioned.

First, it is important to delineate the relationship between a business or company name and the name of a product or a brand name. Often, the name of a company and its product are the same, as found in designer clothing. This type of name is called a dual-function trade name. Typically, in this case the name of both the company and its
product is known to consumers. In other cases, consumers may be aware of the brand name, but not of who makes it. These are your standard brand names. Because business names in many cases serve a duplicate role of a business and a brand name it is appropriate to discuss them as if they were the same. The strategies used to design a business name are also, in many cases, the same as if we were creating a product.

Before turning to some of the more interesting tokens that I've become aware of here in Hokkaido it is first important to consider what makes a good name. Onomasticians, an unfortunate name in its own right for those people who study names, differ on the qualities most suitable for a great name, but let me turn to this problem from a more personal perspective. As someone who has studied a wide variety of names three key factors strike me as important. First, the name should give some clue to what the business or product is or does. This would seem like common sense, but it is often the case that the name does not do this at all. Taking, for example, the name of one of the businesses in an organization I belong to we can see how this works. The name of this business is *The Japan Group*. Now, what does this name tell us? It tells us first that the business is somehow connected to Japan, either through location or through what they do. But, the problem is that we have no clue as to what *The Japan Group* actually does.

The second factor involved in good naming is the imagery that comes from the name. In other words, the name should generate a positive image in the mind of the consumer, or those qualities that the creator of the names seeks to promote in their business or product. For example, another member of the same organization is an Indian restaurant chain named *Taj Mahal*. The image here, of course, is that of the great Indian palace at Agra. It is a far better name than that of the other
Indian curry chain in Sapporo called Little Spoon.

The third characteristic of a good name is that it is memorable. If the name is memorable consumers will recall that business when they're searching for a particular product.

To show how these concepts work in the creation of a new name we can look at the following example. In late 2003, I was called upon to propose a name for a start-up independent publisher in Sapporo. The publisher wanted a short name, reflective of both Hokkaido and the publisher. In thinking about this particular publisher, I wanted to create a name that would be perceived to be upscale and sophisticated, but something that would have a new feel for Japan, and particularly Sapporo. Having spent a fair amount of time visiting Chicago I remembered that many business names there bore some relationship to location. This was an important factor in what ultimately was chosen as the name. Taking this into account, I suggested 43° North, the latitude of Sapporo. In the end, talking with the publisher, the name Books 43° North was selected. This name matches each of the criteria noted above. The name bears a relationship to the product (books). The 43° North (pronounced 43 degrees north) gives a clue to the location of the publisher and has an air of sophistication and an urban feel. Finally, the adjective north conjures a wide range of ideas directed towards Hokkaido including cold, snow, forests, and so forth. This particular name should serve its owner very well.

Turning now to other business and product names here in Japan there is no shortage of memorable names. The problem, however, at least in my view, is that many of these names are memorable simply because of how awful they really are. A couple of notable and widely touted examples in brand names are Pocari Sweat and Calpis. In Sapporo
business names, there is a clothing store called Mein Komph, a ramen shop named Le Bistrot, and a pizza chain called Strawberry Cones. None of these names accurately reflects information about the business. If I’m off to a bistrot, I’m certainly not thinking ‘ramen’. And how a strawberry ice cream cone relates to pizza still baffles me. Memorable names that reflect in a positive and related way to the name are those that will serve the business best.

Now, if we move on to some of the more striking examples we can see some of the naming problems that currently exist in Japan.

This Looks Familiar

Knock-offs, the common practice of copying a designer brand and reproducing a similar design at a lower cost, is as common in America as it is in Japan. Yet, Japan has taken it a couple of steps further. Here, where fake Louis Vuitton bags are as common as Shih-Tzus, not only is the design copied, but frequently so is the brand name itself and the name design. And it is advertised that way. The popular shoe designer, Nine West, remanifests itself here in Japan as a clothing and shoe maker called Win West. The tag is nearly identical as well. Banana Republic turns up as Country Republic. Bear in mind that there is no relationship between the Japanese product and its original, and these are not licensee products.

Paris isn’t as far away as you think

As a researcher and someone who is relatively familiar with a wide range of brands I found it almost comical how many people are fooled by
the name of a product in Japan. It is not uncommon for clothing designers, for example, to list the city where they are based. Donna Karen New York, Charvet Paris, and Ede & Ravenscroft London are such examples. Most of these designers are legitimately based in these cities, or at least show their lines or have main offices there. But, names can be deceiving. A walk through Sapporo’s underground mall Paseo or into one of the men’s clothing chains (Aoki, etc.) will turn up a wide range of clothing shops that list the designer and Paris city name. One shirt I saw recently at Aoki was branded Les Mues Paris. A Google search of this name turns up no brand of that name. In fact, this is nothing more than an Aoki brand, produced by Yamazen Kabushiki Kaisha of Osaka and made in Thailand. Unfortunately, none of these designers actually works out of Paris, and it is questionable whether these designers actually exist. For the most part, these are Japanese companies playing off of the desires of unwitting consumers. The closest most of these clothes have been to Paris is Shanghai or in the case above, Bangkok.

Don’t try this at home

Naming is a tricky business. The right business name and product can keep the customers rolling in. The wrong name and you’ll be boarding up your windows in no time. Here, however, names can do a lot of things they can’t elsewhere. And this is unfortunate. My general view of branding in Japan; from automobile to product names, is that it is the worst I’ve seen anywhere in the world. Here we have car names such as Cube and Viewt. Part of this has to do with the overall weak foreign language ability of most consumers and the nonchalantness with which they accept that which they can’t understand. Foreign names
abound here. It is not uncommon to see building names in French, German, or English and business names follow suit. Yet, it never ceases to amaze me the names business owners choose to represent their business and/or products. Two glaring examples can be found on the old Route 5 between Sapporo and Otaru. The first is Ass Promotion. In blaring yellow letters for all to see is a sign for a sports vehicle business. Ass is actually an acronym for Active Sports Shop. The second name is that of a clothing store in downtown Otaru called Neuter. Now, neuter can be somewhat ambiguous and can sometimes function synonymously with ‘neutral’ in the linguistic sense. Yet, a more prominent meaning of the word is the castration of a male dog or cat. The imagery that goes with the word lends itself rather poorly to clothing, and certainly would scare off many male customers.

There are times, however, when some names are just unfortunate, and family names and businesses are no exception. One particular name that always gets a chuckle among the foreign community in Japan is the name Ohno, which as is probably obvious, is similar to the English exclamation, “Oh No!” The name itself is not all that problematic. Yet, when it is combined with a business or practice that is sometimes associated with pain problems can arise as in the name of the medical practice in west Sapporo called Ohno Clinic. In this case, the combination of the pair creates an image of painful medical procedures.

Occasionally, there is name success however and these too often rely on humor to bring about an image that is good for business. One example is the Oops! cement company. This name is well-designed because it plays on the idea of inadvertently dropping cement on something. Another is the Ari-san Moving Company (Ari-san Hikoshi). Here too, there is an image of a team of ants all in line hauling away your
belongings, just like at a picnic. Both of these names are excellent, well thought out names.

I wouldn’t eat that if I were you...

Sometimes, one must wonder whether companies ever consult with anyone on the name of their choosing. One final example, a name that still leaves me baffled, is Asse chocolate. There is only one image that comes to mind for this product, and it is an unpleasant one. Yet, as noted before, most people are unfazed by their lack of understanding of the name and this brand continues to be on the market.

Finally...

To conclude, a business name should be concise and should offer some idea as to what the business does or sells. Names that fail to do this leave themselves open to losing consumers. Foreign languages may be used if they present the business in a positive light or if it helps present the appropriate image for the company. If you sell French food, or bread and cheese, a French name is suitable. If you sell light bulbs it probably is not. Names that are too long may go unread, particularly in a car at 50km per hour. Names that are too short may be cryptic. Above all, the name should reflect positively upon the company. Some of the names offered above, do not.
References:

Abstract

In this short non-technical essay, some preliminary observations will be made about business and brand names here in Sapporo, as observed by the author. What makes a good name and what problems exist will be discussed along with a range of examples demonstrating each point.