

What's In A Name?

Some Considerations Regarding Organization Names

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“A good name is to be more desired than great riches,
favor is better than silver and gold.”

Proverbs 22:1

Just how important is a name? Consider, for a moment, the agony young parents endure while trying to select the name of their firstborn child. Considerations of in-laws and out-laws, friends and relatives, the sound of the name and its various forms, nicknames that will undoubtedly follow... All of these weigh heavily on the young couple whose offspring will be forever identified by the moniker selected. Thus the proliferation of popular names like Brad, David, Tiffany, Joshua and Jennifer, while the Elmers, Ethels, Myrtles and Mortons have fallen from favor!

Organizations face somewhat the same concerns — although without some of the relational issues as determinants in the selection process. Organizational names, however, convey much more information, defining or categorizing the company for the consuming public. Thus, the practicality of Yellow Page advertising sections promoting the merits of Yellow Cab, AAA Taxi, Capital City Cab Co. and Checker Cab. In business, as in not-for-profit organizations, a good name can make all the difference in “positioning” the organization in the minds of the public. Positioning deals with perception — what people think or believe about the organization. As much as we'd like to believe that people think what we want them to think, most are very adept at making up their own minds based upon their own impressions. And it is quite true that first impressions are usually lasting ones.

The role of the organization's name, then, becomes quite significant — particularly when it comes to attracting new “customers” who've never before been exposed to the organization. Following are a number of factors to consider when selecting or modifying organizational names:

- **Positioning of Purpose**

A good name helps to position the organization in the minds of the public at large, helping create customers and prospects based upon their own needs, interests or desires. A look at the office supply industry is very instructive... Four players in one market are Office Max, Staples, Office Depot and Wright Line, Inc. Without awareness of supporting advertising, only two of these are immediately “positioned” as office supply stores to the prospective customer. In

the Christian nonprofit arena, many organizations focus ministry on college students. To the uninitiated prospect, which name more clearly positions the organization: Navigators? InterVarsity? Campus Crusade for Christ? ISI?

- **Positioning of Scope**

Many organizations enhance customers' understanding of their mission or purpose by defining their scope of operations/service within their name. "City-wide Plumbing" and "American Automobile Association" are good examples. So are "Bibles For The World," "World Team" and "Compassion, International."

- **Avoiding Acronyms**

An unfortunate tendency exists within many organizations to reduce names to acronyms consisting of initials. The difficulty with such a maneuver is simply that it is impossible to learn anything about a company from a string of initials. Yet the practice is so prevalent that consumers suffer from a pernicious disease I call "acronymphomania" — we're bombarded by initials such as ABC, CBS, NBC, AAA, AA, MADD, GOP, and dozens of others we've come to recognize, the payoff for millions of advertising dollars spent to educate us! The difficulty with acronyms is precisely that they are meaningless without education. For example, when US Steel changed its name they chose to call the company simply USX — what does that mean to the uninitiated? One nonprofit organization named its monthly donor program "Partners in Grace." Attempting to shorten this to an acronym left them with the PIG Program!

- **Questions to ask...**

1. Is the name selected easy to remember? (consider how The Midwest Businessmen's Council of the Pocket Testament League created memory problems for donors!)
2. Does the name reflect the mission or purpose of the organization?
3. Is the name in any way misleading?
4. Does the name indicate the scope of the organization's mission or service?
5. Is the name timeless, or does it reflect a certain time-specificity?
6. How does the name position the organization in the minds of the public?
7. Does the name enhance or detract from the desired organizational image/position?

8. Does the corporate logo effectively support the name/image of the organization?
9. Are the corporate name and logo memorable?
10. How do the name and logo distinguish the organization from competitors?

A careful examination of these issues can help create a meaningful and memorable organizational identity – and prevent the type of “identity crisis” that has relegated thousands of otherwise wonderful and effective organizations to the nether regions of non-profit obscurity.