



## **"What's in a Name" ©**

"What's in a name?" Shakespeare's Juliet once asked. Very little, she thought. However, top executives at Coca-Cola, Microsoft, Disney, and Mercedes might beg to differ. Their company names are in the top ten of Interbrand's annual ranking of the world's leading brand names.

Creating, changing, maintaining, and protecting a name is no simple matter. Naming involves many choices. Indeed, company names have the potential to be more than merely descriptive or functional. A name can signify a rich heritage or a powerful identity. It can suggest greater meaning, purpose, and aspirations that transcend the products and services they offer. A good name is like gold, as the proverb goes. To be sure, a name in and of itself may not always have intrinsic meaning. In such cases, we imbue the name with meaning based on perception and experience. Indeed, some names become so ubiquitous they become synonymous with a generic product – think of Kleenex or "to Xerox." Naming can also cause unintentional embarrassment, particularly in the international arena, where translated or transliterated names may have unintended meanings in other languages.

Large companies routinely spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to develop a new name or to change their name. They are aided by market research and design firms that specialize in the creation, test, and implementation of corporate names and logos. Once a name is created, companies turn to law firms who specialize in protecting names from trademark abuse and misuse. With over 290,000 federal trademark applications for new names filed in 2000, naming has become an industry in its own right.

There are many approaches to corporate naming. Historically, in pre-industrial times, people were often named after their trade – think of the Baker, the Miller, and the Smith. In industrial times, the reverse occurred; businesses were often named after their founders – think of JC Penny or JP Morgan. Corporate naming patterns changed again as the concept of multinational corporations developed. Even relatively small companies chose bold names suggesting global reach – think of the newly established International Business Machines in 1924. In later decades, however, big was not viewed as necessarily better, as consumers began to distrust large seemingly faceless bureaucracies. Some companies responded by truncating their names into acronyms – think of AT&T or NABISCO. Other companies faced a new naming challenge caused by waves of mergers and acquisitions. Some responded, albeit ungainly, by including prior names in the new name – think of Morgan Stanley Dean Witter Discover & Company or PriceWaterhouseCoopers. Others, hoping to connote new images and meanings used artificial words and made up names – think of Unisys or Verizon. Finally, a recent but

mercifully short-lived naming trend was to include dot.com at the end of every company name.

Change complicates the corporate naming scene. One study found that mergers, acquisitions, and divestitures account for 58% of name changes. The remaining 42% of name changes are driven by marketing and other reasons. Some companies decide to distance themselves from their corporate history and use completely new names – think of Lucent Technologies (formerly Bell Labs) or Accenture (formerly Andersen Consulting). Other name changes are intended to help customers forget prior scandals or disasters, hoping that the name “makeover” will connote a new message and meaning to clients – think of AirTran Airways (formerly Value Jet Airline).

To be sure, name changing is not just a cosmetic or mechanical exercise. Indeed, it can suggest a positive and life-changing transformation. Nor is name changing just a new phenomenon. Recall that in ancient times, Abram was renamed Abraham after receiving the covenant from God; Jacob was renamed Israel after wrestling with the Divine; and Saul was renamed Paul after encountering God on the road to Damascus.

In 1999, we were faced with the question of “what’s in a name” for our new organization. Our mission statement is to “help leaders integrate the claims of their faith with the demands of their work.” Should we call the organization something self-explanatory, such as “the center for integrating faith and work,” or something pithier like “soul at work”? A professional marketing and name researcher volunteered to give us guidance on our choice of name. She tested a wide variety of names. At the last moment, I asked her to test the name “The Avodah Institute,” as well. She came back with a clear answer. On no account should we use “Avodah,” as it is hard to spell, awkward to pronounce, and worst of all, we’d spend all of our time explaining it. She was absolutely right on all three accounts. And precisely because of the last reason – we’d spend all of our time explaining it – we decided to call our organization The Avodah Institute.

Avodah is a Hebrew word found in the Bible. Avodah has multiple meanings. In some verses the word means work, as in to work in the field and to do common labor. In other verses, the word means worship, as in to worship God. Taken together, Avodah suggests that our work can be a form of worship where we honor God and serve neighbor.

So what’s in a name? In some cases, perhaps very little. It is a neutral factor that rises or falls on its record. Yet in many cases, the name is everything. It signifies something larger. It anchors us, guides us, and motivates us toward greater things. The company name can be aspirational, reminding us and telling the world who we are, why we exist, and who we are trying to become. That’s what’s in a name.

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