

It May Be the Name Game, but They're All Business

When companies seek a perfect image, a new breed of consultant enters the picture.

By DANA S. CALVO

In the days of Bazooka Joe and Ivory Soap, advertising agencies did it all, giving life to products through dependable names, catchy packaging and unforgettable slogans. But with the age of specialization businesses are stopping at a new breed of consulting firm before heading to ad agencies. Staffed by full-time linguists and trademark researchers, naming companies have found a solid market by steering new products through the shoals of trademark law, international double-entendres and other hazards — plus, of course, coming up with catchy names. Labels like Zima, Acura and Compaq are the products of such companies.

"Naming is the ultimate sound bite," said S. B. Master, president of one of this new breed, Master-McNeil Inc., Creative & Strategic Naming Services in Berkeley, Calif. She clearly knows about naming. Armed with an M.B.A. from Harvard, Ms. Master worked for eight years at Landor Associates, a San Francisco-based international identity consulting firm, where she founded a naming division and created "Touchstone Pictures" for Walt Disney's new production company, "Westin Hotels" for Western International Hotels and "Pacific Telesis" for Pacific Telephone and Telegraph.

In 1988, Ms. Master left Landor to start a company dedicated just to naming, one of only a dozen or so such companies in this nascent industry concentrated in California.

In six years, Master-McNeil has named several hundred products — including more than 50 for Apple Computer, like "Powerbook Duo" and "Geoport." And this year, it took on its most complex international project, naming "Borealis," the largest petrochemical company in Europe, born of the merger of state companies in Norway and Finland. Master-McNeil has increased its revenues every year, one of the few naming companies to do so, hitting \$1 million for 1993.

"You think 'Wow, how could there be such an industry?'," said Patrice Cavanaugh, Landor's director of naming. "But as product proliferation has occurred in the United States and internationally, you run into challenges."

Amendments to the Copyright Act in 1989 opened up the trademark registry for graphic trademarks by granting "pending" or "intent to use" status. As a result, from 1989 to 1993 more than 11,000 technical Federal trademarks were filed, increasing the percentage of technical trademarks from 15 to 18 percent.

Thomson & Thomson, a trademark data base and research firm in Washington, mails versions of the updated Federal registry on CD-ROM to naming and identity consulting companies nationwide each month. The company also does specific searches, for \$320 to \$600 each, producing a "hit list" report of more than 45 pages that includes similar or related names already registered.

"You can come up with fabulous names, or at least what they think are fabulous, but some obscure company in Ohio may have that name, knocking it out of the ring," said Art Medici, senior vice president for sales and marketing for Thomson & Thomson.

According to trademark lawyers and executives in the high-tech industry, the surge in less expensive, more powerful technology combined with the expanded trademark legislation has made it possible for the naming industry to flourish.

Master-McNeil named 50 products last



Terrence McCarthy for The New York Times

S. B. Master, foreground, head of Master-McNeil, and her brain trust.

year at prices ranging from \$20,000 to \$250,000, depending on the research involved and the product's global reach — prices comparable with the others in the industry. And 1994 is expected to be a banner year.

Ms. Master, 41, has no formal linguistics training, but her employees do, and she markets it to the hilt. In August 1991, the first year her company turned a profit and the year she moved her fancy office in downtown San Francisco to a small office space in Berkeley, she hired Bud Alper as project director and Ken Feinstein as a sort of in-house Thomson & Thomson.

Mr. Alper, 25, graduated with a degree in psycholinguistics from Swarthmore in 1991. Mr. Feinstein, 22, who majored in linguistics at Berkeley and graduated with honors at 20, is a former library researcher and reader for the Oxford English Dictionary.

"We're young," boasted Ms. Master. "We

naming occupation — to companies that specialize in names," he said. One satisfied customer is Charles R. Oppenheimer, vice president for marketing at Global Village Communication, based in Mountain View, Calif., which manufactures communications products for Apple. Master-McNeil named Global Village's new line of telecommunications servers: Oneworld.

Global Village sought a naming company, he said, because "ad agencies really do not have an expertise in naming products."

Ms. Master says agrees the high-tech industry has been a boon for her company. "High tech has been a baptism by fire," she said. "The product life cycle is so short and the need for names to speak for themselves right now is crucial."

Willard Doyle, president of Brand Group, a Chicago firm that has been christening products for 20 years, said the maturing of the high-tech industry is good news. "We're involved in an area that is becoming very important in the computer field. There's a whole depth here nobody's tapped. In a decade or two, there will be very smart people specializing in refining our communications down to the semantic level."

Master-McNeil's linguistic analyst, Priscilla McKoy, 40, a Ph.D. candidate at U.C.L.A., researches the potential negative impact of names in other languages. This fall she will coordinate a panel of review arrivals in the United States who will review international names. Even the most accomplished linguist may not know which words could have disastrous associations.

For example, a name that Master-McNeil originally recommended to the Firms and Norwegians for what ultimately became Borealis began with the prefix "uni," which means "sea urchin" in Japanese and "sleepy" in Finnish, neither of which seemed appropriate for a giant conglomerate. Another suggested name sounded hauntingly like a new disease that had entered the Nordic countries.

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