



Promises to keep:

Five approaches to naming your portfolio

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Five approaches to naming your portfolio

by Caitlin Barrett and Marina Suholutsky

A brand is a complex thing to parse, but if you could crack one open, chances are, at the heart of it, you'd find a promise. A promise to consumers that it will act a certain way, talk a certain way, and live a certain way. Every living breathing brand, like every living breathing human, knows it's not enough to merely make a promise — the question is can you keep it?

Brands make good on their promises in many ways, but one of the most powerful — and some might say complex — is through smart naming systems. Names, and the relationships created among them, shouldn't reflect internal org charts or inventory systems. The secret to being true to your brand is to name in a way that aligns with the way customers choose you.

There are five essential approaches to consider when developing a naming system that delivers on your brand's promise to its customers.

1. Simplify selection

With consumers' mental bandwidth at capacity, simplicity is like a blast of AC cutting through a sweltering day. Take BMW's international "Sheer Driving Pleasure" tagline, which has held strong for over 25 years. BMW's naming system endures alongside, delivering familiarity and ease of navigation. The brand stays relevant without need for reinvention because simplicity, it seems, is a luxury that consumers are willing to pay for.

BMW's architecture consists of seven numeric series, each with a distinct value proposition. The 1 Series, its entry-level offer, is made up of the smallest cars in the portfolio, while the 7 Series is the luxury carmaker's flagship, and the portfolio area where innovations are first introduced. So it's intuitive: A higher number equals a bigger, better car. (And new product generations are rolled out under the existing

series numbers, so there's no risk of ending up with a 79 Series.)

Because the value propositions around these series are so clear, it's easy for buyers to self-select — entering at the series level and then narrowing selection from the two to five models generally available in each. And while a dealer is crucial to the customer journey, an easy-to-crack naming system makes the job of buying and selling luxury vehicles more pleasurable for everyone.

2. Meet distinct needs with distinct sub-brands

A single promise can be fulfilled in more ways than one. Sometimes making good on your promise means creating separate brands devoted to different needs. Olay, the anti-aging guru, organizes its portfolio to meet the one-size-does-not-fit-all skincare needs of women.

Each of its sub-brands delivers on a distinct pledge—Olay Regenerist promotes cell regeneration, Olay Definity defines skin tone, and Olay Total Effects offers holistic, 7-in-1 anti-aging defense. These names are suggestive not only in approach, but reflect an understanding of what anti-aging consumers are looking for in a fountain of youth. And while each sub-brand goes to market with a distinct look and feel, they all reinforce Olay's position as a winner when it comes to fighting the effects of time.

3. Create clear—and memorable—relationships among products

Any consumer who has visited a drug store knows that choosing the right skincare products can be complicated. Some brands name to the problem, some name to the benefit, and some name for a breakthrough ingredient. It can be tough to understand how they're all supposed to come together in a skincare routine that actually works.

Philosophy, the skincare and beauty brand, promises an effective, simplified beauty and personal care routine, and it delivers this through umbrella names that use unexpected humor to maximize memorability. Also intrinsic to Philosophy's approach are consistent descriptors to help consumers understand relationships in its portfolio. While there are plenty of standalone products in the portfolio, the products that are grouped together are the ones that stand out.

If you're looking to reverse aging, you'll find Miracle Worker, a line of products including a Miraculous Anti-Aging Moisturizer, Miraculous Anti-Aging Retinoid Pads, and a Miraculous Anti-Aging Concentrate. Dealing with oiliness? Try the Never Let Them See You Shine series. Dry skin? Philosophy provides a solution with When Hope is Not Enough.

Philosophy borrows from out-of-category language to create memorable naming systems that not only clarify relationships

among products; they speak the language of the audience, and that makes it easier for its audience to choose Philosophy.

4. Create occasions for use

The functional beverages market is notoriously saturated with claims about focus, weight management, energy and hydration. And for some brands, this seeps into how they name, wanting you to know, all at once, that their products contain the health-boosting effects of açai, the digestive benefits of probiotics, and the energy boost of taurine—all without a single calorie! This can be exhausting for consumers: It's hard to know what's really important when making a choice.

That's what makes Gatorade's latest entry to this crowded market such a winner. Its G Series uses a *functional* naming architecture that tells consumers when, why, and in what order to consume its sports drinks.

Gatorade's promise has long been about helping athletes perform at their best, and its G Series makes it easy to hydrate the right way before, during, and after physical activity. It's broken out into three steps: Gatorade 01 Prime, for pre-workout energy, Gatorade 02 Perform, to help athletes sustain a serious workout, and Gatorade 03 Recover, formulated specifically to replenish tired bodies and aid muscle recovery.

This architecture isn't just easy; it's smart. The brand uses its naming system to inform audiences that they have very specific hydration needs at different points during their activity, and, thanks to Gatorade's long history with providing athletes with the right fuel for top performance, they're able to simultaneously create desire and satisfy need.

5. Let customers guide how they choose you

Sometimes, your customers are telling you the types of names that work best for them—

you just have to know how to listen. Johnnie Walker, for example, is as well known for its whiskey as for its color-coded naming. But this wasn't always the case.

In 1909, the Johnnie Walker brand borrowed from the consumer lexicon to rename their Old Highland, Special Old Highland, and Extra Special Old Highland blends. This type of versioning is rarely engaging or intuitive, so customers took the lead by developing relationships with the brand's elements that were simple and represented clear differences in quality levels—the label colors.

Walker smartly responded with Red Label and Black Label whiskey. By following customers' natural proclivities, the brand abandoned a highly limited name versioning system to an intuitive, customer-coded approach—and it has stuck for over a century. (And good thing, too; by now we might have been ordering up an Extremely Extra Special Old Highland on the rocks.)

Be true and prosper

In much the same way successful relationships among people rely on you to show, not tell, that you're honest, trustworthy, and genuine, a great naming system is a powerful way to follow through on all that your brand represents. Show your customers that you're willing to live, breathe, and name to the promise of your brand. And that means you'll make long-lasting—and profitable—connections with customers who know that you'll always deliver the experience that they expect. ■



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Every brand has an authentic—and compelling—story to tell. By helping clients understand the power of language, Caitlin connects brands to consumers who truly align with their values.



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With a focus on naming systems and ideation, and a not-so-secret affinity for spoken word poetry, Marina helps build brands that speak authentically, act strategically, and always keep their audience in mind.

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