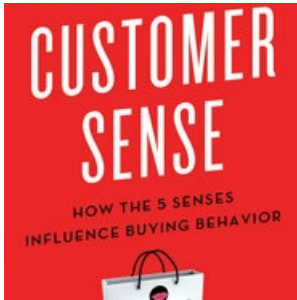


COLUMNS

## Book excerpt: Customer Sense: How the 5 Senses Influence Buying Behavior

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By [Aradhna Krishna](#)

What's in a name?

One of the most important auditory cues associated with any brand-name product is the brand name itself.

The brand name is not really a sensory signature in itself or an example of sonic branding, but it still has the power to make or break a product line's success.

Sometimes, a brand name may be perceived as lackluster, might be difficult for the consumer to pronounce, or it could convey a different meaning in a different culture, all of which could lead an otherwise well-conceived product line to fail.

An example of this phenomenon was the Entire Butt line of porter beers introduced by the Salopian brewing company in Britain.

In England, "butt" refers to a barrel, so the name of the beer refers to the variety of ingredients that went into the brew, but in America the word does not have that meaning. This creates an additional challenge for the company in marketing its product in America.

This may seem funny to younger consumers and increase sales to them temporarily, but it presents a serious problem for the long-term sales of the product in the United States.

While some words or phrases, such as Entire Butt, have different meanings in different parts of the world, there are some universal preferences and associations for certain phonemes.

The linguist Edward Sapir conducted a study in the 1920s showing that the "i" sound in "mil" is associated with smaller objects than the "a" sound in "mal" regardless of both the exact word in which the phoneme appeared and the cultural background of the participants.



A more recent study examined the attributes we assign to certain products based on the phonemes we hear in

fictitious brand names.

The results, a brief version of which is included here, show that certain phonemes are perceived as more feminine, faster, and/or lighter than others.

The study also explored other less tangible properties, such as the creaminess of ice cream, finding that "frish" was perceived as less creamy than "frosh," where the "i" in "frish" is pronounced as in "kiss" and the "o" in "frosh" is pronounced as in "chop."

This would suggest that the selection of the brand name can convey a wide variety of nontraditional attributes, such as creaminess or smoothness, if it makes use of the correct phonemes.

Among the companies specializing in developing brand names are Lexicon, Strategic Name Development and Name Stormers.

Most of these companies are fairly small in terms of number of employees, but they often work for big-name clients to develop brand names for products to suit their needs.

When developing a brand name for a product, these companies brainstorm a list of words that are somehow related to the product, attributes of the product, or emotions associated with the product.

Then, they manipulate one or more of those words to make a brand name, keeping in mind the culture where the brand name will be used and the vowel-to-consonant ratio they wish the brand name to have.

The products Lexicon has helped name include well-known staples such as Swiffer, BlackBerry, Febreze, and Dasani. Swiffer, which is a name attached to household cleaning products, conveys a notion of speed ("swift") as well as a notion of being greater than or better than something else (the "er" ending).

BlackBerry is a crisp, appealing name for a mobile device. Febreze suggests a breeze, which is itself associated with spring and cleanliness. Dasani makes use of the prefix "sani," which suggests cleanliness, as in the words "sanitation" or "sanitary."

Lexicon makes use of word meanings and associations already established in our mind to craft brand names that make us think of the positive characteristics they try to suggest to us even though we may not be aware of the process.

Culture and geography play a key role in the perception of brand names.

As the above example of Entire Butt shows, sometimes certain meanings can be lost or gained when brand names move from one region or nation to another.

Lexicon takes this into account when designing brand names; if a product brand name is to hold up in French-speaking or Spanish-speaking countries, then using a name with a Latin root can preserve the meaning across the language barrier.

Sometimes, a company has to accept that it will not be able to maintain the same brand name in other areas of the world but must adopt a different name in different countries.

For example, in Korea, the formal name of Starbucks is phonetically similar to the English word, but its colloquial name instead translates as "Star-Teahouse," a reflection of the differing preferences for tea and coffee in the Asian culture of Korea compared to the Western cultures where the brand name of Starbucks was developed.

Another interesting complication arises from the nature of feminine and masculine distinctions in various languages.

In English, the word "the" is used universally as a definite article. However, in most Romance languages, such as French and Spanish, and even in German, the definite article varies with the gender of the noun it precedes.

For example, in French, the definite article is either "le" or "la" depending on the gender of the noun, and in Spanish the definite article is either "el" or "la" based on the same criterion.

When picking a masculine or feminine brand name in those countries, the name must be accompanied by the proper definite article; conversely, a brand name that incorporates a definite article therefore automatically assumes a feminine or masculine connotation based on the gender of the definite article.

In Chinese, however, the definite article does not differ on the basis of the gender of the noun; in fact, until coming into contact with Western cultures, Chinese used the same word, "ta," to refer to both "him" and "her" regardless of

the gender of the antecedent.

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