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Online Course for Name-Callers

By Aaron Halabe
December 8, 2006

What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.

With apologies to Shakespeare, that romantic notion doesn't fly at the Naming Center of Excellence, where naming a product, or even choosing a code name, is a pivotal act with far-reaching implications.

The Naming COE is a 15-member virtual group with expertise in branding, law, PR, research, geopolitical strategy and international languages. With a mandate to help employees make the right naming choices, they worked diligently over the past year to develop a new philosophy, strategy and process for choosing code names and product names.

As part of that effort, the team developed Microsoft's first online training course, dubbed "[Optimizing Naming for Marketing Impact](#)," which helps employees select appropriate and effective product names and code names.



"We're trying to get shorter, more benefit-focused names that customers understand," said Sue Kaplan, director of brand and marketing strategy, and Microsoft's Naming Center of Excellence

Each of the six content modules can be completed in about 15 minutes, and they're designed to be fast and fun, said Sue Kaplan, director of brand engagement.

The course also lets employees compete against peers in an online game. As they proceed through the modules, employees can earn points and see how they stack up against others who have completed the same material.

Like naming a baby, selecting a product moniker is no easy task. Microsoft has some great names, Kaplan said. Among the many she likes are Windows Starter Edition, which sets consumer expectations without cannibalizing other Windows versions; Xbox Live, which connotes a highly active, engaged experience; and Unlimited Potential, which fits with the company's "Your

potential. Our passion." vision.

But not all Microsoft product names have hit the mark. Thanks to input from the team, RPC over HTTP – an acronym mouthful – became Outlook

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Anywhere, a much better choice, Kaplan noted.

Looking externally, Kaplan points to Picasa, Google's photo managing software, and Fairplay, Apple's digital-rights management platform, as examples of names that are evocative and descriptive.

"The whole point of naming is to appeal to customer emotions and to communicate consumer benefits," she said. "We have a tendency to be very literal and tell you exactly what a product is without communicating those benefits."

Longtime employees might recall that the company once released software called Microsoft Bob, or that one of the proposed names for MSN was "Onvo" – a choice purportedly quashed by a senior executive. The product's codename, Marvel, was considered but trademark-infringement issues with Marvel Comics prevented the company from using it as a final name.

Sometimes a snappy code name is replaced with one that, while reinforcing the brand, sounds like a step backward. A few years ago, the Mobile Entertainment Software Unit, code-named Media2Go, was renamed Windows Mobile Software for Portable Media Centers.

Not everybody was fond of the change. "Let it roll around on your tongue a little before it falls out," opined an author at Snark Hunting, a naming and branding blog. "Just missing out was the runner-up name: Microsoft Windows Mobile Device Operating Software for Portable Mobile Audio and Visual Media Device Centers."

The humor is not lost on Kaplan. "I totally get it. ... This is what we're getting at. We're trying to get shorter, more benefit-focused names that customers understand. We need to move away from using names that describe to customers what the offering does, to what the offering does *for them*."

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