

The art of product naming in China



By Stephen Knowles, MD at IDC UK & Yifei Dai, MD at IDC China

The art of product naming in China

Opportunities for Western companies to break into China have never been better. Chinese consumers are spending more on high quality luxury products and Western goods than ever before. But something as simple as a name can make all the difference to success or failure in China.

At IDC, our British and Chinese design studios work together to help global organisations choose suitable names for their Western products going into China. Many people don't realise that there is quite an art to the naming process. Brand names in China are extremely significant to consumers; much more so than in the West. It could actually make or break a product and getting the right combination of brand meaning and pronunciation is a fine art when launching a product into Chinese markets. The most successful companies use a systematic process of research to benchmark competitors and use this knowledge to support strategic decisions about brand values and product lines. We will talk more about this naming process in a moment, but first let's summarise the main challenges of selecting a Chinese product name.

So what's involved in naming a product for China?

Well first of all there are the linguistic considerations – it's not just a simple case of translating a word. Chinese characters can be interpreted in a number of different ways and there are many different dialects in China which can lead to misinterpretation if this isn't well planned. The two main forms of Chinese, Mandarin and Cantonese, can in themselves cause issues with pronunciation. In Hong Kong for example, it is Cantonese that is mainly spoken and as the first Chinese consumers to buy into luxury Western

goods, meant that many older Western brands were named for a Cantonese audience. But with mainland China speaking mainly Mandarin, and quite striking differences in pronunciation between Mandarin and Cantonese, these brands are not always easy to pronounce for Mandarin speakers. Now with the ever increasing demand for Western products in mainland China, products often need to be named with Mandarin speakers in mind. There are also wide cultural implications of names, with the association of certain things being considered good or bad, based on traditions or religious beliefs.

There are several different strategies when naming Western products for China, or a combination of these:

- **No translation** - some manufacturers make a decision to keep English names or a combination of English and Chinese. Many medical companies opt to simplify the messages of their medical products by using a combination of English with product descriptions in Chinese, such as Medtronic's neurostimulator PrimeAdvanced® 神经刺激器 (which means nerve stimulation device).
- **Phonetic translation** - this is often used for English names with no or little associated meaning with the product. Chinese characters for translated names are often chosen to deliver the meaning of traits such as perfection, luck, and innovation. Hilton chose this route for their brand, which remains a foreign sounding name in China, but worked to their advantage as it is widely known across China for being luxurious.
- **Meaning-based translation** - If the name has heroic meaning or the meaning of the name conveys product features, this can be a useful type of translation. Reebok is interpreted as 'fast steps' and Nike as 'endurance and perseverance' – in both cases presenting a strong image of what the brands actually represent.
- **Feature-based translation** - This may be used when it is relatively hard to transliterate the English names to easily-readable Chinese names. Feature-based translated names usually describe key features and main functions of the product.

Many medical products take this approach. An example is Abbott Healthcare's glucose test strips, FreeStyle Precision Xtra, in Chinese translated to 辅理善越佳型血糖/血酮仪 which means 辅理善 (help care well) 越佳 (better) 型 (model) 血糖/血酮仪 (Glucose machine).

- **Value-based translation** – This can be used to represent core values and morality of the company in relation to their products, and these names also imply the company's caring attitude and responsibility for their users. Healthcare giant Johnson and Johnson used this in their Chinese name, with characters that mean 'strong vitality'.
- **Heroic Chinese words** – These can sometimes be used to create a more emotional association with the products. The words are usually closely related to powerful cultural habits or religious traditions. BMW chose a name which has great emotional appeal. The Chinese characters include the sounds of the first two letters of their brand 'BM' which translate into 'precious horse'. In China the horse is believed to be a sign of luck and prosperity and the same character for 'horse' also appears in the character for 'motor', so they were also able to develop a name that had appeal in many dimensions.

When we opened our first IDC office in China back in 2008, we had to go through our own naming process. IDC, which stands for Industrial Design Consultancy, didn't really work with a direct translation into Chinese. Therefore we opted for a combination of phonetic and value based translation. We focused on 'IDC' (our recognised brand in the UK) and came up with the characters 易迪思 'Yi Di Si' that are pronounced 'ee - dee - sir', sounding very similar to our English pronunciation. Opting for a value-based translation, the characters translated into useful words for our business. 'Yi' is interpreted as simple design, 'Di' means inspiring team, and 'Si' translates as depth of thought.

IDC's Chinese naming process

Before decisions can be made about naming, companies need to fully understand how to communicate their brand and express the benefits of their innovation. At IDC this is where a systematic process of research and linguistic analysis comes in. Our Shanghai team works closely with clients' marketing departments to devise names which best represent the brand. This usually involves extensive research, developing and translating name concepts and then presenting these to focus groups to be sure that we are getting the right messages across for the brand. As a product design company, we can take the product right through the development process from concept to launch, as well as the naming process itself.

1. Brand analysis

The first stage of the process is to go back to basics and analyse what the brand actually represents. At the highest level, we look at the company, its own values and understand where the product fits, both now and in the future. For example, is it part of a family of products, are more planned and how will this affect the naming of future products? There is often quite a hierarchy to product naming in large organisations. Some products may carry name prefixes when in the same family or perhaps the company prefers products to have their own identity for other reasons. What are the core values that need to be communicated – is it cleanliness, accuracy, comfort, safety, innovation, luxury, quality or any number of other values?

2. Competitor research & benchmarking

As well as understanding the brand values of the new product, we research extensively how competitors are naming their products in the market. What naming strategy have they chosen for translation and which products have been

most successful? We gather information about how their product names communicate company and brand values, how well these have been translated, and patterns of product families. These competitors are then benchmarked to help support the decision making of our client's product. For example, we may learn from our research that it is more effective if the translated names are phonetically similar to the original ones with value-based and feature-based translation to communicate the benefits of products and imply company messages, or it may be a different strategy altogether.

3. Brainstorming for words & meaning

Once we have a clear direction for translation strategy, we start to brainstorm the most effective English words to communicate our brand values. Working hand-in-hand with our Shanghai team, we then translate these words into Chinese characters and assess how they can be interpreted and pronounced in various Chinese dialects. We prepare a shortlist of words which are best suited for potential naming strategies, whether it be feature-based translation, phonetic and value-based translation or any combination of the naming strategies discussed earlier. In all cases, we try to select Chinese characters that sound similar to the original English product name and usually use a maximum of three Chinese characters for the name, to suit the format of Chinese names. Once we have a shortlist of names, we check that there are internet domain names available for each potential product name.

4. Focus group testing

To help us decide which product name is best, we do further research by testing the names out with focus groups. This gives valuable feedback from real people who will potentially be buying or using the product. At this stage we can quickly identify which names are the most appealing and effective. The results of this

research provides essential information to help the client make a final decision about the name of their product.

How are our top brands named in China?

Western Brand	Chinese Name		Meaning of Name
Coca Cola	可口可乐	Ke-kou ke-le	Tasty fun
Land Rover	路虎	Lu Hu	Land tiger (in China a tiger represents power & dignity)
Marriot	万豪	Wan Hao	Ten thousand tycoons (or an image of wealth)
7-Up	七喜	Qi Xi	Seven happiness
Porsche	保时捷	Bao Shi Jie	Guaranteed speed (the first two characters also sound like diamond)
L'Oreal	欧莱雅	O Lai Ya	Elegant from Europe (the Chinese characters are quite feminine which conveys the target consumer)
IKEA	宜家	Yi Jia	Cosy home (the Chinese name actually comes from a classic Chinese literature - the sound is quite similar, so people relate to it and the character "宜" means suitable and harmony)
Lego	乐高	Le Gao	Happy and tall (the character of "乐" which represents 'happy' is an infectious happiness)
Carrefour	家乐福	Jia le fu	Family happy and lucky

As this article has shown, in all cases it's wise to get the outside support of a consultant who understands the naming process in China. It's not just a simple case of translation, there's a whole systematic process of research involved and it's essential to have local knowledge and an understanding of cultural and religious beliefs too, to maximise opportunities for a successful and enduring brand.



By Stephen Knowles, MD at IDC UK



& YiFei Dai, MD at IDC China