

Choosing a brand name is a minefield

 By [Chris Mberdyk](#)

11 Dec 2019

One of the first things every modern entrepreneur has to do before wheeling his Volkswagen beetle out into the driveway so he can turn his garage into an office, is to think global.



Sounds a bit over-optimistic and presumptuous, but quite frankly it is essential forward-planning with the sole objective of not ending up with egg on your face.

Because, once that little business in the garage starts growing and our entrepreneur becomes an established businessman and then a captain of industry, he or she is going to have to make that quantum leap so necessary to sustain growth and development.

It's called going global and is potentially so full of eggs that will not only cover a million faces but which would keep the entire Hilton Hotel chain in buffet breakfasts for the whole of the next millennium.

Now, as you're shoving the old beetle out of the garage the only global thinking you have to consider for the time being is the name of your company, service or product. Quite simply because one man's brand name is another man's punchline.

Take the General Motors people who came up with a new model called the Chevy Nova. Great name. Catchy, easy to remember, literally oozing innovation and things new on the leading edge of automotive design. In English speaking markets, that is, and yes, perhaps one or two of the Latin countries.

But, in some places in South America Nova means "No go."

It didn't take GM long to work out why they weren't selling too many cars in that neck of the woods.

There are hosts of examples of highly respected multi-national corporations that didn't do their homework when creating global brands and ended up in the proverbial. Like the French soft drink brand, Piatt! Doesn't sell big in Britain where the perception is that's what's going to happen to you if you drink too much too fast.

Advertising slogans are even worse. Take the American washing detergent people who decided to get into the lucrative middle-eastern market. They had billboards all over the place with that very message that had created massive sales all over the world: "Acme washing powder makes even the dirtiest clothing whiter." They even translated it into Arabic but forgot that the language was not read from left to right as it was in the West but the other way round and fairly loosely translated, what they were exhorting Middle Eastern housewives to do was use their product to get even the cleanest, whitest wash absolutely filthy.

It is for this very reason that air traffic controllers all over the world not only stick to English as the global airline language but just to be sure they repeat everything.

Hardly surprising because you can be quite sure that "You are cleared to land on runway three" spoken with a thick Mongolian accent will probably come across in Serbo-Croat as "Sorry, we're full up, try that little, farm road on your left..."

Even deep-sea divers have an international language which is something everyone has to learn off by heart before even thinking about putting a toe into the water. For example the typical thumbs-up sign we all use to signal "ok" means something entirely different under water. So, when you're 20 metres under the sea and your instructor gives you the thumbs-up he is not asking you if you are as happy as Larry and having fun, he is telling you to head for the surface. If he has big eyes and is giving you the thumbs-up very rapidly, chances are there is a great white shark about to take a whacking great chunk out of your anatomy.

Now the big international telephone companies have played it relatively safe by just sticking the word Telecom behind the name of their country. Can't go wrong there. But then you get some of the global players like AT&T that create a bit of confusion in foreign climes every now and then.

"Hey, Fernando, call me on AT&T...!" and then you wonder why you don't hear from the guy and eventually discover that instead of phoning you he headed for the nearest café for a cup of tea... and then another one.

But, it's not only language that can create misunderstanding. It's the whole corporate image thing as well. Logos that might be symbolic of technological leadership in one country can look like an instrument for the removal of haemorrhoids in another.

And what about the uniform? That's the most confusing thing I find about travelling abroad. Telling the difference between the fellow who is the pilot of my plane and the guy who's digging through my suitcase at customs. I can't count the number of times I've gone up to a pilot or navigator and confessed to having double my legal ration of scotch.

At least they have a sense of humour. You should have seen what happened when I asked a customs official at Ankara how high he has ever been.

So, don't leave choosing brand or company names to chance - contact me, I have done a lot of corporate and product naming.

ABOUT CHRIS MOERDYK

Apart from being a corporate marketing analyst, advisor and media commentator, Chris Moerdyk is a former chairman of Bizcommunity. He was head of strategic planning and public affairs for BMW South Africa and spent 16 years in the creative and client service departments of ad agencies, ending up as resident director of Lindsay Smithers-FCB in KwaZulu-Natal. Email Chris on moerdykc@gmail.com and follow him on Twitter at [@chrismoerdyk](https://twitter.com/chrismoerdyk).

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