

Whatchamacallit: An Exercise for Understanding the Power of Symbols

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History: This activity was presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, November 2015, Las Vegas. It was a top ranked submission.

Primary courses in which this activity might be used: Interpersonal Communication, Organizational Communication, Language, Persuasion, Rhetorical Criticism, Communication Theory.

Concepts illustrated: Language, Labels, Symbols, Connotation, Audience Adaptation, Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, Persuasion.

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Purpose

When the people at “Fairtilizer,” an online music company, were deciding what to name their business, they might have understood that symbols, including names, are arbitrary and, technically, cannot be wrong. One has to wonder, however, whether they anticipated the negative associations their company’s name might conjure up (e.g., fertilizer; fair [as in so-so]; passing gas) (see Forrest, 2014). Considering there are roughly 500,000 new businesses in the United States every month (Gabler, 2015), such mishaps are not surprising. With a better understanding of the power of symbols, however, business owners might be able to avoid them. The purpose of this exercise is to help students understand the power of symbols by asking them to invent and evaluate names for their own hypothetical companies.

Explanation of the Activity

Start the exercise by creating a list of company names that students say they either like or dislike. Examples of ones we like (but they may not) include Google, Twitter, JiffyLube, Verizon, and PayPal. Besides Fairtilizer, we dislike “Fashism,” the name of a mobile app that allowed people to solicit fashion advice from other users (Forrest, 2014), and Walmart. Based on this discussion, ask students if they think a company’s name is important. Why or why not? Possible answers include the role of names on developing first impressions, product branding, and associated feelings. Here, you might note that many companies think that names are important. Indeed, companies that specialize in naming other companies are known to charge as much as \$80,000 for their services. With that in mind, ask students to imagine that they are one of several applicants trying to secure a career in such a company. As part of the hiring

process, they will become part of a naming team, which must prove itself by inventing and evaluating two names for a hypothetical company.

Break students into groups and ask each group to select (from a list you provide) or invent a type of company to name. Phone books can be a good source of examples. Classes we have taught include companies that feature massage therapists for pets, dating websites for the elderly, professional laughers, mobile dentists, and private detectives. Next, provide guidelines. For example, gurus in the naming industry recommend names that are short (5-10 letters), simple, and recognizable, (e.g., Hasbro, Starbucks, Apple, Exxon)(see Gasca, 2014). Moreover, rather than simply describing what a company does (e.g., International Business Machines), consider names that convey the company's unique personality or philosophy (e.g., what do the names "Puma" and "Amazon" convey?) and ones that intrigue or stir emotions (Keller, 2014). To brainstorm, consider using a thesaurus, finding rhymes, or searching glossaries for root words or interesting jargon (Watkins, 2014). Most importantly, consider the audience you want to appeal to and adapt accordingly.

Next, give your students 15-20 minutes to invent two names for their company. Then ask each group to "pitch" their names to the rest of the class (about one minute per name). After both names have been pitched, class members should discuss which of the two names they prefer. What particular characteristics of names did they like? Why?

Debrief

Debrief your students by connecting the exercise to concepts, theory, and research. You might, for example, define connotation and ask or remind students about the meanings they associated with companies. You might also talk about the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Sapir, 1949; Whorf, 1956), which suggests that language determines how we understand and perceive the world. Ask your students whether this exercise supports that hypothesis. Why or

why not? Finally, ask students to think about other contexts in which labels might influence perceptions and behavior (e.g., when using euphemisms, when labeling people using stereotypes, and so forth). What does this tell them about the power of symbols?

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