

The Power of Power Company Names

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nationalgrid

Leaving my house this morning, I spotted a truck pulling out from the local power company facility. The truck read *National Grid*.

I thought, wow, *National Grid* is a powerful name. It sounds like this is the company that controls the national power grid...the company that pulls the switch and turns the lights on for the whole nation. Of course it doesn't, but the name sort of captures this image.

So how do you come by a name like this?

Essentially, there are four kinds of names for trademark purposes—*generic*, *descriptive*, *suggestive*, and *fanciful*.

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A generic name would be *Energy Company*. Many companies in the field use this term to define themselves (we're an energy company). Sometimes, this is known as the industry-standard name.

One cannot file a trademark on *Energy Company* because it's generic. But (to make things complicated) sometimes a generic name can become a trademark through continued use and marketing. For example, *Vision Center* has become a registered trademark even though hundreds of companies use it as part of their names, *Pearle Vision Center* for example. (Note: This goes two ways. A trademark can become generic if not protected. Think *Cellophane* and *Trampoline*).

Next are descriptive trademarks. These describe the goods or services the company markets. So while *Energy Company* is generic, names like *North American Energy* and *National Energy* (actual trademarks) are descriptive in nature and can be trademarked. Naming an energy company for the region of coverage it owns is a pretty typical practice, like *Southwestern Energy Company* and *Florida Power & Light*.

These names reflected that these companies were regional monopolies, and weren't actively involved in trade competition until recently. The changing competitive market environment gave rise to a new breed of more evocative power company names, like *KeySpan* (which has since been acquired by *National Grid*).

Trademark attorneys generally don't feel confident about descriptive names because they're hard to differentiate from one another, and difficult to protect over time. There's too much room for others to file and use similar trademarks. But, branding

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and marketing people may see the opportunity differently. These names capture big ideas...around geography, industry leadership, and/or breadth of offering. There is a dominance and credibility that comes from using these kinds of names.

Descriptive naming was a common practice in earlier times. Think of companies like *National Biscuit Company*, *U.S. Rubber*, *General Electric*, *United Technologies*, *Bank of America*, *Consolidated Trucking*, etc.

Over time however, some of these names may become too narrow in scope to match the changing business strategies of their owners. Often, they become acronyms, such as *IBM*, *AT&T*, *GE*, and *USG*. Sometimes, there are creative contractions of the names that serve the same purpose, like *Nabisco*, *ConAgra*, or *FedEx*.

This takes us to the next type of names...suggestive names...which indirectly allude to the quality of the company or product. *Fidelity* and *Hallmark* are examples of well-known and powerful suggestive names.

There is a breed of strong names that is somewhat descriptive and suggestive at the same time and seems to capture the best of both. I think of *BankOne*, *Primedia*, and *Microsoft* in this way.

Lastly there are the fanciful names, like *Kodak* or *Starbucks*. Trademark attorneys like these because they tend to be very distinctive and easier to protect.

So, let's come back to *National Grid*. This name is somewhat descriptive and suggestive. What is particularly nice about it is that it combines the power of both. What *National Grid* does so well is to paint a picture with words, balancing the power of a descriptive name with the imagination of a more evocative theme. *National* speaks to breadth and strength. *Grid* evokes coverage and control.

A naming consultant helps clients see the potential in names before they are actually launched and in the marketplace. It is easy to love a name once it has become a recognizable brand. It is much harder for clients to imagine what a name can become.

One has to wonder if the clients liked *National Grid* when it was presented.

Siegel+Gale has created powerful company names for clients, such as *Primedia*, *First USA*, *NationsBank*, *Nortel*, *OneNation Insurance*, and *Telstra*, to name a few.