

Names or Numbers?

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Many marketers avoid brand or sub-brand names composed of number-letter combinations or, to use the buzzword, the alphanumeric. Most marketers prefer to assign meaning to products by using names instead of numbers. The argument is that number-letter combinations hold little meaning, aren't memorable and don't engage consumers emotionally. A BlackBerry 8100 won't inspire consumers the way a BlackBerry Pearl or Curve does. True, sometimes, but not always.

Alphanumerics are usually relegated to the tertiary role of helping consumers understand relationships between product versions. But, in a world where every new Nokia, BlackBerry or Ford sub-brand has a name, whether it's a Chocolate or an Edge, one can argue that in some cases, going back to numbers might be better—an irony of sorts. This sounds counterintuitive, I'm sure. But when every new line-extension or sub-brand has a “name,” the power of naming diminishes incrementally. It becomes naming for the sake of naming. Words begin to blur, differentiation is less clear and names become mere labels. To tell you the truth, I don't know which BlackBerry I have—it might be a Curve, because that's what it looks like. But I don't think so. It's the one I can use anywhere in the world. Maybe that's the Tour? Funny, I can't tell you which sub-brand of Nikes I'm wearing, but I still remember a pair of New Balance 990s and the headline: “On a scale of 1,000, this shoe is a 990.”

Yet it's hard to get excited about an XS versus an XT—in fact, it's hard to imagine a difference between the two any more than I can imagine the difference between an Excursion and an Explorer. But some letter-number combinations carry deeper meaning.

As history goes, number-letter combinations have held religious, superstitious, mythical and, of course, mathematical significance. Some would argue that numbers are the most universal form of language. And, let's not forget the Seinfeld episode when George becomes so emphatic about naming his firstborn child “Seven” after Mickey Mantle's jersey number. Think about the letter X: X marks the spot. X-rated. X means across. X means death. X is a letter that consumers associate with advanced technology and “cool” products. Obviously, there's more to the letter-number combination than just letters and numbers.

In fact, the alphanumeric has demonstrated success throughout the history of branding. The word “brand” comes from an Old Norse word “brandr,” which means literally “to burn.” To brand something was to burn your mark onto your product (like cattle). These marks (or brands) were often just letters or numbers, like a circle with a “K” in the middle. Consider the marks 7UP, 3M, Chanel No. 5, V8, 747, DC10, The 49ers, 320i, Big Ten, Pac12, PS2, 7-Eleven and A1 Steak Sauce. Each one of these household brand names is an alphanumeric. The list goes on.

BMW has done a great job in building meaning into what otherwise would be non-emotional numbers. On most cars, numbers are labels—versioning designators of quality, engine size or trim level. But with BMW, each number means much more. In fact, each number has a different customer, appealing to different psychographics. Each represents an idea and is seen as a distinct form of self-expression. The BMW 3 Series is about being a driver's driver—it's sporty—it's about performance—and it lends the driver an image of edge and vitality. The 7 Series on the other hand is more about demonstrating success, status—you have arrived.

The combination of meaningful numbers with a powerful masterbrand like BMW works elegantly. The numbers carry distinct meaning. But BMW numbers don't divert attention from the masterbrand because of their "modesty"—after all, they are only numbers. They also help to prop up BMW's positioning, because numbers support the idea of performance and German engineering—numbers are about skill, accuracy and precision. Numbers are also about beauty—they are as much about art as they are about science. That makes 3, 5 and 7 gorgeous numbers indeed—numbers that many aspire to. Personally, I have a soft spot for the 8 Series.

911. Now that's a number with meaning. In people's minds it carries at least three different associations: First there was (and still is) the Porsche 911. Then there was (and still is) Emergency 911. Lastly, and most sadly, 911 now also means terrorism. But, what's most interesting is that 911 can simultaneously mean all of these things. Who says numbers don't engage emotionally? Who says numbers aren't memorable? But, it really depends on the role the alphanumeric plays in the context of brand architecture. To this extent the alphanumeric is very flexible.

Many product brand architectures involve at least three levels of branding, such as the masterbrand, sub-brand and version. The alphanumeric can perform at any one of these levels by playing different roles. For example, at the version level the alphanumeric has limited utility. In this scenario the alphanumeric introduces a third level of branding, so its role is tertiary—more one-dimensional—it's just a version, make or model. The alphanumeric at this level is not intended to do any heavy lifting—that role is shared by the master- and sub-brands. In other words, it makes more sense to consumers to buy a BlackBerry Pearl XT than a BlackBerry Pearl Bead.

Now move the alphanumeric to the level of sub-brand, like Boeing 747, and you see how it can really flex its muscle. Every time I'm driving behind a Porsche 911 on the highway, I feel the power of that number, even though I'm not behind the wheel (but maybe someday).

One remarkable convenience of alphanumeric brand names is that they can be identities in and of themselves—they are small, but powerful mnemonic devices. The name is the symbol so to speak. But at least you can still say it when you see it, unlike the symbol for the Artist Formerly Known as Prince.

And lastly, some alphanumeric names just "sound" better than others. What would you rather drive—an LBR or a GT? I'm going with the GT, no question. And, when it comes to phones, I've gotten to the point where I'd rather have a TX than a Tryst. Maybe that's just me, but as a consumer I'm beginning to question the promises made by so many of these names.

So ultimately, brand managers should think twice before summarily dismissing the idea of an alphanumeric as a brand or sub-brand name. An alphanumeric can be an efficient alternative to a word under the right circumstances.