

Mobile Phone Names: When logic gets lost. By George Pneumaticos

People like names - so let's name everything. This has been the approach of American mobile carriers for the last 5 years, creating confusion in brand architecture departments of mobile phone manufacturers - and more importantly in consumers' minds. To be clear, I'm not advocating a return to using alphanumeric codes exclusively - I think a few great names for the best products (or for groups of products) are invaluable communication tools for marketers and consumers. However, there is no hiding from the fact the current American phone naming approach is unsustainable, driven by over-differentiating carriers and bloated manufacturer portfolios. Let's set the tone with a lesser-known Dr. Seuss tale.

From "Too Many Daves" in Sneetches and Other Stories by Dr Seuss:

Did I ever tell you that Mrs. McCave had twenty-three sons, and she named them all Dave?

Well, she did. And that wasn't a smart thing to do. You see, when she wants one, and calls out "Yoo-Hoo! Come into the house, Dave!" she doesn't get one. All twenty-three Daves of hers come on the run!

This makes things quite difficult at the McCaves'. As you can imagine, with so many Daves. And often she wishes that, when they were born, She had named one of them Bodkin Van Horn. And one of them Hoos-Foos. And one of them Snimm. And one of them Hot-Shot. And one Sunny Jim. Another one Putt-Putt. Another one Moon Face. Another one Marvin O'Gravel Balloon Face. And one of them Zanzibar Buck-Buck McFate...

But she didn't do it. And now it's too late.

From numbers to names: the RAZR effect

Before 2005, mobile manufacturers were like Mrs. McCave; they gave each of their "children" numbers or alphanumeric combinations, which were as indiscernible as just calling all models Dave. Although there was always some (internal) logic to the numbers, that logic was rarely decoded by phone retailers, let alone consumers.

In late 2004, Motorola launched the Motorola V3 with the nickname RAZR, which had the potential to spark a golden era in technology brand architectures. At a time of thick (to accommodate space-hungry features) phones, Motorola launched the thinnest phone possible. And gave it the perfect name, emphasizing that thinness.

Unprecedented demand for RAZR led Verizon to abandon its normal policy of not carrying the same product as AT&T. It accepted the CDMA version of the RAZR, and remarkably put RAZR on a marketing *driveslot* (the group of phones a carrier promotes at a point in time) at the same time as AT&T had RAZR on its driveslot.

Some individuals in American carrier marketing organizations attributed RAZR's success to the name (or the fact that it had a name). As a result, in 2005, AT&T and Verizon marketing teams started telling their buyers in no uncertain terms – if a product doesn't have a name, it doesn't get on a driveslot. Buyers became approvers of brand names. Carrier marketing teams didn't want to get involved in naming decisions – they commented only if they disliked the buyer's approved name.

Mobile Phone company brand architecture departments were inundated with requests to name, rather than number/alphanumeric, every single product. Naming agencies experienced a significant windfall – but to be fair some of the good ones also found the name-everything trend troubling.

Moving from just Dave to a plethora of names

Like many bandwagons, this abrupt move from alphanumeric models to naming everything, illustrated some key basic tenets of brand strategy.

1. Names don't help sell bad products any better than alphanumbers do. For the next two years, Motorola named every product with the same 4-letter-text-message-speak gimmick coming out with names like the PEBL, SLVR, RIZR; none of these products were very good, and all lacked any of the wow factor of the RAZR. Sales plummeted.

2. Too many names for similar products dilute manufacturer brands and successful sub-brands Al Ries commented in Advertising Age¹ that naming every single model diluted both the Motorola and RAZR brands. American carriers were not bothered that manufacturer brands got lost in the shuffle – they try to present phones as just one ingredient in their “richer” offering.

3. Consumers like the name of their own phone, but get confused by the choice.

LG and Samsung are very B2B-customer-focused. Mainly in response to carrier buyer demands, they've named or nicknamed roughly three-quarters of their mobile phones for the American market.

If Best Buy were to stock all “current” US models only from Samsung there would be over 60 uniquely named phones on the shelves. I asked Harvard Business School Professor and consumer behaviour expert Gerald Zaltman (author of [How Customers Think](#) and [Marketing Metaphoria](#)) what he thought of [Samsung's current mobile lineup](#). His response was “I can't believe what I'm seeing...they have a horrendous number of names. I'm reminded of the cattle herder – he has a herd of 30 or 35 cattle, and for him each one is distinctive – the herder can give each of them a name. For a normal visitor, all people see is one generic cow copied 30 or 35 times”

When asked how many products from each manufacturer brand should actually be uniquely named, Professor Zaltman responded “Relatively few – probably 4 named

¹ Advertising Age, “It Focused on the Razr as a Product Rather Than a Brand”, Al Ries, 22 January 2007

products at a time is enough – and each name should be connected with some unique attribute of the product or salient dimension about the consumer’s experience with the product.”

American Carriers Obsessed with Themselves and Each Other

In contrast with operators in Europe and Asia, American carriers regard themselves as the most important element of a consumer’s mobile experience. American carriers control phone distribution far more than their European and Asian counterparts, so they must keep up this appearance of being important. This drives American carriers attempts to seem different from each other for every part of the mobile experience. Both Verizon and AT&T seem to mention each other as much as themselves in their recent TV and print ads.

Unfortunately for carriers in the long run, actual differences between networks are minimal, or at least diminishing. The Verizon “There’s a map for that” claim about people REALLY noticing their 3G coverage is timely and targeted disappointed AT&T/iPhone users; their claim that BlackBerry products on other networks are akin to paperweights an insult. AT&T’s problems supporting multiple data-hungry iPhone users should be short term. American carrier strength lies in their distribution power and the huge subsidies they provide in the US; if any manufacturer steps out of line and makes noises about self-distribution of unlocked phones, carriers move quickly to crush the heathens (by not placing new orders or not promoting existing stock.)

To artificially signal differentiation from other networks, a carrier’s handset lineup and resulting handset names is a vital part of their arsenal. Every handset must be different from competitors. When carrying the same handset, carriers insist on changing the name of their version to pretend it’s different. It’s clear that fault for the too many names / too many products debacle lies mainly with carriers. The emperor knows he is wearing so few clothes and it’s only a matter of time before consumers will spot his bitpipe.

It is therefore an interesting development that Verizon has initiated a change in the trend to name every single product (however, this doesn’t necessarily spell good news for manufacturers). Verizon and Google are trying to attack the AT&T + Apple alliance with phones running Google’s Android operating system. Android is a mobile operating system that is available to any manufacturer. Since the operating system is not interesting to most consumers, Verizon realized the futility involved in launching many differently named phones “with Android operating system”. Verizon needed to attack AT&T + Apple with a solid front – the Verizon Droid brand. (yes it’s problematic that Droid is a fragment of Android – but no one seems to care)

Droid will be the common name for any Verizon-specific Android-based phone. The first one was the Verizon Droid Eris (by HTC), and the second the Verizon Droid (by Motorola). In a further move to relegate the manufacturer brand to OEM status, Verizon force the manufacturer to name in a certain way, they typically don’t mention HTC & Motorola at all in their marketing, or they endorse with “by HTC” or “by Motorola” for the “incidental” role they had in creating the product.

Here's where it gets interesting. In the true spirit of co-opetition, Google and HTC have announced the Google Nexus One phone (nice planning starting off with One), as well as plans to distribute independently through Google Checkout. [Mossberg reports it's better](#) than either Droid phone, and it launches in a GSM version (i.e. not compatible with Verizon) to start with. Will Verizon force Google and HTC to call their eventual version the Google Nexus Droid? We shall see next year. Has the shine come off of the heavily promoted Droid line? Definitely. Will Verizon find ways to poke holes in the real Google phone and claim Droid is somehow better? Probably.

2010 to 2012 will likely see carriers try even harder to dilute manufacturer brands by continuing to order multiple variants of products with different names and barely discernible differentiation. When they do see products with potential (as with the Droid line), they may even force specific names upon manufacturers.

Too many names or too many products? Advice to manufacturers

My advice is similar to the obvious words a wise person would give to Mrs McCave. In her case, the problem is not really the similar names she gave her 23 children; the problem lies in the fact she had 23 children in the first place. Her proposed names do not make her predicament any easier. The same goes for manufacturers who launch 30 to 50 different mobile phones each year.

A reduction in portfolio sizes across the industry, combined with clear forward looking portfolios of 4 to 6 phones a year to cover big consumer segments (with a corresponding 4 to 6 names repeated / continued every year) is an excellent step.

For each major manufacturer, this smaller portfolio with resultant fewer names or at least better groupings allows their marketing departments as well as carrier marketing departments to do something with those names... and actually manage to build brands properly. It also allows consumers to understand what a product line means over time, through experience and replacement.

The overnaming of phones is clearly due to American operators obsessively comparing themselves to each other. Professor Zaltman: "Trying to be different is not the right issue. As a marketer I can pay a lot of attention to being different. I'd rather spend my time or a client's time not thinking of what competitors are and aren't doing, but what it is that will make a meaningful experience for consumers. If there happens to be something a competitor is doing well, I'll do it better. But letting your competitor's actions define yours is not a good guiding principle."

The Google Nexus distribution model may make people realize that as with computers, the **phone** is the cool thing, the operator had little to do with the creation of that phone, and paying a high price once is actually cheaper in the long run than paying nothing but being locked into a contract for years. Super smart phones like the iPhone, Google Nexus One, BlackBerry devices and Nokia's Nseries are helping consumers realize the American carrier's services are actually the commodity and carriers can't stand it. Name fewer products and build brands.

georgepneumaticos.com

About the author:

George was a director of brand strategy at the world's largest mobile phone company, and now focuses on helping other companies use their brand brains.