

Commentary

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Juliet:

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet.”

Romeo and Juliet (II, ii, 1–2)

Really?

Some of you remember that old (really old) “Saturday Night Live” sketch that parodied the slogan of the popular jelly brand Smucker’s with the first season’s cast offering their suggestions:

- Jane Curtin - Fluckers: “It’s got to be good!”
- Chevy Chase - Nose Hair: “You can imagine how good it must be... mm-mm!”
- Dan Aykroyd - Death Camp: “Just look for the barbed wire on the label!”
- John Belushi - Dog Vomit & Monkey Pus: “This stuff has got to be terrific!”
- Chevy Chase - Painful Rectal Itch: “The taste? (kisses fingers)”
- Dan Aykroyd - Mangled Baby Ducks: “Great jam! Beautiful jam!”
- John Belushi - 10,000 Nuns and Orphans (Jane: “What’s so bad about that?
John: They were all eaten by rats!”) “Oh so good!”
- Garrett Morris then brings in a jar that’s “So disgusting you can’t say it on television!”
(en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Saturday_Night_Live_commercial_parodies)

Names are important. When I first started taking pictures (around the time of SNL’s first season), I would tell anyone who asked that I was a photographer. Later, I said I was a photojournalist, but considered it an awkward term. After I became more confident with my work and the term, I dropped the hyphen both visually and verbally. Now I teach visual reporting, another awkward phrase I’m starting to like more.

A name, as with branding, is not only a concept that helps our minds understand what is signified, but helps us remember it as well. And we all know—what we remember, we learn from. Corporations, of course, pay millions of dollars to creative teams around the world to come up with catchy, memorable, and hopefully, meaningful and pleasing names for products. Drug companies, it seems, should save their money: Clozaril, Lorazepam, Prozac, Seroquel, Valium, Zoloft, Abilify, Risperdal Consta, Thiorazine, Haldol, Zyprexa (yelp.com/topic/chicago-medication-names-the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly).

All this is in preparation for a more salient case study.

Faculty members for a communications department at a large Western state university decided that the name for one of their concentrations (or majors) was old-fashioned and didn’t reflect the technological and professional changes mandated by this so-called Convergent Era. With tracks in photojournalism and commercial photography, the established name for the concentration was Photocommunications. It is another awkward word that is guaranteed to be accompanied by one of those annoying underlined red lines if you have the spellcheck program turned on in Microsoft Word. With a new faculty hire wise in the worlds of web and interactive design, it was reasonably agreed that a third track, interactive media design should be included along with new names for the other two—visual journalism and studio photography. Obviously, Photocommunications didn’t reflect this new eclectic program, so a new name was chosen—Visual Communications.

Seems simple enough, right? But after a 2-year-plus period with university forms filled and turned in, e-mails passed back and forth, and a 2-day hearing with the school’s curriculum committee, the new name was rejected. Why? Because faculty members of the College of Art objected to the use of the phrase. It seems, that for them, visual communication and graphic design are synonymous.



Babies in the Bath. New York City, 2009. Named at birth, branded sometime later. PML

Despite the argument that the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) merged its Photojournalism and Graphic Design Divisions into Visual Communication in 1983, that the same organization sponsors this journal with its editor contributing to the field with a popular textbook, and other communications organizations such as the National Communication Association and the International Communication Association that have divisions named visual communications, the Art faculty thought that high school students who wanted an education in graphic design might be confused and register with the Department of Communications by mistake.

In this present time of economic troubles throughout the world, universities and their constituents feel the panic. With faculty and staff cutbacks, furlough days, and pay cuts, the name or brand of a program remains a hot topic. Nevertheless, no academic entity can or should “own” a name.

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