



HAVE A STARTLING BRAND

MAKING YOUR BRAND name stand out from all the others is an obvious thing to do—yet many firms (especially small businesses) have brand names that are based on the founder’s surname, or house name, or favorite pet’s name. This is a classic wasted opportunity.

On the other hand, many firms try to develop memorable brand names, and often have expert help in doing so. Cutting through the clutter of short, memorable, zingy brand names is difficult to say the least.

One answer is to make the brand name controversial—but to do so without getting it banned altogether.

The idea

Controversial marketing is nothing new—Benetton’s advertising campaigns show that—but getting a brand name that is controversial is more risky: an ad that oversteps the mark could be banned by the advertising authorities, which would mean losing the cost of producing the ad, but a brand name that oversteps the mark and is banned could lose the company its identity.

Enter French Connection United Kingdom. French Connection was founded in 1972 as a fashion chain, and although it did well the brand name did not exactly stand out from the many other slick names retailers were using. In 1997, though, the company hit on the idea of calling itself French Connection United Kingdom, and using the lower-case acronym “fcuk” on its goods. The effect was electric. The company produced T-shirts with slogans such as “fcuk fashion,” “hot as fcuk,” and (in Australia) “no fcukin worries.”

The company was successful in claiming that fcuk is simply the company's name rather than a misspelled Anglo-Saxon word, but young people still bought the T-shirts.

The new brand appealed to rebellious teenagers who had not even been born when the company was founded—and when some people in authority failed to see the joke and banned the company's advertising, sales went up even further (and with reduced promotional costs as a sweetener). Being banned in Boston was a major boost to the company's American interests: in 2001, the company hung a poster saying “San Francisco's First fcuk” outside their first store in that city.

Being controversial carries risks—but in this case it certainly carried rewards as well.

In practice

- Try to be funny as well as controversial.
- Don't go too far—you might get banned altogether!
- If possible, link the controversial brand to your company's name. This will help you in defending against banning charges.
- The main appeal of controversial brand names is to younger people. This idea would not work for an older audience, or in a “serious” context such as financial services.