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No faux pas in any language



By Emma Jacobs



Way with words: Greg Alger works for Lexicon, which has helped brands including Intel and Dasani

Naming a new product after bits of male genitalia is unlikely to get customers snapping it up. But, until Greg Alger intervened, one company came close to calling its new, innovative medical device a name that sounds like “penis head” in French – and the device wasn’t even anything to do with urology.

As a linguist at Lexicon, a company devoted to creating brand names, much of Mr Alger’s job involves steering multinationals away from such potential blunders.

Speaking from his office near the foot of the Golden Gate Bridge in the San Francisco Bay area, the chatty 33-year-old Californian says the proposed name was changed to something harmless.

However, he points out, some brands do go ahead with phrases that sound like words for male genitalia – although in those cases it is deemed acceptable because of the cultural context. “In some varieties of Arabic, ‘air’ sounds almost identical to a word meaning ‘penis’,” says Mr Alger. However, knowledge of English language among certain brands’ customers mitigates this association, so names such as Nike Air and MacBook Air (which are not Lexicon clients) would be widely acceptable, he explains.

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This is why, he asserts, a linguist’s job is more sophisticated than merely vetoing swear words and innuendo. “If a client is particularly fond of a name that has a potentially problematic association, we’ll [investigate] with other native speakers how widespread the association is, how immediate it is [and] how problematic it actually is.”

Since joining Lexicon 18 months ago, Mr Alger



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has tested names that have (unwittingly) sounded like “they’ll f*** you” in Colombian Spanish, been sacrilegious in Hindi, conveyed impotence in Japanese, and translated as “whore” in Hebrew.

Linguists are essential to Lexicon, says David Placek, the chief executive and founder. “When we were setting the company up in 1982, we

thought ‘what kind of information and insights could we use to help a client name a product?’ – so we thought of a linguist.”

As well as two full-time linguists, he has 77 specialists in languages as diverse as Urdu, Tagalog and Hindi around the world under contract to the company. Most have PhDs. “Other branding agencies don’t employ linguists. This company isn’t driven by linguists, but they are a pillar,” he says.

Mr Alger’s first job at Lexicon was to co-ordinate the global team of linguists in order to spot names that are potential translation minefields. “They find ones that might be offensive as well as tell us what resonates in their culture ... We write a summary assessment of candidate names and present it to the company.”

Lexicon provides the information to the clients and it is then up to them to choose the best name. “It might be that they choose a word that is borderline offensive in Japan, a small market for them, but is great for a big market like Kazakhstan”.

Now Mr Alger gets involved in the creative side too, coming up with new brand names. “Creativity can be messy – linguistics can help bring structure to the process, using rules from phonology [the sound of language] and morphology [the study of the structure and form of words in language]”.

Lexicon, which helped RIM come up with the name BlackBerry for its new mobile device after monikers such as ProMail were said to make users’ blood pressure rise, generates a lot of names before showing them to the clients. It then tests them on consumers before taking a shortlist to the trademark department, which flags up if the name is already taken or if there are existing conflicts.

Different dialects also have different sound systems, which may make a given word problematic in one place and not another. He cites a potential name that was tricky in Spain but not in Latin America – it had two “soft” Cs and one Z in short order, all of which were pronounced as an “s” in Latin America, but as a “th” sound in Spain. “This made the name sound like it was mocking a person with a speech impediment,” says Mr Alger.

After graduating in Spanish literature and psychology from the University of California, San Diego – “I had no idea what I wanted to do. I just did subjects I was interested in” – Mr Alger’s interest in linguistics developed when he went to Spain and then Japan to teach English as a foreign language, and he became aware of the structure of language.

That led him to take courses first in the psychology of language, where he was introduced to Steven Pinker, the Harvard professor of psychology and popular-science writer. “Reading his *The Language Instinct* made me think: ‘Wow, this is how language is structured’.”

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He then studied phonology and morphology. “It was amazing to me that something that comes so naturally – speaking words – is so complex. Language is highly, highly organised. On an unconscious level we take in all these underlying rules. Your mind forces your mouth to give form to them”.

On completing a masters in linguistics at San Francisco State University, he searched for a career to use his newly acquired knowledge. He did a stint building software models for a company that was involved in information retrieval, but “it was quite analytical and highly structured – not much room for creativity”. Then he found a job as one of two full-time linguists at Lexicon.

A big part of Mr Alger’s job is research into sound symbolism – the notion that sounds signal different types of meaning. He cites Swiffer, the Procter & Gamble mop, which Lexicon named. “Swiffer has a ‘sw’ cluster. All different words like swipe, swift, signal a smooth meaning. The research helps us determine what sounds work with different brands.”

Mr Placek elaborates: “Our insight was that mopping is the least interesting and effective chore – we wanted to give some joy to the task. Linguists worked on the name and came up with Swiffer.”

Is it that difficult coming up with a name? Mr Alger laughs. “People tend to think naming products is easier than it is. It is a much more complex process than they think it is. They think we sit around in a room drinking beer”.

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It sounds like RIM needs Lexicon's services on its own name, not just its products.