

Contributed by Maghan Cook



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DEFENDING THE EMPTY VESSEL

APPROACH TO NAMING

We've all heard the maxim, if you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all. A fine thought — but is there a place for “nothing” in the high-stakes world of pharmaceutical naming?

Also termed “blank canvas” or “clean slate” names, empty vessels are nondescript brand names that do not intrinsically communicate product attributes or benefits. Names such as Ativan or Xanax are considered nondescript since they do not convey inherent meaning to their intended audiences.

“Empty vessels tend to be more distinctive, and have less in common with existing drug names,” says Maury Tepper, a trademark attorney with Womble Carlyle Sandridge & Rice, PLLC. “This gives them a higher probability of passing legal and regulatory muster.”

Even so, empty vessels are not always explored with enthusiasm. This is primarily because there is a perception that a nondescript name will not be able to elicit an immediate or strong response from target audiences.

Names that provide overt links to product attributes or benefits do offer distinct advantages. The brand Levaquin, for example, employs the –quin suffix to immediately communicate quinolone; Altace is quickly recognized by doctors as an ACE inhibitor. More suggestive names like Celebrex and Abilify are derived from words that carry positive images and associations. By using descriptive nomenclature, these brands come prepacked with marketing communications that help with awareness and recall of a new name. Nevertheless, empty vessels offer advantages too, and can be much more than a last resort or a free ride through the screening process. When used with an appropriate strategy, a vacant neologism can transform into a robust, distinctive brand with the unique ability to communicate exactly and only what marketers desire.

AVAILABILITY

Let's face it: trademark availability is a critical factor in pharmaceutical naming. There are hundreds of thousands of pharmaceutical trademarks worldwide. Finding a telegraphic name that has not already been used is a struggle, even before hurdles such as URL availability and FDA requirements are taken into consideration. After every lawyer, Web squatter, and regulatory agency weighs in, the task of securing a single global name with any overt meaning becomes increasingly challenging. Empty vessels provide the leeway that allow for smoother passage through this complex system.

TIMING

With the titanic task of clearing legal and regulatory screens ahead of them, companies developing pharmaceutical products know the importance of selecting a name early in the development cycle. While at one time it was standard practice to begin the naming process in Phase III of clinical trials, proceedings have become increasingly arduous, and now the overwhelming majority of companies develop the generic and trademark names for products by or during Phase II.

The catch: rarely has a company thought about positioning by Phase II. The naming process is often the first commercial endeavor for the product team. The name chosen must, therefore, have the pliability to

adjust to potential changes in messaging, as well as changes in indication that may be revealed through further trials.

LOOK AND FEEL

The empty vessel that makes the loudest sound is an aphorism that has been interpreted to mean a number of things, none of which relate to branding. But the underlying truth is that something with no meaning within can still create noise. With more freedom to explore the alphabet, the empty vessel approach provides room to execute on tone, cadence, and pronunciation, which are qualities vital to brand recall and acceptance. The look and feel of a name provides the foundation or context for the name, without having to allude to specific product attributes. A name like Prozac, for example, excels because of its intuitive pronunciation and effective tone, not because it communicates anything outright.

DISTINCTION

What good is an intuitive name if it doesn't have the oomph required for your brand?

“Many marketers think attributes of their new product should be encoded in its name,” Mr. Tepper says. “The problem is, so does everyone else. Names preloaded with meaning tend to look and sound like those being used for competitive products, and therefore do not do what brands should do, which is stand out.”

Not only do empty vessels eliminate the risk of obfuscation in the crowded pharmaceutical class, but they are also more likely to achieve true distinction from other brands. Nondescript names can leverage fresh and interesting letter strings, providing meanings distinct and unique to the products they adorn.

THE FUTURE

In the initial stages of the naming process, it is difficult to see the potential in an empty vessel name. Until marketing bolsters the brand with a visual and verbal identity, an empty vessel will not carry much meaning. But therein lies the beauty. While the transparent nature of descriptive names is their initial draw, it is the semantics of a name that ultimately become its limitations. A product such as Adderall, for example, will have difficulty transcending its implication for ADHD. An empty vessel such as Lialda, however, has the flexibility to take on various messages and indications, and can truly evolve with the brand.

Exploring a variety of name types that fit within your strategy is a best practice. But don't forget about the empty vessel. By itself it may be unassuming, even unimpressive; but backed by a strong and coordinated marketing campaign, an empty vessel has real potential to become an evocative and lasting pharmaceutical brand.

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