



Car Names: A Survey of Buyer Opinions

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Report to Industry

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Introduction

In an exploratory study of naming in the car industry in 2004 it became apparent to me that there was considerable scope for research into buyer perceptions of brand names. While many in the field agreed that the brand name was a fundamentally important choice, there seemed to be little research in the area of product naming. Though there were some notable exceptions, generally what work that was being done on product naming was more in the way of 'how to' manuals.

It seemed that an investigation into product naming, using the Australian car industry as a case study, would be timely. There were several questions deserving of further research: What is it that car names symbolise or mean to the potential buyer? What role does the name of a product play in the buyer's perception of brand image? And, is the perception of the manufacturer's brand more significant than that for the model or type? In short, what do the consumers who actually purchased the product think?

Seeking support from industry then seemed a logical step in a research project with such clear practical outcomes. With this in mind I approached the Toyota Motor Corporation of Australia. Using a Small Research Grant from the Faculty of Business at the University of Tasmania I travelled to Sydney to meet with Toyota executives to negotiate access to their customer database to conduct a survey. Toyota not only agreed to allow access, with confidentiality provisos, but also offered to contribute to the funding of the project.

In September 2006 the survey, 'Car Names: A Survey of Buyer Opinions', was mailed by Toyota to a list of approximately 10,000 randomly generated addresses of people that had purchased a new Toyota car. Subsequent data from the returned surveys have been entered and analysed. The wealth of information now available has the potential to contribute significantly to the academic literature. Importantly though, it will also provide valuable insight into how buyers feel about the naming of products, which perhaps can then be used by industry to better tailor its products to meet buyer needs.

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The Sample

The car industry was partly chosen for this research because of its significance. It is one of Australia's key manufacturing sectors (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005). It is one of considerable size, with approximately 350,000 units produced each year by four manufacturers—Ford, Holden, Mitsubishi and Toyota—and exports totalling \$4.7 billion in 2004 (Australian Trade Commission, 2006). In addition, there are over 200 tooling, component, design and engineering firms (Federation of Automotive Products Manufacturers, 2006). Importantly too, the purchase of a car is typically one of a consumer's largest buying decisions, meaning that not inconsequential consideration is given to the task.

The sample selected for analysis was those who purchased their car from the Toyota Motor Corporation of Australia. A mail survey was to be administered to the first 10,000 private buyers who bought a new passenger car on or after 1 April, 2005. This made vehicle type, age, gender, income and location random. To encourage a larger response rate, three \$500 gift vouchers redeemable at Toyota dealerships were offered as prizes to randomly drawn respondents to the survey. Ultimately, there was a total of 9991 surveys mailed out (20 were returned to sender), with 1803 valid responses, making an overall response rate of 18.1%.

The survey instrument itself was divided into six sections, with five used to obtain quantitative data for analysis, and a sixth section where buyers could write comments relevant to brand names. The first four sections contained items which were measured on 5-point Likert scales ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The fifth section then obtained demographic data and the final section asked buyers to comment on whether they had anything else to say about car names. This was used to gain qualitative comments from buyers which would then be used in support of the quantitative data obtained from the previous sections.

Demographic Information

As noted above, in the fifth part of the survey respondents were asked questions about themselves as the buyer—basic demographic questions, as well as the name and model of the car they purchased (not reported here).

25	Gender	Male	Female			
		50.0%	50.0%			
26	Age range	35 & under	36 - 45	46 - 55	56 - 64	65 & over
		15.3%	17.7%	21.9%	22.4%	22.6%
27	Gross household income per annum	Under \$30,000	\$30,000 to \$49,999	\$50,000 to \$69,999	\$70,000 to \$99,999	\$100,00 & over
		19.0%	23.4%	20.0%	19.3%	18.3%
28	Have you previously purchased a Toyota car?	Yes - new	Yes - used	Both	No	
		41.8%	18.2%	12.4%	27.5%	
29	Which of the following best describes the place you live?	Rural	Small town	Large town	City	Capital city
		12.7%	16.2%	13.8%	32.3%	25.0%

The gender of the respondents came out at exactly 50% male and female. However, there were missing data in this question, and there should be some caution in relation to the response in general. The purchase decision is often made by more than one person (i.e. both the husband and wife etc.).

The respondents were evenly distributed through the age ranges, the lowest group being '35 and under', which makes intuitive sense because new car purchases are expensive. Younger buyers may be more inclined to purchase a used vehicle.

The purchase was evenly distributed across the income ranges also. However, again there were some missing data, due perhaps to the sensitivity of the question.

A large percentage of respondents had previously purchased a new Toyota car (41.8%), with more respondents from urban areas rather than rural or regional areas (57.3% city or capital city).

Findings Summary

Section A

In this first section respondents were asked questions about how they felt about cars generally. The aim was to determine the level of buyer involvement in the product, that is, if respondents considered themselves to be a 'car person'.

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	I have a keen interest in cars generally.	19.0%	34.3%	34.5%	9.7%	2.4%
2	I think the sort of car you drive says something about who you are as a person.	13.2%	42.7%	22.6%	13.1%	3.9%
3	When buying a new car I thoroughly research my choices before making a decision.	45.5%	41.7%	9.2%	3.2%	0.4%

Discussion

On average there was much more agreement than disagreement with the three questions, indicating that the majority of respondents had a relatively high level of product involvement. It could be assumed that a high level of product involvement is largely due to the nature of the product (i.e. a car is an expensive product and therefore represents a substantial purchase). In particular, 87.2 % of respondents either Agreed or Strongly Agreed that they thoroughly researched new car choices before making a purchase decision.

Interestingly, there was a significant difference between men and women on Question 1. Men predominately answered Strongly Agree or Agree, while women mostly answered Neutral or Disagree. This was not the case for the other two questions. For Question 3 in particular, men and women answered identically, both thoroughly researching their purchase.

These items were subsequently combined with Question 17 'The name of my car is important to me' to form a composite score for product involvement, which constituted the average score across each item. Future research will focus on whether there are significant differences in buyer opinions about desirable brand names in relation to level of involvement.

Section B

In this next section respondents were asked questions related to their opinion of the way cars should be named. Questions were linked to the commonly held perception that product names should: be suggestive of the product's benefits and qualities; be easy to pronounce, recognise and remember; be distinctive; and communicate across cultures.

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
4	Car manufacturers should carefully choose their car names.	26.9%	48.3%	22.1%	2.1%	0.4%
5	The name of a car should give the buyer a good indication of the type of car it is.	19.2%	45.5%	27.3%	7.3%	0.8%
6	It is important that a car has a real word for a name, one with a dictionary meaning.	10.5%	19.4%	37.8%	28.5%	3.9%
7	It is important that a car has a name that suggests its qualities or something about it.	13.9%	45.2%	28.9%	11.0%	1.1%
8	It is important that a car has a name that is distinctive.	26.7%	53.3%	16.2%	3.2%	0.6%
9	It is important that a car has a name that is easy to pronounce.	37.7%	50.5%	9.6%	2.0%	0.2%
10	It is important that a car has a name that sounds pleasing to the ear.	28.3%	50.5%	17.9%	3.0%	0.3%
11	It is important that a car has a name that sounds Australian.	16.8%	18.6%	41.3%	19.6%	3.8%
12	A 'foreign' sounding name makes a car seem more exotic.	5.5%	25.0%	36.5%	27.6%	5.4%

Discussion

Overall, this section sought to determine how important the desirable qualities of brand names were to buyers. Respondents certainly believed manufacturers should carefully choose their car names (75.2% Agreed or Strongly Agreed).

The majority of buyers (64.7%) believed that a car name should indicate the type of car it is. This supports the idea that a brand name needs to be a meaningful word and provides some support for the principle that it is beneficial to have a name which is a verbal or aural associate of the product. Similarly, a majority of buyers (59.1%) believed that it is important for a car name to suggest something about it, with only 12.1% disagreeing. As one buyer stated:

Basically I think a car should have a 'strong' sounding name for example Mustang and not 'weak' sounding names such as Jazz or Clio for example. People want strength in a car not flimsiness which is what weak names suggest.

This confirms the proposal that a brand name should be able to elicit a mental image, and is important to practitioners because words which are high in imagery value have a recall advantage over words which are not.

There was strong support for names to be distinctive (80.0% Agreed or Strongly Agreed) and sound pleasing to the ear (78.8% Agreed or Strongly Agreed). There was also strong support for the name to be easy to pronounce (88.2% Agreed or Strongly Agreed). This can be linked to simplicity in a brand name, which is also often cited as a desirable characteristic. Buyer's comments mirrored the need for simplicity, with statements such as:

I feel that the names given to cars should be simple and catchy.

Keep it simple—no more than 3 syllables.

On the surface buyers were uncertain about whether a car name should sound Australian (41.3% responded Neutral). Similarly, there wasn't a trend as to whether respondents thought foreign sounding names made a car seem more exotic (30.5% Strongly Agreed or Agreed; 33.0% Strongly Disagreed or Disagreed; 36.5% were Neutral). However, when some of the demographic items were considered the results were more illuminating. For example, younger people tended to believe a foreign name makes a car sound exotic significantly more than older people, while older people tend to believe an Australian car name is important significantly more than younger people.

Similarly, people from rural areas, and small and large towns, believed that an Australian car name is important significantly more than people from cities. People from large towns and cities rated an Australian car name significantly more than people from capital cities. The trend appears to be that the lower the population density, the more favourably Australian sounding names will be perceived.

Subsequent research will look at demographic considerations in the choice between foreign and local brand names.

Section C

In this part respondents were asked questions about how words or letters should be used to indicate the level of car within a model's range, e.g., GXi, VXi or Grande. The various designations for products within a model are predominantly pseudo-technical, and appear to be mainly aimed at separating the levels of product. These questions were aimed at determining if car buyers considered model designation had any significance.

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
13	The word or letters used to describe levels within the model's range should indicate some difference between those levels.	25.8%	59.6%	12.3%	1.7%	0.5%
14	The type of car should influence how manufacturers show the level differences, e.g. letters and numbers are more suited to sports cars, and words are more suited to family cars.	15.8%	44.4%	28.5%	9.9%	1.3%
15	Overall, it makes more sense to have word, e.g. Grande, to describe levels within the model's range rather than letters, e.g. GXi, VXi.	23.6%	41.8%	23.1%	9.7%	1.7%

Discussion

A significant number of buyers indicated that when words or letters are used to distinguish between levels in a model's range, they should be indicative of some difference between those levels (85.4% Agreed or Strongly Agreed). Interestingly, many more men than women answered Strongly Agree to this question.

Most buyers also agreed that it is the type of car that should influence how manufacturers show level differences, that is, letters and numbers are more suited to sports cars, and words are more suited to family cars. Respondents with incomes higher than \$100,000 were moderately less in agreement, however. Buyer comments, though, revealed that they considered the use of apparently meaningless number and letter combinations to distinguish between model levels was confusing. As one buyer said:

Confusion reigns supreme with respect to levels within model ranges as there is no consistency. For example, how does an SX compare to a YRS or VXi or a GLX or CV in standard? It's hard enough to relate an "Ultima" designation to a "Grande" and a 'sport' to a "Sportivo".

Another trend in buyer comment was for consistency and structure when alpha-numeric brand names are used:

The increased diversity of models/makes makes it important that the naming is structured.

I think words to express levels of extras included in different models is helpful, e.g. Executive, Premier, Grande, etc. [...] Also numerals to indicate engine size is helpful, e.g. Altise 4 or Altise V6, etc.

There did, however, appear to be buyer favouritism towards the use of words rather than numbers to describe levels within a model's range (65.4% Agreed or Strongly Agreed). Thus, although research has shown that buyers can make product inferences from numbers contained in alpha-numeric brand names (Pavia & Costa, 1993), car names appear to benefit more from the use of words rather than numbers or number/letter combinations.

Section D

In this part respondents were asked questions about the naming of the particular car they purchased. The aim of this section was to shed some light on questions related to decision-making in relation to brand names, and to issues of product brand in relation to corporate brand.

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
16	I like my car's name	24.4%	54.4%	18.2%	2.5%	0.5%
17	The name of my car is important to me.	11.9%	23.8%	46.1%	14.7%	3.4%
18	The name expresses my car's personality.	10.0%	25.6%	40.0%	18.4%	6.0%
19	I had heard the name of my car before I visited the car dealers showroom.	37.7%	48.4%	5.9%	6.1%	1.8%
20	The word or letters used to describe the level of my car within its model range make sense to me.	15.4%	41.6%	25.6%	13.7%	3.7%
21	The name of my car did not play a role in my decision to buy it.	27.8%	35.1%	19.4%	13.9%	3.8%
22	I would have purchased my car even if I did not like the name.	29.0%	44.7%	15.6%	8.6%	2.1%
23	The brand name of Toyota is more important to me than the model's name.	47.9%	37.3%	10.6%	3.1%	0.9%
24	Toyota appears to carefully choose its car names.	15.8%	38.1%	40.4%	4.6%	1.1%

Discussion

The vast majority of respondents had heard the name of their car before they went to a showroom (86.1% Agreed or Strongly Agreed), suggesting strong brand awareness for these products. While the majority of buyers (78.8%) Agreed or Strongly Agreed that they liked their car's name, there were many buyers who were Neutral about whether the name was important to them, or whether their car name reflected their personality (46.1% and 40.0% respectively).

To add to this, many buyers indicated that the name of their car did not play a prominent role in their decision making process, and that they would have in fact purchased the car even if they did not like the name (62.9% and 73.7% Agreed or Strongly Agreed respectively). One buyer's statement perhaps summed up the overall feeling:

I held off buying a 'Kluger' for 18 months because of the [...] name! In the end there was still nothing else on the market that could compete with the quality of the vehicle. Just the name AAAH!! Bloody terrible—whoever thought of Kluger (or Klugger—sounds like a machine gun) should be shot! If Toyota had a better name they would sell many more...

Thus, the evidence presented suggests that although many buyers like their car's name, the name is not a salient concern in a purchase decision, and a car with a disliked name may still be purchased.

Question 23 asked buyers whether the brand name Toyota was more important than the model name. There was a very strong sentiment from buyers that this was indeed the case (85.2% Agreed or Strongly Agreed). For example, one buyer stated that:

To me brand name is important, e.g. Toyota or what this brand represents. For me Toyota is great value, safe, reliable and quite nice looking family vehicle. Economical as well with great resale value. The other names (model names) are of less importance to me...

This indicated that buyers felt the corporate brand name of Toyota was much more important than a Toyota vehicle's model name.

Conclusions

The selection of a brand name for a new product is often considered to be the centrepiece of marketing campaigns. A brand name serves as the foundation of a brand's image, and while the image associated with a brand can be built by advertising over time, a carefully chosen name can bring inherent and immediate value to the brand. An effective brand name has the ability to increase awareness and create a favourable image for a product (Aaker, 1991). One of the principle aims of this survey, 'Car Names: A Survey of Buyer Opinions', was to provide insight into the buyer-side of the marketing exchange. What, then, does the consumer who actually purchased the product think?

First off, for some buyers the issue may be less crucial to their decision-making:

Car names are totally meaningless. More and more they are becoming an insult to people's intelligence. They are primarily used by car manufacturers as a means to promote and sell the car into the market. [...] Cars are inanimate objects so the use of names is unnecessary. Use letters and numbers.

But on the other hand, some may view the naming of cars in quite a romantic light:

Car names provide an identity for loyal fans. They tell stories of their past, such as reliability, economy, power, stability, value, quality, manufacturer, and popularity. Names also differentiate one type of car from another. It shows the taste of one owner from the next one in choosing a car. [...] Good to have 'WHAT A FEELING' than no feeling for a car name.

Nonetheless, there is considerable support from buyers that the brand name characteristics deemed desirable by industry are indeed important. Generally, the desirable qualities of a product name are that it should be suggestive of the product's benefits and qualities; easy to pronounce, recognise and remember; distinctive; and communicate across cultures. Respondents to this survey back up this position, particularly in relation to a name being distinctive, easy to pronounce and pleasing to the ear. Simplicity in a name was also seen as desirable.

A similar notion was found to be important for buyers in relation to the naming of the levels in a model. Buyers felt that the current conventions are overly complicated. It is possible that structure in alpha-numeric brand names is of greater concern in the product class of passenger vehicles, or even cars in general, due to the sheer number of different models in the marketplace, each with their own model levels. Still, buyer criticism on the issue is valid.

Perhaps, though, one of the most significant findings was in relation to the use of foreign versus Australian names. As noted above, younger people tended to believe a foreign name makes a car sound exotic significantly more than older people, while older people tend to believe an Australian car name is important significantly more than younger people. As well, people from regional and rural areas believed that an Australian car name is important significantly more than urban people. A possible implication for target marketing in general is that global and foreign branding strategies may not work as effectively within rural or regional settings as they may in urban settings. When the majority of a firm's target market is rural or regional, they may need to consider the use of a localised branding strategy. The same may be said when the target market is older consumers—they appear to rate the Australian brand name as significantly more important than younger consumers and thus may be best targeted with localised branding strategies.

Overall, buyers have indicated that a model name may exhibit many desirable characteristics, and be seen in a positive light by buyers. Throughout the survey results a consistent theme is that the actual word used as a brand name is significant. It forms part of the overall 'picture' that buyers have of the product. This is apparent within the qualitative comments noted by buyers, where there was considerable interest in the topic generally.

However, it is certainly possible to conclude that the names of cars mean less to the buyer than their feelings of the overall brand. That is, they do not consider Toyota's hybrid fuel car the Prius's model name—even if they knew it was Latin for 'to go before'—as separate from the total experience of the Toyota brand or from the buying decision in relation to such a vehicle. The actual word used as the product name is significant but it is not central. What is central is not a question addressed by this survey. If anything can be deduced from the buyer comments though, it is that the quality of the product is paramount—its reliability, the service support and its finish—in relation to the brand.

Therefore, a significant concern to firms may be to ensure that associations with the corporate brand name are positive. It is the corporate brand name which appears to be the most important name when buyers make purchase decisions.

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