



Florida Red or Moody Blue: Study Looks at Appeal of Off-beat Product Names

Published : June 29, 2005 in [Knowledge@Wharton](#)

From Chubby Hubby ice cream to Trailer Park red nail polish, marketers using ambiguous or surprising descriptions for new flavors and colors are likely to win sales by making consumers go through the effort of understanding an off-beat name, according to recent Wharton research.

In a paper titled, "Shades of Meaning: The Effect of Color and Flavor Names on Consumer Choice" -- published in the current issue of the *Journal of Consumer Research* -- Wharton marketing professor [Barbara E. Kahn](#) and Elizabeth G. Miller, a marketing professor at Boston College, found that consumers react positively to imaginative names even if they are not particularly descriptive. The research may have strong implications for Internet marketers whose customers cannot see a product first-hand and tend to rely more on written descriptions when making purchases, says Kahn.



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In studies of jellybeans and colored sweaters, the researchers found an overall positive reaction to names that gave little information about what a flavor or product color was really like, such as Millennium orange or Snuggly white. "People jumped to the conclusion that the marketer must be telling this information for some reason," says Kahn. "They said, 'Even though I don't understand the reason, it has to be something good because marketers wouldn't tell me something that isn't good.' When they stopped and spent time on the name the assumption was that it was positive."

Kahn was drawn to a study of unusual product names when she began to notice nail polish being sold under color names -- such as Gunpowder -- that gave no information about what the polish would actually look like. Another example: the line of Gatorade Frost flavors that are sold with hard-to-imagine flavor names such as Glacier Freeze, Riptide Rush and Cascade Crash. Perhaps the ultimate in ambiguity, says Kahn, has been achieved by Crayola which uses names such as Razzmatazz and Tropical Rain Forest to describe crayons, which are nothing else if not a color. "With the nail polish there was something edgy or revolutionary," she says. "When Crayola comes out with names that don't describe the color of crayons, that is just astonishing."

Gauging the effects of such names on consumer behavior is hard because so many other variables come in to play. So Kahn and Miller constructed controlled experiments of product names that were divided into four categories: Common, which are typical or unspecific, such as dark green or light yellow; Common Descriptive, which are typical and specific, such as pine green or lemon yellow; Unexpected Descriptive, which are atypical, but specific such as Kermit green or Rainslicker yellow; and Ambiguous, which are atypical and unspecific, such as Friendly green or Party yellow.

In an initial experiment testing flavor names, 100 undergraduates were asked to complete an unrelated questionnaire on a computer. After finishing the questionnaire at the computer, the students were told they could take some jellybeans. The jellybeans were in six cups each with a sign attached listing the flavor. Half the subjects saw jellybean names that were common descriptives: blueberry blue, cherry red, chocolate brown, marshmallow white, tangerine orange and watermelon green. The other half saw flavors with ambiguous names: Moody blue, Florida red, Mississippi brown, white Ireland, Passion orange and Monster green. Researchers observed that the less common names were more popular.

As part of the experiment, some subjects were distracted by questions about the computer survey as they selected their jellybeans. In those cases, there was no preference for the unusually named flavors. That suggested that the decision to go with the less common name is a cognitive response indicating a person puts at least some thought into the decision.

To find out more about that process, the researchers set up additional experiments. For example, Kahn and Miller wanted to explore the way in which consumers make decisions by looking at two theories of communication. One, known as "conversational implicature," developed by British philosopher Paul Grice, suggests that people essentially want to cooperate with one another and adhere to certain unspoken rules in communication. When information is left out of a conversation, the theory states, people attempt to fill in the blanks to smooth the communication process.

Kahn uses this example to explain the theory: If A asks B where Dave is, and B replies that there is a yellow Volkswagen outside Susan's house, A will assume that Dave drives a yellow Volkswagen and is at Susan's house. Literally, the comment is a non-sequitor, but because A believes B's response is meant to be informative, A picks up the underlying message that Dave is at Susan's house.

The researchers also wanted to examine the effect of these product names in connection with incongruity theory. This theory argues that people make judgments by evaluating new encounters against existing expectations. When encounters are incongruent with prior expectations, individuals put in more effort to resolve the incongruity. "These theories need not be mutually exclusive," the paper says. "It is possible both these theories operate, but under different conditions."

In a second study, 60 undergraduates were asked to imagine they were ordering sweaters from a catalog and were presented with names of colors representing all four categories established for the research. "In this study, we find that ambiguous names are preferred to more common names," the authors write. "Although this preference appears to be partially driven by the novelty of the items, novelty alone is not enough - the lack of specificity matters, too. Unexpected-descriptive names were not preferred to common names while ambiguous names were." The results meshed with Grice's theory, but they did not rule out the incongruity theory was at work because there was a positive response for names that were atypical.

To get a better sense of the relationship between the two processes in the consumer's mind, the researchers set up another study of catalogue sweaters. In this experiment, 143 undergraduate participants were asked to select a sweater in a color fitting into one of the four types of names under study. Some were shown a color swatch before learning the color's name. Others saw the name first, then the color. After each participant picked a sweater, he or she was shown a full photograph of the item in the color selected and asked to rank how satisfied they were with their choice.

The survey found that showing a picture of the color before learning the name reduced satisfaction for those who saw ambiguous names, but increased satisfaction for those who saw atypical, but specific names. The order of presentation did not make a difference for those who saw common or typical-specific names.

"We find that the revelation of the color shade (through a picture of the color) prior to viewing the name decreases preference for ambiguous color names, but increases preference for unexpected descriptive color names," the paper states. "These results support the notion that when consumers encounter a surprising name (because it violates beliefs about informativeness), they engage in additional elaboration about the name to try to understand why it was provided. The type of elaboration will depend on how the name violates expectations: If the name is uninformative in a literal sense, consumers will engage in a Gricean process to determine the meaning of the communication; if the name is uninformative because it is atypical, consumers will search for the reason the particular adjective was selected as described by incongruity theory. The result of this additional elaboration is increased satisfaction with the product." Kahn says some consumers seem to enjoy figuring out the names and feel smart when an obscure, but

clever name clicks in their mind.

As the researchers note in their paper, "When consumers encounter an unfamiliar name which is counter to their expectation that the marketer would be providing a familiar name, they try to determine how the adjective describes the color/flavor. If they discover the connection, the consumer may congratulate himself for solving the problem, resulting in positive affect. The most positive affect should result when the name is mildly incongruent."

Although she did not test for it, Kahn says there is probably a point where strong incongruity would backfire, leaving consumers frustrated with meaningless names and leading to negative product response.

The research findings could have a strong impact on Internet and email marketing, where consumers are not quite sure they are seeing the real color on their computer and may attempt to infer more from the written name, according to Kahn. "The reason it works for Gatorade is because you really can't taste it there on the shelf. You have to read the words in the description."

Kahn says the use of odd names seems to work best in products that rely on the senses, such as food or fashion, and would probably not work in a high-stakes product category such as healthcare or financial services. And at some point, she says, the advantage of an odd or unexpected name will wear off. "Over time, people get used to it. I don't think people have this reaction to Gatorade Frost anymore," she says. "It isn't an effect that's going to last forever unless the company keeps coming up with new names."

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