

Does your company or brand have the right Chinese name?

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“A Er Pai Mai Rui De”, “Ai Bi Ai Mu Ge Lai Fen Be Ge”, “Ge Lin Ce Ba Ke”, “Ai Si Ta Ai Mu Si Nai Te”, “A Te La Si Ke Pu Ke”...

It doesn't only sound exotic to you; a Chinese businessperson or consumer would feel the same way too. The names above are just a few examples of Chinese names of European companies. They are pure phonetic translations of the European names and have absolutely no meaning in Chinese.

“To be given a bad name is worse than to be born with a bad fate.” – Cantonese proverb

Branding is extremely important in China due to fierce competition, relatively inexperienced consumers and generally untrustworthy quality standards. A famous brand boosts confidence, makes purchasing decisions easier and is considered a status symbol, even for business-to-business products.

A good company/brand name helps you establish and communicate your company or brand values. The name should be distinctive, memorable and relevant to either the brand image, product category or customer benefits. Or all of them. Brands with Chinese names are better accepted and more often searched in the internet. Besides, a Chinese name provides protection from copy cats.

Ways to generate a Chinese name

China's completely different linguistic system poses a challenge for Western companies seeking a proper Chinese name, for the company itself, its products, brands and even executives. There are thousands of characters and dozens of major dialects that have sometimes completely different pronunciations of the same written words.

There are many ways to generate a company or brand name for China:

1. No translation

There is no Chinese name! Examples: *IBM, 3M, ABB, Ralph Lauren*....

The major advantage of this approach is global consistency. No matter where you are, IBM is IBM. However, more resources are needed to build the recognition. Besides, Chinese people may find it hard to pronounce the names in foreign languages correctly: IBM becomes “Ai Bee Aimu”, and Ralph Lauren turns out to be “Lafu Laolen”. Or they invent their own Chinese name such as in the case of *CitiBank* – named as Flowery (colourful) Flag Bank (花旗银行) due to the American flag hoisting on its building. Citibank has adopted it officially.

This method is only recommended if the international name is short and easy to pronounce for Chinese people or the brand is already well established in China.

2. Pure phonetic translation

The examples cited at the beginning of this article belong to this category. Here are a few more examples:

International	Chinese	Pronunciation	Meaning (literal meaning of each single character)
McDonald's	麦当劳	Mai Dang Lao	Wheat, Equivalent, Labour
Motorola	摩托罗拉	Mo Tuo Ruo La	Motor (Mo+Tuo), collect, pull
Atlas Copco	阿特拉斯科普柯	A Te La Si Ke Pu Ke	-
Volvo	沃尔沃	Wo Er Wo	-
Siemens	西门子	Xi Men Zi	West, Door, Child

These exotic names project an imported image, which is usually positive in China. On the other hand, Chinese is more a visual than an auditory language, and such meaningless combinations of Chinese characters in the name often make it very difficult to be remembered. Nor do they communicate the company or brand values.

3. Phonetic translation with Chinese meanings

While the pronunciations of the Western name are taken into account, the Chinese characters also convey certain meaning, usually related to the brand proposition. For example:

International	Chinese	Pronunciation	Meaning
Hewlett-Packard	惠普	Hui Pu	Benefit, popular
Berndorf	百德福	Bai De Fu	Hundred virtues and blessings
Bosch	博世	Bo Shi	Extensive world
Ikea	宜家	Yi Jia (Cantonese: Yi Ga)	Suitable (comfortable) home

Such names are easy to accept and remember. They also help to communicate the brand attributes and values. Through the pronunciation similarity with the original Western name, a certain degree of global consistency can be maintained. However, it is probably the most challenging way to develop a Chinese name.

4. Semantic translation

The names are translated literally, without considering the pronunciation.

International	Chinese	Pronunciation	Meaning
Volkswagen	大众汽车	Da Zhong Qi Che	People's car
General Electric	通用电气	Tong Yong Dian Qi	General Electric
VOEST	奥钢联	Ao Gang Lian	Austrian Steel Union
Shell	壳牌	Ke Pai	Shell brand
Microsoft	微软	Wei Ruan	Micro Soft

Chinese brand or company names translated this way are easy to remember. They maintain the global branding even though the pronunciations differ. The challenge is: most Western brands or company names cannot be semantically translated.

5. Unrelated

The Chinese name is "invented". It has neither a phonetic nor a semantic relationship to the original Western name.

International	Chinese	Pronunciation	Meaning
Citi Bank	花旗银行	Hua Qi Yin Hang	Flowery (colourful) flag bank (historical reasons, see 1.)
Julius Meinl (coffee)	小红帽	Xiao Hong Mao	Little red hat (referring the logo)
Continental (tyres)	德国马牌	De Guo Ma Pai	German Horse Brand (referring to the logo)

These names can be easily remembered and can be chosen according to the brand positioning. However, they are not related to the original (global) names.

6. Combination

Some companies combine two or more translation methods in one name, e.g.:

International	Chinese	Pronunciation	Meaning
Unilever	联合利华	Lian-He Li-Hua	United (semantic), Benefit, China (phonetic with meaning)
Standard & Poor's	标准普尔	Biao-Zhun Pu-Er	Standard (semantic), Pu-Er (purely phonetic)

These Chinese names can be easily remembered and, at the same time, phonetically resemble the original names. They are not common because most western brand names cannot be translated in this way.

The right Chinese name – in different dialects

Even though there is only one written Chinese language (two writing systems – simplified and traditional), there are many spoken dialects. Some of them sound completely different from the official spoken dialect, Mandarin (or Putonghua). Therefore, before you finalise your Chinese name, ensure it does not have negative connotations in a major dialect. For example, **Peugeot's** Chinese name is "标致" (**Biao Zhi** – handsome), but in southern China, it sounds like "婊子" (Biao Zi – prostitute). **Volvo** has a purely phonetic translation of the brand – "沃尔沃" (**Wo Er Wo**). However, the Cantonese pronunciation is completely different: "Yuk Yi Yuk", which is almost a tongue twister.

Developing the perfect Chinese names for companies or brands

Many European companies ask their employees or lawyers in China to find the Chinese name. The results are often less than optimal. Even Google's Chinese name (谷歌 Gu Ge – Grain Song) was developed by their employees and it was considered strange and unsophisticated.

A good Chinese name is not a guarantee of success, but it could make brand building easier, especially for new brands on the market. That's why companies should consult internal or external experts with both language and marketing skills to develop their Chinese brand names.

About Zentron Consulting

Zentron Consulting specialises in b2b marketing services in China. The Austrian consultancy supports European companies who want to establish or expand their presence in China.

The founders, Janet Mo and Wolfgang Gastner, have more than 20 years of practical marketing and engineering experience in China and Europe.

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