



IF YOU WANT TO OPEN A COFFEE SHOP IN SEATTLE, YOU SHOULDN'T NAME IT CAFFÉ VITRIA...

I love double-tall lattes.

To the uninitiated, that's two shots of espresso and twelve ounces of steamed milk. I drink two or more lattes almost every day, and I feel fortunate to have so many wonderful Seattle coffee shops (let's be fancy and call them cafés) to choose from to feed my addiction.

There is *Starbucks*, *Tully's*, *Seattle's Best Coffee* ...just kidding. Did you really think I was going to write an ode to *Starbucks* or anything with "Seattle" in the name? You poor, deprived thing; how can we save you from a life of depressing provincialism? *Starbucks* may be internationally symbolic of our lovely city, but no true Seattle espresso aficionado would dare make *Starbucks* a daily hangout. Just as Starbuck tried to stop Ahab's hunt for the great white whale, let's not let his corporate spawn stop us from enjoying the many alternatives our lovely city offers us for refined recreational stimulants.

I get my caffeine fix from many of the amazing, not-quite-as-internationally-known proprietors of espresso here in Seattle, with names like *Vivace*, *Victrola*, *Vita* and *Verite*. Yes, that's right, *Starbucks* has mastered the art of selling you a branded experience with a splash of ugly muted green, but it leaves the top-notch crafting of espresso beverages in Seattle to the Killer V's. In fact, if you could only tell them apart, perhaps we would be saved from the Starbucksization of Middle America. It took me nearly three years, but I am finally able to create a mental map matching the names of the V-café to their locations.

My point: many of our local coffee shop entrepreneurs may be constantly hopped up on espresso, but not enough to keep them from falling asleep at the wheel when it came to naming the business.

After all, naming is an important branding tool that can make or break a business. If you do it right, your company name is appropriately evocative and nestles beneath the conscious level of your customers' minds to distinguish your business from its competition. If you do it wrong, your business name may be bland, wishy-washy or worse, confusing to customers in a way that clearly costs you business. The cost of confusion may be particularly high from a legal perspective, where a bad name can spur expensive trademark litigation by being "confusingly similar" to the names of related businesses.

In my opinion, good naming is often a function of "zigging" when everybody else is "zagging". A good name creates its own uniquely cozy little compartment in the minds of your unsuspecting customers, and to be unique it must be distinguishable from names chosen by your competitors.

Since what's "good" about a name is definitely relative to what else exists in the marketplace, a salient problem with naming is that people tend to exercise creativity in very similar ways. For example, take hair salon puns; *Curl Up and Dye* might be a very funny name, but it would be more memorable if it wasn't competing with *To Dye For* down the street. Because so many hair salons use hair puns, our minds compartmentalize them similarly and thus hair puns are not individually memorable to most of us. Not convinced? While we are on the salon topic, I can't decide if local salon proprietors Gary Manuel and Gene Juarez want to be Paul Mitchell, Vidal Sassoon or each other, but back to espresso before someone utters the four-letter word "metrosexual".

Good naming is a subjective endeavor, no doubt...but not so subjective that we can't apply some principles to it and have fun deconstructing existing names. Let's take a closer look at the names of some of Seattle's cafés to find out what separates the bad from the bold from the beautiful. Please allow for some bias here -- I don't expect full agreement on the strengths and weaknesses of these names, but I hope to illustrate some general naming pitfalls and good practices through this analysis.

The bad...

Zoka Coffee: what's a Zoka? I don't know, but it doesn't sound very nice. This popular UW hangout features, umm...the 2005 United States Barista Champion, but if that doesn't confuse you, it also features a phonetically unpleasant, abstract name. Abstract names are generally more difficult to remember than names with concrete referents. In other words, our subconscious minds anchor words to physical objects that we can mentally envision to remember them better; *Zoka* is a good example of this phenomenon at work to the detriment of the business – it's too abstract and frankly not very phonetically pleasant. To be fair, some points must be granted for the fact that the name is short and easy to spell, which are positive characteristics for names, it's just that *Zoka* is not particularly pleasant or memorable.

Verité Coffee: Since I have already started two businesses with the prefix *Veri*, which means "truth" in Latin, you would think I would have a special place in my heart for *Verité* coffee. Indeed, I have reserved a special place in my stomach for their delicious but pricy \$2 cupcakes, but I have to wonder why they chose this name in a city with a *Vita*, *Vivacé* and *Victrola* already siphoning from the espresso trough. This is a classic case of a naming rationale that sounds good on paper (i.e. from their website..."*Verité* is about truth in coffee") but ultimately is the coffee equivalent of *To Dye For*. The name simply does not have enough distinguishing itself from what already exists in the marketplace, and since they came after the aforementioned three, I am singling them out for a slap on the wrist.

Caffé Vita, *Espresso Vivacé Roastaria* and *Victrola Coffee and Art*: I used their full names to illustrate a point about naming – people tend to shorten names to make them easier to remember. As expressed above, the holy trinity of Seattle V cafés does not seem *that*

confusing, but *Vita*, *Vivacé* and *Victrola* are how people will most typically refer to these cafés, and people get very, very vexed trying to keep them separate in their minds.

The better...

Caffé Ladro: Regardless of what I think about their bitter yet popular espresso concoctions, I won't deny that *Ladro* has a distinctive and memorable name; it's short and rolls off the tongue nicely, and although it is a little too abstract, to their credit, it's easy to mentally envision one saying "Let's meet at *Ladro*". Of course, *Ladro* made a tragic and unnecessary mistake by adding an "f" to café (especially since it suggests an extra "l" in ladro, like llama), but I doubt that it causes too many problems since people summarily ignore the "f" except that it adds to the inconvenience of trying to find this café on the internet. Moreover, it looks like an internet squatter lapped up *cafeladro.com* like foam on a well made cappuccino, but a good trademark attorney can probably fix this problem.

Uptown Espresso: Vaguely reminiscent of Billy Joel, and hopefully I'm not the only one who finds this unpleasant, but *Uptown Espresso* was at least smart to stop one letter before the dreaded "V". The name is neither too outrageous nor distinctive. It is suggestive of a neighborhood hangout (doesn't every urban area have an uptown?), which is what I think they were going for, even as they have expanded to many parts of the city. By the way, I'll argue for the superiority of "Uptown" over "Lower Queen Anne" for the brand name of my 'hood in another article.

The Online Coffee Company: This café gets utilitarian points for occupying my headspace when I ask myself "where do I go to get espresso and internet access?". Especially since it appears to be marketing toward a walk-in crowd (if not exclusively), I think the straightforward naming approach benefits the *Online Coffee Co.*, but this descriptive name is also a double-edged sword. Names that are too descriptive can never be distinctive enough to create a really strong brand. Almost every company's first instinct is to choose a descriptive name, but this choice ultimately handicaps a company because consumers will meld the brand with the product category in their minds.

The Online Coffee Co. also loses points lack of appropriate shorthand ("Let's meet at Online" doesn't quite roll off the tongue), but I want to at least give them credit for winning the coveted *Stranger* award for the hottest baristas every year. You can read into the marketing implications of this phenomenon on your own dime!

The bold...

Coffee Messiah: *Coffee Messiah* is now extinct, having gone out of business for reasons I do not know, but I think they are worthy of inclusion anyway. Calling yourself the messiah is a fearless marketing move; it's a playful way of suggesting you are the best, while also signalling that you welcome those with an edge. Irreverently mocking religious taboo pretty much assures that pious sorts, soccer moms and people who wear Dockers and boat shoes will stay

away, but it also assures that people with a lot of angst, piercings, and tats will mark this as a prime hangout spot, and last I checked there was a lot of angst swirling around our lovely city. I was too scared to go into *Coffee Messiah*, even though it probably was manned by a bunch of vegans, but it speaks clearly to a niche market in Seattle. I'm not sure that this name would play as well in Wichita, but the next time I am in Wichita, I may actually be grateful that there is a *Starbucks* around.

Bauhaus Coffee & Books: Bauhaus is a German word that means, roughly, the collision of art and technology (it was originally an architectural school of thought). Even if you had no idea what it means, the word probably evokes something like detached artiness in your mind; in other words, it evokes an image that is appealing to the demographic that many cafés compete for, and in this sense it's a winner.

Zeitgeist Coffee. Zeitgeist is another German word; it means "the spirit of the time". It shares much of the appeal of *Bauhaus*. However, unlike Bauhaus, this concept was not already taken by a goth band or an architectural school, which makes this whimsical and suggestive name even more of a winner. I could be demonstrating some bias here, since I capture the zeitgeist almost every afternoon; it is only a couple of blocks from my Pioneer Square office and I frequent it.

The beautiful...

Top Pot Doughnuts: Is *Top Pot Doughnuts* a café? Let's not quibble. To me, *Top Pot* represents "the little engine that could", whether among coffee shop or donut shop names. Its short and simple name isn't overwhelming, and you probably don't think that this is the name to carry those toys through the impassable mountain to all the good little boys and girls, but its simplicity is deceptive. *Top Pot* is almost perfect as a name; it features an obvious playfulness that makes it as desirable as it is memorable for a café. And could it be any easier to remember? It's a palindrome, after all (which gives it a symmetry that sticks in the mind). It's hard to find fault with *Top Pot*, since it is also short, easy to spell and has a concrete referant. I just hope they will give me a t-shirt (or a free doughnut) for pointing this out. Can you top *Top Pot*? Not in my opinion.

Danny Bronski is a trademark attorney and archchair naming consultant in Pioneer Square. He spends most of his discretionary income on double tall lattes and thus feels like his opinion matters. He hopes you didn't need two shots of espresso to get through this article.