How to Create an Effective Chinese Translation of a Western Business Name

The Qualities of a Good Business Name

Philip Kotler, the world renowned marketing guru, once pointed out “the desirable qualities for a brand name are:

1. It should suggest something about the product’s benefits. Examples: Coldspot, Beautyrest, Craftsman, Accutron.

2. It should suggest product qualities such as action or color. Examples: Duz, Sunkist, Spic and Span, Firebird.

3. It should be easy to pronounce, recognize, and remember. Short names help. Examples: Tide, Crest, Puffs.

4. It should be distinctive. Examples: Mustang, Kodak, Exxon.

5. It should not carry poor meanings in other countries and languages. Example: Nova is a poor name for a car to be sold in Spanish-speaking countries; it means “doesn’t work.”

JJW Group, based on our years of experience in helping western companies to set up businesses in China, would argue that if a western firm is planning to launch a consumer business in China, the Chinese translation of the original business name (including the company name, brand name, and product name) should not only carry no “poor meanings”, they should also posses some of the other desirable qualities mentioned above.

The Needs for Good Chinese Translation

There are a number of important reasons as to why a western firm has to develop a good Chinese translation for its business name:

1. **The Chinese customers demand a Chinese name.** It is important to point out that the overwhelming majority of the Chinese population living in mainland China (including some highly educated professionals living in tier one cities such as Shanghai and Beijing) do NOT read English and the Chinese translation will be...
the only name by which most Chinese (including customers, business partners, and people from the Chinese press) refer to a western firm’s corporate/brand/product name. So in China, the Chinese translation is as important as the original name in English (or any other western languages).

2. The Chinese literary norm and tradition calls for a Chinese name. While it is possible for one, in an informal setting, to mix words in English (or other western languages) with Chinese, all formal writings in Chinese (including legal documents and media reports) typically do not contain words written in other languages. There are a few exceptions. Short abbreviations (e.g. the US IT giant’s name IBM) do often appear in formal Chinese writings. Also, some short scientific terms are also acceptable (e.g. x-ray in formal Chinese writings is sometimes translated as “x 光” and the character “光” means “light” or “ray”).

3. Chinese laws also require all foreign companies registered in China to have an official Chinese name. The recent landmark legal victory of the US coffee house chain Starbucks in China was hinged upon a Chinese company’s alleged “illegal use of the US company’s registered Chinese name, Xingbake or “星巴克” in Chinese characters.

4. A casual Chinese translation can hurt a western company’s brand image. Some western companies still appear to be unwilling to “go through the trouble” of developing or registering an official Chinese name. This lack of an official Chinese name may force some Chinese journalists and/or other writers to translate some western business names on their own. Naturally, these translations would not necessarily be done with much consideration for the western company’s brand image. We noticed that the name of the US leading internet search company, Google had been referred in the Chinese press as “古狗”. The two characters are pronounced fairly closely to the word Google; but fortunately or unfortunately, these two characters also mean “ancient dogs”. (Maybe, the Silicon Valley engineers in black t-shirts like to be called “ancient dogs”. One just never knows!)

The Translation Challenges

There are a couple of special challenges associated with translating a business name from a western language into Chinese:
1. **Chinese is a character-based pictographic language.** Everything in Chinese is written in characters. So generally speaking, when a western business name is translated into Chinese, the translated name will have to lose its original western alphabet format. (Japanese and Korean names do not have the same issue since both of these languages tend to use Chinese characters with proper names3.) For example, Yahoo is the English name of another major US internet search company and the name is still Yahoo in French or German (maybe pronounced slightly differently by native French and German speakers). But Yahoo in China is called “雅虎”. These two Chinese characters are pronounced very similarly to the word Yahoo. **It is important for a western firm to realize that all individual Chinese characters have meanings.** A translation purely based on pronunciation can sometimes lead to the use of Chinese characters that do “carry poor meanings” in the Chinese cultural context. Luckily, the Chinese translation of Yahoo actually carries a fairly positive meaning in Chinese: it roughly means “graceful tigers”. (Maybe, the Chinese heritage of Jerry Yang, one of the founders of Yahoo, was helpful to the company’s efforts in selecting the appropriate characters for its name).

2. **Many cultural differences also make it tough to translate a business name.** When addressing cultural differences, some international business executives like to focus their attention on a few well-known differences rooted in some long-term Chinese traditions. For example, some western business people like to talk about Chinese people’s infatuation with dragons or their love affair with the number “eight”. (Eight in Chinese has a very similar pronunciation of “发 “a character that can mean “to prosper”.) We believe that recognizing these cultural factors are important. But our long-term direct observations in mainland China also suggest that the country’s decades of isolation from the western world have created some fairly unique cultural barriers. To us, understanding these barriers can at times be far more meaningful than understanding things such as “the magic of the number eight”. Consider the following example. A casual Italian restaurant located in a high end hotel in Beijing is called Trattoria La Gondola. But for decades, there were virtually no Italian restaurants (or any other authentic western restaurants) in China and very few Chinese citizens had ever visited Italy. Even now, the overwhelming majority of the Chinese living in mainland China would have no clue as to what a gondola is. Obviously, the hotel/restaurant operator recognized the barrier. While the management decided to retain the original western name, possibly to attract the hotel’s international guests, they also created a separate Chinese name appropriate for the Chinese customers. The name is "意大利威尼斯餐厅 (which means Italian Café from Venice, a less romantic but highly functional name).
The Basic Translation Methods

For the past 200 years or so, western names have been translated into Chinese with many different approaches. We believe the following five have probably been the most popular methods.

1. **Strictly pronunciation-based translation.** This has been the prevalent way of translation in mainland China during the time period between 1949 (the year during which the communists came into power) all the way to about 10 years ago. So most foreign proper names (people, places, businesses, etc) would be translated with the Chinese characters that have the closest pronunciation (even though these characters, when put together, may not mean anything or, worse, have negative connotations.)

2. **Verbatim/literal translation.** With this approach, everything that has a meaning in the foreign name will be translated. For example, the country name of Iceland is translated into “Bing Dao” or “冰岛” in characters. The character “冰” means “ice” and “岛” island.

3. **Traditional translation that is neither pronunciation based nor literal.** Many traditional western names that got introduced to China 100-200 years ago have been translated this way. For example, the official Chinese translation of Remy Martin (the French cognac) is “Ren Tou Ma” or “人头马” (meaning a horse with a human head, for an obvious reason, of course).

4. **Functional translation.** With this approach, one will try to translate the meaning behind the name. In a way this is the similar to the verbatim/literal approach. But the difference here is that the Chinese translation can completely depart from the specific words used in the original name. The Chinese translation for the Italian restaurant Trattoria La Gondola discussed in “the translation challenges” section above falls into this category.

5. **Hybrid approach.** This approach has been heavily used in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Now this translation technique also seems to be gaining momentum in the mainland. We also noticed that this approach has produced many Chinese business names that possess some of the desirable qualities a good business name should have (e.g. conveying the benefits of the products, and etc.) With this method, a foreign business name is first translated based on pronunciation; but when it is possible, the Chinese characters would also be chosen to convey some positively meaningful messages. Obviously, the closeness in pronunciation may have to be compromised a bit. One of the most well-known examples is Coca Cola, which is “Keko Kele” or “可口可乐” in Chinese. Although the characters do not sound too close to Coca Cola, yet they...
can roughly mean “tasty and pleasant.” Another example is Mercedes-Benz of which the official Chinese name in mainland China is “Benchí” or “奔驰” (which does sounds quite different from Benz) but the name mean “galloping or running at great speed.”

Also, we need to point out that there are some variations from these five basic translation methods. For example, as we eluded above the Chinese name of the US coffee house chain Starbucks is “Xíngbāi” or “星巴克”. “星” (“xing”) means star in Chinese and “巴克” (“bake”) sounds like “buck”. Many Chinese people we spoke with in Shanghai and Beijing love this Chinese name as it is short, easy to remember, and quite distinctive.

The Recommended Approach

It is clear to create an effective Chinese translation of a western business name can get complicated. But we believe that for a western business serious about the China market, translating its name into proper Chinese is a must. Based on our experience, we believe that following the process below can be helpful:

1. The first thing a western company needs to do is to conduct a quick “culture due diligence” to make sure that there are no cultural issues with the original name in English (or other western languages). If the original name has any cultural issues, then the company may need to consider the functional approach discussed above. Since the functional approach can mean to create a completely separate Chinese name, the entire process may take some time.

2. If the original name does not have any cultural issues, then we would strongly recommend the hybrid approach. As mentioned, this approach has created a number of powerful business names in Chinese. In the appendix of this report, we list a number of successful Chinese business names created with this approach.

3. After a company decides to follow the hybrid approach, we believe it is crucial for them to bring to the process one or several individuals who have a native understanding of the Chinese language. One may want to first develop several translation versions, then a brainstorming session or two can help to make the final selection of the Chinese name. We want to point out that Chinese is a highly prolific language with tens of thousands of characters with multiple meanings. While we believe this approach requires native Chinese speakers,
we do not think a western company necessarily needs to hire language experts to do this kind of translation.

Footnotes:

2. Google launched its official Chinese name in mid 2006. The official name 谷歌 (pronounced as gu ge in Pinyin), which can mean harvest song, is viewed by many as a big improvement from “ancient dogs” although it was reported that many internet users remained unimpressed with the new Chinese name.
3. Proper Japanese and Korean names tend to be written in Chinese characters. And these characters also tend to carry similar meanings in all three languages. As a result, Japanese/Korean names often do not really need to be translated into Chinese although the characters are typically pronounced differently in three languages. For example, the Japanese name of Honda is 丰田. So Honda in China is also known as 丰田 (the pronunciation of which is “feng tian” in Chinese).
APPENDIX-A LIST OF WESTERN BUSINESS NAMES AND THEIR CHINESE TRANSLATIONS (TRANSLATED WITH THE HYBRID APPROACH)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original English/Western Names</th>
<th>Chinese Translations</th>
<th>Pronunciation (in Pinyin System) of Chinese Translations</th>
<th>Meaning of Chinese Translations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BMW</td>
<td>宝马</td>
<td>bao ma</td>
<td>precious horses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coca Cola</td>
<td>可口可乐</td>
<td>ke kou ke le</td>
<td>tasty and pleasant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goldman Sachs</td>
<td>高盛</td>
<td>gao sheng</td>
<td>&quot;gao&quot; (&quot;高&quot;) can be a Chinese surname, it also means tall/high; &quot;sheng&quot; (&quot;盛&quot;) means &quot;flourishing&quot; and &quot;prosperous&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hewlett Packard</td>
<td>惠普</td>
<td>hui pu</td>
<td>to benefit the universe, or to benefit people widely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huggies</td>
<td>好奇</td>
<td>hao qi</td>
<td>curious, or curiosity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IKEA</td>
<td>宜家</td>
<td>yi jia</td>
<td>pleasant homes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercedes-Benz</td>
<td>奔驰</td>
<td>ben chi</td>
<td>galloping or running at great speed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P&amp;G</td>
<td>宝洁</td>
<td>bao jie</td>
<td>precious and clean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pepsi Cola</td>
<td>百事可乐</td>
<td>bai shi ke le</td>
<td>everything pleasant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peugeot</td>
<td>标致</td>
<td>biaozhi</td>
<td>beautiful, handsome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pizza Hut</td>
<td>必胜客</td>
<td>bi sheng ke</td>
<td>victorious guests/customers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualcomm</td>
<td>高通</td>
<td>gao tong</td>
<td>&quot;gao&quot; (&quot;高&quot;) can be a Chinese surname, it also means tall/high; &quot;tong&quot; (&quot;通&quot;) means communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yahoo</td>
<td>雅虎</td>
<td>ya hu</td>
<td>graceful tigers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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ABOUT JJW GROUP

JJW Group, LLC is an international business advisory firm based in Shanghai, China and Los Angeles, CA. Our mission is to help international companies to successfully pursue major business initiatives pertaining to China. We collaborate with our clients to create and implement strategies in multiple areas, including:

- Market Entry
- Sales Strategy & Distribution Strategy
- Sourcing & Supply Chain Management
- Recruiting & HR Support
- Business Due Diligence

We are committed to providing customized and results-oriented solutions to our clients.

With years of management experience gained from many world class international companies, coupled with a deep understanding of China, we aspire to become a leader in the China business consulting arena.

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