

**NAMES FOR MATERIALS:
LETTING THE PRODUCT SPEAK FOR ITSELF**

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1. Introduction.

Names for materials, like VELCRO, TEFLON, TYVEK, and TREX, represent some of the triumphs of trademark lore. These names apply to materials that permeate our daily surroundings and that are the “fabrics of our lives,” such as textiles, building products, coating and binding substances, and other functional materials.

This paper analyzes materials’ names, mostly famous ones, and explores their meaning and construction. In so doing, it suggests techniques for developing names for materials, particularly fanciful names (i.e., names not being words in any dictionary) and discusses important issues in naming such products, such as genericide (i.e., becoming generic) and semantic positioning (i.e., positioning the name semantically in relation to names of competing products). Some names mentioned, like NYLON and RAYON, were coined as generic terms (i.e., as the common name of the material rather than as a trademarked name), and others, like CELLOPHANE and LINOLEUM, were once trademarked but became generic. But well-coined, popular generic names provide guidance in developing distinctive brand names, and trademarked names that became generic are often excellent examples of effective trademarks which were lost because of uncontrolled usage or inadequate legal protection.

Most great names for materials have one element in common: Semantically they embody the product’s essence because their constituent morphemes (i.e., units of meaning) and individual letters reflect the product’s appearance, characteristics, or functions, though not obviously so. Such a name lets the product “speak for itself.” The following brief analysis of famous names for materials show how they are constructed.

2. Some Famous Material Names

First, consider VELCRO, comprised of (1) VEL which connotes a flexible material, as in VELOUR, VELLUM, or VELVET; (2) the CR sound connotes the gripping or hooking function as exemplified in words like CROCHET, CRIMP, or CRUNCH, or closely resembling the GR sound of GRIP or GRASP; and (3) the O ending, masculine in most Romance languages, which is congruent with a functional product in contrast to the more feminine A ending, as in VELCRA, which would connote a fiber like LYCRA. In its entirety, CRO is reminiscent of CROCHET, or hooking. This intuitive name is so strong that it still dominates the hook-and-loop technology market long after patent expiration.

TEFLON is slightly easier to understand. Though few would suspect that it was extracted from its chemical name polyTEtraFLuoroethyleNe, it connotes a TOUGH

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(TEF) flat material (LON), as in NYLON, ORLON, etc. (TUFCOAT or even TUFLOX would have been more obvious and thus weaker.)

TYVEK, for a material used in packaging and as a wrapping in construction projects, connotes TYING (TY) in relation to its binding or wrapping uses. The medial V connotes flexibility, and the ending K reflects strength. (TYVON would have been viable to express the covering function of this flat material for construction projects, in which case the mark would have been TY and ON separated by a V.)

CELLOPHANE, now generic, is also a masterpiece. CELLO is a reflection of CELLULOSE, the constituent raw material, while P(H)ANE connotes the material's flat, clear nature. (PHANEROS means “visible” in Greek.)

PLEXIGLAS, like CELLOPHANE, is another example of more apparent meaning. GLAS obviously connotes the clarity and function of GLASS, while PLEXI emanates PLASTIC(ITY) of function and use. (Compare PERSPEX, the UK equivalent.)

FORMICA is a nicely telescoped word comprised of FORM and MICA, the M serving a dual function. MICA suggests a flat, smooth surface as per sheet mica, while FORM suggests the product's use in geometric-shaped articles.

STYROFOAM consists of STYRO from the product's chemical origin, polystyrenes, plus FOAM which evokes the material's usually white foamy appearance.

LUCITE is derived from the Latin “lucere” meaning “to shine” or “to be clear” with the addition of the ITE suffix connoting a hard material, perfect for this acrylic glass product.

3. Techniques

As with most product naming, before playing with alphabet letters, the trademark developer must first experience the material by sight, touch, and even smell and must be familiar with all aspects of its composition, manufacture, and use. Such familiarity not only provides sounds and morphemes which can be woven into the name but also provides the feelings and associations required for an intuitive approach to the name, as discussed below. Also, as with most naming assignments, the developer must become familiar with competitive product names, both to avoid conflicts and to generate naming approaches.

The simplest technique of creating a name is merely to rework or adapt the product's or its function's generic name. This technique may produce the least imaginative names but not necessarily the least effective. TWEED (generic) from the Scottish word TWEEL, meaning twill, connotes the twisting and twining of a fabric. The ending D perfectly expresses the density and sturdiness of the wool fabric and its relatively unfinished surface. (A harder consonant like K or T—forgetting that TWEED or TWEET would mimic inappropriate words—would not have been right.) Compare BONDO, just one letter away from BOND, its key function, similar in construction to TIMEX, SPEEDO, and JELL-O. Also compare SPANDEX (generic), an anagram of EXPANDS, which suggests the material's elasticity.

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To develop the right name from scratch without reworking the material's generic name, knowledge of semantics and of sound symbolism (aka phonosemantics) is helpful. In particular, devising a material's name requires knowledge of applicable morphemes and the connotations of individual letters, as well as the ability to combine the right morphemes and letters into a word that captures the essence of the material.

Suffixes play a crucial role in expressing the essence of a material. Certain suffixes and ending morphemes have established uses. E.g., as a suffix ITE connotes a hard, sometimes rigid, material as in LUCITE (acrylic glass) and LEXITE (wood substitute composites). Adding an L to ITE and using LITE as the suffix, as in KENLITE (lightweight structural concrete) and THERMOLITE (lightweight fabric), may connote a lighter substance, and perhaps may also emanate a tinge of ecological green. EX frequently connotes a flexible material as in SPANDEX and OREX (lightweight degradable fabric); and adding a T to get TEX obviously connotes a textile as in GORE-TEX and ANSO-TEX (nylon fabric). TEC/TEK/TECH, on the other hand, clearly indicates a high tech material, as in POLARTEC and RHINOTEK (high tech abrasion-resistant fabric). ON, as in DACRON (synthetic polyester fabric) and RAYON, and particularly with an added L as in NYLON and ORLON (acrylic fiber), connotes a soft, flat material. COR(E) connotes a firm material used to create solid objects, as per GRIDCORE (compressed cellulose fiber substituting for wood and other solid construction materials) and DORCOR (non-metal composite panels used for construction). Frequently a UM ending connotes a solid material, perhaps mimicking the names of solid elements, like ALUMINUM, CALCIUM and LITHIUM. Examples are LINOLEUM originally derived from linseed oil (LIN for linseed and OLE mimicking oil, as per "elaion," Greek for oil) and BORIUM (hard metal alloy used for drilling, boring, etc.).

Similarly, various prefixes have somewhat obvious connotations, like CEL(L), connoting CELLULOSE as in CELLOPHANE; STYRO, indicating POLYSTYRENE as in STYROFOAM; THERM, connoting heat as in THERMORE (high tech insulation material); POLAR, connoting cold as in POLARGUARD (continuous filament polyester); and LIN, connoting LINSEED as in LINOLEUM and even the generic LINEN.

Infrequently the operative morpheme appears in the name's middle, as per LAN appearing in CASLANA (a washable wool fabric) and LAST appearing in the middle of DORLASTAN (durable and stretchable fiber).

Ending, beginning, and even medial individual letters also have roles to play. Some letters, however, are much more frequently employed than others, and the effective choices for letter usage, particularly in a fanciful name, are sometimes quite limited.

Starting first with ending letters, ending vowels are typically limited to A, O, or a silent E as in NEOPRENE, LYCRA, FORMICA, BONDO, and DOLOMITE (generic). Few, if any, famous materials' names end in a U or I. Ending consonants are typically N (often connoting a flexible flat material like NYLON, RAYON, and DACRON); M (similar connotations to N but with more firmness or solidity, as per LINOLEUM and STYROFOAM); X (connoting flexibility or plasticity as per SPANDEX and TREX); C or K (connoting firmness and strength, as per TYVEK and

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SHEETROCK (drywall), D (connoting denseness and solidity, such as TWEED and CELBOND (bio-component staple fibers), and R (connoting flexibility and strength, as in KEVLAR (aramid fiber) and MYLAR (polyester film)). One is hard pressed to recite famous names for materials ending in a B, F, J, P, Q, S, V, W or Z.

Similarly, medial letters have their own functions. For instance, V adds an element of smoothness or flexibility as in TYVEK and KEVLAR; K and hard C add a feeling of strength as in DACRON and COCONA (fibers and yarns).

The choice of first letters may also be somewhat limited but not nearly as limited as that for last letters, so it's easier to list the infrequently used first letters in famous materials' names rather than the frequently used. W is probably too weak and wispy to start a materials name. B may be too boisterous to start a fabric name (though suitable for harder materials). J and K are also seldom used, the same with Q, X, Y, and Z. Moreover, vowels are generally not the best first letters since they express the free flow of air and energy in contrast to consonants which reflect the constricted, structured flow of air and energy and are more appropriate as first letters of materials' names. (A number of fiber and fabric names, however, begin with A, like ARAMID (generic) and ANTRON (carpet fiber), and several begin with an E, like EPIC and ESP.) Plosive consonants (consonants sounded with a sudden release of air, namely B, D, G, K, P, T, and the hard C), particularly those expressing focused energy, are the best first letters for materials which are characterized by strength and durability, e.g., C as in CORDUROY (generic), K as in KEVLAR, P as in POLARTEC, and T as in TEFLON.

To see how analytic selection might proceed, letter by letter, the naming process yielding NYLON is instructive. NORUN, a combination of two obvious morphemes, NO and RUN, was the first choice leading toward NYLON but was discarded because stockings made from the material *would* run. The next choice involved changing NORUN's O to a U to get NURON, but that sounded too neurological, perhaps like a nerve tonic. So the R in NURON was changed to an L to get NULON; however, NULON was too close to an existing trademark and would have resulted in tautological phraseology like NEW NULON (and NULON would have been as obvious as TUFLON instead of TEFLON). Thus, the U in NULON was changed to an I to arrive at NILON, but that variation had three possible pronunciations: NILLON, NEELON, or NIGHLON. Therefore, the I was changed to the more distinctive Y to finally yield NYLON. (See THE NYLON DRAMA by D. A. Hounshell and J. K. Smith, Jr.)

We have seen how some letters have more or fewer uses in materials' names. But can other typographical symbols, especially numbers, play any role, as in other product areas, e.g., PRODUCT 19, CHANEL NO. 5, WD-40, 4711, MOTEL 6, and 37SIGNALS? The answer is generally no, unless a number is used to designate a variety of the material. Since the goal of naming a material is often to establish a designation which dominates a field and possesses some universality, using a number as a prefix, suffix, or adjunct, detracts from the name's universality. And there are few, if any, famous materials' names comprised only of numbers (as per 4711 cologne or 501 jeans). Using PLEXIGLAS 17 instead of PLEXIGLAS is a weaker usage. Perhaps a construction like WD-40 (derived from the 40th attempt to devise a "water-displacement" product) would be possible but also would not have the same

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universality as a non-numerical name like VELCRO, TEFLON, or SPANDEX. However, there are some practical uses for numbers, e.g., in high tech materials, so one can occasionally find product names like WR100X (highly processed water-resistant leather fabric).

A common technique to derive a strong name is to begin the word with a morpheme that connotes the material's origins or functions and end the word with a morpheme, letter or suffix that gives an impression about the product's physical qualities. Examples are LINOLEUM, SHEETROCK, STYROFOAM, and CELLOPHANE. Occasionally the reverse order suffices, and the material's origin or function comes at the end, as with PLEXIGLAS and SHELLAC (SHELL + LAC(QUER)) (generic). However, regardless of the order of expression, the name usually has enough components to give an impression of the material, without being obviously descriptive (i.e., describing the product, its functions or characteristics, as TASTY is descriptive of food products). This is why famous materials' names are seldom one syllable, and those that are, like TREX (almost evoking T. Rex) and MAPP (Merino wool fabric), are often somewhat fanciful with the aim of making the name almost synonymous with the product without becoming generic. Yet, at the other extreme, materials' names with four or more syllables (at least one-word names), like LINOLEUM and REZILLION (durable, multipurpose fabric), are typically a mouthful of sounds and are almost as uncommon as their one-syllable cousins. Thus, the great majority of materials' names contain two or three syllables.

Of course, pasting together appropriate morphemes and letters (and sometimes numbers) doesn't mean success unless the word in its entirety expresses the material, since the sum of the parts does not equal the whole when dealing with an artistic process like naming. After all, the strength and identity of a brand name is derived not only from its meaning but also from its sound and appearance. For instance, a name comprised of various meaningful elements may fail if the entire word is unnaturally cacophonous, jarring, difficult to pronounce, non-phonetic, not phonetically palatable in all applicable markets, etc. Putting together a winning name is not slapping together a sandwich but rather serving a gourmet entrée.

A much less analytic, more intuitive way of devising a suitable name is to avoid creating the name piecemeal and begin imagining what the material would call itself if it could speak, with the assumption that the name is invisibly hovering over the product, waiting to be discovered. The mindset of this technique is similar to that of an artist who imagines that the sculpture is already in the stone and that all he does is release it from its marble prison. Trying to discover the name rather than create it tests one's intuition and can produce the very best names, the kinds of names that emerge in moments of exhilaration or quiet reflection. Even if using imagination in this way is not successful, this technique can be used to test names that are analytically assembled by asking of every assembled name, "If it could speak, would the product call itself this name?"

One may imagine that intuition played a role in developing trademarks like TEFLON. That mark seemed to be sleeping in the product's chemical name polytetrafluoroethylene (from which it was extracted) until awakened by its developer. The same is true of anagrams. Conceivably SPANDEX, an anagram of

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EXPANDS, was not developed by shifting around letters on a SCRABBLE rack but intuitively unscrambled by the developer.

When the goal is to intuitively let the material utter its own name or analytically construct a name which semantically fits the product like a glove over a hand, then the viable choices are typically suggestive names (i.e., names providing a substantial hint as to the identity of the product, like PLEXIGLAS) and fanciful names (like TYVEK). Descriptive names are harder to protect, and arbitrary names (like ECLIPSE for a nylon fabric) usually don't express the material since, by definition, they are real words having no direct semantic connection to the product.

4. Genericide

One virtue of a trademarked name which bespeaks the material is its ability to become so closely identified with the material that most consumers cannot express a desire for the material without using, or at least thinking about, that name. However, this virtue is also a potential weakness since such a name is ripe for genericide, as demonstrated by former trademarks such as CELLOPHANE and LINOLEUM. Genericide is a serious issue for materials' trademarks. The problem is irksome because the trademark which has scaled the heights of popularity is more likely to become generic. So if the developer's goal is create a brand name which can be a protectable trademark, the following considerations may be relevant.

The materials' trademarks more likely to become generic are the highly suggestive or borderline descriptive, e.g., these would be marks like FIBERGLAS, THINSULATE, and BONDO, and in other fields names like THERMOS, ESCALATOR (generic), and TELEPHONE (generic). By being very semantically close to the product, such a mark can become so tightly associated *with* the product that it becomes identified *as* the product. Strangely enough, next in line for genericide are fanciful trademarks like TREX, VELCRO, and ORLON (and in other fields, ASPIRIN (generic), ZIPPER (generic), and YO-YO (generic)). Even though fanciful marks may have no obvious semantic connection to the product, they also generally have no strong semantic connection to any other product or article and thus can become a substitute for the product's generic name.

The least likely to become generic is the arbitrary name comprised of a real word having no ordinary connection with the product, e.g., ECLIPSE (for a nylon fabric), AUGUSTA (for a synthetic cotton-like fabric), and ENTRANT (for an active sportswear fabric) and in other fields, KIWI for shoe polish, SATURN for cars, and APPLE for computers. This is because using a name which has no connection to the material but is associated with something entirely different will still resonate the other association (e.g., APPLE as a fruit) and thus usually prevent a generic identification. Yet, it is difficult to create a successful arbitrary name for a material, and hardly any famous arbitrary trademarks have emerged.

Thus, since suggestive and fanciful trademarks are most easily adapted to materials (in contrast to arbitrary names and difficult-to-protect descriptive names), to avoid genericide the trick is to develop a name which thoroughly expresses the product while maintaining strict controls over use of the name. Such controls include, for example, proper use of trademark symbols and use of the mark as an adjective in

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relation to the product rather than as a noun or verb (e.g., “Enjoy the comfort of GORE-TEX brand fabric” than “Enjoy the comfort of GORE-TEX”). Hopefully, the ultimate rewards of commercial success will justify the extra costs of proper usage and legal protection.

5. Semantic Positioning

Devising a name for a material involves most of the same considerations in creating other kinds of product names: semantic positioning, avoiding descriptiveness and misdescriptiveness, avoiding confusion with competing marks, and determining the name’s propriety and palatability throughout all territories of use. But semantic positioning (i.e., positioning the meaning of the name in relation to the meanings of competing names) will always be an issue. The following semantic positioning considerations—just a sample of many such considerations—apply to naming materials, much as they apply to naming other products.

For a totally new product, the goal may not be a dramatic name but rather one which can dominate the field in the face of later competitors, like placing an X in the middle square when starting a Tic Tac Toe (Noughts and Crosses) game. One way of placing the X in the middle is to devise a name which totally captures the material’s essence, as described above, to the point where after patent expiration or loss of trade secret protection the trademarked name leaves little room for others to assail its almost generic quality. Names like VELCRO, LUCITE, LYCRA, and TEFLON can remain in the middle square, hopefully not becoming generic.

For a material which will be only a new variety of an already existing material, e.g., a new kind of nylon or polyester, the goal is often a name crafted to carve a desirable market niche. When the new material is a variation of a long established material, sometimes the best approach to differentiating one’s product is a name which has few or no traces of the generic name. E.g., names for nylon fabrics include CAPROLAN, AKWADYNE, and CORDURA, none of which contain a trace of NYLON. Also, when naming a new variety, the challenge may be to find a name which doesn’t contain any well-worn morpheme, suffix, or prefix already in use. E.g., if a dominant industry material has already inspired numerous names containing the POLAR morpheme (as in POLARTEC and POLARGUARD), you may not want to be one more bird in a flock.

In contrast, where only a small band of existing names for a material contain an important morpheme, enough room may be available to use that morpheme creatively, especially if your new name so artfully incorporates the morpheme that it aesthetically trounces the other names and avoids causing confusion. For instance, note the integration of morphemes into distinctive flowing names like CORDURA (COR(D) + (D)URA)(nylon fabric for bags and baggage), THINSULATE (THIN + INSULATE)(warm, lightweight, and breathable microfiber blend), and SENSURA (SENS[E] + ENSUR[E])(high tech fiber for soft and smooth fabrics).

Since the first word in a multi-word mark or the first syllable in a multi-syllabic one-word mark is often the dominant component, there may be less room, legally and commercially, to begin a name with a word or morpheme which is also the first component of competing marks. E.g., how many competitive marks can begin with

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the distinctive morpheme STYRO without causing public confusion? With secondary components like suffixes, there is more room, e.g., DACRON, NYLON, ORLON, RAYON, ANTRON, etc.

The biggest challenge is to enter a field utterly dominated by someone else's trademark, especially after a patent on the competitor's trademarked product has just expired. This would be like naming a new hook-and-loop product under the shadow of VELCRO. Currently there are hundreds of other trademarks for hook-and-loop products, a sampling of which is YKK, PRIFA, FREEMAGIC, KANNEBO, and TALON. None are as effective as VELCRO even though many are imaginative. Occasionally the best choice is a name more striking and catchy than the dominant name since it may be hard to create a name which reflects the product more perfectly than the dominant name.

6. Ingredient/Component Considerations.

Because most materials' names will be used not so much as product trademarks that identify the source of an entire product but rather as ingredient or component marks (as KEVLAR, like NUTRASWEET, is an ingredient mark and TEFLON, like INTEL INSIDE, is a component mark), another positioning consideration is how well the name will complement the product names it will accompany. Will product manufacturers who include the material in their product be pleased to include the material's trademark alongside their own product trademark? And will the material's name also be a selling point for the finished product?

The producer of any material who wants the material's trademark to be displayed in others' finished products should devise a name that will be palatable for use on all such products. And the material's name often should be targeted not only to product manufacturers but also to ultimate product consumers. I.e., the name should often be designed not only as a B-2-B trademark but also as a consumer mark. Furthermore, legal and practical considerations which apply to the products sometimes should be considered when naming the material. For instance, if there are legal restrictions on what kinds of trademarks can be used for the product, the material's trademark may also have to comply with such restrictions.

These ingredient/component considerations dictate why most well-known materials' names are not overly-technical, long multi-syllabic creations nor wildly adventurous arbitrary words but rather somewhat conservative, palatable, relatively short suggestive or fanciful names. To please the B-2-B customers such names often include some technical element, perhaps even a hint of the material's technical composition, while also remaining simple, phonetic, and resonant to appeal to ultimate consumers.

7. Conclusion

To name a material properly, the name developer must know how the material is made and used and what it looks and feels like. This information provides the linguistic clues the name developer needs to construct a meaningful name. But sometimes the better name emerges when the name is intuitively devised or intuition has some role in selection. As the Chinese proverb says, "The beginning of wisdom

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is to call things by their right names." With materials, the wisdom is to listen carefully when the material whispers its own name.

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