

IKEA and the **false name check**

There was a bit of branding mischief taking place late last week. Most of the major papers reported a storm brewing over IKEA's brand names. For years the furniture retailer has used Scandinavian towns to name its products. But a recent study by two Danish academics revealed a bias in its naming approach. All its low-end products, such as toilet seats are named after Danish towns. In contrast, higher-end products such as sofas are named after Swedish or Norwegian towns.

Professor Klaus Kjoller from Copenhagen University, who was reported to be one of the co-authors of a study into the naming abuses, accused IKEA of 'Swedish imperialism', claiming that 'doormats and runners, as well as inexpensive wall-to-wall carpeting are third-class, if not seventh-class, items when it comes to home furnishings'.

IKEA was quick to reject the accusations. 'It was a pure coincidence, and it happened many decades ago,' said IKEA spokeswoman Charlotte Lindgren. 'The employee who chose Danish names for floor coverings retired long ago.'

It made for a great story but, alas, it is bogus. In February, a journalist from *Nyhedsavisen*, a free Danish tabloid paper, called up Professor Kjoller asking if he had noticed the anti-Danish bias in the latest IKEA catalogue. Kjoller, who had not seen the catalogue, let alone completed an empirical study of it, played along with the journalist because he assumed, correctly, that the article was being written with a Danish tongue firmly planted in cheek. Since then, however, Kjoller has been deluged with media enquires and found

himself repeatedly explaining that the whole thing was just a bit of fun.

It is too late for that, of course. The IKEA naming scandal will now be added to the long list of false brand-naming stories.

The most common erroneous brand naming case concerns the Chevy Nova. According to business legend, GM launched the Nova around the world very successfully, except in Spanish-speaking



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countries where the car fared miserably. GM eventually realised that the name Nova meant 'no go' in Spanish and quickly renamed the sub-brand.

Unfortunately, none of it is true. The Nova sold very well in Spanish-speaking countries because the name of the car is stressed on the first syllable, rendering it very different from the 'no go' phrase which stresses the second syllable. A similar, and equally untrue, story exists about

the Ford Pinto, which was rumoured to have failed in Brazil because the name means 'tiny male genitals' in Portuguese slang. Again, the story is false; the Pinto was never launched in Brazil.

Another erroneous case concerns Coca-Cola stumbling in China, when it translated its brand into Mandarin as 'bite the wax tadpole'. In reality, Coke entered China in 1928 and did a very proficient job of finding four Chinese characters that sounded similar to Coke's English pronunciation and indicated something positive and consistent to Mandarin ears. The characters that it selected are pronounced 'ko-ka-ko-la' and mean 'to allow the mouth to be able to rejoice'.

Of course, there have been some genuinely stupid brand naming cases but they tend to be ignored in favour of their untrue alternatives. Who can forget Mitsubishi naming an SUV the Pajero without realising that the name meant, literally, 'wanker' in Spanish? And how about when the consulting arm of PwC was renamed Monday by Wolff Olins? I bet everyone concerned with that one now wishes it had been fiction.



30 seconds on... genuine naming blunders

- **PwC** announced in 2002 that it was to demerge its consulting division and rebrand it '**Monday**' at a cost of **\$110m**. Barely a month later it cancelled the rebrand.
- In 1982, **Mitsubishi** named its latest SUV **Pajero** after the wild cat *Felis pajeros*. After discovering that the word was a commonly used Spanish term

- for '**wanker**' it renamed the car in Spain, the Americas and the UK.
- In 1994, telecoms firm **Orange** had to change its '**The future's bright... the future's Orange**' ads in Northern Ireland. In that area, Orange is synonymous with the **Orange Order**; the implied

- message was that '**The future's bright ... the future's Protestant Loyalist**', which didn't sit too well with the country's Catholic population.
- When Starbucks opened in Germany its **latte coffee** caused amusement as 'latte' is a well-known German word for an **erection**.