

Corporate naming from a branding perspective: an analysis of naming criteria applied to company names

Nomeação corporativa sob a perspectiva da marca: uma análise dos critérios de nomeação aplicados aos nomes de empresas

Nombre corporativo desde una perspectiva de marca: un análisis de los criterios de denominación aplicados a los nombres de empresas

DOI: 10.55905/ijsmtv10n2-023

Originals received: 02/01/2024

Acceptance for publication: 03/07/2024

Fernando Olivares-Delgado

Doctor in Communication

Institution: University of Alicante

Address: Ctra. San Vicente, S/N, 03690 San Vicente, Alicante, Spain

E-mail: f.olivares@ua.es

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2483-6801>

Daniel Rodríguez-Valero

Doctor in Design

Institution: University of Alicante

Address: Ctra. San Vicente, S/N, 03690 San Vicente, Alicante, Spain

E-mail: daniel.rodriguez@ua.es

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9951-5682>

Alberto Pinillos-Laffón

Doctor in Communication

Institution: University of Alicante

Address: Ctra. San Vicente, S/N, 03690 San Vicente, Alicante, Spain

E-mail: alberto.pinillos@ua.es

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3346-4739>

María Teresa Benloch-Osuna

Doctor in Communication

Institution: Universitat Jaume I

Address: Campus Riu Sec, 12071 Castellón de la Plana, Spain

E-mail: benloch@uji.es

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7713-5785>

ABSTRACT

This article analyses the views of branding professionals on the types of brand names for companies. Brand naming is an important part of corporate branding that is hardly addressed from an academic perspective. The few works on naming deal with products or services, but not with companies. Based on personal in-depth interviews and semi-structured questionnaires with renowned and prestigious experts from the professional branding sector, the relevance of common naming criteria for corporate brand names is measured. It is found that certain naming criteria seem to be more appropriate depending on the sector of activity of the company or the family or non-family character of the company. It is also found that their view of naming methods depends on their academic background and the specific professional field of activity in relation to brand management (design, advertising, marketing, linguistics or law, among others).

Keywords: corporate name, brand name, family business, brand management, naming, branding.

RESUMO

Este artigo analisa as opiniões de profissionais de branding sobre os tipos de nomes de marca para empresas. A denominação de marca é uma parte importante do branding corporativo que raramente é abordada do ponto de vista acadêmico. Os poucos trabalhos sobre denominação tratam de produtos ou serviços, mas não de empresas. Com base em entrevistas pessoais em profundidade e questionários semiestruturados com especialistas renomados e prestigiados do setor profissional de branding, é medida a relevância dos critérios de denominação comuns para nomes de marcas corporativas. Descobre-se que certos critérios de denominação parecem ser mais apropriados dependendo do setor de atividade da empresa ou do caráter familiar ou não familiar da empresa. Também é constatado que sua visão dos métodos de denominação depende de sua formação acadêmica e do campo profissional específico de atividade em relação à gestão de marcas (design, publicidade, marketing, linguística ou direito, entre outros).

Palavras-chave: nome corporativo, nome de marca, empresa familiar, gestão de marcas, denominação, branding.

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza las opiniones de los profesionales de branding sobre los tipos de nombres de marca para empresas. La denominación de marca es una parte importante del branding corporativo que rara vez se aborda desde una perspectiva académica. Los pocos trabajos sobre denominación se ocupan de productos o servicios, pero no de empresas. Basándose en entrevistas personales en profundidad y cuestionarios semiestruturados con expertos renombrados y prestigiosos del sector profesional de branding, se mide la relevancia de los criterios de denominación comunes para los nombres de marcas corporativas. Se descubre que ciertos criterios de denominación parecen ser más apropiados dependiendo del sector de actividad de la empresa o del carácter familiar o no familiar de la empresa. También se constata que su visión de los métodos de denominación depende de su formación académica y del campo profesional específico de

actividad en relación con la gestión de marcas (diseño, publicidad, marketing, lingüística o derecho, entre otros).

Palabras clave: nombre corporativo, nombre de marca, empresa familiar, gestión de marcas, denominación, branding.

1 INTRODUCTION

In previous research (PINILLOS, 2014; PINILLOS et al, 2016) we found a basic problem: Naming has traditionally been done without criteria and in a familiar way. Naming must be considered as the professional field which deals with verbal *branding*, the creation process and strategic management of the denominative universe and the verbal identity of the company, ranging from names and verbal identity parameters of the brand for products and/or services up to the specific name of the organization, and evidently, those of their affiliate companies or divisions. However, we must consider that none of the branding professionals and hardly any expert authors in naming pay attention to the differences or similarities between the corporate names and the brand names.

And what is the opinion of diverse experts about *naming*? Which is better, an acronym or a patronymic name? Questions which require prior clarifications. As noted by Olivares (2011), the name is the first element of the brand identity (product brands and corporate identity or the company name), in any case, assisted by the visual element, although at times, the name is selected by graphic identification (case of Nike). According to the experts from Aebrand (Spanish Association of Branding Companies) such as Bouanich (2016), the patronymic brands tend to decrease because there are increasingly fewer qualified individuals to launch a product which bears their own name. For Costa (2004), the name or verbal brand is the most frequently repeated commercial communication (what does not have a name does not exist; and the brand name makes its own vocation feasible, which is simultaneously communicational and transactional), something which other authors emphasize such as Keller (2008), who considers it to be an extremely effective means of abbreviated communication. Hence, how a company is named is essential information, what its reference brands are to promote its commercial impact, its target or target market. Let's review, although briefly, several of the main

classifications of naming so that based on the thesis by Pinillos (2014), we may consider what is the perception of naming by different groups of experts.

Among the criteria for naming, Pinillos et al. (2016) indicates that the individual name or patronymic name of the male or female founder is the most frequent. However what would the other criteria be?: Patronymic or contractive (initials or acronyms)? Fantasy or toponymic? Initials or descriptive? Are they mutually exclusive or interrelated elements? If the patronymic appears as an acronym, are we talking about initials or only the patronymic?

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It should be noted that the majority of the works about names are usually carried out under linguistic, morphological or semantic prisms (KLINK, 2000 and 2001; CHAN and HUANG, 2001; GONZÁLEZ DEL RÍO et al., 2011); in philological terms, a specific branch of lexicography: onomastics and anthroponymy.

The studies performed to date about the commercial brand names —from linguistic approaches — do not usually establish differences between the corporate names —the name of the company — and names of a product or service. Muzellec (2006) does focus on the differences between the brand names and the corporate names. However the most numerous studies are the ones which have an influence on the commercial function of the company name (in their link with the external public), while at the same time, they focus above all on the impact of the commercial relations of the brand name. Hence, a corporate name becomes the ideal vehicle to transmit specific corporate associations to their stakeholders.

Following the same author, the brand name is the basis on which the brand image is built (AAKER, 1991), and a corporate name is the vehicle which expresses the corporate associations to the customers (BROWN AND DANCIN, 1997; DANCIN AND BROWN, 2002). Due to the above, Olivares (2011) points out that the use of the name or surname of the founder or family in the company name is perhaps the most common naming resource in family businesses, however “if the founder possesses positive values and social recognition for the trademark, this will potentially increase the company's reputation, if other factors remain constant (...) if the founder or any member of the

family is involved in any ‘murky’ affair (...) the ‘good name’ of the company will be directly harmed”.

2.1 PATRONYMICS AND FAMILY BUSINESSES

The inclusion of the own name or patronymic to a company business, for Kashmiri and Mahajan (2010), “represents a crucial form of trust, the name thus guarantees fame”. According to Olivares et al. (2015), upon observing the abundance of patronymics in the Spanish company:

- (1) The patronymic is the category with the most denominative variants in the names of the Spanish family businesses.
- (2) The denominative category in the names of the Spanish family businesses is presented in a non-exclusive or hybrid way with other categories.
- (3) The patronymic is presented in a direct or indirect, complete or contractive way.

2.2 THE CLASSIC CATEGORIES

Reviewing the bibliography, we note that the majority of authors (FOX, 2002; KOHLI AND LABAHN, 1997; KOHLI AND SURI, 2000; MOLLERUP, 1998; ROOM, 1987; SWYSTUN; 2008; FONTVILA, 2013; OLINS, 2014) contemplate at least these categories: patronymics or names of persons, toponymics (or allusions to a place or to the gentilic), descriptive names (of the activity or sector), fantasy (creative, evocative, suggestive, etc.), with some variant (abstract, symbolic, etc.) and initials or acronyms (contractive or abbreviated with the above mentioned criteria). It can be verified that no typology contemplates that sometimes people do not rely on only one creative motive, but several criteria can coexist in the same name. They are not exclusive categories.

For this reason, Pinillos et al. (2016) recreated a new denominative classification more in accordance with the studied reality, which precisely contemplates this mixture. Hence, he develops a denominative taxonomy more nuanced in categories, especially considered for the scope of the family business but applicable to companies of another nature and to products or services and which is based on a survey to the experts.

3 OBJECTIVES AND HYPOTHESIS

The main objective is to analyze all the essential questions about corporate names and their verbal criteria: evolution of the use of patronymics, if the denomination affects in any way the general success of the companies, the naming as an important element for the commercial strategies of If the name fulfills a more relevant function in family businesses than in non-relatives, if the use of surnames is a good criterion for naming a family business, the assessment of the patronymic, toponymic, acronym and Fantasy or fiction to name a family business, and so on.

As we explained previously, the experts in this field do not establish substantial differences between the concepts of corporate naming and product naming. Based on this fact, we can deduce:

H1. The vision of the name varies depending on the expert's profile, as is the case of the four profiles of the experts surveyed for the preparation of this article.

H2. The group of experts surveyed to a large degree tends to assess the category of names which we have categorized as fantasy or fiction more than the remaining categories, such as the patronymics.

4 METHODOLOGY

To underpin the thematic basis of this study and after having carried out exhaustive research based on the rare literature on our object of analysis in this article, we have consulted primary sources: recognized experts who work in the naming field. The study is planned in two time steps: this data, between 2013 and 2015, will be replicated in 2023. We decided to use a meticulously prepared survey to cover practically all the essential questions about corporate names and their denominative criteria, since this involves a tool with proven effectiveness and ideal to successfully carry out this type or research through the statistical treatment of the obtained data.

4.1 THE SURVEY

The survey was prepared, comprised by 195 questions structured in five interrelated thematic blocks, measuring the experts opinions about the main questions of interest concerning the company name:

- (1) Name management and commercial and business success.
- (2) Naming and the family business.
- (3) Assessment about naming techniques and strategies.
- (4) Assessment about royal names.
- (5) On-line and off-line naming.

The key questions included in these thematic blocks deal with:

- (1) Concept and role of naming in the current business context.
- (2) Name as the factor of a company's success.
- (3) Naming as a relevant factor for corporate strategy.
- (4) Naming as an important factor for commercial strategy.
- (5) Naming and the family business.
- (6) If the name in the family businesses fulfils a more relevant function than the non-family businesses.
- (7) If the company name should aspire to geographical universality.
- (8) If the use of surnames is a good criteria or motivation to name a family business.
- (9) If the use of the founder's name or surname as the company name fulfils the strategic function to pay tribute to his/her legacy and take advantage of the reputational wealth of the founder or family. And if the name is a more important asset in family businesses than in non-family businesses.
- (10) Strategic criteria which motivate the name change in the family business.
- (11) What assessment do the experts make for the techniques and strategies of naming.
- (12) Opinion about the common denominative criteria in the family business.

4.2 THE SAMPLE

The survey, prepared *ex professo*, was carried out with 75 recognized international experts in branding and/or corporate naming, segmented in four specialization profiles, foreseeing that there is not a univocal view about the object of the study, with nuances according to the perspective or profile:

- (1) Academic scholars

- (2) Jurists and experts in corporate law and in family business topics
- (3) Branding and naming consultants and marketing managers
- (4) Copywriters, designers and advertising agents

4.3 SPECIFIC VARIABLES HANDLED IN THE STUDY

An independent variable is one whose value does not depend on another variable: the ones considered as basic or crucial for this statistical research. A dependent value is one whose values depend on those taken by another variable. In this field work, they are all observable response variables and influenced by the values of the independent variables mentioned above. Hence, the nominal-metric integrates and measures three types of parameters or well differentiated variables: business, corporate naming and linguistic variables.

The first two aspects belong to the strategic dimension of the name, in quantitative aspects —such as economic factors— and qualitative aspects (the denominative homage to the respective founders). In relation to the parameters of the last variable, they would be included within the required approximation to the linguistic dimension of the name and they correspond only to the aspects of the use of grammar.

The variables of the contemplated corporate naming were:

- (1) Patronymic (or matronymic) in a strict sense
- (2) Patronymic (or matronymic) honorary
- (3) Patronymic (or matronymic) of syntagmatic parentage
- (4) Patronymic (or matronymic) acronym or covert
- (5) Patronymic (or matronymic) alphanumeric
- (6) Strict toponymic
- (7) Acronym or covert toponymic
- (8) Topo-gentilic
- (9) Fantasy or fiction name
- (10) Descriptive name of the activity

The variables were mainly categorized according to the values: no = 0 / yes = 1. However with a series of peculiarities which can be studied under other parameters. Hence, although they are the topic of another potential article, as an example, we use the

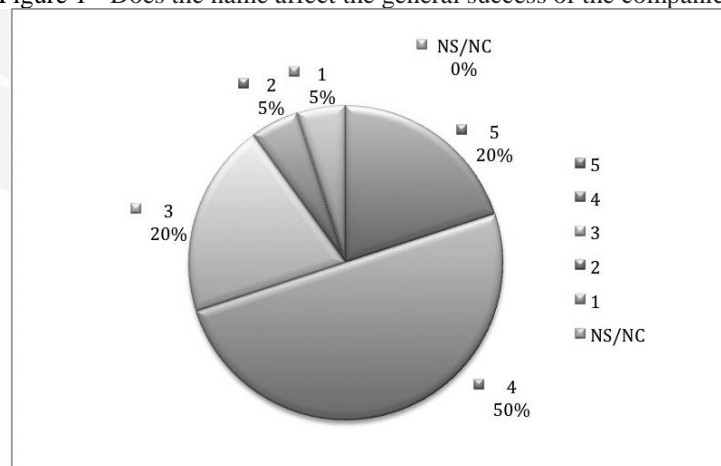
Fantasy or Fiction criteria, a delicate variable for its qualitative analysis and assessment, since in the creative field, the intersubjectivity could follow paths which are not necessarily convergent. The used criteria was that if one or two names (corporate or commercial) respond to the characteristics of the variable, we considered the nominal register of the fantasy or fiction (creative, original or arbitrary name —distant from any common name — and not necessarily derived from the semantic field of the noun). In the opposite case, if the names analysed in this category were formed by any type of derivation of a patronymic, toponymic or matronymic or of their relation with the activity; we considered that this did not respond to what we understand by names of fantasy or fiction.

5 RESULTS

5.1 THE EXPERT'S VIEW

And what are the expert's opinions about naming? The following graphic representations, of our own preparation, with a variable which allows us to notice, first that by adding the two highest values of the scale, 70% of the surveyed parties consider that in some way, the name does affect the general success of companies (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 - Does the name affect the general success of the companies?

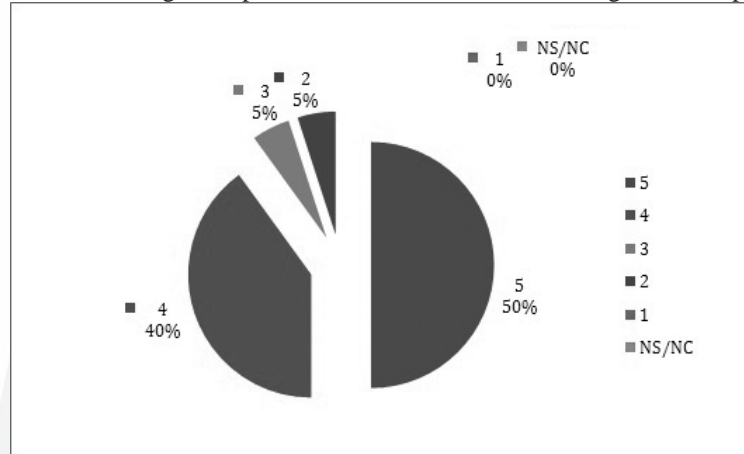


(1- minimum value of agreement; 5- maximum value of agreement)

Source: authors.

In addition, 90% of the experts consider naming as an important element for the commercial strategies of the companies (see Figure 2).

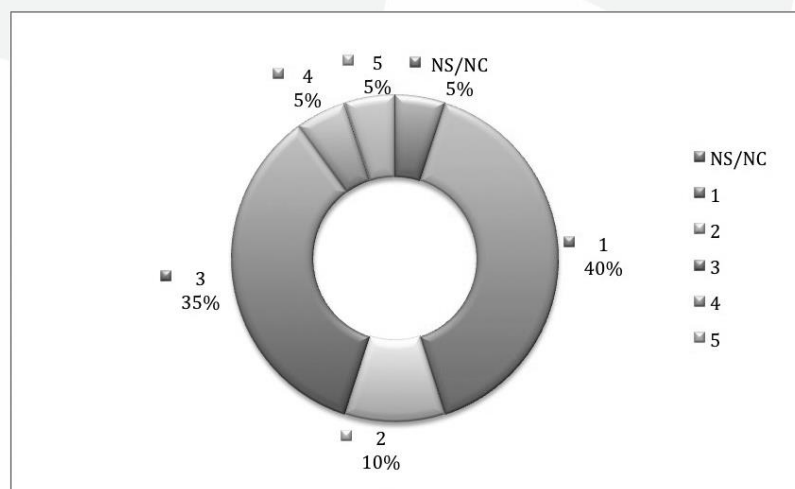
Figure 2 - Is naming an important element for business strategies of companies?



(1- minimum value of agreement; 5- maximum value of agreement)
Source: authors.

Furthermore, only 10% of experts quite agree or highly agree with the hypothesis that the name fulfils a more relevant function in family businesses than in non-family businesses. 35% are only moderately convinced, but it draws our attention that 50% completely disagreed or quite disagreed with this statement. The abstentions of answers amounted to 5%. Do these results correspond to the praxis? In a family business which can use the same name for generations, the public highly values this intangible asset as a symbol of tradition and the guarantee of confidence in its commercial management (see Figure 3).

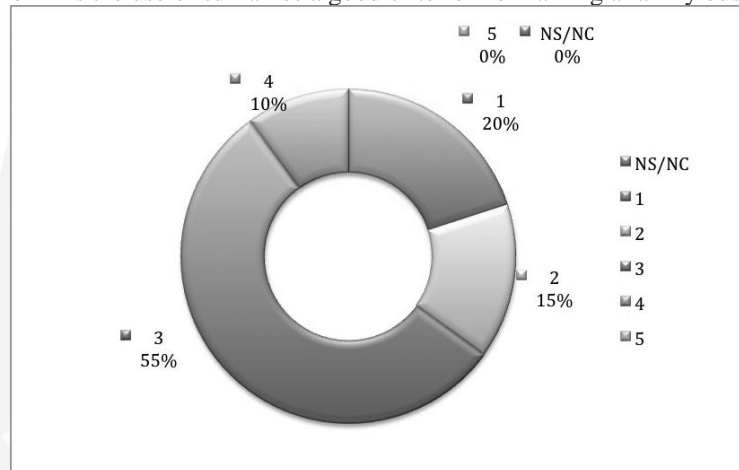
Figure 3 - Does the name play a more relevant role in family businesses than in non-family firms?



(1 - minimum value of agreement; 5- maximum value of agreement)
Source: authors.

Regarding whether or not the use of surnames is a good criteria to name a family business, only 55% moderately agree. Only 10% quite agree and no one completely agrees (see Figure 4).

Figure 4 - Is the use of surnames a good criterion for naming a family business?

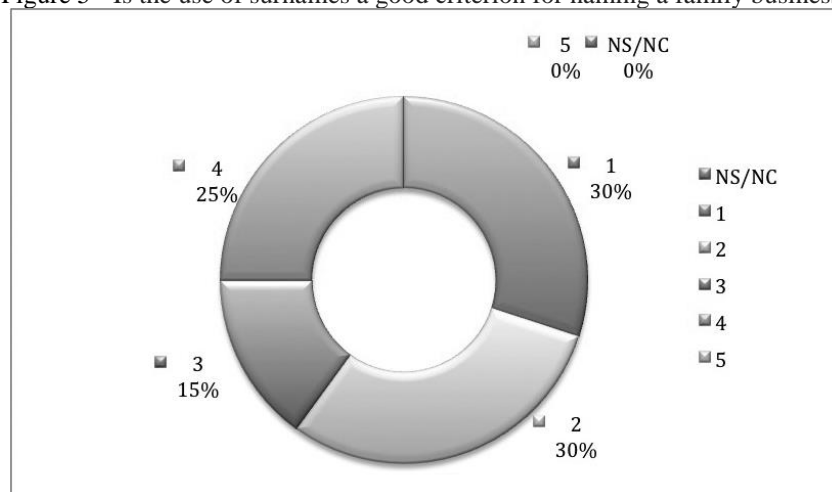


(1- minimum value of agreement; 5- maximum value of agreement)

Source: authors.

What about the use of the surname or name as recognition or tribute to the founder? The majority —60%— do not completely agree or only slightly agree with this statement, compared with 40% who moderately or almost completely agree. However no one fully or completely agrees (see Figure 5).

Figure 5 - Is the use of surnames a good criterion for naming a family business?



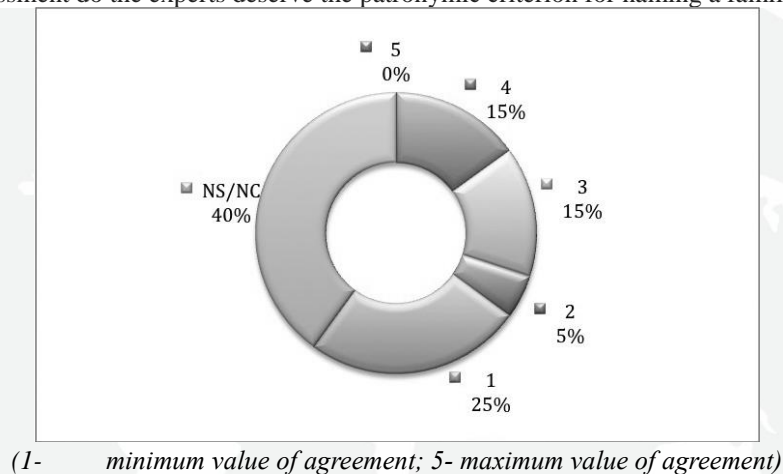
(1- minimum value of agreement; 5- maximum value of agreement)

Source: authors.

What assessment (where 1 is the minimum value and 5 is the maximum value) do the experts provide to the patronymic criteria to name a family business? Concerning 60% of the answers, the dominant result is a low assessment. Only 15% considered the option quite suitable to name a family business, and 30% thought that it was very or quite unsuitable. In general, with an excessive dose of prudence and reserve, either they did not express an opinion about the topic or they are not in favor of this option for the small and medium family companies (see Figure 6).

Figure 6 - Patronymic.

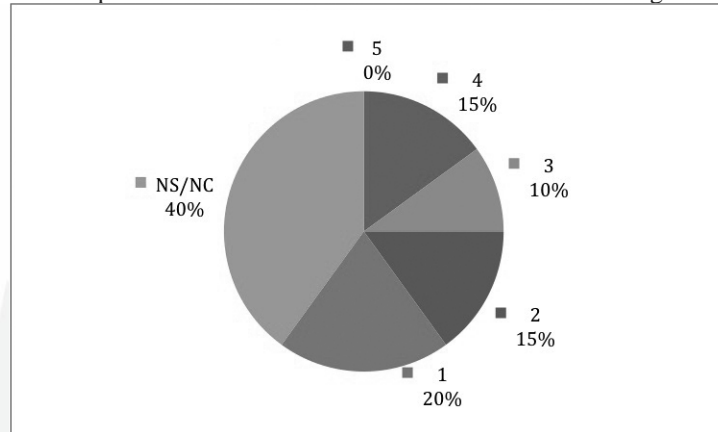
What assessment do the experts deserve the patronymic criterion for naming a family business?



And what about the toponymics? With the same abstentions as the former question (40%), we verified results quite similar to those of the patronymics. Only 15%, considered them quite suitable, and none of them, very suitable. Approximately 35%, considered them very or quite unsuitable (see Figure 7).

Figure 7 - Toponymic.

What value do the experts deserve the TOPONYMIC criterion for naming a family business?



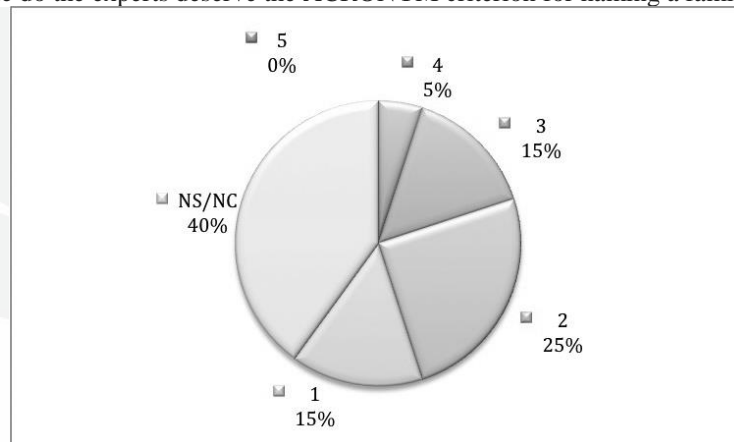
(1- minimum value of agreement; 5- maximum value of agreement)

Source: authors.

The initials continue to provide even more accentuated results of significant discredit on the part of experts. None of them considered the initials as the most suitable option, and only 5% think they are a quite suitable option (see Figure 8).

Figure 8 - Acronym.

What value do the experts deserve the ACRONYM criterion for naming a family business?



(1- minimum value of agreement; 5- maximum value of agreement)

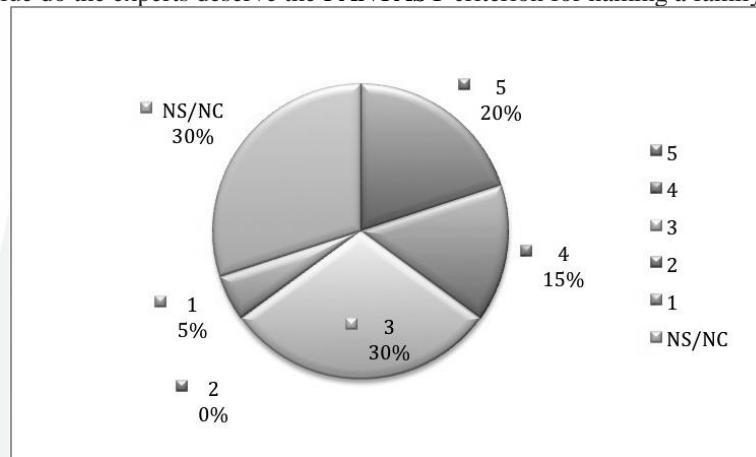
Source: authors.

What about the fantasy or fiction names? Concerning 70% of the answers, we have an intermediate assessment of the experts (35%). Once again, they either did not express an opinion about the topic due to excessive prudence or reserve, or those who

answered are quite in favor of these names for small and medium family businesses (see Figure 9).

Figure 9 - Fantasy

What value do the experts deserve the FANTASY criterion for naming a family business?

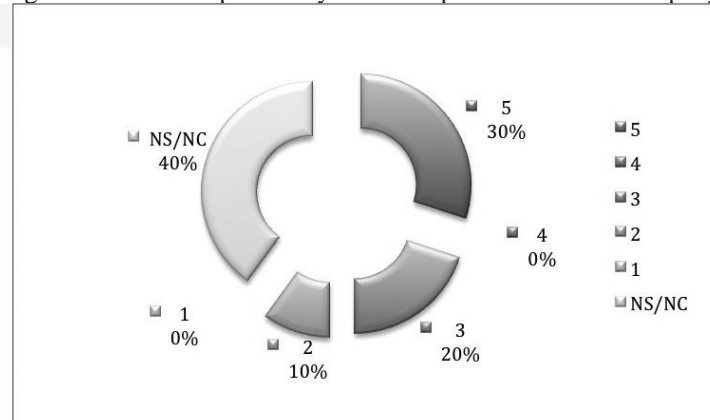


(1- minimum value of agreement; 5- maximum value of agreement)

Source: authors.

And what about the possibility of other options to name a company? With a highly meaningful abstention of 40%, the experts provided a very discrete assessment in favour (30%), leading us to understand that there are more and different options to name a family business, although none of the interviewed parties suggested any alternative in the optional comments section (see Figure 10).

Figure 10 - And the possibility of other options to name a company?



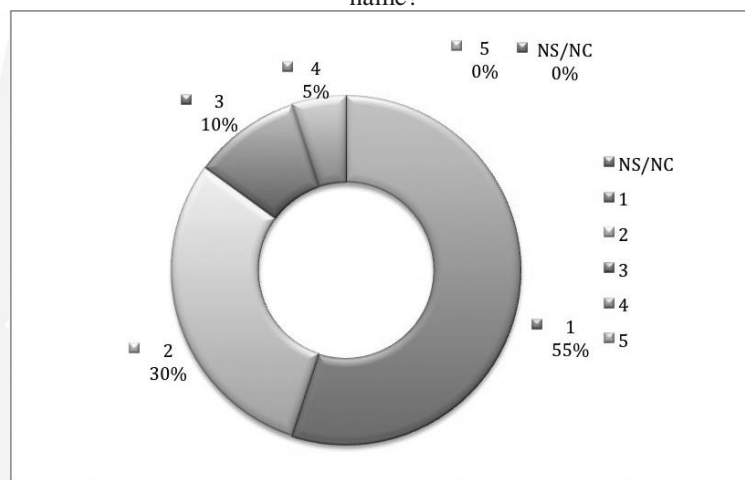
(1- minimum value of agreement; 5- maximum value of agreement)

Source: authors.

Regarding whether the inclusion of syntagmas such as “widow of”, “children of”, “successors of” or “heirs of” contribute value in the public, we verified that a majority (85% adding the values 1 and 2) completely or almost completely disagree (see Figure 11).

Figure 11 - Syntagma.

Does the incorporation of phrases like "sons of", "successors of" or "heirs of" add value to the corporate name?

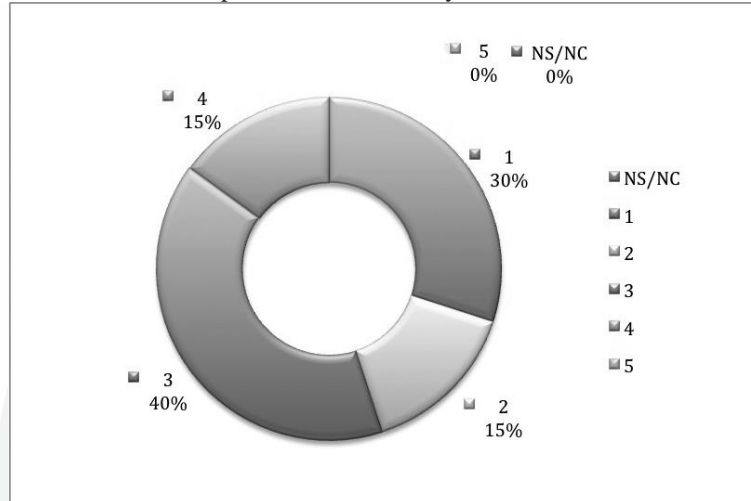


(1- minimum value of agreement; 5- maximum value of agreement)

Source: authors.

Concerning whether the name is a more important asset in family businesses than in non-family businesses, the experts were cautious: 40% only moderately agree and only 15% show quite agreement although not completely in favor. 45% do not share this affirmation (see Figure 12).

Figure 12 - Is the name a more important asset in family businesses than in non-family businesses?



(1- minimum value of agreement; 5- maximum value of agreement)

Source: authors.

5.2 OTHER PARAMETERS FOR THE SURVEY

In other relevant parameters, 50% of the surveyed parties consider that the initials only possess a relative or moderate mnemonic effectiveness, with an equally intermediate or debatable differentiating power. Likewise, 65% consider that, in line with what occurs with the initials but with greater agreement, the acronyms only maintain a relative or moderate mnemonic effectiveness. And 60% consider that brevity is quite important to select a suitable name (only 10% believe the opposite). With regard to pregnancy (quality of visual forms which capture the attention of the observer due to the simplicity, balance or stability of its structure), a well-established concept used in the professional field of graphic design; 85% consider it a mandatory condition to select a suitable name (no one, 0%, disagreed).

And the so-called strategic coherence? 65% of the experts (55 and 10) agree that in order to be coherent with the context, it is always necessary to select or build a good brand name with guarantees of success. Meanwhile, mnemonics refers to the association procedure in order to easily remember something, an essential quality for every brand name which aspires to fulfil its commercial function. And thus this is confirmed by 80% of the experts (50 and 30), with a practically unanimous criteria (only 20% of the intermediate assessments).

And what about euphony, the proper combination of the acoustic elements of the word or words? 80% (75 and 5) grant it a high value to select and/or construct a suitable brand name, which, if there is no opposing opinion, provides a significantly unanimous criteria. And to facilitate the maximum legibility, pronounceability and visibility of all brand names appears to be a logical and evident question: 95% (50 and 45) are in favor that the brand names are easily legible and pronounceable to obtain a higher level of recall of the potential recipients. Likewise, all brand names with aspirations to be launched in globalised markets must function properly at the international scale, hence 75% (45 and 30) validates the spatial universality of the names. No one provided negative assessments.

Every brand name with aspirations of permanence must equally consider the temporary universality of the name, since the name more or less aspires to be imperishable. And the majority, 85% (55 and 30), support this at the time of selecting the most suitable option. And as expected, 85% of the surveyed parties (60 and 25) highly agree or quite agree that an unsuitable name can weigh down or hinder new business opportunities. Finally, we recorded that an overwhelming majority (85%) consider that at present, creative names and/or fiction names tend to be used more than proper names for traditional usage.

5.3 RESPONSES BY SECTORS

- Academic scholars:

(1) Importance of the name as a factor which affects the success: 60% quite agree or highly agree, without abstentions.

(2) Patronymics. 40% quite agree and 20% only moderately agree. 20% abstentions.

(3) Toponymics. The same assessments are exactly repeated.

(4) Initials. Low assessment: only 40% consider them moderately recommendable. 20% abstentions.

(5) Fantasy or fiction: 40% are highly or quite in favor and 40% are moderately in favor. 20% abstentions.

- Jurists and experts in corporate law:

- (1) Importance of the name: 100% agreement, perhaps due to the exhaustive knowledge of the legal and registry aspects of the brands.
 - (2) Patronymics: 50% assess it in a very negative way and only 25% in an intermediate way. 25% abstentions.
 - (3) Toponymics: the same results.
 - (4) Initials: 75% assess it quite negative or highly negative. 25% abstentions.
 - (5) Fantasy or fiction: the highest valued option, with 75% highly or quite in favor and 25% moderately in favor, without abstentions.
- Branding Consultants and Marketing Managers:
- (1) Importance of the name: 64% in favor, without abstentions.
 - (2) Patronymics: only 9% assessed it quite favorable and 27% in an intermediate way. 55% abstentions.
 - (3) Toponymics: only 9% assessed it quite favorable and 18% in an intermediate way. 55% abstentions.
 - (4) Initials: 9% assessed it quite favorable and 27% slightly favorable. 55% abstentions.
 - (5) Fantasy or fiction: 36% are highly or quite in favor and 18% are moderately in favor. However with a significant 46% abstentions.
- Copywriters, designers and advertising agents:
- (1) Importance of the name: 75% quite agree, without abstentions.
 - (2) Patronymics: 50% highly against or quite against and the other 50% did not respond.
 - (3) Toponymics: identical results.
 - (4) Initials: the proportions were repeated.
 - (5) Fantasy or fiction: 37% highly or quite in favor and 13% are moderately in favor, but with 37% abstentions.

6 CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

As the first conclusion, a relevant discovery: the collectives directly involved in the *naming* preparation process are also the most critical concerning the criteria to name the family businesses, which responds to a clear logic of praxis. Regarding the first

hypothesis (the vision of the name varies depending on the expert's profile), the fantasy or fiction criteria is the highest valued. However, if we understand this as a synonym of creativity and imagination compared with the merely descriptive, it is surprising that the profiles such as the copywriters (37%) and the branding consultants (36%) value this name option so low in comparison with the jurists and experts in the legal field. With regard to the patronymic names, it is the academic scholars who most appreciate this traditional naming option (40% quite agree and 20% only moderately agree). If due to reasons of extension, the members of the profiles are necessarily reduced quantitatively but not qualitatively, and the academic scholars and the researchers are also who seem to be more in line with the reality of the current naming criteria of the family businesses.

Regarding the second hypothesis (the group of experts tends to assess the category of fantasy or fiction names more than the remaining categories), we can verify in figure 10 that only 20% of the experts give the maximum value (5 points) to the names of fantasy or fiction, reason why the second hypothesis is refuted or invalidated.

However it is fitting to add an additional reflection about the underlying issue which we address in this article. In practice, above all when we refer to the scenario of company names, the namers have also been the individual employers, partners or the family as a whole, selecting this name by means of consensus or more or less recreational processes, with a participative or inclusive nature, which explains the generalized scarcity of consistent creative criteria (such as fantasy names) and likewise, this would explain the predominance of logical criteria such as the patronymic, toponymic or descriptive names of the business activity.

6.1 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This work allows for future studies on the importance of the corporate name from the perspective of branding and naming experts. For example, it would be interesting to further measure whether names created following professional processes are more conducive to business success and profits than when companies create their name according to arbitrary or unprofessional criteria. It would be important to determine in the future what additional skills and competencies are required of the professional when creating a company name, rather than the name of a product or service. It would be

interesting to broaden the sample and geographical scope, opening the study to experts from other countries and trying to introduce the cross-cultural perspective to the company name.

6.2 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

This research can be of use to company directors and managers, both in long-established and new companies, in making professional decisions about brand and name management. One of the practical implications of the work is that more attention and resources should be given to the professional choice of the corporate name, as the name increasingly needs to be integrated into the company's corporate and commercial strategic planning. The company name can support a stronger brand experience. The paper will also serve as a guide for researchers wishing to explore this topic, providing them with an analysis of current research on corporate naming.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Thanks to the UA_Brandscience research group of the University of Alicante for funding this research.

FUNDING INFORMATION

The research was funded by Corporate Brand Research Group UA_Brandscience (University of Alicante, Spain)

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