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New-Media Company Names: Part Puzzle, Part Shorthand, All Jargon

By STEVE LOHR - New York Times

Corporate names -- good ones, at least -- communicate a message, attract attention and convey an aura. Whether today's high-technology companies are succeeding is a matter of opinion. But these companies, flirting with the frontiers of technology, are also the ones straining the conventions of corporate naming.

The names borrow liberally from the shorthand of software programming and urban street talk. None of the traditional rules about capitalization, punctuation and spelling apply. Mostly, the names strive to look and sound hip and futuristic, though some are just oddball.

Linguistic innovations or orthographic abominations, take your pick: UUnet, VXTreme, iVillage, ichat, id Software, planetU, D2K, TouchNet, X'iT Group Creative, Q-Zar, 360media, Alt-imeri, Art4-U, DesignVoX, Dsignlight Studios, eVox Productions, iMOTION, @Climax, Yahoo!

"These new companies are trying to be edgy and playful with their names," said Russell Meyer, director of naming at Landor Associates, a branding consultancy in San Francisco. "But many of the new corporate names seem overly trendy, kind of trying too hard. You have to wonder whether either the names or the companies will last."

If the past is any guide, some elements of the corporate naming experiments will live on, as they prove to be effective and become familiar. The use of capital letters in the middle of corporate names or product brand names -- called intercaps in marketing jargon -- has moved firmly into the mainstream from its roots in the computer software industry.

In software code, programmers often capitalize to set off words or word segments that are run together, because computers cannot read spaces. But people can, and the capitals make it easier for humans to read programming.

Software engineers had long used intercaps to name their products, like HyperCard and MacWrite. In corporate names, some say, the watershed came in 1986 with the founding of the NeXT computer company by Steven Jobs. In NeXT's wake, high-tech companies began strewing capital letters like confetti in their names. Today, the intercap is a mainstream fixture, even appearing in brand names like SnackWell.

Some corporate names are simply programming abbreviations. UUNet Technologies is named for the Unix-to-Unix Copy Program, or UUCP, which helps computer networks to exchange e-mail. UUNet is a leading supplier of high-speed hookups to the Internet.



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Other companies use unconventional spellings and typography to convey subtle messages. iVillage is a new-media company in Manhattan that produces online programming in fields like health, child-rearing and workplace issues. The italicized i, explains Jason Stell of iVillage, was selected to suggest "interactive and Internet." The "village" term, he says, was chosen to connote warmth, since the company is striving to build on-line communities.

Adopting Internet nomenclature -- like @ or .com -- in a corporate name shouts technology. One hot start-up company, the @Home Corp. of Redwood City, Calif., is certainly being heard. It markets high-speed Internet service and programming via cable television modems to homes, and after going public in July, it has a stock market value of more than \$3 billion. The @Home name, says Ty Ahmad-Taylor, the company's art director, serves to "simplify our message of at-home Internet access."

The same reasoning, no doubt, applies to other at-sign companies like @Climax, an online purveyor of adult videos. (Incidentally, @ is a grammalog, as is the ampersand. In English, it is referred to simply as the "at sign," but it has names in other languages like "api," or monkey's tail, in Dutch.)

There is a risk in selecting techie symbols. "You may think it's oh so cool, but it may be unintelligible to many people or difficult to find in the phone book or in convention directories," said S.B. Master, president of **Master-McNeil**, a corporate naming consultancy in Berkeley, Calif.

In most telephone directories, a name like @Home is listed as if it were spelled out -- At Home. Such names are also typically spelled out by major newspapers, like The Wall Street Journal and the print editions of The New York Times.

And no monkey's tails on the stock exchange, thank you. The ticker symbol for @Home is ATHM.

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