

THE ORANGE COUNTY Register

By Andre Mouchard/The Orange County Register

Name = marketing, money, success



Image isn't everything, but it's close. Particularly in Orange County, where business images include everything from waves and fish racostocowboy hats and lederhosen. Register staff writer **ANDRE MOUCHARD** is looking for image makers, the images they make, and the reasons why those images work — or don't — in the marketplace. He'll be writing about these topics in Neon Coast, a new monthly column in Business Monday. Send your thoughts to Neon Coast, Andre Mouchard, The Orange County Register, P.O. Box 11626, Santa Ana, Calif. 92711. Fax to (714) 565-3685 or E-mail to mouch@aol.com

At first, Chiranjeev Kholi refuses to look into his pants. Not here, he says, not in the hallway in front of his office.

But after a moment of tense silence, he relents.

"I can't tell," Kholi says, laughing.

"Maybe they're J.C. Penney. Something like that."

He's talking underwear. Specifically, underwear names.

Kholi is big on names. Yes, he teaches marketing at California State University, Fullerton. And, yes, he's got a Ph.D. in marketing from the University of Indiana, an M.B.A. from the Indian Institute of Management, and an unrelated degree, in mechanical engineering, from the University of Delhi in India, his homeland.

But the thing that makes Kholi (shirt by Perry Ellis) happiest, business-wise, is thinking about trade names.

Brands. Monikers. Proper nouns. He's interested in business names the way Mike Tyson briefly was interested in ears. He loves the detail and nuance and, yes, the essence of what a company calls itself and its products.

"Naming is a science," Kholi says, "but there's art there as well."

If there were such a thing as licorice cotton candy, it would look like Kholi's beard. His turban (by Madhurani, an Indian brand that translates as "Queen of Honey") only adds to his likability.

Last year, Kholi was picked by administrators as "teacher of the year" in CSUF's marketing department. His classes fill up quickly. Students grin sheepishly when they duck into his office. They aren't nervous. At 34, Kholi — who insists that everybody use only his last name — seems not so different from them.

But, of course, he is.

In addition to his teaching job, Kholi is a partner in I.D. Entity, one of about 20 companies nationally that sell naming services.

For a fee of up to \$20,000, Kholi and three others at I.D.E. will learn everything they can about a company, meet with consumers and generally conduct big-think style market research. When they're done, they produce a name — or a list of names — that the company accepts or rejects or, in a few cases, buys and copyrights simply as a way to thwart competitors.

Kholi says corporate names are like a person's looks — too superficial to care about deeply, but genuinely important when it's time to find a date or make a sale.

Still, the well-pondered name is hot.



MARK AVERY/The Orange County Register

NAME PRO: Chiranjeev Kholi of I.D. Entity says naming companies and products is a science but there's also an art to it.

"Since Wall Street has gotten so big, just about every company thinks hard about names," Kholi explains.

"And some companies give themselves good names just so they won't look dumb."

Kholi, once a stand-up comic, smiles slightly at this.

"I like that," he says.

The well-pondered name is turning up in places you might not expect. Consumer products usually get catchy names, but today that's also true for many of the parts used in those products (think "Intel Inside!"), and even some ingredients (think the "Techron" that's in Chevron gas.)

Kholi says the difference, moneywise, between a good name and a lousy one is critical.

"If you're starting out today, and you've got a bad name, you're pretty much dead right there."

Or not.

Oakley, the Foothill Ranch sunglasses company, has sold about \$1 billion worth of glasses in the past five years. The company reportedly is named after founder Jim Jordan's dog.

The Walt Disney Co. has done OK, too, in spite of the fact that it is named after the old advertising exec who founded it. Kholi says this type of self-named naming is a bit of corporate vanity that is dying quickly.

"If they were starting today, everybody would want a return on their investment long before they'd spent enough money to build up a brand name that nobody had ever heard of before," Kholi says. "I mean, what's a 'Disney'?"

When pressed, Kholi (watch by

Movado) offers opinions on several Orange County brand names.

On Carl's Jr: "Like Disney, the company started in times that were less competitive. You wouldn't name it that today."

On the Irvine Co: "Works great here, and it makes sense. But it probably won't work so well if they develop property outside Orange County."

On the car company Kia: "They sound too Korean, which is unfortunate for an auto company. They might've liked a very American name or maybe a Japanese name."

On the clothing company No Fear: "It's a great name. It captures the attitude of the product. Their name is also their slogan."

Kholi says the ultimate test of a great name might be crisis.

As proof, he points to the sky. "Remember ValuJet, the airline?" Kholi says. "Now, think about their situation vs. the situation for Swiss Air."

Good point. Both airlines sent planes into the air that crashed and killed hundreds. But because ValuJet's was a name that invoked such ideas as thriftiness, Kholi says, its name became associated with the problem. Eventually, ValuJet changed its name to AirTran Holdings.

But, Kholi says the name "Swiss Air" invokes the precision and timeliness sometimes associated with Swiss people. As a result, Kholi believes the airline will put its disaster behind it.

"When you think that Swiss Air had an accident, you say to yourself, 'Well, those things happen.' That's because of the name."

"Pretty powerful, I'd say."