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Why Western Companies Like LinkedIn Need Chinese Brand Names It's a Brain Teaser, So Consultancies Tap Software, Linguists, Even Poets, For Help

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LinkedIn's Chinese name emphasizes leadership and eliteness.

When LinkedIn decided to push into China, it needed a Chinese name. So the company hired Shanghai-based branding consultancy [Labbrand](#) to hunt for the right moniker, something that encapsulated the social network's professional image and had a good ring to it.

Labbrand started with hundreds of candidates, whittled them down to a shortlist, grilled consumers about them and ended up with Lead Elite, pronounced "ling ying" – which sounds almost like the original.

Often, a company's most important marketing decision in China is localizing its name. It's also a notoriously tricky one, and branding consultancies big and small are in on the naming game, blending inspiration, linguistic know-how and science. Labbrand has even developed special naming software to make the process more efficient.

Naming: a checklist

The right Chinese name should tell the brand's story, experts say. It should sound similar to the original or it might not stick. The characters have to look good together, and it has to be legally available. It should work in Mandarin as well as Cantonese and Shanghaiese – which sound nothing alike.

On top of that, the name shouldn't evoke negative connotations. LinkedIn's brand name won praise, though some complained online that it sounds similar to a term for the ghost of a dead infant. (Labbrand saw that critique coming but decided the many positives outweighed that small drawback.)

Often, Chinese brand names take on more weight and meaning than the originals. Pepsi-Cola becomes *bai shi ke le* in Mandarin -- "anything can be happy." BMW is *bao m* a "precious horse." Subway sandwiches are *sai bai wei*, "better than 100 tastes."

The trends

Experts say brands are moving away from choosing nonsense names that merely sound like the original, like McDonald's. That's *mai dang lao*, a head-scratcher whose characters mean wheat, should and labor.



McDonald's Chinese name is gibberish.

Some global companies with short names, including [Gap](#) or [IBM](#), expect Chinese consumers to learn their Western names.

"Is that good? I don't know -- if they spent the effort working out a nice Chinese name, it might be better for them," said Amanda Liu, VP and creative director for naming at Labbrand. The company also recently handled Booking.com's name for China – a play on the word for guest, *bin ke*, that includes a sense of colorfulness and diversity.

In general, "there's no question anymore whether you need a Chinese name," Ms. Liu said, pointing out that they are often essential on e-commerce sites and social media.

Not having a Chinese name puts a stop to word-of-mouth, too.

"Take Hermes -- for years the Chinese couldn't talk about it, because they couldn't pronounce it," said Laurence Lim Dally, who founded Hong Kong-based market research and consulting firm Cherry Blossoms.

Translating luxury

Some luxury brands used to resist reinventing their names for China out of a desire to keep a unified brand image, Ms. Lim Dally said.

"Today, that taboo is gone," said Ms. Lim Dally, who helps luxury and cosmetics companies choose slogans and names for brands and products.

Localizing names for luxurious foreign products can be tricky, since "if you put Chinese on the package then Chinese (consumers) don't want it," as it seems more local and less upscale, she said. Other solutions are to put the translation on brochures nearby and to educate the sales force about them, she said.

In addition to doing market research, Ms. Lim Dally's company also consults language specialists, translators, journalists, poets and musicians on naming projects.

Last year, she worked with France's PPR luxury group when it rebranded as Kering to come up with Chinese name *kai yun*, or "open sky."

Chinese brands

As more Chinese brands go global, some are thinking about names that are easy to take beyond China. Hot mobile social app Weixin rebranded itself as **WeChat** for its international push, for example.

"We're starting to have business from Chinese companies coming to us for English names," said Ms. Liu of Labbrand, noting that she's currently working on such an assignment for a Chinese tire brand.

Some Chinese names are as hard to pronounce as Hermes. Take Xiaomi, the hot Chinese smartphone maker. The name means millet or "little rice," but it's a real mouthful: It's pronounced sheow-mee.