

Name that car: Why MX-6 makes it and Caliente doesn't

By David Menzies

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Why is it so many new vehicles are saddled with dreadfully lame names? X-90. ES 300. LHS. SC2. RAV4.

Whatever happened to Impala and Thunderbird and, for that matter, Legend? When it comes to monikers, they sure don't make them the way they used to. Unbelievable as it may seem, a big reason for the current explosion of alphanumeric names is that nearly every name that has a positive connotation (be it a tree, bird, mammal, insect, Zodiac sign or Greek god) has been registered and trademarked by marketing companies the world over.

Indeed, it's estimated that more than 1,000 product and company names are registered every hour. All of which means automakers have been forced into coming up with wholly original nameplates for their products - often with mixed results. Naseem Javed, president of Toronto- and New York-based ABC Namebank International, is a developer of corporate and product names. He laments that most automakers are now taking "the easy way out" when it comes to new model names. For example, instead of coming up with "powerful and memorable" names, such as Corvette, Firebird and Mustang, manufacturers are choosing alphabet soup designations ranging from A4 to Z3.

"Car names have gone into oblivion," Javed says. "So many models are just a hodgepodge of letters and numbers and many of the newer names - for example, Dodge Neon - are just silly or don't make any sense at all."

Often the industry succumbs to a copycat mentality. For example, in the early 1990s, Javed says, several automakers contracted the "killer-A virus" when it seemed every new car was given a name that began and ended with the letter "A" (examples: Achieva, Altima, Asuna, Aurora.) A trend recently revived by some automakers is naming vehicles after geographic designations (Tahoe, Yukon). But Javed cautions this will end sooner rather than later as the number of glamorous or relevant place names becomes scarcer. "Somehow I don't think that a GMC 'Mississippi' sounds nearly as good as 'Yukon.' "

Most of the automakers contacted for this story were vague on how they name their new vehicles. There were some exceptions, however. Chrysler Canada Ltd. spokeswoman Jody Ness says all members of a new vehicle platform team take part in naming a new model. In some circumstances, consumer focus groups are also used.

Mazda Canada Inc. spokesman Greg Young notes consumer research conducted by Mazda in the early 1990s indicated Canadian car buyers respond far more positively to proper names as opposed to alphanumeric designations. As a result, such Mazda models as the MX-3, MX-6 and 626 were given the "only in Canada" add-on designations of Precidia, Mystere, and Cronos respectively.

Honda took a completely opposite approach with its Acura division a few years back. When several models were completely redesigned, original nameplates such as Legend and Vigor were replaced by such tongue twisters as 3.5RL and 2.5TL. The reason, says Honda Canada Inc. spokesman Todd Fowler, is Honda wanted to emphasize the name of the make (Acura) as

opposed to the name of the model - a practice embraced by most of Acura's competitors (Audi, BMW, Infiniti, Lexus, Mercedes, Saab and Volvo).

Still, with all the effort that goes into naming new car models, often the marketers still manage to get it wrong. Consider, for example, the Ford Probe. The name is fairly innocuous, although Ford discovered that many people tended to bristle at the suggestive nature of the word.

If anything, automakers have long been obsessed with trying to strike gold in a name. Back in the 1950s, for example, Ford hired an esteemed poet, Marianne Moore, for a princely sum to suggest names for a new car model that was about to be unveiled. Alas, the poet's suggestions - which included such zingers as Utopian Turtletop, Intelligent Bullet, Mongoose Civique - failed to impress the Ford brain trust. There were 16,000 names proposed for the car that would become the Edsel, named after Henry Ford's only son.

Perhaps Utopian Turtletop wasn't such a bad name after all. In 1955, in an early attempt at target-marketing, Chrysler unveiled a concept car called La Femme - a vehicle (and name) that would be unthinkable today. Designed to appeal exclusively to women drivers, the Dodge La Femme was pink and white and came loaded with such vital equipment as a lipstick holder and matching handbag.

ABC Namebank sells clients a 20-step process (costing between \$75,000 and \$150,000) for cultivating a name that is "clear, clean, suitable, translates well and doesn't infringe on any trademarks," Javed says.

As well, the name will be researched in more than 200 languages to make sure it doesn't translate into something ridiculous or obscene. Javed notes there have been some momentous cross-cultural boo-boos over the years. Ford once sold a car in Brazil called the Caliente, which turned out to be a slang term for prostitute. As well, poor sales of the Chevy Nova in Spain were linked to the Spanish translation of Nova as "no go."