

As any visit to the local liquor store will show, the alcohol category is a crowded one, with established purveyors and niche players alike competing for shelf space.

As any visit to the local liquor store will show, the alcohol category is a crowded one, with established purveyors and niche players alike competing for shelf space. Gone are the days when a handful of labels made for a well-stocked bar. Today, there is a flavor, ingredient, method or vintage to meet any taste, tempting a new breed of cocktail enthusiast – and the mixologists who serve them – with ever more innovative concoctions.

So, how do you stand out in a heavily populated category like this?

A good place to start is with your look and feel, your trade dress. Certainly it's about events, locations and grassroots marketing. One thing that you know can't be overlooked is your name, especially if you're new to the party. When it comes to naming a new bottle, it helps to know the lay of the land.

Can I see some ID?

Not that long ago, it seemed that many alcohol brands were staked on heritage, with their names intended to reflect experience, provenance and heritage, as one look at any whiskey line-up will show. Distillers have long leveraged their credibility to woo drinkers by promising them the real thing: "Want proof? Just look my label," they seem to say.

As far as names were concerned, this was the recipe for success for a long time. With the right heritage, whether genuine or implied, legions of fierce loyalists, drinkers with a single preference for a single drink, might enjoy a bottle of just about anything.

Then the category started to shift as more and more challenger brands appeared to test consumer tastes and make some room on the shelves for themselves. These newcomers had decided to go against the grain, driven by a crazy new idea.

Heritage isn't everything.

Nowhere has this been more evident than with vodka. In territory once firmly ruled by Russian and Eastern European—born (and sometimes just "inspired") brands, vodka was once easily identified on shelf, with an impossible to pronounce name — think Stolichnaya, Luksusowa and Wyborowa — the ultimate sign of heritage.

For a spirit that can be distilled anywhere and from just about anything, heritage vodka started facing some stiff competition in the form of sheer drinkability and names started following suit.

No longer were Soviet-block letters or Czarist script the heralds of authenticity. Simple taste had some serious appeal too, and suddenly people were asking for SKYY, Pur, Rain and other names specifically meant to convey purity, a blank canvas on which to mix any number of new cocktails.

Now the rules are different.

While heritage still counts for plenty, personality, lifestyle and flavor are all popular naming cues today, and for more than just liquor. Wine and beer have long been eschewing traditional naming conventions in

search of something unique and representative of an independent spirit, especially in the craft-brewing sector.

With all of these new brands angling for some attention, looking outside the category for inspiration has become commonplace. It's proven to be a strategy with the potential for some rich naming options.

For example, cosmetics have often looked to wine labels for names and descriptions: "That shade of merlot perfectly matches your wine!" But with so many wines available today, it seems that winemakers are turning the tables and looking to cosmetics for inspiration themselves. Is Anomaly Pinot Noir a vintage or a lip stain? How about Barolo Blackberry or Rose Imperial?

In fact, these two industries share a number of interesting parallels. For one, each has seen precipitous growth in the sheer variety of their offerings in recent years, adding to the importance of the naming system as a means for both navigation and differentiation.

Pushing the limits.

Cosmetics names in particular are known for exploring extremes with products such as NARS' line of Orgasm blushes or Philosophy's I Love Candy Corn™ lip shine. Although these brands are certainly aiming for the provocative and the unusual to grab the customer's attention, there is a deeper strategy at work here as well.

The alcohol category resembles beauty in many respects, but especially in the family structure of its brands.

For a product brand to play in the marketplace, it must receive permission from the parent brand, meaning its name, personality, values and voice have to be consistent with where it comes from. Hence, you'll find Fbomb lipstick from the ultrahip cosmetics brand Urban Decay alongside Backstage Bambi, part of the Painted Love line by celebrity tattoo artist Kat Von D. Makeup, being such a crowded and loud category, is almost certainly going to continue to test sensibilities as long as parent brands allow it.

The question is whether there's a limit to how far they can go before the customer gets lost in such raw creativity. When confronted with bright red, brilliant red, fire engine red, stop sign red, heat wave, valentines day, manhunt and an infinite number of other even more evocative names, it seems that some customers might start wishing for something simple like "The Red," the color you'll, not surprisingly find, in Sephora's private label brand.

The power of simple.

The alcohol category resembles beauty in many respects, but especially in the family structure of its brands. Whether it's a vodka brand with a flavor for everyone, a whiskey distiller with bottles of all ages, or a winemaker that never met a grape it didn't like, the parent brand provides the credibility and the personality that allows the variant to compete.

Today, there is an incredible range of variants to choose from, with more being introduced all the time. From flavors, ingredients and vintages to aging methods, barrel types, distillation styles

and many more, the number of variants now has brand managers looking for ever more clever ways to set themselves apart.

While alcohol brands may not be experiencing the same naming excesses as cosmetics yet, it seems to be falling under the same influence as brands struggle to differentiate. Brand managers, however, would do well to anticipate the inevitable pushback that results when consumers are overwhelmed with choices and constantly challenged by the outlandish and the unusual. After all, a name is only going to be unexpected the first time it's heard.

One wine label that has successfully set itself apart despite shelves being chock full of other options is the popular Yellowtail brand. Rather than adopting standard wine naming conventions that emphasize the vineyard, the terroir, the family or the region, this Australian import identifies itself solely with the parent brand name and the varietal.

Saving the name from having to do it all, the brand relies on its voice and visual identity to tell the rest of the story. And what does Yellowtail have to say, exactly? "We are a fun adult brand perfect for those deliciously quiet moments or laughfilled evenings with friends. Cheers!" . . . a pretty easy – and simple – proposition to remember.

Consumers can be notoriously difficult to pin down, and tastes – whether they are for alcohol, cosmetics, cars or clothes – are shifting and transforming all the time. While new brands are constantly being introduced and existing brands updated to meet this ongoing demand for variety, it's worth noting that the consumer's capacity to absorb it all is limited. In other words, there is such a thing as too much choice.

In categories that have become complicated and difficult to navigate because of the limitless options available, simplicity can suddenly become the most attractive option of all—even when I want it to be customized solely for me—and have people coming back over and over again asking for just "The Red."



Paola Norambuena

Paola Norambuena is Interbrand's Executive Director of Verbal Identity, North America. She is passionate about language and believes it is a powerful tool that impacts behavior and helps brands create an emotional connection with customers, employees, and key stakeholders.

Combining her experience in communications, brand strategy, and ideation, Paola helps her clients harness the power of language in compelling new ways, through naming, voice, messaging, and creative writing—verbal identity strategies that help bring brands to life.

