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## Would You Buy Xylitol? Why Some Names Scare Us

By Jeffrey Kluger

Remember the Volkswagen Scirocco? Didn't think so. Ever go out of your way to shop for Xylitol? Not lately, right? And it's a pretty safe bet you don't know too many people named Eleutheria.

It's not just that all of these names are a nuisance to spell and a mouthful to pronounce — though they are. It's that they strike us as downright dangerous. That, at least, is the conclusion of a new study published in the journal *Psychological Science* — and it's a study that ought to give pause to any manufacturer with a product to brand or parent with a baby to name. ([See the top 10 medical breakthroughs of 2008.](#))

It's no secret that people like shorthand names. Bartholomew almost always becomes Bart, Alexander gets squeezed down to Alex and Margaret — inexplicably — turns into Peggy. Coca-Cola had barely dented the national consciousness before it was compressed to a short and sweet Coke. Ditto the National Biscuit Co., which sounds like a place that manufactures dog chew toys — until you abbreviate it to the scrumptious Nabisco.

But what psychologists couldn't determine for sure is why we're so drawn to brevity. Is it nothing more than laziness — why master Salvatore when Sal will do? — or is something else involved? To study that, University of Michigan psychologists Norbert Schwarz and Hyunjin Song devised a test. ([Read "Are Direct-to-Consumer Drug Ads Doomed?"](#))

Recruiting a sample group of students, the psychologists presented each participant with a list of what they said were food additives but were in fact dreamed-up words that simply had a chemical sound to them. All of the names were 12 letters long, but not all of them were equally easy to pronounce — running from the relatively phonetic Magnalroxate to the tongue-cramping Hnegripitrom. The students were then told to rank the additives according to how dangerous they believed they were to consume. As the researchers suspected, the more challenging it was to say a chemical's name, the more novel — and less safe — it was thought to be.

Schwarz and Song then repeated the study with a new group of students and a new group of words. This time, the subjects were told that the invented names belonged not to food additives but to amusement-park rides — something for which an element of danger is often part of the appeal. The results were similar: a ride with a name like the Chunta was perceived to be a less dangerous choice than one named the Vaiveahtoishi. But the Vaiveahtoishi was also described as likely to be more exciting. The lesson for marketers is obvious. ([Read "Getting Closer to a Flu Supervaccine."](#))

"Insurance companies and food manufacturers may value safety, and easy-to-process names would appeal to their consumers more," says Song. "Adventure-travel packages and risky sports such as bungee jumping might want to use harder names." When a product like the Scirocco folds, it might have been done in not just by the nonintuitive pronunciation of the name (shi-*rock*-o), but also by its definition: a hot desert wind. That's a

double-dose of danger that could simply be too much for safety-conscious consumers. ([See TIME's special report on the environment.](#))

Names don't have to be difficult to seem dangerous, of course; sometimes manufacturers earn their menacing rep rightly. There's nothing inherently scary about names like Morris or Philip, but flip them around and stick them together, and pretty soon you're thinking about lung cancer. The Altria Group, on the other hand — which is the new corporate handle by which Philip Morris prefers to be known — means nothing at all, and that is precisely the idea.

Still, the research does suggest that when you start out with a complicated name, you have a steeper hill to climb, and that goes for abbreviations and initials too — something that Wall Street, which sells what may now be the most dangerous products around, might want to keep in mind. Schwarz cites a 2006 study in which investigators found that on the first day of trading, newly issued stocks with simple ticker symbols like KAR sold better than those with less pleasing ones, like RDO. "While the authors did not argue about risk perception," he says, "I believe risk may be underlying the effect."

And what about the baby-naming issue? Names fall in and out of vogue, and there are a lot that have probably been shelved for good — your Fidels, Benitos and Osamas, for example. But what about blameless names that are hard to get out but may be worth the effort? Eleutheria, after all, is a Greek name that means free. The bad news for kids whose parents couldn't keep it simple is that uncommon monikers do present problems — at least at first. "People may not necessarily be perceived as more dangerous," Song says. "But if all you know is their name, they may seem riskier to approach or hire."

That, happily, changes as you get to know the person behind the name. Philip Morris may not deserve a second chance, but Guillermo and Fiametta certainly do.

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