



When familiarity breeds brand confusion

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Have you ever been mistaken for someone else who happened to share your name? Perhaps you answered a call that confused you until you figured out that’s what was happening. You both laughed and hung up with no damage done.

But what if the confusion wasn’t about your name, but the name of your company? A prime prospect reached out to do business with you and wound up giving their order to an entirely different company. That company is in your industry, performing strikingly similar activities, operating with the same name, but located in another state. Your prospect found them because your website addresses were also nearly identical. You found out about it when you tried to sell to the prospect after the fact.

The real twist? You didn’t even know the other company existed.

It’s more common than you might assume, and for several decades, both companies could operate separately and never knew the other existed. Their customers would only know the company that was closest to them. Oh, it’s possible both might show up in one of the trade directories that were common once upon a time, but since you did business in different places, nobody would have thought twice about it. Then along came the transition to digital commerce, when many companies discovered the name and image they assumed was unique really wasn’t.

That’s especially true for companies whose names are somewhat generic. For example, many local business owners adopt names such as Quality Manufacturing Solutions, confident they’re the only company in their area by that name. But a quick Google search will identify companies with the same business name everywhere — perhaps even in other parts of their home state.

You say that doesn’t matter to you because people know who you are or don’t do business outside a fairly small geographic area? You’re right to some degree, but research shows everyone is using the web to research, even at a local level. If your website doesn’t make your differentiation clear, you’ll be out of contention before you even realized a prospect was considering you.

Like it or not, having the same name as others in your industry will create confusion among customers and prospects. If they’re looking for you online, the search engine they use may not realize they want the Indiana company you run, versus the Michigan business that shares your name.

Your company’s reputation may also be tainted by customers’ unsatisfying experiences with the other companies. For example, if a customer buys a shoddy product from the other company, they may associate you with their disappointment and refuse to do business. Plus, in this era of online reviews, a potential buyer might see a negative review of the other company and automatically assume it refers to you.

If all that doesn’t concern you, what’s going to happen to your business if another with aggressive plans for national growth trademarks their name? You may be forced to rebrand your company or find yourself in an expensive legal battle in another state. Doesn’t it make sense to trademark your name (and symbol, if applicable) to avoid this in the future?

The issue underscores the value of developing and consistently using unique branding and messaging to help you stand out from the competition and clearly communicate to your prospects what you do and how you’re different. Your company is unique, and your website and other communications tools should reflect that. You can’t count on customers and prospects to do the differentiating for you — and why should they? If you can’t define why people should do business with you, they won’t be able to, either.

Review and verify your logos, taglines, colors, messaging, and website design. They are distinct and clearly set your business apart from your competitors. Protect your investment in those tools by obtaining trademark and copyright protection as appropriate. Keep everything consistent, from your website to any advertising you do, to golf shirts and anything else with your company name. Be especially careful when it comes to extending your brand into new markets and marketplaces to ensure you’re not getting dangerously close to someone else.

Ensure that your messaging is clear and consistent, and that all your marketing materials, social media profiles, and your website content convey the advantages your customers enjoy when doing business with you. It’s also important to keep your messaging up to date so it reflects the most current view of your business and what you do.

Not sure what to do next? Having a marketing partner conduct a brand assessment can be invaluable. At the very least, after you finish reading this, spend some time searching for your company online. If your business name is truly unique, you may be fortunate. But more likely, you’ll be surprised at the number of companies with similar or even identical names. If so, you need to give serious thought to protecting your company’s name and brand before someone else undoes your reputation.

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PERSPECTIVES



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