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Folks at Brand X



by

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Pick up any current writers magazine and you'll see them, dozens of small ads from big companies telling you not to "misuse" their names in your fiction. If they had their way, we'd all be writing lines like, " 'Give me a Coca-Cola™ brand soft drink, please,' said Bob" and "I had to dodge flocks of Roller Blade™ brand in-line skaters as I strolled the beach-front sidewalk."

The companies have their reasons, to be sure. As an example, they like to cite the case of the word aspirin. "Aspirin" used to be a brand name for acetylated salicylic acid, owned by the Bayer company. But it seems "boy I need an acetylated salicylic acid right now!" was too much of a mouthful for most people, so the name Aspirin (big A) became common parlance. It became so common, in fact, that it degenerated into a generalized term. As a result, Bayer lost its exclusive ownership of the word, and anyone producing acetylated salicylic acid tablets could market and advertise them as aspirin (small a).

This is no small thing to the various corporations that have billions of dollars invested in their brand names.

That, however, is their problem. As writers, we must reflect the world as it is, not as Big Business would like it to be. The reality of our modern existence is that brand names are ubiquitous. They are stamped on our shoes, our slacks, our shirts, our hats. They are emblazoned on the sides of busses and buildings. They litter our magazines and newspapers, invade every television and radio broadcast. They blaze in night-piercing neon scrawls twenty feet high. They have replaced the once place-specific names of our sports arenas -- instead of Denver's McNichols Arena (named for a former mayor of the city) we now have the Pepsi Center. One can no longer merely watch the Orange Bowl on New Year's Day, one must now watch the FedEx Orange Bowl. And just try walking down any street in the industrialized world without encountering a single Big Mac or Starbucks' Frappuccino.

And much as it may irritate corporate lawyers, people in the real world do use words like "rollerblading" and "xeroxing."

The choice that we are faced with as writers is whether or not to reflect this in our writing.

It depends on what you're trying to accomplish in your work.

Some reasons TO use brand names:

1. Brand names are, as I've said, pervasive. They are every bit as much a fact of everyday life in most of the industrialized world today as is the air we breathe. Including brand names can infuse a degree of realism into a story. I find this especially useful when writing horror, specifically because the supernatural element will inevitably stretch my readers' suspension of disbelief. By dropping in the occasional familiar brand name, I ground

my story more solidly in the familiar, banal world -- thereby giving my characters' lives a shade more believability while at the same time making the supernatural element feel all that much more intrusive.

Even if you don't write this kind of fiction, you may find that using brand names in your work lends plausible familiarity to your characters and settings. After all, readers can immediately relate to characters who use the same products they have in their kitchens and bathrooms.

2. Brand names add a quality of specificity. Saying that Lisa drinks sparkling water is generally less evocative than saying she drinks Perrier. Describing a character as driving a Chevette is a good deal more specific than simply writing that he drives a compact car. And just as it's usually better to give readers a "willow" rather than settle for a plain old "tree", writing "CK1" rather than just "aftershave" makes a description all that much more complete.

3. Familiar brand names can help define characters. The reader is likely to have different expectations of a man who wears Armani than they will of a guy dressed in clothes from K-Mart (expectations that the writer could play with by, say, making the fellow in the K-Mart blue-light specials a corporate CEO). Someone who drives a Harley is likely to be greeted differently than someone who rides a Vespa.

4. Some brand names can play a big part in establishing the timeframe of a story. A kid engrossed in a game on his Play Station II is instantly planted in the late 1990s or after; a kid lost in a game on his Atari is probably coming of age during the early part of the Reagan administration. This can also have the added benefit of striking a cord among readers who fondly associate those brand names with certain times in their own lives -- evoking a sense of nostalgia without lapsing into sappy sentimentality.

Some reasons NOT to use brand names:

1. There are times when it may be best not to lock a story into the ordinary world. For one of my own tales, I wanted the setting to be "no particular place at no particular time" -- a sort of archetypal film noir city that could exist almost anywhere in the United States at almost any time from the 1930s to the not-too-distant future. This was in line with the story's mythic sensibilities, and any brand names would have seriously disrupted this mood.

2. Along these same lines, you may prefer to leave some details vague. Perhaps you'd rather simply write "perfume" and let the reader fill in the type with his or her imagination. While for the most part I advocate specificity, generalization can certainly serve a useful purpose.

3. As noted above, brand names are sometimes specific to a certain era. You may not want to pin your story's timeframe down, especially by making references that will become dated before the work is even published.

4. You may not want to turn your work into yet another ad for various products. They can complain about misuse of their names all they like, but I can't help believing that those big companies are thrilled every time their trademarked names are mentioned -- further evidence of how deeply imbedded in our lives their products have become.

5. If your fiction revolves heavily around a certain company or product, you will probably want to invent your own brand names. For one thing, this will help you avoid any potential legal action -- you don't want a big pharmaceutical company suing you because your fiction involves a serial killer who goes about his business by poisoning their product. Even if the company lost the suit, you'd probably be out a lot of money and time. And if they could prove that your story scared people away from the product in question, they'd likely have a good case against you.

Furthermore, fictionalizing a product gives you greater freedom in writing about it -- you can invent your own marketing, your own sleazy CEOs, your own history of takeovers and corporate wheedling.

In the end, the decision of whether or not to use trademarked brand names in your fiction is entirely yours. Don't let those magazine ads dissuade you -- they exist as much so that companies can prove they have taken steps to protect their trademarks as to actually prevent you from using those names. As writers, we have the right -- even, arguably, the duty -- to represent the world as it is. If that means we have characters reaching for the kleenex and slapping on band-aids, so be it.

For better and worse, the corporate world has succeeded in burning their brand names into our collective consciousness. If the fruits of their labors spring up in the fiction we write, they have no one to blame but themselves.



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