



A rose by any other name...

Sound Branding or Audio Branding?... or Sonic Branding?... or even Acoustic Branding?

by John A. Groves

Now, I don't want to argue with the bard, but I think having the right name is important. It seems the companies that spend millions every year having new names thought up for their products would also disagree with him. To paraphrase Mr. Shakespeare, „would not a baby by any other name be just as cuddly?“ Maybe so, but the impulse to cuddle a baby called Adolph or Gaddafi might be understandably a little dampened. Let us not forget that the character that coined this phrase, Juliet Capulet, was out of her mind with love for Romeo. This chemical imbalance called love can make people believe anything they want to, so I would not take this quote as gospel.

Indeed, we have our memories and experiences that connect to certain words and build associations. My theory is that a rose that looks and smells like a rose but is called a Deadly Nightshade, a Bumwiper or Baby-strangler would, in fact not be perceived as smelling so sweet.

Coming to the point, with "Sound Branding", it is a little different. Of course this new discipline needs a name that is worthy of its power and potential, but it only needs one name. It should not be watered down by having twenty names.

Besides, it is always confusing when different people talk of one and the same thing using different terms. Especially in an emerging technology where the terminology is in the process of establishing itself. Wouldn't it be better if the initiators of these terms put their heads together and agreed? Ah, life should be so easy! But we must not forget that any science or technology with a commercial application will usually try to protect its knowledge as its prime assets. And rightly so, especially when it entails proprietary routines or systems that have taken a lot of energy and resources to develop. Usually, companies will

develop snappy little names for modules or tools which will inevitably be shortened to even snappier acronyms, with added little "tm" signs.

The hope is, of course, to patent or copyright the system or information - which is unfortunately not always possible. Each company hopes that its terminology and nomenclature will be the one that will be adopted, thereby giving them a competitive edge as first mover.

Why then, do I refer to Sound Branding when others still talk of Audio, Acoustic or even Sonic Branding? Well, to tell the truth, when I first started talking about the strategic use of sound and music in branding at the end of the 70s, I first referred to it as Audio Branding - Audio Logo and so on.

When we refined our methodology at the beginning of 1998, I was tempted to refer to what we do as Music Branding, but then we got a whole row of assignments which involved sounds in a whole spectrum of non-musical aspects such as man/machine audio interfaces, Key Sound Elements and Sonic Mnemonics.

Let's take a quick look at the terms "Audio", "Sonic", "Acoustic" and "Sound". These terms are currently being used interchangeably, but what is the actual meaning of the words?

The term "Audio" refers to hearability and has more of an electronic feel, especially when sound is recorded, transmitted or electronically reproduced. "Sonic" has more of a sound-wave/frequencies character while "Acoustic", while also being receptive (based on hearing), has more to do with the physical properties of sound in air and space.

Here are my associations of the terms:

Sound

The generic term for everything hearable - be it music, sound effects, ambient noise or the human voice. Although it is all encompassing, it suggests the source and the event itself, as opposed to the listening or hearing perspective.

Audio

The electronic reproduction of sound, especially recorded.

Acoustic

The physical properties of a sound. Properties of a room, a space or an instrument. Can mean without the aid of amplification.

Sonic

The waves themselves - the qualities of sound referring its frequencies. e.g. bats, Concord as supersonic and medical Ultra-sonic machines.

Auditory / Auditive

Hearable as a connotation from "Listening". The structure of sound from the recipient perspective.

If we use Google as the barometer of what's happening now, then "Audio" is ahead with 30.500

hits with "Acoustic" limping in at the end with 2.300 hits- (UK Nov 2006).

Nevertheless, the term "Sound" works best in all connotations and is thus semantically most suitable as the umbrella term for everything hearable.

"Audio" is also good, although not really useable for anything mechanical or live – and is nowhere near as flexible as "sound". "Sonic" is largely associated with the speed of sound, and the hearing of bats. Curiously enough, the term "Sonic Branding" was "hip" in the UK during the late 90's but has since lost ground.

Anyway, we decided that, for us, "Sound" should be the collective term of all forms of hearable events. Hence - "Sound Branding". A number of other specialists have in the meantime followed suit, and the term "Sound Branding" is catching on.

London tradesmen used to have a little device to introduce themselves with their name and their profession - like „Groves is the name - Sound is the game!" It doesn't quite work with the other terms.

And so we made our game part of our name. Which might be another reason why we like the term „Sound Branding" so much!

John A. Groves
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