

Transmedia Marketing Titles Have Personalities

The name or title is one of the most important branding and marketing decisions you can make for your media or entertainment project. No surprise, because it creates the first and most lasting impression. That's why expectant parents agonize over a child's name. It can be the difference between being cool and being bullied.

The name translates your project's internal brand essence into its external brand positioning. And it encapsulates all the brand stands for in just a few simple words. Naming products—cars, paint colors, food, and movies—is a multi-billion dollar business, rooted in social science, psychology, and marketing artistry.

Titling entertainment properties on any media platform follows some basic rules. To build a relationship with audiences, it must stand out and telegraph what the project's about. The "perfect" title is descriptive, but not boring; memorable, but not cliché; clever, but not alienating; provocative, but not inappropriate. It should never promise more than it can deliver. To achieve all this, it should possess a number of critical attributes in the Good Title Checklist, which is fully outlined in Chapter 10, "What's in a Name?" of *Transmedia Marketing: From Film and TV to Games and Digital Media*. Ideally, your title:

- Supports brand essence
- Is meaningful
- Is simple and accessible
- Is fresh and unique
- Is evocative
- Is timeless

Like audience psychographic profiles and brand archetypes, titles can take on personas. If you look carefully, you'll see some distinct title personas in entertainment and media that are captured in these personality-driven categories. Developed by *Transmedia Marketing's* author, Anne Zeiser, these personalities support The Good Title Checklist attributes. Recognizing and applying these personas can help you find a strong name for your media project.

A great place to start is the most straightforward title persona, the **Explainer**. It's both "Meaningful" and "Simple and Accessible." Samuel L. Jackson threatened to leave *Snakes on a Plane* when director David Ellis planned to change the title to *Pacific Air 121*. The star said the title is why he read the script in the first place. This Explainer title communicates the film's premise and is provocative. No doubt, Jackson loved saying, "I've had it with these motha****ing snakes on this motha****ing plane!" Other Explainer films are *Star Wars*, *When Harry Met Sally*, *Finding Nemo*, *Cars*, and *Murder on the Orient Express*.

Friends may be one of the best-titled TV shows of all time because it says what and whom it's about (it's also a Who). As a universal concept, everyone can relate to it. Other TV Explainers are *Modern Family*, *Survivor*, *Planet Earth*, and *The Office*. Some game Explainers are *Dungeons*

and *Dragons*, *Grand Theft Auto*, and *Count the Bugs*, and a Web site example is *Coollest Gadgets.com*. If you want to take a “just the facts Jack” approach, try the Explainer.

Then there’s the **Intriguer**. Its mysterious and thought-provoking nature pays off on the “Evocative” and “Fresh and Unique” titling attributes. For example, *Black Swan* is both sexy and ominous. When it works, it is also “Meaningful,” hence very powerful. Films love this persona. Some are *Psycho*, *Jaws*, *Clockwork Orange*, *Pulp Fiction*, *The Devil Wears Prada*, and *Inconvenient Truth*. Television Intriguers include *The Sopranos*, *The Walking Dead*, and *Jeopardy*. Intriguer games include *Angry Birds*, *Portal*, and *Minecraft*; and some Intriguer Web sites, *The Onion.com* and *The DailyBeast.com*. If you want to entice and engage your audience, this persona’s for you. But beware of being too opaque.

The next title persona is the **Who**. It delivers on both the “Simple” and “Meaningful” titling attributes, and puts all its eggs in one basket. This persona bets on the valid idea that people are deeply attracted to characters. But, if you don’t already know and like the character, it can be a risky route. The shorter the name, the better. Whos are popular in film and include *Godzilla*, *Annie Hall*, and *Bambi*. *Ellen* is an unusual story of a television program changing to a Who title after it already had been established. The ABC comedy was called *These Friends of Mine* in season one and changed to *Ellen* in season two. Good call. Other television Whos are *Girls*, *Dexter*, and *SpongeBob Squarepants*.

The story of how the game Pac-Man got its name is an interesting mix of two cultures and evolving meanings. In 1981, a Namco employee created the dot-eating concept from a pizza with a slice missing. The game’s name, *Pakkuman*, was inspired by the Japanese onomatopoeia, “paku-paku,” describing an eating sound like “chomp.” It was then changed from Puck Man to Pac-Man when it hit the U.S. due to concern that kids would vandalize arcade cabinets by making the P into an F. So, a Who game title was born from a sound. Another signature Who game is *Super Mario Bros.* and a Who Web site is *Oprah.com*. If you have a compelling enough main character, then maybe he, she or it can carry your title.

Like person, place also can be important in titling, hence the **Where** title persona, which also supports the “Simple” and “Meaningful” attributes. It has the same pitfalls as the Who, but place is usually less captivating than character. Some top Where films are *Casablanca*, *Manhattan*, and *The Asphalt Jungle*. Examples from television include *The Office*, *Nashville*, and *Sesame Street*. *The World of Warcraft* is a game Where. If the location in your project can translate from geography to state of mind, then consider this persona.

Next is the **Double Entendre**. It has a double meaning or uses play on words. It strongly supports the “Fresh and Unique” naming attribute. Double Entendre films include *Prometheus*, referring both to the name of the ship and the Titan God that created mankind, as well as *Die Hard*, *Dark Knight*, and *Gravity*. A prime television example is *Grey’s Anatomy*, using the character’s last name and Henry Gray’s classic 1918 medical text “Gray’s Anatomy of the Human Body.” Other TV examples are *Mad Men*, *Arrested Development*, and *Weeds*. *Halo* and *Bloody Good Time* are game Double Entendres. If you have two project themes that a single title can telegraph, then this is a great persona, but like the Intriguer, is difficult to achieve.

The **Code** persona is a favorite for action films and procedurals. It uses letters or numbers to represent words or key ideas. It plays on the smart, clever, and cool aspects of the “Fresh and Unique” attribute. But, because it’s so inside baseball and cliquey, it can be an instant turn off. To work, it must get word-of-mouth resonance. Numbers combined with recognizable words, do better. Film Code personas are *Fahrenheit 451*, *Se7en*, and *GATTACA*. Some television code examples include *NCIS*, *\$#*! My Dad Says*, and *Beverly Hills 90210*; and a Code Web movement is 350.org. If numbers or letters unlock the big idea hidden in your media property, then consider this persona.

Then there’s the **Tease**. It’s a title persona that pushes the “Evocative” attribute, by being provocative. It appeals to the more prurient desire for sex – a proven strategy in marketing and media. Film Teases include *Octopussy*, *The Beaver*, and *Spank the Monkey*. Television examples include *Sex in the City*, *Wife Swap*, and *Gossip Girl*. Some games Teaser examples are *Ballz* and *Blow It*; and Web sites, *trueconfessions.com* and *Penisland.net* (Pen Island). If titillation is how you want to grab your audience’s attention, use the Teaser, but be sure you can deliver on the expectation.

An even more lowbrow title persona, **Dumb and Dumber**, is named after the film that best embodies the concept. This persona takes the humor in “Fresh and Unique” and targets it to a specific audience. Titles in this persona are usually in the slapstick comedy or reality genres. Other Dumb and Dumber films include *Herbie Fully Loaded*, *Legally Blond*, and *Meet the Fockers*. Television examples include *Bridezillas* and *Hillbilly Handfishin’*; and a game example, *Leisure Suit Larry*. If your project is about having silly fun and you’re proud of it, then go with this persona.

Finally, there’s the **Self-fulfilling Prophecy** persona. It pays off on the accessible part of the “Simple and Accessible” attribute. Because people respond to positive reinforcement, a title that makes audiences feel good might generate the same positive outcome for your property. This persona has worked well in film for *Life Is Beautiful*, *Little Miss Sunshine*, and *Hope Springs*. Television titles in this persona include *I Love Lucy*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, and *Happy Days* (which was in the schedule as *New Family in Town*). Some sample Web sites are *MrPositive.com* and *ihavebackbone.com*. If your project is life affirming and optimistic, then this persona may fit the bill. Who knows, maybe it will propel your project to success. Just be careful not to be too schlocky.

Now that you’ve “met” these title personas, check out other real-world entertainment and media titles to see if you can determine which personality they fit, or, even create your own personas.

© 2015 Anne Zeiser



Companion content to *Transmedia Marketing: From Film and TV to Games and Digital Media*