What Should Time Warner Name Its TV and Film Division After Split?

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In spinning off its publishing unit, Time Warner has a decision to make, branding consultants say: Create a new identity for the remaining TV and film division or return to its roots.

Time Warner has several media brands to choose from to elevate to its corporate moniker, including Warner Bros., HBO and Turner Broadcasting, which boasts TV networks like CNN, Cartoon Network, TBS and TNT.

With Time Inc. out of the picture, the company has reached a fork-in-the-road moment, said Christian Turner, director of naming at Siegel & Gale, a global brand strategy and customer experience firm.

Time Warner could use the opportunity to reinvigorate the Warner name, he said, noting that Warner is a valuable name that carries a deep history, with ties to Warner Music Group, The WB network and the movie studio.

"There's equity in the Warner Bros. name, and the beloved movie studio solidified the notion of creating content for audiences generation after generation," said Chet Fenster, managing partner at MEC Entertainment. "From silent movies to talkies to TV to cable to digital, they've innovated as time goes by. Thus, they'll probably pick something as simple as Warner Bros. Media."

Mr. Turner contends the Warner name has lost some of its edge after the spinoff of several properties and that this could be a chance to redefine what the Warner name means in today's media landscape. "They can build meaning and power into the Warner name again and decide what it means to a new generation," he said.

It's unlikely Time Warner will elevate the HBO brand to represent the entire portfolio since the name is associated with a premium brand that has a very specific audience and message, Mr. Turner said.

"Chances are, they will settle on an awkward hyphenation of the entities that over time will flow off the tongues of consumers and viewers the way Apple and Coca Cola do," said James Martone, director of broadcast media at G2 USA. "Maybe it would be an all-encompassing tag, like Warner-HBO Communications or The Warner Group."

But Mr. Fenster warns against such combinations. "While it would be nice to include another business unit into the corporate moniker, Warner Turner just sounds awkward," Mr. Fenster said. "It would certainly make Ted [Turner] happy, but people stopped caring about his feelings a long time ago."

Time Warner should also steer clear of an acronym of letter scramble, Mr. Fenster advised. "WBHT sounds like the call letters for the Baltimore TV station in 'Hairspray.'"

Time Warner could also create a completely new name that's evocative and reflects the changing landscape, Mr. Turner said.
But Mr. Fenster said a wholesale name change would be tough, and typically isn't done unless there is a major scandal. "It really depends on what Time Warner's goal is as an organization - if they are looking to completely reinvent themselves and new name would signal that change," said Denise Lee Yohn, who has provided marketing and branding consulting to brands like Sony and Burger King.

Of course, there's also potentially the option to keep the name as is.

"If it were up to me, I would leave the name unchanged, in spite of the Time Inc. split," Mr. Martone said. "The name Time Warner has gained almost iconic status. Unless they are forced to change that, why would they? Misnomer as it may be, if the name remained unchanged, it would only be one of many. Greenland is not green, the steel mills left the Steel City years ago, and 7-11s have been open 'round the clock for decades."

Whatever name Time Warner choses for its TV and film unit, it should avoid terms like "channel" and "television," advises Kevin Aratari, exec VP-entertainment marketing at mOcean. "Their TV and film business should learn from Time Inc.'s recent past and find a name and position that reflects the future of entertainment."

This isn't the first name-change for Time Warner. The company added AOL to its corporate name in 2001, but two years later decided to drop it.

In 2009, Time Warner spun off its cable-systems business, Time Warner Cable, as an independent company. In the wake of that spinoff, Time Warner Cable evaluated its brand name in 2010 under an effort dubbed "Project Mercury." In the end, Time Warner Cable decided to keep its name, but introduced a new logo. Time Warner Cable has the right to use the "Time Warner" name forever at no cost under a licensing agreement struck with Time Warner before the cable company's spinoff.