

improved?

BY HOLLIE SHAW

The New Democratic Party will find out what's in a name in Halifax this weekend when the fate of its 48-year-old appellation is put to an historic vote at the party's national convention.

It's not as if the federal NDP's brand image hasn't brightened in recent years, but the party may be thinking it could make itself even sexier with a dash of Obama cool. It's even invited Betsy Myers, U.S. President Barack Obama's chief operations officer, to speak at the convention. And it's floating a proposed name — the Democratic Party of Canada.

But brand strategists, while agreeing the party's image is a bit stale, are skeptical whether or not a new moniker is a positive strategic choice for the party, forged in Depression-era 1932 as the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation.

"When I first heard the party rationale from those who advocated the change, namely that it makes sense because they are no longer a 'new' party, my first reaction was one of disbelief," said Lawrence Bernstein, managing partner at BC3 Strategies Inc. of Toronto, a brand-development consultancy.

"It suggests to me that somebody was just looking for reasons to just change it. The [historical] idea is not that the party was 'new,' but its approach to democracy was, and it was supposed to be different from an older approach to social democracies."

Organizational name changes generally arise out of clear necessity, Mr. Bernstein said.

For example, when Andersen Consulting was renamed Accenture Ltd. after it cut all business ties with former parent company Arthur Andersen LLP in 2000 — or to mark an ideological shift that would conflict with the older name whereby retaining the old name would inhibit future direction.

"I don't think a political party should change its name unless it changes itself," Mr. Bernstein said.

(The New Democratic Party came about in 1961 when Tommy Douglas, later known as the father of Medicare, took the helm of the federal party after the CCF posted a dismal showing in the 1958 election and the party wanted to reinvent its image.)

Ted Matthews, founding partner at Instinct Brand Equity Coaches, said the left-wing party's name is well established, but not necessarily as the New Democratic Party.

"To many people, the party is much more widely known as the NDP [rather] than the New Democratic Party," he said. "I am betting there is a whole generation of people who do not know what 'NDP' even stands for."

While it has long been in vogue to shorten brand names either officially or colloquially to acronyms, Mr. Matthews generally cautions brands to shy away from starting up the practice.

He said the public attaches less meaning to a series of letters. But when the acronym is better established than the brand name, it might not be smart to tweak it. "Nobody [in the public] dissects a name like that anymore; nobody wants to call New York 'York' because it's been around for hundreds of years."

With Obama-mania still holding strong, it might look clever to adopt a new name that treads perilously close to the ruling party of our southern neighbours, said Glenda Rissman of brand consultancy q30 Design Inc. But it might not look so bright if and when the party falls out of power or gets an unpopular leader, she said.

"The U.S. Democratic Party owns that name, and does it really make sense for [the NDP] to align themselves with a party that is not too similar to them ideologically?" she said. "We tell clients that if they are going to do a name change, there has to be a fundamental change and you want to substantiate that change to the public."

"A name change is not something that is strictly cosmetic," Ms. Rissman said. "A name lasts much longer than a logo, which is modernized and changed every few years."

Patricia McQuillan, president of the consulting firm Brand Matters, worked as a vice-president of marketing in wealth management at Royal Bank of Canada when it was in the process of rebranding to RBC. Names, she said, have an emotional resonance with executives of organizations and the public, and that makes name-change debates among the most charged of organizational exercises.

"There is subjectivity; there is word association

The New Democratic Party is thinking of changing its monicker and branding gurus are thinking that's not such a good idea.

— emotionally, [reacting to a name] is like reacting to a colour," she said. "Why you like it and why you don't can be difficult to articulate. Senior executives can talk about major corporate issues that are strategic in a day, and an issue like renaming can go on for months and months."

As it is, she said, organizations put too much of a marketing focus on naming as part of a typical branding exercise. "Ultimately it's what you do with that name and how you use it that counts: the service and experience you offer as an organization."

"Your brand strategy and market positioning is essentially a promise that is aspirational and credible and motivating and relevant for consumers — and that is the case whether you call yourself Google or Royal Bank of Scotland."

Another drawback for the potential change, some have noted, could arise from the effect of changing the existing French acronym, NPD. The last two letters are sometimes used by francophones as a slur against homosexuals, and dropping the "N" might draw further attention to that.

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