

Mega-brands can't buy everything

Ameritrust gets turned down from branding a ballpark; McDonald's can't get the dictionary to positively spin the definition of 'McJob.'

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NEXT TIME YOU fret that global corporations such as Microsoft, Starbucks and Wal-Mart rule the world, consider this: Even as they overtake desktops, street corners and mini-malls, mega-brands can't own the English language.

Two events this week show how difficult it can be for companies to control their brands. First, after a year of trying, the Texas Rangers finally succeeded in dumping their ballpark's name sponsor, Ameritrust, after the struggling mortgage giant laid off a large number of employees.

Then McDonald's announced that it would petition the Oxford English Dictionary to change its definition of "McJob." The dictionary currently defines the popular term as "an unstimulating, low-paid job with few prospects, especially one created by the expansion of the service sector." David Fairhurst, "chief people officer" for McDonald's in Northern Europe, called for a new definition to "reflect a job that is stimulating, rewarding and offers genuine opportunities for career progression and skills that last a lifetime."

Presumably, Fairhurst is semi-joking. Unless he's some kind of Orwellian villain, he can't possibly believe he can, by decree, get people to hear "McJob" and think "awesome gig!" Even as companies spend millions splashing their logos across T-shirts, stadiums and sitcoms, real-life events skew brand messages all the time — in bad times (Enron Field in Houston became Minute Maid Park) and good (mergers turned Pac Bell Park into SBC Park, then into AT&T Park). Executives grumble when trademarks slip into common usage — think of Kleenex, Xerox or Google — but that's always been part of the price of success.

Ameritrust, which has bigger problems than a sponsorship deal gone bad and probably won't mind not having to fork over \$75 million to the Rangers, backed off quietly. But McDonald's fights on, despite a spotty track record beating up on those nasty lexicographers. In 2003, former Chief Executive Jim Cantalupo flew into a rage when the definition of "McJob" popped up on a marketing webpage for Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary. Like Fairhurst, he wrote a scathing letter.

The result? "McJob" disappeared from Merriam-Webster's webpage — but kept its place in the dictionary. And, according to the lexicographers at the Oxford English Dictionary, its place in the English language.