

Branding Breathes New Life Into Technical Standards

The IEEE moves to brand its new standard for lithium-ion batteries



By Robert C. Sprung
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When asked to give an example of the benefits of branding, many of us would cite “Intel inside” – this simple phrase seems to connote quality and a positive customer experience more compelling and efficiently than a raft of technical specifications.

This is but one example of a growing trend uniting the worlds of branding and technology, with profound implications for both manufacturers and end-users – namely the branding of technical standards. In this case study, we look at the IEEE’s role in branding its standards – first through the work of third parties in applying trademarks to IEEE standards, then through a look at IEEE’s new branded standard for lithium-ion batteries, Livium. In each case, the addition of the brand has the potential to significantly increase market share as well as customer awareness and loyalty.

The Birth of a Trend

IEEE, one of the oldest and most respected technology standards organizations of the world, is also one of the best positioned to take advantage of the benefits of branding its standards. “A numbered standard such as 802.11 offers little in the way of legal trademark protection, and presents a real obstacle in terms of branding and memorability,” notes Claudio Stanzola, manager for standards intellectual property at IEEE.

IEEE was one of the pioneers in the standards-branding business – ironically being unaware of its role until after the fact. Its standards form the basis for four of the major branded standards currently on the market today – but in each case, a third party took the initiative and branded an existing IEEE standard.

The first example is Wi-Fi – the wireless networking standard based on IEEE’s landmark 802.11. One can hardly imagine a better illustration of the power of branding than the contrast between “802.11” and the memorable and compelling brand name “Wi-Fi.” The average consumer has no difficulty remembering Wi-Fi and even dropping it in cocktail-party conversation, while that same consumer may not have even heard of IEEE, let alone the designation 802.11.

But having the best technology may not be enough to take home all the marbles. Despite IEEE’s role in transforming most of our lives through wireless networking, the idea of branding this standard was conceived and implemented outside the IEEE, namely by the Wi-Fi Alliance. Founded in 1999, the Alliance claims to have 200 member companies, and has branded 1500 products with the Wi-Fi certification. The dollars to cover both certification testing and the licensing of the Wi-Fi trademark flow to independent testing laboratories and the Wi-Fi Alliance, but not to IEEE.



Firewire is another powerful brand based on an IEEE standard. Here, too, we can get a sense of the power that branding can bring to the world of technology by contrasting the imagery in the coined word “Firewire” with the technical jargon that underlies it (this from Apple’s Web site): “FireWire is a cross-platform implementation of the high-speed serial data bus – defined by the IEEE 1394-1995, IEEE 1394a-2000, and IEEE 1394b standards – that can move large amounts of data between computers and peripheral

devices.” The Firewire trademark and logo are owned by Apple Computer, and may be licensed by third parties. Apple currently charges no license fee, apparently seeing more value in high-speed dissemination of this powerful mark.

A similar story can be told about two other branded standards. WiMax, based on IEEE 802.16, relates to broadband wireless communication. The WiMax Forum (www.wimaxforum.org), unrelated to IEEE, has its own certification process. Similarly, Intel’s Centrino trademark – so powerfully linked with the chip maker through branding and advertising – is also based on IEEE’s 802.11 standard.

IEEE Brands Its Own Standard

Having seen its standards turned into brands like Centrino and Wi-Fi, IEEE realized that developing its own brands was a matter of great strategic importance. By developing a trademark along with a standard – or a single unit of a “branded standard” – IEEE could create immediate business benefits for its members, for itself, and ultimately for consumers. If IEEE failed to pursue the opportunity, the door would be open to multiple parties branding a standard, or for a given standard to be subdivided at the whim of third parties into multiple brands, all sources of potential brand dilution. By controlling its own brand, IEEE would also have greater control over the certification process, including the licensing of any trademark or logo related to the standard.

The first project came in the form of IEEE 1625, a standard for rechargeable batteries for mobile computers. With booming demand for long-life lithium-ion batteries, the organization’s members saw the need for a standard that set the stage for the manufacture of a new generation of batteries. Collaborating on the standard were 19 of the world’s major battery and computer companies, including Dell, Hewlett Packard, IBM, Motorola, National Semiconductor, Panasonic, Samsung, Sony, and Texas Instruments.

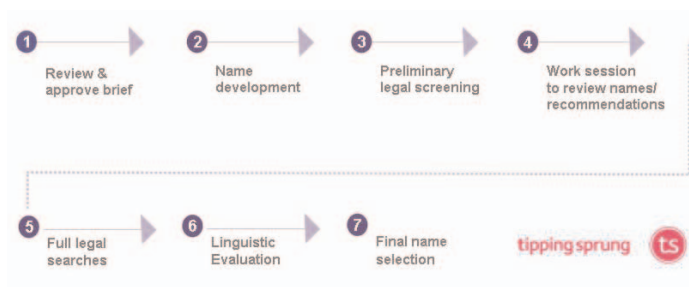
IEEE brought in TippingSprung, a Manhattan-based branding firm with a track record in brand strategy, brand naming, and graphic design for a wide range of technology companies. “We needed a

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branding partner who not only had the creative energy to devise a powerful new brand, but who also saw the strategic business benefits we were trying to achieve,” said Stanzola. “TippingSprung showed that a brand never exists in isolation, but must be part of a larger brand architecture – critical in our case, with our vast catalog of technical standards.” Martyn Tipping, director of brand strategy at TippingSprung and a veteran naming expert, worked closely with IEEE on the project. “When people think of a naming exercise, the project appears to be mostly a creative exercise – basically who can come up with a brilliant name.” But this is only one aspect of a complex process. “One of the reasons we wished to work with TippingSprung is their process-orientation,” noted Karen McCabe, marketing manager at IEEE. “It was a big epiphany that there was a real discipline around this activity. ‘Branding’ has the general aura of just the creative element, but having a real process allowed us to get beyond personal likes and dislikes.” The following flowchart gives a sense of the basic steps involved in a brand-naming project:



Given that the branded standard would have to gain acceptance among IEEE’s large constituency – its members as well as the huge population of end-users – getting the buy-in of a number of stakeholders in a structured way, throughout the branding process, was seen as indispensable to its success. “Otherwise we ran the risk of developing a name and identity that our members couldn’t live with,” noted McCabe.

A Brand is Born

After a rigorous process of name-generation, legal screening, and further buy-in among members, IEEE standard 1625 was finally given the trade name Livium. “The Livium name suggests lithium-ion batteries, but also implies ‘live’ power,” Tipping noted.

The process also includes international testing to ensure that a name is effective and nonoffensive around the world. One of the strongest contenders – LionHeart – was eliminated at this stage, since it happened to also be a major pop song in Japan, a key market for the standard. “We also wanted more of a techy name; in the end we didn’t want to have the name of an animal in our

standard brand,” said McCabe.

For IEEE, Livium marks a strategic shift from the world of numbered standards. “With branded technology standards like WiFi and Bluetooth becoming everyday terms, we have seen a shift in the role that standards play in people’s lives” notes IEEE’s Stanzola. “And strong, distinctive, brand names like Livium make it easier for consumers to understand and remember the many technology standards they deal with every day.”

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