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We Call it Brown. They Call It 'Weekend in the Country.'

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Sue Kim, color trend and forecast specialist at Valspar, says the company no longer has to “connect the color name with the general color reference.” Credit...Peter Hoffman for The New York Times

CHICAGO — If you heard the words “Tempest,” “Turbulence” and “Tornado Watch,” you might head for the basement — fast.

Paint manufacturers want you to head for the living room.

In a redoubled effort to capture consumers’ attention in this sputtering economic recovery, some paint companies are hoping to distinguish their brands with names that tell a story, summon a memory or evoke an emotion — even a dark one — as long as they result in a sale.

What they do not do is reveal the color.

“For a long time we had to connect the color name with the general color reference,” said Sue Kim, the color trend and forecast specialist for the Valspar paint company. “But now,” Ms. Kim added, “we’re exploring color names that are a representation of your lifestyle.”

Thus, Valspar, which once featured Apricot 1 through Apricot 6, now offers Weekend in the Country, a name that might put you in mind of an idyllic getaway or a Stephen Sondheim tune but that will not convey a specific hue. (For the record, it is the color of mud — perhaps not such a great weekend after all.)

Sherwin-Williams offers Synergy. From Ace Paint comes Hey There! Benjamin Moore has Old World Romance, all names that give new meaning to the term colorblind.

“Color names are marketing tools, meaning they help sell paint,” said Lyne Castonguay, merchandising vice president for paint at The Home Depot.



Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times

With home sales depressed, there is new urgency to that mission. The fortunes of interior paints (“architectural coatings,” in industry lingo) are tied to the housing market. Paint sales tumbled when the housing bubble burst, and while they edged up 6.7 percent last year over the previous year, they have not rebounded to the peak level of more than \$9 billion in 2007.

Even with a fresh coat of creativity — like fanciful names — sales could slow again, as more housing remains stalled in foreclosure, new construction sags and consumers face higher paint prices because of the rising costs of raw materials.

“Emotional color names in neutral shades and color combos are crucial for successful home sales,” Ms. Castonguay said, citing as examples Home Depot’s Behr Collection names like “Quietude,” “Rejuvenate” and “Cozy Cottage.”

Pete Appezzato, 36, who works in sales, was surveying the staggering number of paint chips at a Home Depot in New York City the other day. Many, he thought, are “just weird,” but he was not impervious to the appeal of names.

He first bought Crème Brûlée, a Martha Stewart color, because he liked the sound. But after trying it in his kitchen, he was not happy, and he painted over the room.

After his fourth try, he settled on colors that sounded decidedly upscale: Prestige for the walls and, for inside the cabinets, Polished Leather. He found that Polished Leather actually looked polished, and said happily that it reminded him of a leather bag he once owned.

In pursuit of emotional connections, some paint companies have swept aside even basic rules, including the one that said to avoid negative connotations.



“The Deck,” one of Valspar’s brainstorming rooms for colorists. Credit...Peter Hoffman for The New York Times

Martha Stewart offers Darkening Sky and Tempest. Benjamin Moore has Stormy Sky. Pantone has Turbulence and Tornado.

“These names might be disturbing to some,” said Lee Eiseman, executive director of Pantone. “But these are things that exist in nature.”

And then there is Dead Salmon, a taupe-like color from Farrow & Ball, the English paint company. Sarah Cole, the company’s marketing director, explained that the word “dead” in Britain means matte. Has the company considered dropping the “dead” for its American audience? No, Ms. Cole said. “It’s fun, and people pick up on it.” (The company also offers Arsenic.)

Executives at Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, whose 280 colors are sold through Home Depot, say they have spurned the narrative approach in favor of names that are based in reality: File Cabinet and Lunch Bag among them.

“They don’t need a long Harlequin romance of a title,” said Kevin Sharkey, executive creative director for Martha Stewart. “ ‘Pencil’ is enough.”

To avoid confusion, paint companies almost never retire old colors or reuse names. So customers must wade through an ever-expanding universe in which colors multiply and become less distinguishable. Benjamin Moore, for example, offers 3,300 colors. Valspar, which sells its paints through Lowe’s Home Improvement stores, has 3,500.

The sheer number and oddity of some of the names lead some consumers to suspect that paint companies are just pulling names out of thin air, but industry representatives say there is method to their madness.



Pete Appezato didn't like Crème Brûlée — the paint color in his kitchen, that is — and so he painted over it, several times.

Credit...Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times

At Valspar, located in a Chicago high-rise near O'Hare airport, colorists can meet in "vignette" rooms that encourage storytelling. One resembles an outside deck, replete with a porch chair and mural of Wrigley Field. Ms. Kim assigns the colorists homework, like browsing certain magazines and blogs. One, called colourlovers.com, allows users to create and share their own palettes; among more than one million offerings are I Feel Sorry for You and When Time Ran Out. They also watch movies and visit stores. And a few times a year, they head downtown for a big brainstorming session at a loft building called Catalyst Ranch and its brightly colored meeting spaces, which are intended to help employees think creatively.



Catalyst Ranch in Chicago.

The Valspar team begins with mind-stretching exercises, like puzzles, then Ms. Kim, 35, usually provides a few words to get the discussions rolling.

At a recent session to name a light green color, they started with this description: "Misty green; in motion; anticipation for next stop." She said this led to storytelling that prompted chatter about sightseeing in Europe, guidebooks and subway maps. It soon yielded a working title, to be refined at a later date: Metro at 5.

And what if the name makes no sense to the consumer?

"I am perfectly fine if a certain name gives them a perplexed, thoughtful moment," Ms. Kim said, "if the three-second glance gets us another five seconds as they pause to think, 'Why is that Metro at 5?' I think that's a good thing."

Taryn Look, 25, an actress, who was checking out Home Depot's Behr collection the other day, rolled her eyes at some of the names. "I wonder how much these people get paid," she mused, glancing at Genteel Lavender, a color she said she would rebrand My Gay Best Friend.

But she did pause at a color named Lightweight Beige, and soon she was telling a story about when her parents met. Her father told her mother that he liked her in beige, and so she swapped her once-colorful wardrobe for one that was all beige.

Ms. Look said she would rename the color My Mother, After She Met My Dad.