



Wacky job titles can help or hurt

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So you want to be Chief Marketing Ninja? Be careful

By Marty Orgel
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SAN FRANCISCO (MarketWatch) — Job titles can spell success or failure and the new century is generating a host of new and unusual job titles. That's important, consultants say, because a unique title really does give a person an advantage and helps generate additional interest if the title is part of a job posting.

Evangelist. Guru. Those are so stuck in the dot-com bust. These days try chief popsicle. Or chief executive pickle. And director of storytelling.

When people hear Rana DiOrio's title, chief executive pickle, "They almost universally smile," DiOrio said. She's the head of Little Pickle Press in Belvedere, Calif., "When asked 'why,' I say it's because I don't take myself too seriously."

"We get a lot of clients who want us to give them a name, and make them an honorary employee," said Felicia Hatcher, chief Popsicle at Feverish Ice Cream, in Miami, Fla. "It is really fun."

The trend of too-cute, offbeat job titles isn't limited to small, boutique companies. Allan Haley, director of words and letters for monotype imaging with Monotype Imaging Inc. **TYPE**, in Woburn, Mass., said creative titles are even showing up on Wall Street. He's used this title since 2000, saying "I needed a succinct way to introduce myself to clients, create a positive impression and then get on with business."

But it is in smaller and creative businesses like marketing, public relations and media where today's titles go off the chart.

"My job title is director of storytelling," said Austin Lee, who works at the social media company eyespeak.com in Atlanta, Ga. He's in social media marketing. Even the lower case letters in the company name are there on purpose, to better reflect the new century's edginess. "I approach social media as an opportunity for my clients to tell their story online."

Jean Lafferty at Arico Natural Foods Company in San Diego is called communicator and public happy-maker. "As a small company with a fun, hip product, we don't take ourselves too seriously," she said. The head of the company is called chief flavor maker, not CEO. And a coworker's title is the wicked witch of the web. "She handles our social media and graphic arts designs," Lafferty said.

Sara Sutton Fell, CEO at FlexJobs.com, in Boulder, Colo., said 21st century titles fit into one of two groups. They are either a new take on more traditional job titles, or they didn't exist 10 years ago and, "they are off-beat, modern titles."

Fell said an innovative job title can instill pride and let an employee know they are valued, "as long as the person holding the title is happy with it and the title speaks to the important elements of their role," she said.

The downside

There is a downside to embracing these non-traditional job titles. "It's what the company and its people 'do' that means the most," said Skooba Design CEO Michael Hess in Rochester, N.Y.

While a "chief happiness officer" or a "director of delight" may well attract attention, set an individual apart and even create a positive image to the customer, Hess said he would bet, "100% of customers would rather get their needs taken care of splendidly by a boringly-named customer service representative than get mediocre service from a cheerful and fun, but less effective 'satisfaction advocate.'"

Sander Daniels is co-founder and director of user happiness at the San Francisco startup Thumbtack.com. It wasn't customers, but his parents, who questioned his sanity in choosing the title director of user happiness. "My parents think the title is idiotic," he said. They liked an earlier title, when he was an associate at a law firm. "They thought that was much more respectable. Now, they're worried I will never be able to get a 'real' job ever again with this new title."

To ease his parents' concerns, he hedged. "I use co-founder when the situation demands a bit more dignity, like with parents, friends, future job interviews, and director of user happiness when the situation tolerates a bit more frivolity, like when promoting the values of our company to our employees and customers."

Mitch Kocen, assistant marketing manager for BAJobs.com, in Campbell, Calif., said he's seen growth in non-traditional job titles in the past two years. "The trends I'm seeing are all very recent," he said. And the trends come with a downside. "It's a huge resume liability," he said. While it may seem like every company is doing something different and hip and edgy, anyone with a trendy job title "runs the risk of it not matching up when your references are checked."

Kocen advises anyone holding a cutting-edge job title to figure out what their "real world" job title equivalent would be, and put that in parenthesis in the resume.

Charles Purdy, senior editor and career expert at Monster Worldwide, Inc. [MWW](#), a leading jobs-

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posting site, agreed that having a, "quirky or unique title in the past may hurt your job search."

Purdy gave this scenario: Someone works at an online magazine as a "word guru." And applies for a new job as a more conventionally named "associate editor" opening. A resume scanner may be looking for the key word "editor" in your past jobs, but not "guru." Purdy also suggested placing a widely understood term in parentheses after a trendy title.

Purdy said a more conventional job title will translate better to future employers on a resume for most people. But he also said as long as a job title is accurately descriptive, even if a bit odd, it can be eye-catching. "If you're going to come up with a wacky title, choose one that doesn't require you to also add a long description of what you actually do all day," he said. "That's going to hurt you when it comes to networking, both personally and for your company. It's a fine line."

Good enough for government work

Government and public-sector workplace — which one might not expect to be on the cutting edge — are beginning to hone in on more creative job titles. At the Oregon Travel Information Council, Madeline MacGregor is chief creative strategist. The OTIC places business logos on interstate signs.

"Our organization wanted to move away from ordinary titles. Creative job titles let the person behind the title assume ownership and that helps us deliver great service," she said.

She said it has been a complete revolution for her, since she came from a classically run government agency where all of the titles were set in stone like analyst 1 or PIO 2. "Having a creative job title simply motivates us to bring more to what we do," MacGregor said.

The trend is global. Jason Bradshaw is director of transformation for the Department of Services, Technology and Administration, in the New South Wales government in Sydney. "My title is reflective of the pace of business of the 21st century," he said.

In previous generations, Bradshaw said, businesses could evolve over time. But today changes in client and stakeholder expectations, and the rapid global pace of business, "require more and more organizations to set up departments that can guide a business through the rapid and turbulent pace of change."

Roy Cohen is a career coach in New York and author of the book, "The Wall Street Professional's Survival Guide." He said modern titles represent a new commitment by both the business community and Wall Street to act professionally.

Cohen said Wall Street is rapidly adopting some 21st century job titles. But not all titles. "Chief ethics officer is noticeably absent from Wall Street firms," Cohen said, referring to the backlash of the economic meltdown. He said the Wall Street title that comes closest to chief ethics officer is chief compliance officer.

"As the way we work and our environments change, the language we use to define jobs and functions must reflect that change," Cohen said. New titles evolve out of new and emerging technologies. "They are part of a generation entering the work force whose language is less linear, where functions and roles are blurred."

Tech companies seem to be on the forefront of assigning seemingly wild and crazy titles. Monster.com's Purdy said new technology requires new skills which this leads to new titles. "Also keep in mind that every industry has its own jargon that's understood only within it," he said.

BAJobs.com's Kocen, agreed. He said technology companies are very comfortable with trendy job titles. "Specifically, companies currently in the start-up phase or that just left that phase." Kocen said the title-naming practices stem from a more relaxed, casual atmosphere, where employees are given the leeway to choose their own titles. Part of it is a product of ... would that be arrested development or a youthful outlook?

"I'd totally give myself the title 'marketing ninja' if I was allowed," Kocen said. "You have to remember, I also work in a cubicle lit by a robot lamp and it's filled with action figures."

Marty Orgel is a freelance writer in the San Francisco Bay Area.

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