

# 7 Key Strategies to Effective Naming

According to the U.S. Small Business Administration, more than 500,000 new businesses open their doors every year. It stands to reason that above these doors, whether virtual or real, these new businesses will need 500,000 new names. Some of these enterprises will go with the clarity of Joe's Coffee Shop. And some will go with the cleverness of Cups of Joe's.

It's not just new businesses that need new names. A business may have outgrown its old name by entering new markets or by selling new products or services. Or a business may need to rebrand itself because of negative perceptions around the old name that can't be rectified.

And it's not just businesses that need names. Many companies with well established names need to brand new products or services with appealing, effective names to attract new sales.

What does a marketing director or business owner need to know about the naming process? How do you christen a company or product with a perfect name? Here are seven key precepts to keep in mind.

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## 1. HIRE A PROFESSIONAL

A British government agency opened the naming of a state-of-the-art scientific research vessel to the public. The winner: Boaty McBoatface. The lesson: Hire a professional.



Likewise, you shouldn't entrust something as important as the name of a company or flagship product to a brief brainstorming session with co-workers. These people are stakeholders; their opinions matter, and they can provide key insights on what is needed in a name early in the process. That said, you will be well served to rely on them for insight, rather than for a solution.

## 2. RESPECT THE PROCESS

Naming is a process, with three key components: generating names, a decision-making procedure, and vetting. To manage all three elements, select a naming firm/marketing agency that in fact has an established process. That firm will do the interviewing and competitive research required, generate names (and we don't mean 10 or 20, but a

significant number, perhaps in the hundreds). For some naming firms, this can be an endeavor of several weeks or longer, and the process may involve steps including interviews with key members of your company, an analysis of your competitive landscape, a first round of name generation, preliminary trademark search for name availability, a first presentation, a second round of name generation, a second presentation and selection of name finalists, focus group/internal testing and final trademark registration.

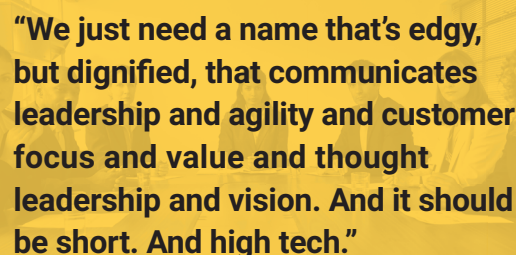
### 3. KNOW WHAT YOU WANT YOUR NAME TO CONVEY

If you want your name to clearly communicate who you are – or who you want to be – you need to have a clear idea of those notions yourself beforehand. And you must clearly communicate these attributes to the agency doing your naming. What do you want your name to do? Distinguish you from competitors? Reinforce a particular trait? Defining objectives for what you want the name to do and to communicate is crucial before name development begins.

Realize, as well, it's asking too much for a name to convey seven or eight attributes. You need to do some serious brand definition work, which can be facilitated by the naming agency's process of interviews, focus groups, etc. At the end of the process, you shouldn't have more than two or three primary attributes you ask for a name to communicate, and those attributes need to be prioritized. Chances are, no one name of three syllables or less is going to communicate everything you want to say about your company or service. Remember, a name does not exist in a vacuum. Cohering to the name itself will be its visual treatment as a logo and, potentially, a tag line. Additionally, you will have your firm's full range of marketing, PR, social media and advertising opportunities to explain the full story of your company.

Your name will typically be seen in the context of a website, a storefront, a product, a press release or an ad or marketing communication of some sort. Some naming firms will offer clusters of names under different attributes – for example 20 names that express Leadership – that reflect each characteristic you wish to communicate.

Keep in mind: one name can only convey so much.



**“We just need a name that’s edgy, but dignified, that communicates leadership and agility and customer focus and value and thought leadership and vision. And it should be short. And high tech.”**

### 4. BE FAMILIAR WITH THE MAIN TYPES OF NAMES

There are several different types of names, and it's important for someone who's in charge of a naming or re-naming program to be aware of them. There are practically as many ways to slice and dice naming categories as there are naming agencies, but at the most basic level, they can be broken into one broad dichotomy:

Made-Up Words versus Real Words.

Company and product/service names are generally either made-up words (like Verizon, which was created after the merger of Bell Atlantic and GTE), or real words (like Sprint). Made-up words, or neologisms, have the advantage of being unique and are typically easier to trademark than names composed of real words. Real words have the advantage of their quiddity – their being anchored to the real world and their ability to register as more substantial and straightforward than made-up words.

Under the broad umbrellas of Made-Up and Real Words, there are many subcategories, which we'll touch upon below. There is some overlap in this typology, (Verizon for example could fall under both the Latinesque and Portmanteau categories), but these groupings should provide a basic understanding of the main kinds of names out there. If there are certain types of names that you believe won't work for your project, it's important to let your naming firm know they should not be exploring those avenues. And if you have other requirements (for example, "the name plus .com must be available as a URL"), make that clear, because there's no reason to explore solutions you will reject, or run down roads that are known to be dead ends.

## MADE-UP WORDS

### *Portmanteau*

A portmanteau is a single piece of luggage that opens into two compartments. A portmanteau name is one where two or more words (or parts of words) are brought together to make one new name. You might hear this type of naming also referred to as combination words or word mash-ups. This type of naming is often useful for conveying more than one attribute in a single word. Examples include Youtube; FedEx; AmGen; Accenture (Accent plus future to suggest accent on the future); Coca-Cola (from coca leaves and kola nuts); Microsoft; and Verizon.

## **verizon**<sup>✓</sup>

Verizon is a combination of the Latin word for truth – Veritas – and the word horizon, suggesting integrity and a focus on the future.

### *Creative Misspelling*

Creative misspellings of recognizable real words allow for the positive associations of the real word, plus the branding and ownability benefits of a made-up word. Examples include Flickr; Tumblr; Chick-Fil-A; Google.

## **Google**

Google is a creative misspelling of googol, a mathematical term for the number 10 to the hundredth power i.e. a very big number. Google helps you sift through an incredible amount of information on the web.

Note: The success of the "Google" name points out one fact that cannot be overlooked – the success of a name is ultimately established by its use and the excellence of the company, product, or whatever is being named. Many new names, to the degree that they are new, sound odd, at least in the beginning – but if they meet the criteria established up front, they can be successful.

### *Latinesque*

Latinesque names use real Latin words or parts of them or made-up-but-Latin-sounding words, typically to lend gravitas (that's real Latin) to a name. Examples include Exelon; Verizon, Acer; Agilent and Altria.



The Philip Morris group wanted a new name that was not just associated with tobacco brands and that more accurately represented the diversity of the company's holdings, which then included Kraft Foods. Altria, based on the Latin word altus for high, was chosen, as broad enough to cover a range of businesses.

### *Snappy Acronyms*

There are standard acronyms aplenty, like IBM for International Business Machines, but a more distinctive approach is to manipulate the letters to form a new verbal entity that is more than just the repetition of letters. Examples include AFLAC (American Family Life Assurance Company of Columbus), Alfa Romeo (the Alfa stands for Anonima Lombarda Fabbrica Automobili), GEICO (Government Employees Insurance Company); Fannie Mae (Federal National Mortgage Association) and 3M.

## **3M**

Instead of the more prosaic MMM (which is their NYSE symbol), the Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company went with the snappier 3M.

### *Partial Words*

Many names are built from a meaningful segment of a recognizable word, linguistically known as a morpheme, to call to mind the connotations of the full word. Examples include Acura; Xerox (from xerography); Cisco; and Intel



Intel is a morpheme of intelligence, a good name for the makers of the microprocessor “brains” of computers. It’s also a portmanteau for Integrated Electronics.

## **REAL WORDS**

### *Straightforward Descriptions*

The virtue of these names is that they can sometimes tell you exactly what a business does, or clearly identify a brand’s virtue. The drawback is they tend to be generic, unexciting and similar to many others in the same field. Examples include Waste Management Inc.; TripAdvisor; and Tractor Supply Company.



You don’t have to speak Latin to get a good idea what this company is all about.

### *Names of Founders*

Many companies are named for their founders or key figures within the company. It calls for a certain amount of hubris, but these names can become icons in their industries. Examples include Johnson & Johnson; Harley-Davidson; Wal-Mart; Ford Motor Company; and Smuckers.



A distinct name can be a distinct advantage. “With a name like Smucker’s it has to be good” is a tagline that underlines this truism.

*Geographical*

Though expansion into new markets can sometimes be an issue for companies with limited geographic names, the fact is where a company is from is often considered integral to a company's origin and its identity. Examples include Texas Instruments; Southwest Airlines; Bank of America; and Boston Properties. Or Nebraska Furniture Mart, which has stores in both Kansas and Texas.

**Adobe**

The Adobe Systems name does not refer to the building material, suggesting its software is a useful component in building success, but rather comes from Adobe Creek in Los Altos, California, which ran behind the houses of both of the company's founders.

*Symbolic*

Symbolic names call upon the positive associations of legendary beings (Jason) or things (the golden fleece), or make allusions to characters we admire, or draw upon the rich, symbolic associations of certain archetypes (apples, eagles, gold, etc.). Examples include Nike; Vulcan Materials; Target; Apple; Amazon; and Starbucks.



Cappuccino Ahab? Starbucks is named after the first mate in *Moby Dick*, and is meant to evoke "the romance of the high seas and the seafaring tradition of early coffee traders" and not an irrational, monomaniacal pursuit of an impossible goal leading to death and despair.

*Promissory*

Promissory names describe how a company is going to help you or how they are going to make you feel. Examples include Best Buy; Prudential; Thrifty; Yahoo!; and Yum! Brands.



What do you call a restaurant company whose brands include KFC, Pizza Hut and Taco Bell? Um, Yum!

**5. DON'T BE ENTIRELY SUBJECTIVE WHEN CHOOSING**

Yes, you want to like the name of your company or product or service. You want to be able to say it with pride. But remember to think strategically, too. Your naming agency should be able to give you a brand rationale for why every name they present is relevant. And don't fall in love with just one option. It could be unavailable for trademarking.

In addition to your gut reaction, consider:

Does it project the right brand image?

Is it too limiting if your company grows/evolves?

Is it easy to pronounce?

Can it be trademarked?

Is the URL/domain name available?

Does it distinguish you from your competitors?

Do you have alternates in case your first choice isn't available?

In general, a naming presentation process should leave you with a list of ten top choices, rank ordered, so that if the legal vetting process shows the first choice is not, in fact, available, you have still solved the naming problem – you have a next-in-line choice.

In India, Tata Motors decided to name their new hatchback the Zica (a portmanteau of zippy car). And then the Zika virus started spreading. Days before the vehicle was to be unveiled at an auto show, they announced they were changing the name. The eventual new name: Tiago. The lesson: Have alternate names.



## 6. LAWYER UP

At some point, lawyers need to get involved. You don't want to be attached to one name only to find out it's unavailable for your use because another company in your industry has already trademarked it. When you have reached a handful of finalists for your name, you need trademark attorneys to ensure your future name doesn't infringe on another business's trademark. Smaller naming firms will often do a preliminary screening, sometimes just a simple Google search, and rely on you (or your lawyers) to do the official trademark search and registration. Larger naming firms often have their own trademark attorneys to determine availability.

## 7. SUPPORT THE NAME

Changing the signs is not enough. To establish your new name among your target audience, you need to devote resources to a marketing campaign that will reach them, incorporating media such as social media, email, outdoor, broadcast and print.

With these precepts in mind, you should be able to confidently oversee the naming or renaming of your company or the naming of new products or services your company plans to offer. Be aware, many marketing agencies will claim the ability to provide naming services, but ask them whether or not they have a proven naming process and professional namers on staff. Before you commit to a creative group, make sure they can drop some impressive names.

**Note: SullivanPerkins has a three decade history in naming companies, products, processes, services, properties, etc.**

Our process includes:

- Client and competitive research
- Development of appropriate naming categories
- Masterlist of potential names (multiple hundreds of names)
- Presentation list (normally 80-100 names)
- A presentation of single names on 11 x 17 cards, to decision makers
- A narrowing/decision-making process to a list of 20 or fewer finalists
- A preliminary availability check
- A rank ordered list of ten finalists, with a selected winner
- Names to legal



*This urgent care facility knew the importance of marketing its new name.*

Sources for information above include:  
 Brandingforthepeople.com  
 Brandroot.com  
 BrandingStrategyInsider.com  
 BusinessInsider.com  
 IgoInternational.com  
 Inc.com  
 Landor.com  
 Namedropping.com  
 NameLab.com  
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