



Just Name It.

A brand name development guide

For executives, marketing managers, entrepreneurs—and everyone else

catchword

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Hello

So you'd like to know more about brand naming. You've come to the right place.

Since 1998, Catchword has been naming companies and products for every kind of business, from multinationals like Starbucks, Gap, and Agilent to startups—and everything in-between. This guide shares some of what we've learned along the way.

Whether you're with a global corporation that routinely hires naming consultants or a mom-and-pop embarking on your first DIY naming challenge, this guide is for you.

We're going to take you behind the scenes of this unique craft where art most surely meets science. And we're going to show you that yes, there is a method to the madness—it's not just about scribbling ideas on cocktail napkins. (We wish!)

Better still, we'll reveal just what that method is, starting with developing a solid strategic naming foundation and proceeding to effective techniques for creating names (lots of them), vetting name candidates legally and linguistically, acquiring domain names, and last but hardly least, launching your new name.

You'll also find sections on the power of names (and what they can and can't do), the ins and outs of working with naming consultants, a glossary of useful naming terms, and plenty more.

Let's get started.

The Basics

Your brand name is the **verbal trigger** that conjures up your brand in customers' minds. The associations and reactions it **sparks** when seen or heard for the first time will start to define **your brand**, for better or worse.

Name power

A good brand name can:

- identify what you're offering
- differentiate you from competitors
- evoke positive emotions and associations
- pique curiosity and interest
- boost brand recall
- inspire and motivate employees

And that's before you've even spent a cent on marketing.

Of course, even a great brand name can't salvage an ill-conceived or poorly executed idea. And it certainly can't convey every relevant marketing message. (That's why you have a logo, packaging design and copy, a website, and all of your other marketing communications.) But if you want to build a strong brand, a name that memorably captures your brand essence is the foundation for all that follows.

Types of brand names

Though there are a seemingly infinite number of brand and company names out there, all of them fall into a few basic categories. So if you're going to be naming something, it's good to be acquainted with these styles and structures:

Descriptive names

These are names that clearly describe the goods or services being offered. Think names like Advanced Optics or Integrated Services Router. Descriptive names usually work best when you want to:

- reinforce a strong master or parent brand rather than launch a new brand
- reach a B2B audience that just wants to know what the thing does
- name products with short lifecycles and low marketing budgets

On the other hand, purely descriptive names are difficult to trademark, because they make use of common, everyday language. So if having a legally protectable name is a big concern, a less descriptive name is a better bet.

Suggestive names

Like descriptive names, suggestive names allude to the features and benefits of the goods and services being offered, only less directly. Droid, Fitbit, Sharper Image, Mountain Dew, and Google Glass are all examples of suggestive names.

Suggestive names are the middle ground in naming. They're more evocative and memorable than descriptive names, and more communicative than arbitrary or fanciful names (see below). For these reasons, suggestive names are the most popular kind of brand name.

DESCRIPTIVE

3 Day Blinds
All-Bran
Cartoon Network
The Dollar Store
FlatRate Moving
Hotels.com
VirtualWallet
The Weather Channel

SUGGESTIVE

Aleve
Amazon
Dreamery
Facebook
Fitbit
Subway
Swashies
Willow Glass

ARBITRARY/FANCIFUL

Apple
Bluetooth
Dove (chocolate)
Etsy
Hulu
Kodak
Oreo
Starbucks

Empty vessel names (arbitrary and fanciful)

Empty vessel names are names that bear no semantic connection to the brands in question. They fall into two general categories: arbitrary names (real words like Orange or Virgin) or fanciful names (made-up words like Kodak or Exxon).

Empty vessel names are the easiest to trademark because of their distinctiveness, but they can require serious marketing to help consumers make the connection to the goods or services in question.

Different languages

Names derived from different languages—whether a Germanic language (like Swedish), a Romance language (like French or Italian), or an entirely non-Indo-European language (like Chinese or Swahili)—can help create a different tone or feel for your brand.

Exploring other languages in your naming exercise is an obvious approach when the target market includes many non-English speakers. But non-English names can also be appealing to native English speakers, especially when they're familiar foreign words. Examples include the vodka Absolut (Swedish for “absolute”), the XM receiver Tao (Mandarin for “the way”), the online payment service Boku (from the French “beaucoup” meaning “much” or “many”), and the tomato sauce Prego (Italian for “please”).

Acronyms & initialisms

Both acronyms and initialisms are formed from the initial letters of a series of words, but while acronyms are words or word-like entities, initialisms are pronounced as their individual letters.

We usually advise against both acronyms and initialisms, as they're often forced or confusing, and customers almost always end up using the initials and not the expanded form. Occasionally, though, an acronym makes sense. For example, CORA is an agency that helps victims of domestic violence. The name expands to Community Overcoming Relationship Abuse (important information to the target audience).

And the shortened form, CORA, is a woman's name that allows the agency to leave a discreet message on an answering machine. MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) is another example of an acronym that works both in its abbreviated and extended form, to powerful effect. Other acronyms and initialisms that have stuck: NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration), NASCAR (National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing), LASIK (LAsEr in SItu Keratotomy), ALDA (Analytical, Life Science & Diagnostics Association), HBO (Home Box Office) and IBM (International Business Machines).

Construction

Names can be structured in a number of different ways. These forms include:

Real words

- Cascade
- Chase
- Fandango
- Ivory
- Mint
- Posit
- Refreshers
- Staples

Coined words

- Agilent
- Coca-Cola
- Google
- Pentium
- Swashies
- Vudu
- Zappos
- Zippity

Truncated real words

- Cisco (from San Francisco)
- Daptiv (from adaptive)
- FedEx (from Federal Express)
- MetLife (from Metropolitan Life)
- Promptu (from impromptu)
- Quintess (from quintessence)

Compound Words

- Allstate
- ClickStart
- DreamWorks
- Facebook
- Keysight
- Livescribe
- MasterCard
- Microsoft

Alphanumerics

- 3M
- 7-Eleven
- 7 For All Mankind
- Crazy 8
- Porsche 911

The Naming Process

The roadmap (aka the creative brief)

Whether you've hired a naming firm or are handling the naming yourself, the creative brief is the tactical foundation for all of your naming efforts. This document should synthesize key aspects of your name strategy and provide guiderails for naming explorations.

If you're working with a naming firm, they'll develop a creative brief for your approval. If you're on your own, you'll need to develop one yourself. (And please do. Under no circumstances skip this critical step in the naming process!)

Here are some questions your brief should answer:

What are you naming?

If you're naming a company, the answer is usually pretty straightforward. For products, though, the answer is not always as simple. For instance, are you naming a totally new type of product (which could be worthy of a proprietary, branded name) or merely a line extension? Is it a standalone brand or an ingredient brand? And could the individual product you're naming now become a suite of products in the not-too-distant future?

How will your name be used?

Include all types of marketing contexts (website, brochures, signage, packaging, cold calls, ordering situations, etc.) as well as any qualifying language that might surround the name in print.

What arena are you competing in?

Sounds simple, but the best answers might not be immediately obvious. For instance, if you're introducing a bottled, coffee-infused health drink, your competition might include health drinks, coffee drinks, and energy drinks. Or you might narrow your field of focus. It's your strategic decision as to where your product fits best, and what categories you want to take on.

Who are your competitors and what sorts of names are they using?

Once you've identified your competitive space, assemble a list of your competitors and the names they're using. Be thorough. Often you'll be able to discern naming patterns, which will allow you to spot opportunities for differentiation. It will also allow you to make informed decisions down the road when reviewing trademarks for potential conflicts.

Who are your customers?

Are you selling to mainstream consumers or business customers? Tweens or teens? Fortune 500 companies or mom-and-pop stores? The more focused and clear your target audience is, the easier it will be to reach them.

What's different about you that your audience will care about?

Lots of companies get so involved touting all of the things that their brand embodies that they wind up standing for nothing in particular. A good brief will highlight the things you do well that are important to the people you want to reach.

What do you want the name to communicate?

Is speed one of the key attributes of your brand? Accuracy? Maybe your product has a really unusual shape. Or perhaps you see your company as forging a path through uncharted territory, in the manner of mythical heroes. While messaging themes may change once the creative process begins, you always want to have some naming ideas at the outset that are relevant to your brand and its audiences.

What tonalities and constructions seem most appropriate?

Names that are real words or composed of meaningful word parts can communicate overtly through meaning and association. For instance, Dropbox, Evernote and FireEye each convey something about the nature of their respective services, albeit in styles ranging from fairly descriptive to evocative and suggestive. But names also can communicate through tonality, construction and rhythm. Reddit, for instance, with its propulsive rhythm and sharp "t," has a strong, energetic tonality, while Hulu's softer, rhyming sounds convey a more playful personality. Wii, with its evocations of "wheel" and "we," sounds like a whole lot of unconstrained fun.

Code-naming your project? Here's a tip: choose a code name that's totally unsuitable and unrelated to what you're naming. Hedgehog, Provolone, Room 102... you get the idea. That way you won't get emotionally attached to an appealing name that's legally unavailable.

Naming architecture

refers to the way brand names in a portfolio are organized. The architecture should structure a company's names so they make sense in relation to each other, and provide guidance for new product naming.

Are you open to words derived from other languages?

For example, French can convey a certain cachet (witness Au Bon Pain or Pureau). Swahili is playful and lively (take Kijiji). Latin words tend to sound stable and traditional (Veritas, for instance). Keep in mind though, it's especially important to check your names for negative meaning or associations when using non-English words and word parts.

What countries are you targeting?

You'll want to make sure to secure trademark protection in any countries where the name will be marketed.

Any legal or linguistic constraints?

These might relate to the industry, the product or packaging, or your intended audience. For instance, are there words you can't use for legal reasons? (In the food industry you can only use the word "organic" if your product meets certain requirements.) Will your product be so tiny that it literally can't accommodate names with a lot of letters? Are you targeting countries where certain sounds or letters could be a problem? (For example, Mandarin speakers sometimes transpose l's and r's.)

If you're developing a product name, does it need to be proprietary?

If you don't want to steal a master brand's thunder or you have a small marketing budget or a product you expect to be short-lived, you might be better off with a descriptive, non-proprietary name.

Should each name within a product family share a common element?

This could be a particular structure (alphanumerics, for instance), a word part (e.g., the final "o" in Lingo, Deco, and Tempo phones from Kyocera), or a shared thematic direction (like Apple's OS X operating systems Cheetah, Panther, Lion, etc.).

Does your company already have naming conventions that apply?

You wouldn't expect Toyota to come out with a car named LT88—or BMW to come out with a car named Lightning.

Will a domain name be needed?

If the answer's yes, consider whether you'll need the exact domain name. You can often do just fine by simply adding a descriptor or some other relevant word to the name for domain purposes. For instance, you'll find Method cleaning products at methodhome.com, and Catchword at catchwordbranding.com.

Getting creative

People often ask us how we come up with names. Are they computer generated? Do we sit around drinking wine and jotting down thoughts on cocktail napkins? Or maybe we shuffle Scrabble tiles around until we find that perfect combination of letters?

If only.

Maybe once upon a time these methods worked. But today, with all the hurdles faced by potential naming candidates, you need to develop an enormous pool of names just to have a few good choices at the end of the day. (To give you an idea, at Catchword we typically develop around 2000 names for a project.) So creativity isn't enough; one needs a very methodical process for exploring all kinds of relevant ideas, in depth and in quantity.

Here are some of the phases in our creative process which you may want to adopt if you're a DIYer:

Project vocabulary

For all but the most abstract projects, it's a good idea to begin by creating a project vocabulary. Your thesaurus is your best friend here. Check the list of naming messages in your creative brief, and put together as many synonyms as possible for different words in these messaging buckets. This is a great starting point for free-associating and getting some naming ideas down.

Beyond just mixing and matching your vocabulary words to form compound or blended forms, you might take key vocabulary words and translate them into Latin, Sanskrit, Italian, Hawaiian—whatever languages suit your communication and tonality needs.

Or you might take interesting prefixes and suffixes and add them to different words. Or play around with word endings or truncations of words.

There are lots of online resources that can help you with this kind of wordcraft.

Blue-sky territory

After exploring all the obvious ideas—what we call “due-diligence creative”—it’s time to take off into blue-sky territory. This might involve pairing a short, obvious word from your project vocabulary with something completely unexpected. Or looking at various metaphors, arbitrary (but interesting) words that have the right sound, and magazine articles and videos in your industry space. If you’re naming or renaming a company, you might play with ideas that springboard off the personal interests and hobbies of the founder. You can even run your eye down the song titles in your iTunes library for inspiration. Truly, anything goes. At this stage in brainstorming, the more ideas, the merrier. At Catchword, we also make sure that several people work on each project so we can riff off each other’s ideas.

When there’s a substantial amount of creative (for us, well over a thousand names), it’s time to combine all your ideas and look at your naming list as a whole. You’ll find when you do this that new names will start to form. Continue to play around, modifying spellings, combining different roots, and just generally looking beyond the obvious and letting your imagination roam.

Assembling evocative images is a fun way of generating name ideas. Try making a **collage** or some other kind of **mood board** with visuals related to different directions you’d like to explore.

Choosing name candidates

Once you're satisfied you've explored every direction and have a vast pool of name options, you're ready for what may be the most important part of your process: selection. This will involve narrowing your list considerably (what we call shortlisting), and then selecting a handful of your favorite candidates for legal and possibly linguistic and/or domain-name vetting.

Shortlisting is an iterative, non-linear process that can take a few days as you hone and re-hone the list until only the very best candidates remain. A good rule of thumb is to shortlist 10 percent of the total names; then look at your shortlist with fresh eyes a day or two later and prune it some more.

In addition to the parameters set out in your creative brief, we suggest you refer to the following 10 guidelines for name selection (page 14), along with the 10 criteria for great brand names (page 16), so that knee-jerk reactions and idiosyncratic associations don't rule the day. If you are working with a naming firm, they should also be able to provide an objective perspective.

10 guidelines for name selection

1. Don't rush it.

From the development of a naming strategy through creative exploration and evaluation, a thoughtful naming process usually takes at least four to six weeks, not including time for formal legal vetting and, when required, focus group research or global linguistic screening. So build in ample time for your selection process, and carefully consider your options. You've heard that old saying "never enough time to do it right, always enough time to do it over"?

2. Play the field.

We know, we know. You thought of a name, and it was the biggest epiphany since you saw your future spouse across a crowded room. There's no other name like it in the whole world and...Wait. Just hold on. Before you get hitched there's a little detail known as legal screening. And when you submit this name you're so smitten with to legal counsel, you may discover it's already taken. So do yourself a favor and select at least a couple of other names you could live with, and have them all screened together. It could prevent you from getting wedded to any name prematurely.

3. Don't decide by committee.

Rarely is a name embraced by everyone involved in the naming process. If it's any good at all, it's bound to make someone uncomfortable (although they'll have a very "rational" reason for why they don't like it). So don't necessarily look for a name that no one objects to. And structure your decision-making process so that only those with veto power get to play—and make sure they're involved as early as possible in the naming process. Otherwise you'll wind up with a lowest-common-denominator name.

4. Don't expect your name to tell the whole story.

No name is an island. Whether it be web copy, packaging, advertising, whatever, there will always be context to help tell your brand's story. So don't expect your company or product name to say it all. It would only make your name awkward and dull.

5. Don't get (too) hung up on dot-com availability.

A memorable name that needs to be modified with a descriptor for domain purposes is often a better marketing choice than a less distinctive name that's available as an exact dot-com domain. Unless your sales are generated predominantly online, don't squander one of your biggest branding opportunities because of overly rigid domain-name considerations.

6. Trust your audience's intelligence.

Avoid being overly literal and rejecting a name because of an inconsequential or slightly negative meaning or association—as long as its other meanings work with your brand. Your audience will figure it out. You wouldn't expect people to think the Ford Freestyle was being offered free of charge, would you?

7. Forget about “virgin” names.

Don't get mired in hunting for a name that's never been used before. Most names have been around the block a few times, in different industries or contexts. That's okay. You can usually adopt a name that's similar (or even identical) to a name being used in an unrelated space—as long as it's not in your space. Think Ford Explorer and Internet Explorer, or O Organics and O (The Oprah Magazine). These brands happily coexist. So use common sense (and check with your attorney). Many a great name is rejected out of an excess of caution, or a misunderstanding of marketing differentiation.

8. Get past your personal associations.

It doesn't matter if a name candidate reminds you of the name of the cousin you don't get along with, or the particularly scruffy area in Michigan where you grew up. These are idiosyncratic, personal associations that few others on the planet are going to share. Look beyond them. Otherwise, you may reject a name that would resonate with your target audience for reasons that only matter to you.

9. Embrace the unusual.

You want your brand to stand out in the marketplace, right? So don't shy away from ideas that may seem a little strange at first. Be brave. Sure, it's only natural to be more comfortable with ideas you've seen before in some form. But if you've seen those ideas before, chances are so has your audience, and they'll be much less likely to take notice of your brand. The best names are a little different. Would CoffeeWorld have gotten the same traction as Starbucks?

10. Avoid perfectionism.

It's okay to want a name that's short, easy to pronounce, original, totally cool-sounding, relevant in meaning, absent negative associations, and available as a dot-com domain name. (Most of us would like to win the lottery, too.) Prioritize your wish list, and be prepared to go with a name that only meets your top criteria. Because no name has it all. Imagine the objections raised when Häagen-Dazs was first proposed. (“How do you pronounce that?”) Or Wii. (What's it mean?”) And let's not get started on Virgin. The point is, every name has potential downsides and no name will seem perfect at the outset.

10 criteria for great brand names

At Catchword, we use 10 touchstones (along with specific project parameters) to determine whether a name is truly great. We recommend keeping these criteria in mind when you evaluate potential name candidates to maintain some measure of objectivity. Just remember, almost no name will score equally well in all of these dimensions (see “Avoid perfectionism” in the last section). In naming, as in life, there are always tradeoffs.

1. MAGNETISM

Does the name engage you and spark your imagination? (Crazy 8, Method, and Häagen-Dazs all do, in wildly different ways.)

2. DISTINCTIVENESS

Will it pop in your space, or blend in without a trace? (There’s Alaska, American, United, Delta...and then there’s JetBlue.)

3. BRAND FIT

Does it capture the essence and spirit of the brand? (Think Leapfrog, Twitter, Vogue, Tesla, Any Mountain, Wii.)

4. ACCESSIBILITY

Is it easy to say and spell? (Jwaala, Xoopit, Myngle, Fairtilizer—don’t go there.)

5. LONGEVITY

Will it remain relevant if the brand expands? (Amazon, yes; Book World, no.) Will it sound dated if naming trends change? (RIP, Napster.)

6. CONCISENESS

Is it as short as possible? (Which name grabs you—Gap or PriceWaterhouseCoopers?)

7. EUPHONY

Does it sound good? (Jamba Juice is alliterative.... Aria is melodic....Vudu? Woohoo!)

8. APPROPRIATENESS

Is it free of serious negative meaning in a major language? (Virgin, pass. Swastika, fail.)

9. CONSISTENCY

Does it follow your company’s naming conventions? (You won’t find Apple introducing a phone called Neptune.)

10. PROTECTABILITY

Is it in the clear for trademarking and domain use? (Toys R We? Forget about it.)

A word to the wise: brand names face enormous **legal hurdles** these days, and many of your candidates will fall by the wayside. So set expectations accordingly, and be sure to **choose several candidates** for vetting. You'll stand a much better chance of emerging with a viable name the first time around.

The ins and outs of screening

Once you have your shortlist of naming ideas, the heartbreaking process of vetting them begins. We say heartbreaking because in legal screening—not to mention domain screening and foreign-language vetting, which we'll cover in later sections—you **WILL** lose many of your favorites. But if your creative process has been robust, there will still be good name options standing at the end of the day.

Trademark availability

The very first thing to determine about any serious name candidate is whether it's legally available. Most naming firms (including Catchword) will conduct a preliminary screen in the United States trademark databases to uncover registered uses of name candidates. In addition, they'll conduct a Google screen to reveal common-law uses of names (i.e. unregistered uses of names that may still pose a legal risk). Yet no matter how diligent a naming company is in their initial trademark screening, you will need to have a qualified attorney evaluate your names for potential conflicts, no exceptions. What's more, everyone has a different tolerance for risk, and trademark law is notoriously open to interpretation.

Here are some of the most important considerations when evaluating a name for trademark availability (though note that this should not be construed as legal advice—consult an attorney!):

Relevant trademark classes

The first step in the legal vetting process is determining in which trademark class(es) your name will need to be registered. Trademarks are grouped into 45 different international trademark classes (or descriptive categories)—34 for products and 11 for services. In general, to protect your trademark you only have to register your name in the class or classes that are relevant to your company, product, or service.

At the same time, you also want to look as far into the future as possible and anticipate likely extensions of your brand to determine other relevant trademark classes—so you're not shut out when you're ready to expand your offerings.

Likelihood of confusion

If legal review turns up other names similar to yours in relevant trademark classes, perhaps the most important question you can ask yourself is whether there's a likelihood of confusion. That is, are the two names so similar as to potentially confuse a customer? If two names look and sound similar, are in the same business space, and share associations, the answer is probably yes, and the name should be eliminated.

On the other hand, someone else's brand name can be identical to yours, but as long as it's not in your industry space, it may be fine. For instance, no one's going to confuse O (The Oprah Magazine) with Safeway's O line of organic food products. Or the Ford Explorer with the Internet Explorer web browser.

In addition to appearance, sound, and associations, other factors that courts consider before finding a likelihood of confusion include:

- distribution channels
- whether the products or services compete directly
- distinctiveness of the marks
- similarity of customers
- similarity of pricing

Strength of a mark

Let's assume your legal counsel has reviewed your name and determined that it's legally available and clear.

Now your major worry isn't mistakenly using someone else's mark, but making sure that the name is a strong mark in and of itself. You want to be able to protect your name and prevent other marketers from using the name for similar (or even dissimilar) products.

The key will lie in how distinctive the name is. The more distinctive, the stronger and more legally protectable it will be. (Remember what we said about being brave when you choose your name?)

Catchword's Law of Name Availability

The more you like a name, the less likely it is to be available.

(There's a reason for this: people tend to like what's familiar—which may be familiar precisely because it's in use by others.)

The courts use a number of factors to gauge a name's distinctiveness, including whether:

- the name is coined (e.g., Google)
- the combination of word parts is creative (e.g., Simple Human)
- the name carries other meaning (e.g., A Pea in the Pod maternity clothing)
- the visual identity is unconventional (e.g., Yahoo!)
- the name is arbitrary in nature (e.g., Apple for a technology company)

If you want to be unique in your space and preclude others from using your name, choosing a name that incorporates some of these approaches can give you a big edge.

Taking your name global

It's easy enough to weed out name candidates in your native tongue that are unpronounceable or freighted with negative connotations. But what do you do if your name is headed for countries or audiences whose languages you don't speak?

For your own peace of mind, your best bet is to hire a global linguistic analysis service. And you want a service that only uses native speakers who live in the target country or countries, are knowledgeable about naming and marketing, and speak excellent English—so they can effectively communicate pros and cons with you, and their degree of concern over different issues. (Thankfully, when Catchword vets a name that has to work in other countries, we can draw from a network of qualified native speakers who speak virtually every language and dialect in the world.)

A thorough global linguistic analysis should include feedback on ease of pronunciation, intuitiveness of spelling, meanings evoked, brand fit, and existing brand names that are similar to your name candidates and which may cause confusion.

To avert disaster, you'll want to test name candidates with native speakers of each language or dialect your target audience is likely to speak. Here are some examples of names we've nixed because of their associations outside the U.S.:

COZM: sounds like "kotzen," which means "to vomit" in Germany

REEGO: too close to "rego," a Mexican Spanish word for "he screwed up"

KIZMO: associated with "kizumono," meaning "defective gadget" in Japanese

If you don't have the budget to hire a global linguistic analysis service, you can try vetting a name internationally yourself, if you follow these caveats:

- Only ask native speakers who've lived in the target countries for long time.
- Make sure they're in your target audience.
- Always ask more than one person or your results may be skewed by personal preferences.

Also, don't hesitate to probe if you don't understand a response. For instance, one respondent told us a name didn't "sound popular." What does that mean? Does it mean "I've never heard of this name before"? If so, that could be a good thing! So if you don't understand a response, ask questions until you do.

Once you've gathered all your feedback, interpret the results with care. For example, if two or more respondents flag a competitive brand, this indicates a likely problem. But if only one person mentions that brand, you'll want to dig around online to see if the brand's really relevant. As with any kind of marketing research, it's important to distinguish patterns from idiosyncratic responses—and not to be put off by personal preferences.

What about consumer research?

Consumer research is a way to gather opinions about something from a diverse group of people in your target audience. It can be extremely useful for figuring out if a new cereal tastes good to a lot of people, or if a new mobile phone is easy to use. But should you use consumer research to help evaluate naming candidates?

Well, it depends.

If you're looking for consumers to make name decisions for you, you'll probably miss out on some great name opportunities. Consumers tend to gravitate towards the most literal and least enduring and unique brand names, because those are often the names that "map" to the product descriptions most closely. Plan on opening a chain of coffee shops? Ask consumers if they prefer "Coffee Connection" or "Starbucks" and they'll tell you "Coffee Connection." It's a coffee shop, right? What does Starbucks have to do with coffee? And yet, it's hard to imagine that coffee giant becoming nearly as successful with a name as uninspired and borderline generic as "Coffee Connection."

For some things, however, naming research—whether through focus groups or online surveys—can be useful. For instance, it can be an excellent way to:

- find out if a name has damaging associations in slang or regional varieties of English
- convince your CEO that certain name candidates are acceptable to your target audience
- help determine what messages a name effectively communicates

But it's important to remember that naming research is simply one data point among many. Unless it's kept in perspective and handled with care, it can steer you away from the very names that stand the best chance of distinguishing your brand. People are used to seeing brand names where a lot of marketing context is provided via packaging, ad copy, and even product placement in the store. Absent that context—i.e., in market research—it's usually the most familiar or literal names (read: boring) that do the best.

Naming research is a data point, not a decision point. As long as a name reflects your **brand promise** and doesn't carry overtly negative associations, it need not win any focus-group popularity contests.

So if you're going to do research, here are some tips on how to do it right:

1. Limit the number of names you test to a small group of serious finalists that has passed legal screening (unless you are doing early-stage concept testing, in which case you can test a broader range of name styles and messages).
2. Determine whether your research needs to be quantitative (surveying a lot of people for a short time) or qualitative (interviewing a few people for a long time, and getting in-depth feedback). Quantitative research is often best when you're only testing a few names and looking for discrete responses from a statistically valid sample.
3. Present each name in exactly the same way, rather than customizing each name with its own logo or other distinguishing graphic elements. (Otherwise, the customized elements will influence respondents' feedback in ways that have nothing to do with the name itself.)
4. Take care to distinguish between relevant and idiosyncratic responses when evaluating your research. (A professional research or naming firm can be key here.)

And most critical of all:

5. Don't ask people which name they like best. You'll only get a confusing array of personal preferences. Consumers are in no position to gauge how effective a name will be when properly contextualized and marketed. That's your job (with the help of your naming firm, if you have one).

The ever-changing domain landscape

Back in the pre-Internet days of naming, if you found a product or company name you liked, all you had to worry about was whether it was legally available. If it was, you trademarked it, and that was that.

Then along came the Internet circa 1985. And anybody who wanted an online presence needed an available domain name, too. At first, there were three global top-level domains (gTLDs): .com for commercial enterprises; .net for network operators originally, although now also used more generally; .org for non-profit organizations.

Actually, there were three other gTLDs—.edu, .mil, and .gov—but they weren't relevant unless you were starting your own university or country.

As the years went by and available domain names grew scarcer, new extensions were brought out to expand Internet real estate. There was .biz (for business); .info (for information exchange); and extensions like .co.uk, .fr, .jp, and .us (for different countries). But none of these made a dent in the ubiquity and import of .com.

Today, after more than a quarter of a century, .com is still the most desirable option for businesses. Even those who have a country domain would love to have the .com too. And that's just the way it is. But the overall gTLD landscape is changing dramatically.

In January 2012 ICANN (the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers) began accepting applications for new gTLDs at a cost of \$185,000 per extension (and \$25,000 for each year after that). These new gTLDs fall into roughly four categories: corporate gTLDs (like .BMW and .Mini), geographical gTLDs (like .Tokyo, .London, .NYC, .Vegas), industry/vertical gTLDs (like .attorney, .autos, .credit), and more general-purpose gTLDs (like .link, .xyz). While some registries will retain exclusive use of their gTLDs, others will allow registrations for a fee, which can vary widely.

The long-term effect of this decision remains to be seen, but certainly in the short-term .com will remain supreme, and a strong .com will never lose its value. However, established companies should probably register and hold relevant gTLD domains just in case.

Finding an available domain name

As long as .com reigns supreme, you or your naming firm will have to be very creative—and prolific—to create or find a good .com domain name. The awful truth is that almost any domain you want has already been registered. In fact, every word in a typical dictionary has already been registered! (That’s why Catchword often screens 200+ names when domain availability is required.)

Checking is free and easy—just go to a service like checkdomain.com or domaintools.com and type the name in. If the name shows up as available, you’re golden. (And congratulations.) But if the name’s taken, all’s not necessarily lost. Many registered domains are purchasable.

Buying a domain name

Sometimes a domain will be listed as “for sale” and you can click through to the sales site—often Sedo, Afternic, or GoDaddy. (We’ve bought and sold many domains through these services; they are fast, easy, and trustworthy.) But even if the domain isn’t listed as for sale, you can always contact the owner and try to negotiate directly. Find out who the owner is by searching “Whois” records at a site like Network Solutions. Sometimes there’s a privacy protection set up, so you can’t see the owner’s name, but most of the time the site will tell you who owns it. If the owner is open to selling, be sure to use an online service like Escrow.com to keep everything transparent on both sides. They’ll hold the money until the domain is released to you (a polite way of making sure no one cheats).

Using a third-party to negotiate

If you’re working with a naming firm, they’ll often handle domain-name negotiations for you. Or you can consider using a domain-name consultant to assist with the acquisition. An experienced domain negotiator can save you significant time and money by:

- assessing the fair market value of the domain, and what budget you should set aside
- gauging the likelihood that the owner of the domain will sell
- providing information on the owner, including other domains they may own
- shielding your identity if you’re a large company presumed to have deep pockets

If you’re having trouble creating an available and appealing .com, there are a number of sites that have portfolios of domain names for sale.

Just The Word is one such site (full disclosure: it’s owned by Catchword).

By the way, there are no hard and fast rules for figuring out a domain name's value. (Sorry.) In general, real-word domains are worth more than coined words, and short words are more valuable than long ones, since they're easier to type and remember. Online domain valuers like Estibot.com and SwiftAppraisal.com may help you establish a ballpark price, but these work much better for keyword-oriented domains than for what are known as brandables. In the final analysis, a domain name, like a piece of art, is worth as much as you're willing to pay for it.

Modifying a domain name

If you don't have the money to buy a domain outright (or it's unavailable), consider modifying your chosen brand name with an intuitive descriptor. (Our own URL, for example, is catchwordbranding.com.) After all, having the exact domain isn't critical unless you're an e-biz marketing directly to consumers online. Don't let the tail wag the dog by choosing your company or product name based on exact-domain availability. Usually it's better to modify a memorable name than to settle for a mediocre one just because the domain's available.

Registering a domain name

Once you've registered your domain with a reputable domain registrar, be sure to set it for auto-renewal. You don't want to lose your domain because you forgot to renew. (You'd be surprised how often companies, even big ones, forget to renew. Symantec forgot to renew norton.com, and Microsoft once forgot to renew passport.com. Even Google forgot to renew its German domain, google.de, in 2007!)

Finally, remember: registering a domain name doesn't give you rights to the name as a trademark. Nor will trademarking a name give you rights to the domain, in most cases. (The exception would be if you were to trademark a name and then someone else registered the corresponding domain and tried to sell it to you. In that case, you might be deemed the rightful owner of that domain.) In general, even if you really, really want a domain, you can't force its registered owner to sell it or give it up to you.

Launch it!

Congratulations, you've got a name for your company! But you're not done yet. There are special considerations when launching a company name or rename. Here's a checklist to guide you through the key steps of your name launch, so nothing slips through the cracks.

Legal and Administrative

- Have your attorney submit an application for trademark registration to the United States Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO) and foreign equivalents, if appropriate.
- File for a name change with the Secretary of State and appropriate city/county authorities.
- Check with your tax attorney for any name-change filing issues related to subsidiaries, divisions, sister companies, etc.
- Update bank accounts, checks, and other financial paperwork.
- Update your listing in print and online directories.

Marketing and Identity

- Conduct an audit of how your logo appears across all communications.
- Engage a graphic designer (or design team) to create/update your logo and other elements of your new visual identity.
- Create/update business cards, letterhead, envelopes, and other stationery.
- Create/update brochures, pamphlets, and other marketing collateral.
- Engage a web designer (or design team) to create/update your website.
- Establish a plan for how to phase out the old name, if applicable (e.g., use transitional copy, such as “NewName—formerly known as OldName”).
- Decide when to debut the new name and identity change.

Internal Communications

- Solicit ideas from the internal team for the best ways to announce the new name and visual identity. Possible vehicles could be an email from the president, an employee gathering, an outside party, or an internal blog where direct questions can be addressed openly.
- Announce the new name internally (and be sure it's before you do so externally).
- Roll out new business cards early (ideally at the announcement) to get employees on board. Consider giving out some kind of promotional swag (hats, t-shirts, water bottles, etc.) with the new name and logo.
- Ask HR to familiarize employees with the new name and understand the rationale for the change. Use this as an opportunity to galvanize your organization to “live the brand.”
- Recognize that not everyone may be on board with the name change at first. Identify naysayers and engage them by asking them to take an active role in the announcement.

External Communications

- Develop a plan to communicate the name change to customers, analysts, and other key external influencers.
- Send customers and partners a letter or postcard announcing the name change (e.g., “We’d like to announce our new identity... same great company, new name.”)
- Anticipate and address questions such as whether service contracts will be affected.
- Call key customers to communicate the name change directly.
- Send out a press release announcing the new name. Be sure to include the rationale for the name change—and how it supports your company’s vision. (Feel free to mention your naming company!)
- Create a page/link on your company website with rationale for the name change.

Technology

- Register the new domain name with your company's registrar (e.g., Network Solutions, GoDaddy, etc.).
- Forward your old domain to your new domain.
- Register close variants and potential misspellings of the new domain name and redirect them automatically to the new site.
- Update your website content as needed.
- Update email addresses to reflect the new domain name, and make sure all emails sent to legacy addresses are automatically forwarded.
- Update email signatures.

Using a naming firm

First, the cold, hard facts: naming services don't come cheap, and not everyone can afford to work with a professional naming firm (even if they could use one). You're a good candidate to work with a naming agency if you meet one of these criteria:

- You have a large customer base and the budget to market your brand names.
- You're a medium-sized organization looking to differentiate your products or services in a cluttered category.
- You need a name with broad appeal to reach different target audiences.
- You really, really (really) want an exact dot-com domain, and for good reason (e.g., you have a large e-commerce site).

Other good reasons to hire a naming firm include:

- The need for a globally appropriate name (legally and linguistically).
- Internal creative burnout.
- Critical deadlines, such as a product launch or trade show announcement.
- Disparate internal opinions (this is where an objective third party can really help achieve consensus).

That said, a powerful brand name is a tremendous marketing tool for any company. So if you think your company or organization isn't getting the kind of attention or market share you deserve, you might consider hiring a naming firm, even if it's going to be a financial stretch. Chances are you'll wind up with a much better name—and one that's legally available.

*Other
Good Stuff*

You can tell a lot about a naming company's style and approach to naming by the name they've chosen for themselves. So pay attention—this is one book you can judge (at least in part) by the cover.

What to look for in a naming firm

Okay, so you've decided to hire a naming firm. How do you go about choosing one?

The first step is to review a naming firm's portfolio. Take a look at some of the names they've created, which you'll usually find featured on the firm's website. Don't focus exclusively on the most famous brand names, as they're often not the best measure of a company's naming ability. Besides, you'll probably have a hard time being objective, since success has a way of conferring greatness on even mediocre brand names. Instead, widen your focus to include expertise (how much experience do they have within your industry?), versatility (how varied are their naming styles and portfolio in general?), and yes, sheer creativity (how fun/distinctive/interesting/memorable are their names?).

Once you have a shortlist of naming companies whose work you like, here are some questions to ask:

- Do they have a dedicated naming discipline? Many advertising agencies don't.
- What's their process like? It should be rigorous and fine-tuned.
- Do they have legal and linguistic screening capabilities, and can they clearly articulate their approach to vetting names? These are absolute musts.
- Who'll be working on your project? A tight-knit team with a long history of working together is far better than a collection of freelancers.
- What are the deliverables? Get as much detail as you can—from the number of rounds of creative and whether they'll be preliminarily screened to the number of names you can expect to see and how the work will be presented.

Finally, your experience interviewing a prospective naming firm can tell you a lot about what it will be like partnering with them. So pay attention. Do you have easy access to the people you want to be working with? Are you comfortable asking questions—and do you get answers that make sense to you? The better your rapport with your naming company, the more likely you'll be happy with the end result.

Once you've made your choice, there are things you can do that will vastly improve your naming firm's chances of getting it right. On the next page you'll find 10 of them.

10 commandments for getting the most out of your naming firm

I. Thou shalt know thy internal naming team (although not in the biblical sense). Identifying your naming team members may not be as simple as it sounds. For instance, you may think your naming team is your marketing team. Or the group of people you picked to work on this project. In truth, your naming team is everyone who has to sign off on the new name (but ideally few others; see Commandment IX). Even the CEO is part of your naming team, if you're going to need his or her approval. Which leads us to Commandment II....

II. Honor thy team members, and keep them in the loop. It's a common story: a name has been chosen after months of strategizing, name creation, and legal vetting (perhaps even focus-group testing). It's presented to the higher-up who has final approval and it's nixed on the spot, because that person has different ideas. Now name creation is back to square one. Moral of this story: don't let any naming decisions be made by proxy. Make sure your entire naming team is in the loop every step of the way and attends the meetings with your naming consultant if at all possible.

III. Thou shalt gather and share information. Your naming consultant will want to know everything about your brand, including its mission, customers, competitors, capabilities, benefits, projected expansion into other areas, and so on. You can enrich and streamline their discovery process by gathering pertinent information in advance, including a list of all of your key competitors' brand names, and the results of any naming efforts you've conducted internally (including comments on what worked and what didn't).

IV. Honor thy positioning, and keep it holy. A clear vision of your brand's positioning is the driver for all branding efforts, including naming. If you don't have a positioning, develop one before starting the creative process (with the help of your naming company, if they're up to it). And take your time. Nothing is more important.

V. Thou shalt have no other gods before thy customers. It doesn't matter who else likes or dislikes your new name if it doesn't resonate with your customers. So don't get hung up on idiosyncratic reactions to names from your internal team. It's not going to matter to your customers if the proposed name reminds you of your ex. What matters are the associations they derive from it. And along those lines...

VI. Thou shalt keep an open mind. It's easy to poke holes in just about any name. Many have negative associations (think Banana Republic or Snickers). Some aren't intuitive to say or spell (witness Flickr and Wii). Others are long (Travelocity anyone?). If you focus on the negative, you may fail to recognize the name candidate that would be perfect for you—even though it's not “perfect.” You may also straitjacket your naming firm during name creation so completely with your dislikes and prohibitions that you'll miss out on bolder, richer naming territory they might otherwise explore. Which leads us to...

VII. Thou shalt focus on what's working and not lose sight of the promised land. Remember what your ultimate aim is, and focus on what works in the name candidates that are presented. It may just be one aspect of a name—the way it sounds, or the use of a particular letter. Communicate that. You'll get much better work out of your naming firm if you can tell them what's resonating, rather than just what to avoid.

VIII. Thou shalt sleep on it. The naming company loves the name, but you don't. Sometimes the most disruptive and effective brand names are going to seem pretty scary or weird at first. Don't reject them out of hand. Keep an open mind. Good names have a way of growing on you.

IX. Thou shalt not let spouses, admins, friends, neighbors or anyone else who isn't on thy naming team into the decision-making process. Selecting a good brand name is hard enough when there are lots of internal stakeholders. It's practically impossible (and guaranteed crazy-making) if you solicit the opinions of others who aren't on your team. This isn't to say that focus groups can't be useful sometimes. But that's a structured exercise designed by experts to elicit very specific types of feedback from your customer base. It's not a group free-for-all.

X. Thou shalt remember the Golden Rule (of naming). If there's one naming principle that's written in stone, it's that powerful brand names intrigue people and spark their imagination and emotions. They draw people into your world, and lend themselves to a brand story that can build over time. Keep that in mind during name selection, and you won't be tempted to choose a brand name like Bargainland over one like Amazon. You don't want a flash in the pan—you want a name for the ages.

Final words

Well, that pretty much wraps things up, though if you've still got the energy, there's a wonderful naming glossary that follows.

We hope you found the guide helpful and that you'll share it with colleagues and friends with naming challenges or simply a fascination with the wonderful world of brand naming. If you need more naming help, you know where to find us.

Thanks for reading, and best of luck to you in all your naming endeavors.

- The Catchword Team

Naming glossary

Acronym A word or word-like entity formed from the initial letters of a series of words in a phrase or name. BART is the acronym for Bay Area Rapid Transit system; MADD is the acronym for Mothers Against Drunk Driving; LASER is the acronym for Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation.

Agentive A noun denoting the agent or doer of an action, typically formed by adding the suffix “-er” to the verb. It can be a very active-sounding type of name: for instance, the Ford Explorer.

Alliteration The repetition of the same sound at the beginning of a series of words. BlackBerry and Dreyer’s Dreamery both use alliteration.

Alphanumeric A name made up of a combination of letters and numbers, such as WD-40 lubricant or the Lexus GX 460 SUV.

Arbitrary Name A name that’s a real word bearing no logical relationship to the object it’s branding. Orange (the telecom company), Cadillac (originally the name of a Native American chieftain), and Apple are all examples of arbitrary names.

Assonance The repetition in a name of vowels (without the repetition of consonants). Hulu, Vudu and Togo derive much of their appeal from assonance.

Backronym [a compound of back + acronym] A word reinterpreted as an acronym. For example, at one time Yahoo! was jokingly said to stand for Yet Another Hierarchical Officious Oracle.

Blending Creating a new word by combining the first part of one word with the last of another (see Portmanteau). Examples: smog (smoke + fog), Petopia (pet and utopia), jeggings (jeans + leggings). Although rare in English, blending is a common means of word formation in several language families.

Coinage The creation of a name through the alteration of an existing word. Google (from googol), mPower (from empower), Altegrity (from integrity) and Lego (from the Danish “leg godt,” meaning play well) are examples of coinage.

Connotation A feeling, idea, overtone or shade of meaning associated with a word that's outside of its literal meaning (see Denotation). For example, the word travel can connote different things. Some may think of driving a car; others, of journeying to exotic locations; and still others, of the hassle of getting from airport to airport.

Consonance The repetition of a consonant sound. Cracker Jack is a perfect example of consonance in naming.

Denotation A word's direct, explicit sense, excluding its overtones and shades of meaning. For instance, while there are various connotations of travel (see Connotation above), the denotation (from Webster's Dictionary) is "to go from one place to another; to make a journey or journeys."

Descriptive name A name that plainly describes a feature or benefit of a company or product, such as Integrated Services Router.

Descriptor A word or words describing a product or service in very literal fashion (often used with a fanciful, arbitrary, or suggestive name). In the case of Kleenex Facial Tissue, for instance, "Facial Tissue" is a descriptor.

Dissonance A harsh or disagreeable combination of sounds. Some native English speakers consider various Southeast Asian languages dissonant, based on their unfamiliar tones and consonant combinations; the reverse is also true.

Eponym A brand name derived from a person, whether real, fictitious or legendary. Betty Crocker, Michael Jordan, and Barbie are eponymous trade names.

Fanciful Name A name invented without apparent reference to any other word in the lexicon. Kodak and Exxon are the archetypes of this category.

Genericide When a trademark becomes synonymous with its product and is no longer legally protectable. Aspirin, escalator, kerosene, thermos, yo-yo, zipper—even heroin—were all once legally protected trademarks in the United States that have now become generic terms.

Iconicity The likelihood of a name being readily visualized by its intended audience. The name of the computer company Apple, for instance, passes this test with flying colors.

Initialism A name which is formed by combining the first letters of several words, and is pronounced as its individual letters. Famous examples include IBM (International Business Machines) and BMW (Bayerische Motoren-Werke, also known in English as Bavarian Motor Works). Often initialisms develop after a longer name has been in use for a while. Unlike acronyms (see entry, above), initialisms cannot be pronounced as words.

Invented Spelling The practice of using non-standard spelling in a name to achieve a desired effect or acquire a domain. Cingular is an intentionally altered spelling of singular.

Linguistics The science and study of language, especially the nature and structure of human speech.

Metaphor A figure of speech in which one object or concept is likened to another. Fruit of the Loom is a metaphorical brand name.

Metonymy The use of a word that's associated with a thing or concept as a stand-in for that thing or concept. Examples include calling the U.S. film industry "Hollywood," the U.S. government "Washington," and a business executive "a suit."

Mimetic Word A word formed in imitation of another word. Litterbug is a mimetic play on jitterbug.

Morpheme A meaningful word or word part that cannot be subdivided into smaller meaningful parts. In English, the letter "s" at the end of a word is a morpheme indicating plurality.

Naming Architecture The way a company's existing names are organized, often including a Naming Protocol that provides guidelines for how future products, services, divisions, and subsidiaries should be named, and how.

Nomenclature The system for naming a particular group of products. A line of General Mills' cereals, for instance, is based on monsters' names: Count Chocula, Frankenberry, Boo Berry, and the sadly departed Fruit Brute and Yummy Mummy.

Onomastics The study of names and naming practices.

Onomatopoeia The creation of a name that sounds like what it refers to. The Rice Krispies' elves Snap, Crackle, and Pop are famous examples. (The fourth elf, Pow, was fired after inappropriate behavior in a New York nightclub.)

Personification A type of name that gives human form to a product (see Eponym). Mr. Clean and the Nintendo Game Boy are examples of personification.

Phoneme The smallest unit of speech that distinguishes one word from another in a given language. In bat and mat, the sounds “b” and “m” are phonemes.

Portmanteau A word that’s a blend of two or more others, like smog (smoke + fog), or Snapple (snap + apple). See also Blending.

Proprietary Name A name that’s distinctive enough to be trademarked (unlike a purely descriptive or generic name).

Root The semantic kernel from which a set of words is derived through phonetic changes and/or extensions. For example, child is the root of a number of words: childlike, childish, childproof, children, etc.

Semantics The study of meaning in language, including the relationship between language, thought, and behavior.

Sound Symbolism The semantic qualities that a sound suggests in and of itself. Many linguists have theorized that the high vowel /i/, as in the word pea, connotes smallness and that the low vowel /a/, as in the word father, connotes largeness, although many exceptions to this rule exist.

Suggestive Name A name that suggests or refers to a product indirectly, without actually describing it. Spalding Infusion (ball-pump technology) and BlueArc (high-speed data storage) are two examples.

Synecdoche A word or words representing a part of the whole that’s used as a stand-in for the whole. Staples and Wall Street are good examples. (See Metonymy, which is the larger category encompassing synecdoche.)

Toponym A name derived from a place or geographic feature: for example, Shasta soft drinks, Chevy’s Tahoe SUV, Farallon’s Timbuktu remote control software, and perhaps the most famous example, Amazon.

About Catchword

Catchword has been in business since 1998. We have offices in the San Francisco Bay Area and New York City, and a network of naming partners throughout the world. We specialize in all aspects of brand name development, including product and company naming, brand strategy, naming architecture and protocol, preliminary legal screening, and linguistic analysis.

Our mission is to help clients connect with their customers through brand names that are memorable, engaging, and rich in meaning. We do that for companies like McDonald's, Starbucks, BlackBerry, Gap, Cisco, General Mills, Wells Fargo, Adobe, and all manner of start-ups.

We're often asked, "What sets Catchword apart from other naming companies?" To which we reply, "The experience." And we're not just talking about our own many years of experience in the industry. Your experience throughout our process is even more important. We pride ourselves on making the process fun, inspiring, stress-free and most of all, successful, and we've built our business model around that belief.



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