



A Rose by Any Other Name... *The Nuts and Bolts of Naming*

By Drew Zagorski
June 23, 2009

A while back I read a piece by Scott Trimble of Halfagain, LLC (www.halfagain.com) on what goes into naming. It was one of the best articles I've ever read on the topic. I recently had a discussion with a prospective client about naming their business and thought of the Trimble article again. I went back and re-read it and it's still as good the second time around.

As the tectonic plates of the economy continue to shift, many businesses and professionals are re-inventing themselves. If you're one of them, and if you're launching a new business or re-branding or re-naming your business is front and center in your world right now, I believe the info Mr. Trimble provided will help you a great deal.

First: Before you go into naming, embrace the fact that there's no set of events that will lead you to naming perfection. Likewise, there are no set naming principles you must adhere to.

Sometimes a name idea will hit you like a bolt of lightning. Sometimes you'll rack your brain for day, weeks or longer, then land on something only to discover it's been used or doesn't work.

Here are the highlights from Scott Trimble's article on naming (along with some of our own recommendations), starting with the basics and working up to more involved concepts.

THE BASICS

1. Be easy to pronounce and spell.
2. Make it memorable.
3. Don't pigeonhole yourself (being too specific in the naming of your company or product [example: Dave's 256k Flash Drives Inc. or Portland Flooring Inc.] can hinder growth later).
4. Go easy on the numbers.
5. Don't use names that could have a negative connotation in other languages (Baka Software Inc. sounds OK in the US, but won't fly in Japan).
6. Stay away from negative connotations.
7. Make sure your name doesn't alienate any group (race, religion, etc.)

8. Search for existing trademarks on potential names.
9. Make sure that the domain is available or purchasable in the aftermarket. Use your favorite registrar or use a bulk domain checker (I've outlined one below).

CONSIDER THIS: DOMAIN AVAILABILITY

Domain availability is possibly the biggest hang-up to ever happen to naming. Sure, you can come up with great potential names, but can you come up with great potential domains that are available?

I won't spend much time on this because it's pretty simple. If you're creating a name for a product or business that will require a .com, be patient, keep trying, and you'll start to get a feel for names that are more likely to be available than others. I've also listed some tools below that will help immensely with this.

LeftBrainRightBrain Recommendation:

Don't sweat the fact that your domain name is the same as your business name. With a domain, you want it to be easy to remember and if possible, have some keywords in it. Though, according to SEO guru Jerry West, your domain name doesn't necessarily have to be keyword rich (but filenames should be). If at all possible, secure a .com domain. They're still the king of domain name extensions and account for the vast majority of the search engines' top results.

CONSIDER THIS: FOCUSED BRAINSTORMING

Don't just sit back and try to come up with ANY words that describe your business. Focus your brainstorming to answering a set of questions.

Answer each by making as long a list of words and phrases as you possibly can. Remember, the longer and more abstract your list, the better off you'll be. So go wild...

- ☛ What does your product do?
- ☛ What does your industry do, what's its purpose?
- ☛ What is your product's benefit to the consumer?
- ☛ What will happen for them?
- ☛ What will they get?
- ☛ What are the "ingredients" that go into your product or service?



A Rose by Any Other Name...

The Nuts and Bolts of Naming

- ☞ How are you different from the competition?
- ☞ What makes you unique?
- ☞ What's the lingo in your industry? What are the expressions that are unique to your offering and business?
- ☞ Botanical names
- ☞ Math or Engineering terms
- ☞ Astronomical terms
- ☞ Animal, fish, or bug names

CONSIDER THIS: SYNONYM SEARCH

It's pretty simple, really. Take every one of the words you brainstormed above and plug them into a thesaurus, like Thesaurus.com (thesaurus.reference.com). Run through each entry, keeping the words you like, trashing the ones you don't. Put these into a new list, paying attention to name possibilities.

CONSIDER THIS: WORD COMBINING + A COOL NAME-COMBINING TOOL

After you've done some focused brainstorming and/or a synonym search, try word combining. Pop ALL of your words into a word combiner like My Tool (www.my-tool.com/word-domain/word-picker/), tweak its settings to reflect what you want it to show, and combine.

Depending on how many words you put into the system, you may get a massive list returned to you. To weed through them quickly, you can then hit the button at the bottom and check each domain for availability.

CONSIDER THIS: NAME AND WORD LISTS TO GET YOUR JUICES FLOWING

Plenty of great product, company, and Web site names have their roots in other, irrelevant names. Look up "list of _____" in Google and you'll get more than you can handle:

- ☞ Geologic periods
- ☞ Fruit or food names
- ☞ Types of dinosaurs
- ☞ Kinds of rocks
- ☞ Latin or Greek roots
- ☞ Place names
- ☞ Historical figure names
- ☞ Zoological names

Think about this abstractly also. If your product is new and unique, what foods or plants have fresh connotations? And so on.

CONSIDER THIS: PUNNING AND PLAYS ON WORDS

I just tried a new beer recently specifically because of its name. It was called Tricerahops, a double IPA made by Ninkasi Brewery. Quite a beer, incidentally. But check out how you can create a name like that.

Cruise your focused brainstorm and synonym lists for words that describe/define your product. In this beer example, we might find hops—one of the main ingredients in beer. Then, we can look through lists of animals, foods, places, etc and see if we get any good combinations, where the words fit seamlessly. In this case, they chose the dinosaur name "Triceratops" and simply changed one letter. Here's an even easier way of doing it...

CONSIDER THIS: GROOVY WORD TOOL

Use this More Words tool (www.morewords.com) and search for any words that contain _____. You can search for anything—search for words that contain "top," or words that have a double "e." Virtually any sound or letter combo you want to find in a word, this site will do it for you.

CONSIDER THIS: MEANINGFUL OR NOT?

Example: Dave's Rocket Repair Inc. has meaning, Simble Inc. does not.)

Some say creating a name with built-in meaning is a must—new companies or products need to seem familiar and safe. Others say non-meaningful names are the best—the name is completely yours, free of meaning (which you can then define); plus, newly coined word names connote innovation.

The jury, as they say, is out. Some things to keep in mind though:



A Rose by Any Other Name...

The Nuts and Bolts of Naming

Newly coined words CAN convey meaning. The most championed of these may be Acura, which was formed from the morpheme "Acu" and finishing with suffix "ra." Acu as a root connotes accuracy or precision, which fits nicely for a luxury car line.

The creator of the Acura name (Ira Bachrach of NameLabs) is purported to have a list of thousands of combinable morphemes. I, as of yet, have not found such a list. If you happen to run across one, I'd love to see it.

CONSIDER THIS: A TRULY KILLER NAMING TOOL

Word Lab (www.wordlab.com) and specifically this page: Word Lab Tools (www.wordlab.com/tools/t_index.cfm).

This Web site I consider to be one of the single most powerful naming tools out there. With an absolutely massive list of company names, a morpheme name creator, name builder, and so on, this site is the juggernaut of idea generators. Every time I'm naming something new, I use this site.

CONSIDER THIS: METAPHORICAL NAMING (SOME POWERFUL STUFF)

I call it metaphorical or lateral naming; but no matter what you call it, it's a branch from the focused brainstorm, and often the coolest names come from this method. It'll take a more creative, abstract frame of mind, so whatever you need to do to break out of your linear comfort zone, do it.

So, after you've changed into your tie dye and stared at your Led Zeppelin poster for a while, grab your focused brainstorm. Here we're going to center on the question "What does your product, business or industry do?" You're going to sequentially take each of the words and phrases you came up with, and come up with other things in life that do these things too.

Let me repeat (or rewrite, as it were) that. You're going to take what your business does, and come up with other things in life that do the same thing. Make a list of everything you come up with. Here is an example:

I have a software company, and our newest product's function is to copy files (pretty high-tech, I know). So I ask, "What else in life copies things?"

A copier—too logical.

A cell—might work, but a little "out there."

A mime—A HA!

Why not call the new software product... Mime.

Here's another:

My marketing company helps its clients voices get heard above the competition's. So, what else gets voices heard or makes things louder?

A bullhorn.

A volume dial.

An Amplifier—A HA!

Why not call the company Amplify Interactive (happens to be a real company here in Portland). Volume Media wouldn't be bad, either.

CONSIDER THIS: MISPELLINGS

Misspellings of commonly used words can get you in familiarity's proverbial backdoor. Example—netflix.com. It's familiar, short, and you instantly know what they do. Though, if looking for an available domain, you'll have to use some fancy combinations because common misspellings are already registered.

CONSIDER THIS: INDUSTRY LINGO

Each industry has its lingo, and you may have noticed that many taglines come from such lingo... or, more distinctly, from words and expressions that are used by your consumers.

For example, I've just developed the perfect fish hook. It never, and I mean never, lets a fish go. A common expression in fishing when you feel a fish take your bait is "Fish on." This great expression, combined with something else, might make a nice tagline for my fail-safe hook. How about "Fish on ... never off."

LeftBrainRightBrain Recommendation:

Be careful when using industry lingo. Don't use industry lingo if the lingo will only confuse your audience. If you have a product that targets attorneys, use attorney lingo rather than software lingo.

CONSIDER THIS: ASK YOUR FRIENDS, BUT...

Ask your friends' opinions, but take them with a grain of salt. First of all, your pool of test subjects is



A Rose by Any Other Name...

The Nuts and Bolts of Naming

probably pretty small, leaving your results (ratio of yays to nays) with little accuracy.

Second, consider whether your friends are in your target market. If they're not, they may not "get" a name that might be perfect for your market.

Finally, people in general side with what's familiar. Finding your Web site, seeing an advertisement, or having a friend suggest your product can have the unique ability of making your product's name sound good. The name or names that you ask your friends to grade won't have the benefit of such an advantage.

Consider this: How is the competition named? What are the trends?

I've made the mistake (like an idiot, I might add) of not checking my competition first, before creating a name, only to find out the name I created is just like a competitor's. Time wasted.

Now, my general rule is to find out how my competitors are naming themselves and simply be different. Stepping out of the box is always a bit of a gamble, so make sure you're different in what will be seen as a positive way.

CONSIDER THIS: NAME RHYMING

Rhymed names are memorable and can work, as long as they're not too cute or overboard. Rhyme Zone (www.rhymezone.com) is fantastic for finding words that rhyme. More Words can also be good for this.

CONSIDER THIS: WEB 2.0 NAME GENERATORS

I'll be honest, they're generally crap. I've used this one, Web 2.0 Name Generator (benjamin.hu/w2namegen.php), but found that, for the most part, they return relatively useless gibberish.

If you have a few extra minutes, though, try popping some of your synonyms into the interface and see what it comes up with. At the very least, it might give you some ideas and get your wheels turning.

CONSIDER THIS: DON'T PUT TOO MUCH STOCK IN YOUR NAME

They're certainly important, but naming can also be over-emphasized. There are plenty of highly successful businesses and products out there with bad names. So, take your naming, like your friends' opinions, with a grain of salt. And, as with

everything, the more you stress about obtaining perfection, the less likely you'll come up with that killer name that seamlessly fits your offering.

LeftBrainRightBrain Recommendation:

When it comes to naming a business, your own name can certainly add a unique element. For instance, if I named my business after myself, it would be something like "The Zagorski Group." The downside? If my long term goal is to create a valuable enterprise and either sell it or pass it to another generation (who may have a different last name) the business name can become a stumbling block. As you grow your business you build a lot of equity with your name. If your goal is to sell it when you're ready for retirement, it would be best to not use your name. (Unless, of course, you're in a field where that type of transition happens regularly, such as a law firm.)

Drew Zagorski is the Principal of LeftBrainRightBrain Marketing. You can reach him at drew@lbrbmarketing.com.

LeftBrainRightBrain Marketing © Copyright 2009. All rights reserved.