

About Naming

The Art and Science of Brand Naming



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Introduction

Why naming matters

A name is a first impression, a symbol, and a one-of-a-kind communication tool. With a single word or phrase, you can convey what a business or product stands for—literally, figuratively, and sometimes both.

A good name doesn't just sound nice—it's the start of your story. Like the title of a book, your company or product brand name distills your key communications or narrative into one or several words.

More than packaging, promotions, or any other branding element, it establishes your brand voice and distinguishes you from your competition.

Of course, a bad company or product name isn't necessarily a smack down for a strong companies or offerings. Conversely, a top-drawer name won't save a deficient business or product. But a powerful name can add incalculable value to a great company or offering.

Naming Approaches

Go it alone or not.

Certainly some people have been lucky enough to catch lightning in a bottle and land on the right name almost effortlessly, but more frequently, naming is fiendishly difficult.

On the naming journey, you'll encounter hurdles of every sort, from strategic and creative, to legal, linguistic, and emotional.

So while you might be the right person to name your enterprise or offering, the intricacies of naming may surpass your skillset.

Fortunately, there are other options. Let's look at the pros and cons of each.



Yourself

THE GOOD STUFF

Affordability

You'll get the me-myself-and I price.

Ease

You don't have to deal with anyone else.

You control the process from soup to nuts.

Expertise

You have the deepest knowledge of your business. This might lead to unique insights and inspirations that others would overlook.

THE FLIPSIDE

Affordability

You get what you pay for. It is the same with naming.

Ease

Done properly, naming is time-consuming and challenging. Is this where your focus should be?

Expertise

Naming specialists are experts in all aspects of brand naming, including legal and global linguistic issues.



Agency

THE GOOD STUFF

Affordability

A reputable agency can help avoid potential legal issues down the road.

Ease

The best naming agencies are one-stop shops, handling all aspects of naming, from name development and screening to linguistic checks.

Expertise

Naming agencies know how to rise above “like” and “dislike”—they can help you get beyond your personal preferences and think like your customer.

THE FLIPSIDE

Affordability

Working with a naming agency is more expensive than D-I-Y.

Ease

There is paperwork. Lots of it. You will also have to spend time clarifying your concepts to better communicate with your agency.

Expertise

Branding professionals are highly creative and may push you past your comfort zone. This is important because strong names often lie beyond the comfort zone.



Crowd

THE GOOD STUFF

Affordability

Like D-I-Y, crowdsourcing is an economical way to find a name.

Ease

Throwing things out to the digital playground is as easy as 1,2,3.

Expertise

You won't get expertise, but you will receive a voluminous number of names from a diverse range of people.

THE FLIPSIDE

Affordability

You get what you pay for. Cheap and quality are not compatible.

Ease

Hoping for the best is not a naming strategy. Naming is not easy—there are too many moving parts.

Expertise

Most names received from crowdsourcing will be off message and not clear trademark hurdles. Volume doesn't necessarily lead to success.

The Naming Process

Same but different

Your company name is your “trade name.” It is the name you register with your state in order to operate and appears on all your legal documents, from bank accounts to tax forms. Your product name is what your company produces.

Sometimes the company and product name are the same; other times they are distinct. Both types of names are extremely important, but company names have some extra lifting. A company name needs to be comprehensive enough to encompass possible future products.

Had Amazon started out with a business name like Books for All, making the leap from an online bookseller to an online marketplace of everything would have been more challenging.

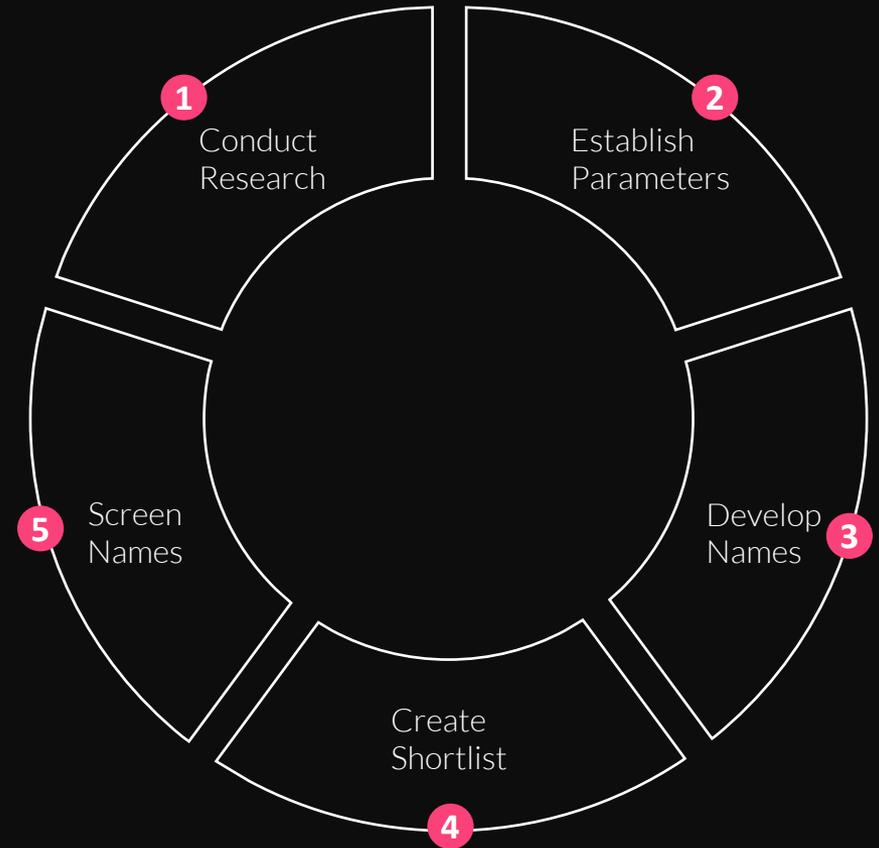
The process described in this guide, applies to both company and product names.

** Throughout this guide “brand” will be used to cover company, product, and service name.*

Creative or Crazy Chaos?

Like any creative endeavor, naming can be messy. And there is nothing wrong with mess. It is part and parcel of creative work. To keep the mess from turning into crazy chaos, it's important to have clear guidelines and goals.

There are many approaches to naming, but we suggest you follow these five name development steps:



1. Conduct research

Conduct research

Before beginning any naming project, you will need to do a great deal of upfront research. Beyond understanding the profile of your target market, you will want to deeply explore your competitors' naming styles and messaging.

After you've done this, you will need to determine if you want to sit comfortably within the competition or break into new territory with your name.

2. Establish Parameters

Establish parameters

Establishing parameters or guidelines at the start of any naming activity is crucial. Your interests may change as the naming process goes on, but without guardrails, the process can quickly go off the tracks.

At River + Wolf we call these the 4 Cs:

- Character
- Communication
- Construction
- Continuum

You will want to consider each at the start of any naming project. Let's take a closer look at each.

C

Character

Like people, names have different personalities. In the branding world, this is referred to as “tone of voice.” Tone of voice relates to the personality of your written communications. To better understand tone of voice, have a look at the examples on the next page.



Character

A.I

Cinnamon
(playful)

DeepMind
(powerful, scientific)

Rainbird
(poetic/lyrical)

MindMeld
(scientific/friendly)

HOTEL/RESORTS

The Pierre
(classic luxury)

Freehand
(creative, cool)

Yotel
(playful, friendly)

One & Only
(modern luxury)

LINENS

Peacock Alley
(friendly)

Boll & Branch
(classic)

Parachute
(friendly)

Snowe
(poetic, lyrical)

C

Communications

Names can generally convey one or two communications. It is also important to note that a name doesn't always have to map back to a clearly defined message. On the next slide are examples of 3 industries that demonstrate how, while the product may be the same, the communication can vary.



Communications

SPARKLING WATER

Hint Waters
(touch of fruit flavor)

Spindrifft
(winking bubbles)

Recess
(a refreshing pause)

St. Croix
(island holidays)

FRAGRANCE

Beautiful Minds
(intelligent women)

Fresh Laundry
(clean, natural)

Gypsy Water
(abandon, free spirit)

Dirty Flower Factory
(natural, earthy)

LINENS

Snowe
(whiteness, purity)

UrbanHut
(cool, cosmopolitan)

Charter Club
(exclusive, membership)

Boll & Branch
(nature, cotton and tree)

C

Construction

Names are created in a variety of ways. They can be formed from one, natural dictionary word, two natural words not commonly found together, invented words, clipped words, and many more. On the next page are examples of some commonly used constructions.



Construction

SINGLE NATURAL WORD

Parachute

Amazon

Method

INVENTED/FOREIGN

Kijiji

Google

Accenture

PHASAL

StumbleOn

LinkedIn

Six Senses

COMPOUND WORDS

Youtube

Facebook

BirchBox

AMPERSAND/PLUS

One & Only

Boll & Branch

Crate & Barrel

ACRONYM/CLIPPED

AOL

FedEx

NBC

C

Continuum

In terms of trademark, names exist on a *Spectrum of Distinctiveness*. On one end is generic, and on the other fanciful. In-between fall descriptive, suggestive, and arbitrary names. The categories are not hard and fast, but generally the more fanciful a name, the easier it is to trademark.



Continuum

DESCRIPTIVE NAMES

Descriptive names convey a brand's chief benefit or purpose with literal language. Service or goods are immediately graspable with no imaginative effort needed.

Examples: Salesforce (CRM platform), Three Day Blinds (window coverings), Google Maps (maps).

ARBITRARY NAMES

Arbitrary names be real words with no immediate connection to the underlying goods, service, or benefits of a brand and therefore require greater imaginative effort to connect name and brand.

Examples: Apple (technology company), Amazon (online marketplace), Drunken Elephant (skincare).

SUGGESTIVE NAMES

Suggestive names easily map to a brand's core message in a non-literal way. These names can easy to grasp metaphors or non-metaphors. Whatever the form, they clearly map to the brand's offering.

Examples: Dove (personal care), Chop't (salad eatery), Method (cleaning products).

FANCIFUL NAMES

Fanciful names are made up or coined words with or without inherent meaning. These can be the easiest to trademark, though may require greater marketing muscle.

Examples: Sephora (cosmetic chain); Pinterest (social site), Google (search engine).



Continuum

Generic

Descriptive

Suggestive

Arbitrary

Fanciful



3. Develop Names

Develop names

You've done your research and established your naming parameters. Now it is time to generate names. And while some people have been lucky enough to catch lightning in a bottle and land on the right name almost effortlessly, more frequently, finding a name that works take time, effort, and trial and error.

Moreover, you'll need quite a few, as both preliminary trademark screening and full search can considerably shorten a list. Strive to develop at least 100 names. On the next slide, are some tips to get the process started.

Do

FEED YOUR IMAGINATION

Traipse the aisles of a bookstore and check out titles. Read poetry. Check out magazine headlines. Think laterally. Naming a spa? Visit a wine store. Visit venture capital sites and study the names.

WRITE EVERYTHING DOWN

Even if an idea strikes you as less than stellar, there is no harm in documenting it. It could lead to an interesting train of thought. Naming is a journey. Each idea gets you closer to the goal.

SAY IT AND SEE IT

Consider how it sounds and looks. Could you imagine your customer recommending it to a friend? How would it look on a business card or Facebook page?

TAKE YOUR TIME

Ruminate! Let your ideas percolate. Creativity is hard to force. Think of it like an archeological dig. Hours or days can go by before you find any treasure. And then—presto!

On the next page are examples of where to look for naming inspiration.

Inspirations

Characters: Names referencing a real or made up character



Oscar (insurance company)
Siri (voice assistant for search)

Places: Names that tie to a brand's geographic origin or imaginary places



Patagonia (sporting apparel)
Seattle's Best Coffee (coffee company)

Cultural Icons: Names similar to place names but focused on a well-known icon.



Taj Mahal (tea)
Big Apple Circus (circus)

History: Names relating to people or events in local, regional, or world history



Rosetta Stone (foreign language program)
19th Amendment (clothing)

Songs/Literature: Names inspired by songs or literary works



Wandering Aengus (wine)
Shakespeare & Company (bookstore)

Mythic: Names inspired from Greek or other world mythologies, epics, or legends



Pandora (music platform)
Hermes (fashion)

Foreign: Names created from language unknown to the target market



Kijiji (online market/Swahili for village)
Saatva (mattress brand meaning purity, wholeness)

4. Create shortlist

Create shortlist

It's always hard to be objective about your own creative process, but you must evaluate every single name by the same criteria. Here are some activities for winnowing your list.

- Say the names out loud. Eliminate those that sound clunky or awkward.
- Check the spelling. Strike off those that will trip people up or look jarring.
- Examine the tone. Does it convey the personality of your brand?
- Check your key communications. Is the name doing what you set out to do?
- Consider your audience. What would they think of this name?

Don't

REJECT NAMES YOU DON'T LOVE.

Names are more like friendships—they accrue power over time.

EXPECT A NAME TO PLEASE EVERYONE.

People have different responses to names.

ACCEPT ONLY EXACT MATCH DOT COM.

Be open to adding a suffix or prefix to secure an available dot. com.

REQUIRE NAMES TO BE FAMILIAR AND UNIQUE.

If a name is familiar, it won't be unique. If it is unique, it won't be familiar.

GET HUNG UP SHORT.

A well-designed longer name can work just as well as a short name.

DENY THE CHALLENGES OF TRADEMARK

Huge numbers of names need to be searched to reach reasonable risk levels.

5. Screen names

Screen names

The most creative names in the world are worthless if they infringe on other marks in the same or related goods and services. Such a conflict can lead to expensive legal battles or require a name change. For this reason, proper trademark screening of names is essential.

The trademark process normally begins with what is known as a preliminary trademark screening, also known as a “knock out” search.

Once you’ve weeded out obvious problems, the next step is to order a full or comprehensive trademark search that examines the name against many more databases.

Trademark

Preliminary Trademark Screening

Preliminary screening involves searching your domestic Intellectual Property Office, along with a Google search for names of interest that are the same or *related* to your offering. A preliminary trademark screening looks for exact matches, along with obvious variations, such as separate words, plurals, and sound-alikes.

Many names fall-out during a preliminary trademark screening, so we advise against “falling in love” with names prior to screening. At times, there can be a workaround for a name with a higher risk.

Comprehensive Trademark Screening

A comprehensive trademark search is a much deeper search than a preliminary trademark screening. It is managed by specialized research firms that can access a vast number of databases and other resources, among them state trademarks, press releases, business publications, domain name databases, and many others.

A comprehensive trademark search looks for names that are not registered. In many countries, these names have common law protection, though it is a more geographically limited scope of protection.

Conclusion

An Origin Tale.

So there you have it – your not-so-easy guide to naming. We hope this guide has taught you what to expect from a company or product name, and how to go about developing a name that can deliver on those important objectives.

Before we part, we would be remiss if we did not tell you a bit about us and how we got our mark, River + Wolf. Sometimes a river twists and turns, responsive to the lay of the land. Other times, it is an unstoppable force, carving its way through solid rock.

As to wolves, they're known for their deep instinct, keen intelligence, and sense of loyalty. And since no two wolves make the same sound, the wolf is considered a precise and original communicator. For these reasons and more, we believe River + Wolf is the perfect metaphor for how we work and what we stand for.

If you like the sound of that, give us a call. We'd love to hear from you.

Meet the Authors



Margaret Wolfson
Founder & Chief Creative

Margaret is the Founder and Chief Creative of River + Wolf. Prior to launching River + Wolf, she worked for more than a decade as a verbal identity consultant/creative director, developing names, stories, and marketing messages for established companies throughout the world. Her naming experience includes name development for clients such as Yum China, NCC Media, Bangkok Bank, Starbucks, Calvin Klein, Target, Unilever, and KraftHeinz Company, to mention a few of hundreds. She also lectures on brand naming, most recently appearing at the Harvard Club in New York City and in Paris at the Institute Francaise de la Mode and Cinquieme Sens.

Margaret has widely contributed to or been quoted in the media, including Forbes, Crains, Fast Company, More Magazine, The New York Times, NBC News, and The Next Web. In 2018 she was selected as a top female entrepreneur by the Huffington Post.

Meet the Authors



Jacqueline Lisk
Writer

Jacqueline is the President of JR Lisk who partners with River + Wolf in the areas of messaging and naming stories. Her work has appeared in dozens of publications and newspapers, including Forbes, USA Today, Washington Post, Entrepreneur, AdExchanger and AdAge (although not always under her own name, as she frequently ghostwrites for C-level ad tech execs).

Jacqueline also works directly with companies big and small to devise content marketing strategies. Past and present clients include Twitter, Anderson Technologies, Inc. mag, Mediaplanet, UberMedia, The UPS Store, MODCo Creative, H&M, Monster.com, Las Vegas Tourism Board and Regions Bank. Jacqueline has a Bachelor's in journalism from Boston University.

Get in touch.

Naming is not easy, so don't get discouraged. If you need help, whether a consultation or a full naming engagement, we'd love to hear from you.

In addition to working directly with brands, River + Wolf also partners with advertising, design, and branding firms. If you want to learn more about River + Wolf, including what our clients have to say, visit: clutch.co/profile/river-wolf

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