

Hitting the Mark

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 brand name distills your 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 name isn't necessarily a smack down for a strong company or offering. 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 are able to get beyond personal preference.

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.



Crowd Sourcing

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.
- **Expertise:** Most names received from crowdsourcing will be off message and not clear trademark hurdles.

The Naming Process

Same but different

Let's begin with what you are naming—a company, a product, or service.* 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 to do some extra lifting. A company name needs to be comprehensive enough to encompass as yet unknown 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. Likewise, IBM's Watson, a name inspired by the company's CEO and the name of a fictional character, is broad enough to suit the platform's range of functions. Early name candidates for Watson included EureQA, Thinqer, and SystemQA, were all too narrowly focused on question and answer.

For the most part, the naming process described in this guide, applies to both company and product naming.

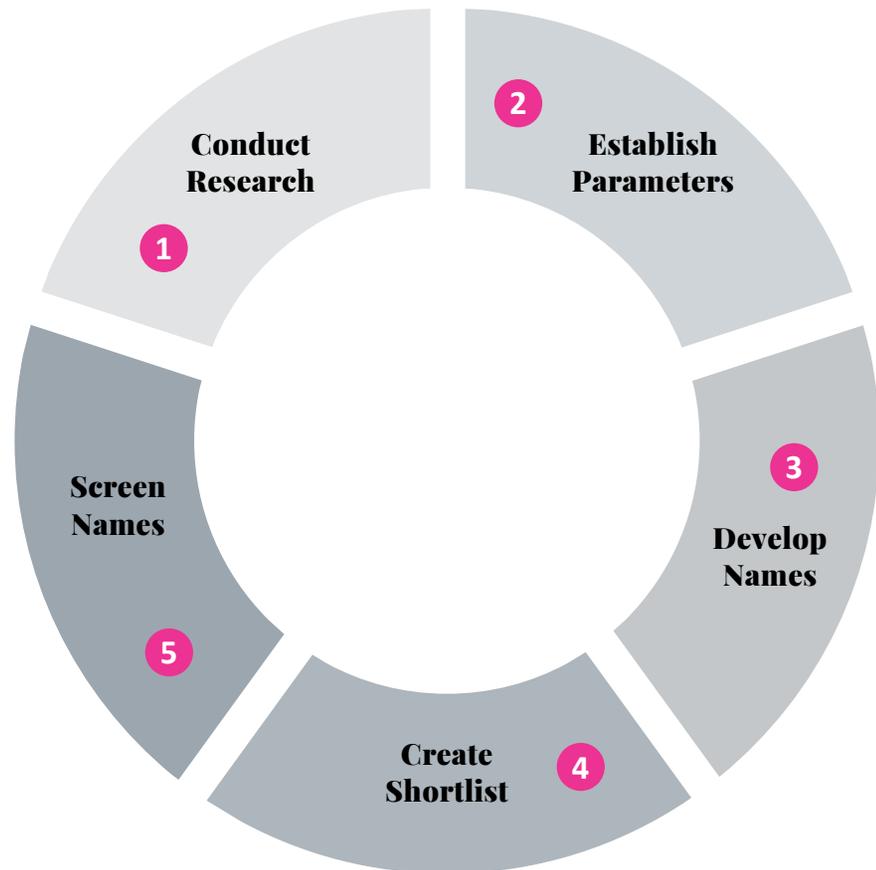
* Throughout this guide “brand” will be used to cover company, product, and service name.

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

Not only must you understand your company or product, but you need to have a firm grip on how your your competitors or close competitors. This will help you define where you want to “sit” in the marketplace. Before starting any naming, answer these questions.

- What differentiate your brand from the competition?
- How would you like your brand to be positioned relative to competition?
- Who is your target market?

Let's take a closer look at each of these questions.

RESEARCH

What differentiates your brand from the competition? What makes your company or product unique?

Avoid terms like innovative, honest, trustworthy—these are givens.

How would you like your brand to be positioned, relative to competition? Take a look at your top competitors—for example, in sparkling waters: Spindrift, Recess, and St. Croix. Make a list of the things you associate with each brand and its name. If all conjure up a similar message, explore a new theme.

Who is your target market? Think about age, demographics, educational levels, and anything else that paints a picture of your chief customers. It is better to be narrow than overly broad. Everyone is not an answer.

1

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.

The three key things you will want to consider at the start of a naming project are these:

- Communications
- Tone of Voice
- Style

Let's take a closer look at the meaning of each of these.

COMMUNICATIONS

Below are some examples of brands and the key communication the name conveys. Despite sharing an industry, the names in each column below convey different communications. It is also important to note that a name doesn't always have to map back to a clearly defined message. This can sometimes constrain the name development process. Apple, for example, has no obvious tie to a single communication though it could allude to simplicity of design, science, education, and freshness.

SPARKLING WATER

Hint Waters
(touch of fruit flavor)

Spindrift
(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)

CRYPTO CURRENCY

Tether
(stability)

Ripple
(wide-range)

Stellar Lumens
(incredible speed)

Neo
(new kind of money)

TONE OF VOICE

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, below are some examples from three separate industries—artificial intelligence, hotels/resorts, and athleisurewear.

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)

Yoga/Gymwear

JoyLab
(friendly)

Sweaty Betty
(playful)

Oiselle
(elegant)

Cobalt 21
(powerful)

STYLE

Names come in a variety of styles. And while the categories are not hard and fast, an understanding of the most commonly used styles, can help focus the name development process. These four are:

- Descriptive
- Suggestive
- Invented
- Metaphoric

Descriptive names convey a brand's chief benefit or purpose with literal language. Examples: Salesforce (CRM platform), Three Day Blinds (window coverings), Google Maps (maps).

Suggestive names easily map to a brand's core message in a non-literal way. These names style can be easy to grasp metaphors or non-metaphors. Examples: Dove (personal care), Chop't (salad eatery), and Method (cleaning products).

Invented Names are made up words. They can be created from morphemes or combine dictionary words in unique ways. Examples: Lunesta (sleeping pill), SoulCycle (bicycling club), and Accenture (consultancy).

Arbitrary names use real words that have no literal or immediate connection to a brand. Arbitrary marks require greater imaginative effort to connect name and brand. Examples: Apple (technology, etc.), Amazon (online marketplace, etc.), Virgin (airlines, media).

More naming styles appear on the next page.

MORE STYLES

Character Names: Names referencing mythological, historic, and fictional characters.

Starbucks (coffee/first mate in Moby Dick)
Newman's Own (Paul Newman's food company)

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

Santa Cruz Organic (organic food company)
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)

Abbreviation: Names created through the clipping or telescoping of longer words.

FedEx (delivery service/Federal Express)
Ameriprise (financial planning/American Enterprise)

Acronym: Names that use the first initials in a name composed of several words.

AOL (online platform/America Online)
UPS (delivery service/United Parcel Service)

Portmanteau: Names created through fusing two distinct words through a shared letter (s).

Pinterest (online bulleting board/pin + interest)
Travelodge (hotels/travel + lodge)

Foreign Word: Names created from language unknown to the target market.

Kijiji (online market/Swahili for village)
Hyundai (automobiles/Korean for modernity)

3

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 come up with at least 200 names.

On the next slide, are some tips to get the process started.



Feed your imagination.

Traipse the aisles of a bookstore and check out titles. Read poetry, both contemporary and classic. Check out magazine headlines. Visit venture capital sites—their portfolios are packed with names that might spark an idea. Think laterally. Naming a spa? Visit a wine store.

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 and each word or phrase brings you one step closer to your end goal.

Say 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.

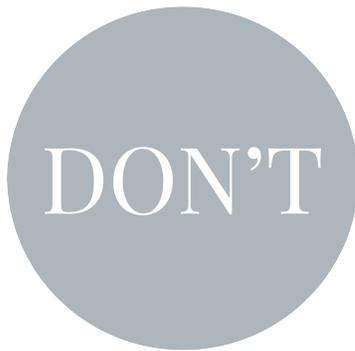
Ruminate! Let your ideas percolate. Creativity is hard to force. Think of it like an archeological dig. Hours or days can go by before you find any treasure. And then—presto!

4

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?



Reject good names because you aren't "in love".

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

Require a name to be both familiar and unique.

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

Expect a name that will please everyone.

People have very different responses to names.

Get hung up on short.

Names should be easy to say and spell, but a well-designed longer name can work just as well.

Accept only exact match dot com.

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

Deny the reality of trademark issues.

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

5

Screen Names

The most creative names in the world are worthless if they are in conflict with 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, screening names is essential to naming.

The trademark process normally begins with what is known as a preliminary trademark search. This is also known as a 'knockout' or 'screening' 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.

Let's take a look at both.

TRADEMARK

Preliminary Trademark Screening

Preliminary screening involves checking the data at your domestic Intellectual Property Office (PTO), along with a Google search for names of interest that are the same or *related* to your offering. Many factors bear on risk assessment, so we recommend using the service of a highly qualified Intellectual Property attorney.

It is difficult to put a number on how many names will fall-out during a preliminary trademark screening, but the number is quite high. This is why we strongly advise against “falling in love” with names prior to screening.

We also recommend assessing your tolerance for risk right from the start. At times, there can be workarounds for high risk names—but they can come at a cost.

Comprehensive Trademark Search

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.

Too, a comprehensive trademark search goes beyond the preliminary trademark screening that is looking for exact trademarks, and a few obvious variations, such as separate words, plurals, sound-alikes, and so on.

A comprehensive trademark search looks for names that are not registered. It also reviews many more variations, along with the sub-parts within your proposed name.

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. For more than a decade, she has worked 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, Starbucks, Unilever, and Burt's Bees, to mention a few of hundreds of companies. She also lectures on brand naming, most recently at the Harvard Club in New York City and in Paris at the Institute Francaise de la Mode and Cinqieme 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.

Prior to her brand naming career, Margaret was an award-winning author and accomplished artist-entrepreneur with a long history of producing/performing spoken arts concert throughout the world. Margaret has a Master's degree in literature and communications from New York University.

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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