

# HITTING THE MARK

The Art and Science of Company,  
Product, and Service 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.

In today's world, **naming takes on an outsized importance**. Here are some reasons why:

- In the digital era, names are omnipresent—they live everywhere, from your website and social media pages to your marketing materials and advertisements.
- People identify with brands personally and names help you cultivate a relationship with your customer.
- You are not just battling competitors, but also shrinking attention spans. From 2000 to 2015, the human attention span dropped from 12 to 8 seconds.

Developing quality things is never easy, and name development is no different.

This purpose of this guide is to help you through the naming thicket. Whether you are a business owner developing a name by yourself, a brand manager charged with naming, or working in partnership with a naming agency, the insights and tools in this guide can help.

# Same but **different.**

Let's begin with what you are naming—a company or a product or service.\*

For the most part, the content in this guide applies to both. 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 creates, whether it is a physical item or service. Sometimes the company and product name are the same; other times they are distinct.

\*Throughout this guide “product naming” also covers “service naming.”

Both types of names are extremely important, but company names have to do some extra lifting. Unlike brand names that can focus on present-day functionality or benefit, **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, its labs, and the fictional Dr. Watson of Sherlock Holmes' fame, is broad enough to suit the platform's range of functions. Early name candidates such as EureQA, Thinqer, and SystemQA, too narrowly focused on question and answer.

# APPROACHES TO NAMING



# Go it alone **or not.**

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 in theory, 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 what you should be focusing your energy on?

**Expertise:** Brand naming specialists spend hundreds of hours studying brand names. They are also aware of the very steep legal and linguistic issues involved.



**AGENCY**



## The Good Stuff

**Affordability:** While they may cost more money upfront, a naming agency can help you avoid expensive infringement legal issues down the road.

**Ease:** The best naming agencies are one-stop shops, handling all aspects of naming, from strategy and name development to trademark and global 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 a good chunk of time sharpening your ideas and concepts to effectively communicate with your agency.

**Expertise:** Branding professionals are highly creative and may push you past your comfort zone.



## CROWDSOURCING

### 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.

**Ease:** Hoping for the best is not a naming strategy.

**Expertise:** Crowdsourcing participants do no strategic work upfront, nor are they aware of the crucial importance of trademark screening—most of the names you receive will not be legally defensible.

# TRAITS OF EXCEPTIONAL NAMES

# Good or Great?

You know a good name when you hear it, but to be sure you land on one that is right for you, you have to understand why these names are so exceptional in the first place.

Exceptional names have one or more of these traits:

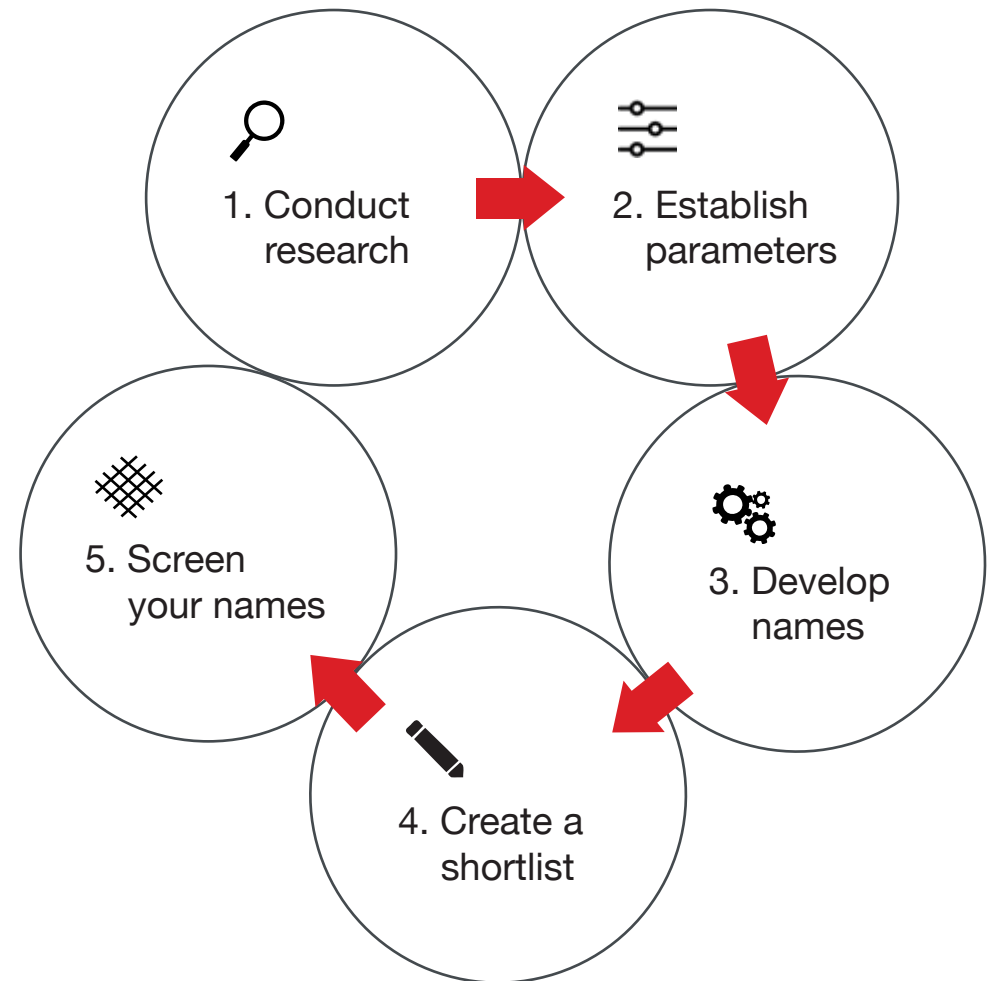
- Communicate something about your company and its offerings, either explicitly or subtly
- Feel memorable and elicit emotion—when you hear the name, you feel something
- Easily leap from one person to another
- Possess storytelling power

# THE NAMING PROCESS

# 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 steps:





# Step 1: Conduct Research 🔍

Before starting any naming, try to answer these questions:

- What differentiates your products or services from the competition?
- How would you like your product to be positioned relative to the competition?
- How would you like customers to describe your brand?
- Who are your top competitors? How are they like you? How are they different?

You must also decide where you want to live in the brand landscape. Consider the mattress space, which has trudged along with little interruption or innovation for decades with brands like Beautyrest and Sleepy's leading the way. Today's mattress brands sound quite different—think Casper, Loom & Leaf, Saatva, and Cocoon.

## Step 2: Establish Parameters

This step is quite involved. Before any actual name development begins, answer the following:

- Identify key communications
- Define target market
- Select tone of voice
- Determine naming categories

Let's take a closer look at each of these sub-steps.

## Identify Key Communications

A name can generally convey one or two key communications. Think of how “Amazon” conveys *bigness*, “BestBuy” speaks to *cost-savings*, and “Covergirl” suggests *beauty*.

To help understand the key communication points of your company or offering, ask yourself these questions:

- What do you do?
- How do you do it?
- Why do you do it?

## Define Target Market

Naming isn’t about you. A good name is only good if it resonates with your target consumer. Names that appeal to 20-years olds may be jarring to an older age group. Names that appeal to men may not find favor with women. Industries have their own orientations, too.

A tech startup may be more open to an adventurous name than an engineering or financial firm.

## Select Tone of Voice

Like people, names have different personalities. In the branding world, this is referred to as “tone of voice.” Tone of voice is the written and spoken expression of your company or product’s personality. Sometimes, defining tone is simple and a core part of the brand identity. Other times, tonality is less obvious.

To better understand tone of voice, let’s draw on some examples from fashion, a landscape chock-full of names of varying tones.

Think of the female athletic leisure brand, *Sweaty Betty*. This name is fun and a bit edgy as it puts a positive spin on something not normally pleasant.

How about *Rich & Skinny*? It sounds both matter-of-fact and proud—a declaration or an aspiration. Different still is *Under Armour*, a name that speaks to both inner and outer strength.

When setting up your naming blueprint, identify your tone of voice early on. Some examples of varying tones include, but are not limited to:

- Classic/Traditional
- Contemporary/Cool
- Luxury
- Playful
- Edgy
- Easy/Friendly
- Exciting/powerful
- Innovative/technical

## Determine Naming Categories

You don't have to commit to a naming category before beginning your naming process. It is recommended, however, that you familiarize yourself with the various naming categories. This will help open your imagination to different possibilities.

What follows is a list of naming styles. The usual four categories—Descriptive, Suggestive, Arbitrary, and Fanciful/Neologic—appear first with numerous examples, followed by some less commonly known or used categories.

## Descriptive Marks

Descriptive names convey a brand's chief benefit with literal language. They help your audience to immediately understand something about your company – its purpose or benefit. Descriptive names are clear, but because they use common words and phrases, they can be harder to trademark.

### Examples:

BestBuy (discount electronic store)

Google Maps (web mapping service)

Salesforce (customer relationship management platform)

## Suggestive Marks

Suggestive names hover between descriptive and arbitrary names. They generally suggest something about the business or offering, but in a less obvious way than purely descriptive names.

### Examples:

Facebook (social media platform—a digital book of faces)

Chop't (casual restaurant featuring readymade salads)

Blue Apron (meal delivery service playing to lifelong learning, as professional chefs wear blue aprons when learning to cook)

## Arbitrary Marks

These names use real words that have no literal connection to the business or product. Arbitrary marks are often metaphors that suggest some tie to the product. An arbitrary mark like Dove for personal care products clearly cues to gentleness, tranquility, and peace. Other arbitrary marks are open to interpretation. Apple, for instance, could allude to the Tree of Knowledge, simple design, and/or uniqueness (at the time of Apple's naming, computer names were highly technical or functional sounding).

### Examples:

Skylark (luxury travel service)

Brocade (data/technology)

Nyx (cosmetics)

## Fanciful Marks

Fanciful or neologic names are made-up words with no meaning in any language. Like real words, they can either suggest meaning, as the sleeping aid Lunesta suggests "moon" and "siesta", or be totally abstract.

One of the great masters of coined words is Shakespeare who reputedly created 1,700 neologisms, including such wonders as moonbeam and besmirch. Naming specialists develop coinages in a similar fashion, joining or blending existing words or parts of words to create ones with new meaning. These names are challenging to construct, but they can be easier to trademark than literal names.

### Examples:

Zappos (an online shoe and clothing retailer; based on the Spanish word for "shoes", plus "zap" for speedy, as in speedy shipping)

Uniqlo (fashion brand created through contraction of "unique" and "clothing")

Nivea (a personal care brand derived from the Latin words niveus/nivea/niveum, meaning snow-white)

A few other kinds of names and examples follow below:

### Personal Name

These can range from full names of founders to mythological, historic, and fictional character names.



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

### Geographically Descriptive

These marks usually tie to a brand's geographic origin. Like descriptive marks, they can be difficult to trademark, although it can be done.



**Santa Cruz Organic** (organic food company)  
**Seattle's Best Coffee** (coffee company, now a subsidiary of Starbucks)

### Cultural Icons

Cultural icon names are similar to place names but focus on a well-known icon.



**Taj Mahal** (tea)  
**Big Apple Circus** (circus)

### Abbreviation

These marks take an existing word and clip or telescope it into a shorter form.



**FedEx** (delivery service/Federal Express)  
**Ameriprise** (financial planning service/American and enterprise)

### Acronym

These marks represent longer words or phrases.



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

### Portmanteau

These marks blend words together to create a new compound word. Portmanteau marks are often melded together through a shared



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

### Foreign Word

These marks use words from languages not familiar to the target market.



**Kijiji** (online marketplace/Swahili word for village)  
**Hyundai** (automobiles/Korean word meaning modernity)



## Step 3: Develop Names

You've done your research and established your naming parameters. Now it is time to generate names. You'll need quite a few, as both preliminary trademark screening and full search can whittle down the list.

Certainly some people have been lucky enough to catch lightning in a bottle and land on the right name almost effortlessly, but more frequently, finding a name that works takes time, effort, and trial and error. Strive to come up with at least 200 names. It is also helpful to work with defined naming routes or themes. These are often based on your key communications.

For example, when naming Amazon, its namers could have developed ideas around various themes—one may have addressed “vastness,” another “variety,” and yet another “speedy delivery.”



Do

### **1. Feed your imagination.**

Traipse the aisles of a bookstore and check out titles. Read poetry, contemporary and classic. Check out magazine headlines. Visit Venture Capital sites—their portfolios are packed with names that might spark an idea, but warning: bad names abound, too. Think laterally. Naming a spa? Visit a wine store.

### **2. Write everything down.**

Even if an idea strikes you as less than stellar, there is no harm in documenting it. It could spark an interesting train of thought. Naming is a journey and each word or phrase brings you one step closer to your end goal.

### **3. Take your time.**

Ruminate! Let your ideas percolate. Creativity is hard to force. Hours or days can go by before anything emerges. And then—presto!

### **4. Say and see it.**

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



## Don't

### 1. Fall in love

So many things impact a name's viability, including trademark availability and, if your brand is in global use, cultural and linguistic issues. At River + Wolf we tell our clients that a name is more like a friendship than a passionate love affair. With packaging, use, and messaging, it can grow over time.

### 2. Latch on to naming trends.

Great names last forever, but as with any field, there are trends. Remember Dressbarn, Pottery Barn, and Pizza Hut? How about the web 2.0 names that sound like babies babbling in their cribs—Oookles, Bebo, Meevee, Weebly, and Simpy? Avoid trends!

### 3. Choose obvious names.

They will be too hard to trademark. And forget well-travelled areas of inspiration—e.g. rocks, animals, Greek mythology and so on. Almost everything easy to say and spell that has relevance to your product will be taken.

### 4. Rely exclusively on the thesaurus for ideas.

The thesaurus is only one naming resources. There are many wonderful language tools online to draw on. Here are a few:

Positive Words <http://positivewordsresearch.com/list-of-positive-words/>

Favorite Words <https://favoritewords.com/>

Idiom Connection <http://www.idiomconnection.com/>

Rhyme Zone <http://www.rhymezone.com/>

Business Name Generator <https://www.shopify.com/tools/business-name-generator>

Visual Thesaurus <https://www.visualthesaurus.com>

## Step 4: Create a 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 approaches 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 your brand voice?
- Check your key communications. Is the name doing what you set out to do?
- Consider your audience. What would they think of this name?

# Step 5: Screen Your Names

Let's talk trademark.

Trademarks are used to protect a brand's distinctive elements, which can include company names, slogans, product lines, and logos. In the U.S., trademark rights are granted on a "first to use" basis. You don't have to file for trademark protection, but doing so could be crucial to your growth plan.

There are two forms of trademark screening and search:

- Preliminary Trademark Screening (also called a "knockout" search)
- Full Trademark Search (generally takes place at registration)

## Preliminary Screening

Often times, people are unsure whether they should do a preliminary trademark screening or a comprehensive search, also called a full search.

A preliminary trademark or “knockout” search is your first step. It tells you whether or not a name is potentially available, or available for further consideration. A full search should be done by a qualified trademark lawyer. Trademark decisions are not black-and-white and often depend on your tolerance for risk. Even names that pass through a full search can be rejected by the USPTO (United States Patent and Trademark Office).

For more information on trademark screening and search, have a look at: <https://riverandwolf.com/getting-clearer-on-trademarking>.

Also keep in mind that names that are too generic cannot be trademarked. For example, it is highly unlikely that names like “Best Car Wash” or “Your Digital Experts” would clear at the USPTO (United States Patent and Trademark Office) or its international counterparts.

## Full Search

A full search is performed by specialized search firms and trademark lawyers and, as its name suggests, is a more thorough search. This stage is reserved for your top few names after you have completed preliminary screening. But unfortunately, a name that appears potentially available during a preliminary screening could end up on the cutting room floor during full search.

If you are developing an app, you will also want to check the app stores to see if there are any apps with the same or close names. Just because a name is available as a trademark doesn't mean it is available as an app name and vice versa. The same holds true for URLs.

Professional namers often evaluate hundreds of names before choosing a final 20-50 (or more) to put through a preliminary trademark screening process.

From the survivors in this group, those that seem available or potentially available for further consideration go to the next step—a full search. Your budget and timeline will determine how many names you subject to a full search.

Global naming can require many more. At the time of this writing, there are 56 million active trademarks registered globally and over 330 million registered domain names. \* This means there is a strong likelihood the name you want is already in use.

For more information on trademark and trademark classes, visit the United States Patent and Trademark Office website:  
<https://www.uspto.gov>.

\* Source: Thomas Compumark, Verisign, Inc.

## Domain Screening

Along with trademark screening and search, domain screening has become an increasingly crucial part of naming, so much so that some experts advise using domain search tools at the beginning of your process. We beg to differ. While a domain name is crucial, you shouldn't throw a name that works away just because an exact match dotcom URL isn't available.

It has become increasingly acceptable for brands to adapt all kinds of URL workarounds, including purchasing a not.com domain. These domains end in something other than dotcom, such as Google's use of abc.xyz for its company, Alphabet.

Examples of not.coms include professional extensions, such as .marketing or .investment; product lines, such as .books or .tea; or playful brand attributes, such as .bigshots or .leaders. For an evolving list of not.coms, pay a visit to Donuts at <http://www.donuts.domains/products/our-tlds>.

You can also consider adding a suffix or prefix. Oscar insurance added "hi" in front of its name (hicoscar.com) when the exact match dotcom wasn't available. This complements its friendly brand voice.

No one wants to spend tens of thousands of dollars on a URL, but creative thinking can help you snag a cost-effective and creative option that may even be more memorable than an exact match dotcom.



Whatever extension route you go, your goal is to make it easy for your customers to find you.

Don't:

- Use dropped vowels or unnatural spelling
- Include hyphens or special characters
- Confuse people with unnaturally broken up words, e.g. del.icio.us

Useful Domain Search Tools:

- <http://www.buydomains.com/>
- <https://sedo.com/us/>
- <https://whois.icann.org/en>

## Global Linguistic Check

To make sure your name works well and doesn't offend customers in foreign markets, it is worth hiring a global linguistic agency such as Transatlantic Translations, a valued River + Wolf partner.

# 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 such as Home Depot, Sherwin Williams, Dove, Starbucks, Samsung, Motorola, Target, Unilever, Belvedere, Burt's Bees, and Yum China, as well as mid-sized businesses and start-ups. Her naming and messaging experience has helped hundreds of clients in multiple industries throughout North and South America, the Far and Middle East, and Europe. Margaret has contributed to the media, including Forbes, Crains, Fast Company, More Magazine, Inc., The New York Times, NBC News, and The Next Web. In addition to her branding work, she is 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.



## Jacqueline Lisk

### Writer

Jacqueline is the President of JR Lisk who partners with River + Wolf in the areas of messaging, naming, and naming stories. Jacqueline is a writer, editor and marketing strategist with 14-plus years of professional experience. 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:

<https://clutch.co/profile/river-wolf>

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