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Naming Can't Be That Hard — Can It?

By Carroll Ray [TR Design](#)

Have you ever tried naming a company or product? It seems so simple at the outset, but nearly always becomes an exercise in frustration — especially if you have a committee to “help”. It’s easy to create a long list of name ideas, but then what? How do you choose the right one from the list? That’s where everyone gets stuck, so it’s the focus of this article.

Here is a simple process we use with our clients:

Create the List

There are many ways to develop names. You can brainstorm in small groups, send out memos to the whole company asking for ideas, and so on. There are also software and online tools to help create names and generate ideas. Some techniques that are especially helpful include:

- Take the list you’ve started and dig deeper. Look for synonyms (words that express a similar meaning) at [Synonym.com](#).
- Run your names through a thesaurus — a useful tool is [Thesaurus.com](#). Or, one that I recommend is [Visual Thesaurus](#), which requires a small annual fee, but the site allows you to interactively explore word associations.
- Think about the product or company you’re naming, and the value that it provides to your customer. Think of your value proposition. Are you providing confidence? Comfort? Ease of use? Affordability? What other words convey those same qualities?
- Try combining words. You can use words that “go” together and those that don’t. There are powerful examples of combined words that don’t appear to belong together, yet communicate a tone that feels right (LionBridge is a good example).
- Consider intuitive misspellings. Don’t go overboard because this technique can cause more problems than it solves. You want to be different, but you also want people to spell and pronounce your name correctly.
- Look for homophones, or words that sound the same but are spelled differently, for example: peek and peak. Using the alternate spelling can result in compelling names when the fit is right.
- Consider industry jargon. Each specialty has its unique collection of words and phrases. These can offer possibilities for exploration.

Eliminate Names

Now let’s get to work paring down that list. Eliminate all these types of names:

- Purely descriptive names. Names that simply describe what a product or company is, or does, will not be given registration status by the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.
- Names that use numerals or superscript. Sure there are brands like 3M and 7-Up that have been successful, but unless you have their marketing budget, why add barriers to

recognition right out of the gate? Numbers are hard to remember, and superscript names are hard to pronounce.

- Names that are inappropriate or have negative connotations. Enough said.
- Names that are similar to a competitors' product or company name. This is a no-brainer, but it requires you to do some research. There is absolutely no point in considering a name that will be confused with a competitor.
- Linguistically-challenged names. If it's not easy to understand the name or spell the name, then get rid of it.
- Names you can't stand. You don't want the list to be your subjective opinion, but if there are names on the list you really cannot live with, now is the time to cross them off.

Test your names

Your list should now include between 10 and 20 names. This is a good time to test your names with impartial people, to help identify further names to eliminate. Feel free to use co-workers, family members or friends. Have other members of your naming committee conduct the same tests with their own subjects — the more data you collect, the better.

Conduct these two simple tests:

- Spelling test - Give your subject a clean piece of paper and say each word one time, using your normal speaking voice. After each name, give your subject time to write it down, spelling it as they heard it. Performing this test over the phone is an even better indicator.

NOTE: If you have misspelled a word intentionally for impact, you have to factor that in to your analysis. Simple misspellings can be overcome in the future as long as it's simple and intuitive. For example, the name "KardioView" could easily be addressed in practice by saying the name and following with, "that's Kardio with a K." But if the name is a collection of misspellings, then it will become painful to live with, for example: "KardeoViu" sounds the same but will require you to spell it out every time.

- Speaking test - Provide your test subject with the names typed on a piece of paper and ask them to verbalize the names. This cannot be a test subject who took the spelling test described previously. Keep a record of any names that were mispronounced or that caused difficulty for the subject.

Names that are too hard to spell or pronounce should be eliminated.

Eliminate some more

Now it's time for the final elimination stage. You should remove names from the list that have one of these problems:

- Forgettable names. Return to the test subjects from either of the linguistic tests on the following day and ask them to write down all the names that they remember from their test a day earlier. Do not tell them in advance that you intend to do this. We want to identify the names that stick with your audience without giving them time to prepare. Again, the more you test, the more confident you will be in the results. You will typically be able to identify several names that nobody remembered. These may be good candidates for removal from the list.
- Problematic acronyms and initials. You may still have acronyms and initials on your list. Check [The Free Dictionary](#) and [The Acronym Guide](#) to be sure that the acronym you are considering does not have any meanings that would be undesirable.

- Unavailable names. Take the names that remain and do a Google search for each. Unless you have developed a name that's extremely original, you may need to refine your search by combining the word with the category you're in (for example endoscopy + catheter + "name"). Now go to the [U.S. Patent and Trademark Office Website](#) and conduct a TESS (Trademark Electronic Search System) search of your remaining names.
- Names with translation problems. Linguistic connotation services are available to make sure that your name does not have an undesirable meaning in another language or culture.

What about Web domain availability for your name? This is typically an issue only for corporate naming and the results of your domain name search should not be a deal breaker. Naturally, it would be ideal if yourname.com were available as a domain, and it's an important consideration when choosing your top three candidates, but in the world of Google, it's less important than it used to be, especially for B2B companies.

Now that you have completed the screening process, you should have only a handful of names remaining. You can now reduce the list to the top three by preference. If you have done all of the steps listed above, the chances are very good that you have at least one name out of the three which will survive a comprehensive trademark search.

Protect the Name

The final step in the process is to submit your top three names for a trademark search with a reputable search firm. [Thomson CompuMark](#) has traditionally been the place to turn, but there are more and more search firms available online, which has thankfully driven the search costs down.

This article is intended as a guideline for a simple, in-house naming process for a stand-alone product. If you have a catalog of products and are releasing new ones on a regular basis, you should consult a naming firm to develop a product architecture and naming convention that organizes your offerings and establishes guidelines for the naming of future products. In addition, naming firms will generally provide validation services such as naming research, emotional mapping, etc., to insure that your efforts are successful.

To read the original, longer version of this article, please visit www.trdesign.com.