



By Greg Conderacci, MPP

Whatchamacallit?

The fine art of naming a company

“My favorite fruit,” is the answer Steve Jobs is reputed to give when people ask him how he came to name his company Apple Computer. And, the fact that he’s changed the name to just plain “Apple” illustrates how truly tricky—or easy—naming a company can be.

“The naming of cats is a difficult matter,” T.S. Elliott wrote, and the same goes for companies. Like cats, companies can answer—or

(such as Honest John’s Used Cars)? Should it contain its key products or services (for example, American Telephone & Telegraph)?

- What are the key characteristics of the name itself? Does it have to be unique, short, memorable, pronounceable in foreign languages, “sound” like healthcare, be geographic (Southwest Airlines), etc.?
- What do you NOT want in a name? Are you concerned

- Although you should be able to come up with more ideas in a group than individually, coming to a decision on a single name usually takes longer the more people who have to like it. It can take months for a committee or a board or a large team to agree on a name. To speed things up, begin the process with a set of rules—like you’ll go with a name that three quarters of the group likes.

- You may decide to marry your name with a “tagline” that explains or expands it. Taglines can not only help with your messaging, sometimes they are good compromises between different factions that like different names. So if some in your group want to call your ice cream company “Snow White” and others like “Frosty,” you could say “Snow White Ice Cream Company—Frosty Treats That Are Hard to Beat.”
- If you try Googling every name as you think of it, that will take longer, too. Better to winnow down the list and then search the Internet.
- I find that the thesaurus is one of the first places folks go to look for names—and one of the worst sources for inspiration. Also, the chances of finding a unique differentiable name there are thin—because everybody else looks there, too.
- In general, shorter is better than longer and more simple is better than more complex.

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fail to answer—to a wide variety of sobriquets. But which one? The challenge is even greater when the company is in a field where “all the good names are already taken” such as healthcare.

Here are a few tips and tricks I use when one of my clients is searching for a new name, for either a new company or one that is already established.

Before you start thinking about a name, it’s a good idea to ask yourself some basic questions:

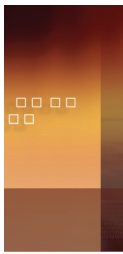
- What are the key characteristics of the company that you’d like the name to reflect? For example, do you want the name to emphasize the company’s mission and values

about sounding too “cute” or technical?

- Can you live with a “made-up” name such as “Verizon” or just initials like IBM?

Actually brainstorming a name can be the easiest or most challenging part. A few words of advice here:

- Generate a *lot* of names without making any decisions or exercising any judgment. The idea is to write as many as you can on a piece of paper up on the wall, as fast as you can. You can always discuss them later. If you talk about each name as you think about it, you’ll generate fewer choices and take more time.



Management

- If you pick a name that's hard to pronounce, you're making it harder on your future customers. For example, GM once had a car called Versailles. You can imagine how most Americans pronounced that. And remember, just because it's easy for you to say doesn't mean everybody everywhere can say it: Visa is a better global name than American Express.
- Sometimes, it's fine to name your company after yourself. Obviously, that works better if your name is Ford than if it's Conderacci. Of course, you won't have any competition for the later name, but there

are plenty of folks who might object if you chose the former. Once you've got a name you like, you're not quite done:

- How well does it translate into a URL? Remember that you're probably going to want the name to be easily searchable. Can you "own" the *nameofyourcompany.com*? If not, can you own something close to it? Checking with sites such as "Godaddy.com" can answer these questions pretty quickly.
- Does it mean something different in another language? There's the famous story about how Chevrolet's Nova needed another name in Span-

ish-speaking countries because "No va" means "it doesn't go."

Finally, I think some of the best names have a "story" behind them. When I choose my company's name, "Good Ground Consulting," I was thinking of the Bible passage "The seed that falls on good ground multiplies a hundredfold" (Luke 8:8). That's because I believe that the most productive marketing is focused on a specific niche—what I call a company's or a product's "good ground." Plant your resources in that niche and you get a great return on investment.

May you always pick names that will pay you dividends—at least a hundredfold! ■

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