

Naming Your Organization

Your organization's single most important branding decision is choosing its name. Unfortunately, this can become an organization's greatest blunder. Whether through faulty reasoning, bad advice, or simply not giving the naming process enough attention, many organizations find themselves paying a price for choosing a less-than-effective name.

The purpose of your organization's name goes far beyond identification. A good name:

- will distinguish you from your competition
- will create an immediate, positive image of your organization
- will help you be remembered
- will inspire images that later will take form in your organization's logo, marketing campaigns, and other communications efforts
- can help you dominate your organizational category (such as education, tableware, or wireless networking).

How can a name do all that? It is the first contact everyone has with your organization. Most people will hear or read about you even before they see your logo, and they will form a initial impression based on your name alone. When your organization's name is spoken aloud, it should create a positive connotation for the listener. It should be easy to remember and, above all, not give people confusing or misleading ideas about your organization.

Here are some tips on choosing a good name for your organization.

Keep It Short

This standard branding and marketing practice is firmly rooted in human psychology: we have a tendency reduce names to the simplest and clearest forms available. For example, Coca Cola became Coke, the Metropolitan Museum of Art became the Met, and Federal Express became FedEx. Friends and colleagues refer to

each another by one name—Al or Sue—rather than using full names. If your organization has a long name, nobody will use it. It will be trimmed, and you won't be able to control what shorthand name people will use. You might luck out and get a good nickname or acronym, but don't leave it to fate.

Nonprofits and government organizations have a particular tendency to choose long names that describe what they do, such as the National Aeronautics and Space Administration of the American Association of Retired Persons. It seems logical to choose a name that tells clients what you do, but this idea often backfires. Names too long to remember are often shortened into something that doesn't reflect the organization at all. (Unless you already know what AARP and NASA mean, you wouldn't have a clue what those organizations do.)

Can you think of any successful company with a long name that is commonly used by its clients? It's much easier to think of organizations with short, simple names, such as Apple and Dell. And that's the point—you do remember them.

Not all short names are equal, however. In choosing a name, you should also consider the following:

- It should be easy to spell.
- It should make a good nickname.
- Aim for repetition of letters and sounds (For example, Apple and Dell both repeat a letter.)
- The name should suggest the category into which your organization fits. (For example, it's easy to guess what Rounder Records sells.) At the very least, your name should not suggest a category different from the organization's.
- The name should be easy to pronounce. Beware of foreign words and of English words that are too esoteric.

Make it Memorable

Make your name unique (but not so unique as to require a mini-dissertation). It is especially important that your name not sound like or be easily confused with that of other organizations similar to yours.

Stay away from generic names such as Central Lumber or Books Are Us. When there are many similar names, organizations are easily confused with one another. This is especially true with organizations' Web pages. On Internet sites, there are fewer clues to help viewers decide whether this "Central Lumber" is the one in their hometown or one halfway around the world. When you consider the number of organizations with pages on the Internet, you realize that your group's name had better stand apart.

Here are other things to consider.

- Avoid using numbers in names, as they can be hard to remember. An exception is a number with a specific, commonly understood meaning, such as 90 degrees or Fahrenheit 451.
- Using color in a name is tricky, but sometimes works (Red Cross, Yellow Pages, the Green Party). When colors are used in a name, they are frequently used ironically. For example, "blue" is often used with something that is not blue (Blue Fox, Blue Wombat, Bluetooth). Before using a color in your name, make sure you investigate what that color represents in other cultures. (For example, white can mean purity or death; yellow can represent gold or quarantine.)
- Don't use variant spellings (such as Kwik Chek) as they make your organization seem mentally weak, and variant spellings often reflect trends that go out of style quickly.
- Avoid clunky "Frankenstein names." These arise when parts of several words are combined into one, such as Accuweld.
- Look for a name that works as both a noun and a verb, such as Xerox. (People usually turn a noun into a verb only for larger organizations that are tops in their field.)

Names that are Proper Nouns

Proper names (for example, Trump Towers or Abercrombie and Fitch) do a wonderful job of differentiating one organization from another. When people started naming themselves they used a limited number of names because communities were small and everyone knew which

Smith ran the local general store. But as communities became larger and more diverse, so did the number of proper names. Today, proper names represent individuality and are generally more successful than generic names.

Proper name sources can be:

- yourself or your family (L.L. Bean)
- historical (Ford Motor Company) Who founded your organization? Where did it originate? Who has made a significant contribution to its success?
- geographic Think big, as did the outdoor outfitter Patagonia. Avoid tying your name to a small place. (What if you expand?) You need a name with growth potential.

You might argue that an organization's name is less important than the quality of its merchandise. But quality only counts when clients can discern a difference between you and your competitors. Quality is something proven to clients through experience and over time. You can't simply tell someone you are a high-quality organization. They have to hear it from others or see it for themselves. So steer away from "best" or "quality" words such as apex, ace, A-one, etc. They are overused, forgettable, and make you appear to be trying too hard to convince people that you are number one. Instead, use positive words and metaphors, like Beacon Investment and Tapestry Health.

Sound Like You Belong

The big fish strive to "own" a category. Organizations that succeed at this find their names synonymous with their category—Xerox, Band-Aid, and Kleenex are examples. Most organizations don't achieve this gold standard, but your name should sound as though it belongs in your category, or at least not sound like it belongs in a different category. For example, A Touch of Class might refer to a swanky bed and breakfast inn, an educational institution, or a massage therapy business, but Whole Foods is obviously a health-food store.

Avoid misleading names, such as off-brand clothing labels bearing a name only one letter different from a famous designer's name. This is a particular problem with special-interest groups that try to hide their political agenda behind generic names—the Institute of Historical Review is actually a publisher of articles that deny the Holocaust. This tactic might deceive people in the short run, but won't work in the long run.

Legalities

When considering a name, especially a name to be used on the Internet (and that's nearly every name), you must do research to avoid stepping on toes or breaking copyright laws. Even a small organization can run afoul of the law if its name is the same as or similar to an existing name on the Web.

Corporate naming laws vary between states. Most states will send you an information packet (or check the business section of the state Web site) that includes samples and any required wording, like rules for using incorporated, corporation, company, limited, or abbreviations thereof. You will also get a list of words you can't use, or that may only be used by certain type of businesses (for example, bank, engineering, architect, pharmacy, or trust).

If your corporate name is rejected by the state because it is the same as or confusingly similar to that of another corporation, you don't have to completely abandon the name. Slight changes may be enough to have it accepted. If your name is similar to another's, though, I strongly consider changing it no matter how much you like it. Ultimately, your name must resonate with your clients, not you.

State approval of your organization's name doesn't give you permission to use it any way you wish. An unincorporated organization (LLC, partnership, or sole proprietorship) may be using the name, or it may be incorporated in another state. For this reason, you also need to research beyond your state to avoid conflicts.

Sole proprietors sometimes choose to do business under names different from their own names, and partnerships usually select a partnership name other than the full names of all partners. Corporations and limited-liability companies may also decide to do business under names different from their official corporate names. Depending on state law, these adopted business names will legally be called "assumed names" or "fictitious names." If your business uses such a "doing-business-as" name, you probably must register it.

It is wise to consider talking with a lawyer about the legal details of selecting a name for your organization.

To Change or Not to Change

Think twice before changing an existing name. Your name may not be great, but if your organization has used it for a while the name undoubtedly has cachet value. Carefully weigh the pros and cons of changing. If the scale tips towards a change, then go all the way. Recognize your past naming mistake, use the guidelines above to make the right change, and publicize your new name broadly and boldly.

Research and Development

Researching possible names should include an analysis of your proposed name vis-à-vis your market and competitors. This will help you better define your brand position and set common goals for the naming process so that it does not become a subjective battle of wills among the people choosing the name.

The Decision-Making Process

Feedback about and testing of a potential name can take place at any point before a final decision is made. "Testing" can be as informal as asking colleagues and friends for their opinions of potential names or as formal as presenting finished-looking samples using your proposed name and logo to organized groups of potential users. Gather as much feedback and as many test results as you can, but no more than three people should analyze the feedback and make the final decision. All feedback is not equal and you can kill a great idea by trying to please everyone and having a committee make decisions.

Conclusion

Your organization may not come up with a revolutionary name, but that's okay as long as you avoid the common naming mistakes discussed above. While choosing a name, keep your ultimate aim in mind—you want people to remember your organization.