

A HELPFUL COMPANION TO THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO REBRANDING

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The Ultimate Guide to Naming Brands

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WITH RICH HEFTY



thebrandleader.com

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01 Introduction

“Names are the sweetest and most important sound in any language.”

— DALE CARNEGIE

WE BUILD BRANDS.

To do so, we have to first vet, tweak, or create an identity. Not a visual identity (yet), but an identity nonetheless. It's true that a name is one of the most important decisions you'll ever make, but that's exactly why it's the last part in our process.

To build a great brand we look at or create the brand essence, purpose, vision, mission, values, and attributes. From there we choose one of twelve brand archetypes to establish their brand position. Once agreed upon, then — and only then — do we tackle names.

You may be wondering why. Well, a name is just a label. It doesn't mean anything alone, but imbued with personality, experience, history, and stories it will be not only your calling card and your internet address but also it will start to become, among other things, your brand.

YOUR BRAND. Many so-called branders and naming experts describe it differently, but we call a brand the “emotional connection between your business, product, or service with the consumer.” You *feel* it. You understand it. And it’s consistent, sometimes literally: You get the same Grande Vanilla Almond Milk Latté at a **Starbucks** in New York City as you will in Topeka, Kansas, or even Dubai. For **Nike**, they’ll help you achieve your athletic goals. **Glossier** make-up will not only make you look glamorous, but you know that someone like you helped create the product. These are promises. Connections. A brand therefore is a handshake deal, a promise in which you’re offering something they need. What do you do when you shake a hand? You introduce yourself by name. That’s only the starting point.

NAME /nām/

- noun**
1. a word or phrase that constitutes the distinctive designation of a person or thing (ex: The boy’s *name* is Brad.)
 2. a word or symbol used in logic to designate an entity



WE LOVE TO NAME companies and name rebrands, too. It’s that one thing that surfaces across the entire business. It’s on the door, the business cards, the top of the website, polo shirts, sides of cars, advertising, email address, etc. Over time, it becomes so synonymous with you because it *is* you. And there’s usually a story behind it. Sometimes, when it becomes so popular that the product name is inextricable with the product type (think of **Kleenex**, **Xerox**, or **TiVo**), you know you’ve struck gold.

Let me share a personal example: The name Kyle wasn’t very popular in 1974, the year I was born. In fact, according to some light research, the name Kyle has been used in the United States ever since 1881, with barely 500,000 boys given the name in the past 200 years. However, the name gained the most popularity in 1983, when it’s usage went up by 152.61%! In that year alone, over 12,000 US babies were given this first name. But in 1974, however, only 2,601 babies born in the US were named Kyle. I was one of them.

I was told (to some degree of suspicion this is even true) that I was named after Kyle Rote, Jr., a famous soccer player who played for the NASL’s Dallas Tornados and captained the US Men’s National team from 1973-1975. A great forward on a poor U.S. team, Rote’s national team *didn’t even play* in 1974 until August, well after I was born. How my mother — who has never watched sports in her life — discovered this name is still baffling. But the name was given to me, and there was a story *behind it*. It has meaning. And for the better part of fifty years, it’s what I answer to. However, it’s not until you actually meet me, or experience time together, that my name carries meaning.

Names aren’t just dreamt up and given out like candy; they’re carefully considered (hopefully more so from your brand agency than my mom), tested, thought about, and then put into place. Gosh, I love naming companies: **Retül**, **Nuqleous**, **Acamas**, **Aēspire**, **NITA**, **Spero**, and so many more. A good name sometimes becomes a great name when it’s thoroughly crafted, can take its entire identity to the point that when it’s spoken, it evokes layers of brand characteristics and expectations. ■

Why a ~~Good~~ Great Name is a Must



“The beginning of wisdom is to call things by their proper name.”

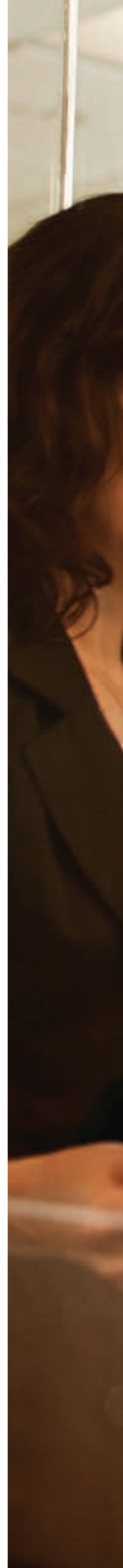
— CONFUCIUS

WE CALL THINGS by their name so we can differentiate them from one another. People have names. Cities have names. We give names to everything. One of the hardest decisions in life is naming our kids (maybe watch a little soccer match first?) — or our pets. A name conveys meaning, imbues emotion, and defines the person, place, or thing for generations or more.

But a name by itself is *meaningless*.

Names are only words until they have a connection to the subject. This connection comes through meaning — the brand. But what is a brand? “A brand is the set of expectations, memories, stories, and relationships,” says marketing guru Seth Godin, author of *Purple Cow* and *This is Marketing*. “That, [when] taken together,” he continues, “accounts for a consumer’s decision to choose one product or service over another.” Just as the adage goes, “a brand isn’t just a logo,” it’s also true that a name isn’t just the brand either.

One of the biggest myths of naming is that you’ll know it when you hear it. A good name may just come to you, but choosing a *great* name takes time. This can come at the end of a process that starts first with identity, characteristics, tone, feeling, etc. As we’ll see later in this guide, the human mind makes many connections with a brand name: how it sounds, its vowel choices, ease of remembering, and its connection to the logo — among other things. →





A company's reputation comes from how it engages with its customers. **Amazon** delivers fast service, **Zappo's** shipping and return policy is second-to-none, and **TOMS Shoes** cares about those less fortunate. Is it their name that conveys those meanings, or is it your experience with their business? Sure, their name identifies the company of which you're speaking, but it's the connection you have with them (through all their brand touchpoints) that connects you, their product or service, and their name with their brand.

If outside reputation is based on experience, inside acceptance of a brand name starts with its stakeholders. They drive or own nearly every influential touchpoint that defines the feeling the name ultimately evokes. If your C-suite, leadership team, or board members feel it's not right — it won't be. They need to be the biggest evangelists.

A strong name — a *great* name — is paramount to forming a business and creating a brand.

Sports teams, beer companies, ministries, products, banks, sneakers, streets, landmarks, estates — everything we know has a name, and someone came up with it. But man, it's hard to do. Let's see why. →

Naming is part art, part science — and it's hard.

Creating a business and, moreover, creating a brand involves naming it — or many times, renaming it. (Imagine if Nike was still called Blue Ribbon Sports. It would lack a little something, wouldn't it?) Naming is a complex undertaking that involves research, listening, competitive analysis, and brand positioning.

IT MAY SEEM easy at first. You want to name something to give it meaning — a riff on your product name, the place you built your business, or maybe after your favorite of two grandfathers. The bigger the stakes, the more difficult it is.

In the 1994 film *PCU*¹, the character Katy comes up to Jeremy Piven's Droz and asks what he thinks of the band's name for the concert. The name? *Everybody Gets Laid*. The reason? On all the posters, the signs would say: "**Tonight at the Pit: Everybody Gets Laid.**" Get it? So did he. His response: "It's tasteless, disgusting, and offensive. I love it!" Thirty years later, I remember that band's name because it was different. Disgusting, I agree, but memorable nonetheless.



However, when a name doesn't work, smart brands make a change to re-emerge as a great brand — potentially with a rebrand or reposition as well. **Best Buy** was originally called **The Sound of Music**. **Burbn** was **Instagram's** initial name. Would you rather have a **Brad's Drink** or a **Pepsi**?

This is where strategy comes in. Finding a naming strategy — what you want your name to convey and how it positions you — can be more important than the name itself. Are you trying to be classy and sophisticated? Gaudy and ostentatious? Flamboyant and over-the-top? Witty and clever? Or, like Katy's band, disgusting and offensive? The name you choose will begin describing your brand the second it's read or said aloud. That band poster? It works because it's on-the-nose for what a college student thinks is funny. For them, in that context, it worked. Strategy determines how you're going to achieve your goals and objectives. Therefore, naming strategy is *how* you're going to achieve your brand goals through your name. It should compliment your brand positioning, and help solidify its meaning. ■

¹ This really is a funny movie. It's been years since I've seen it, but I still laugh many times when I do. And it was one of Jon Favreau's first acting roles. He later went on to direct *Iron Man*, and many other blockbusters.

02 Types of Names

“A rose by any other name
would smell as sweet.”

— WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

YOU'VE HEARD that quote, meaning it's not the name of the rose that gives it its olfactory sensations, but the rose itself. Call it whatever you like; it smells the same. Shakespeare backed up my point on **naming** in particular: Juliet Capulet was speaking of Romeo's surname of Montague being one that she should despise (as their two families had been feuding for years), but she didn't. Juliet did not love the name, but rather the man and his brand: his humor, looks, love, loyalty, honor, and daringness. Call Romeo anything and his brand would remain: Just as sweet.¹

As lovely as this sentiment may be, and despite the fact that it's been shared around the world for centuries, a name is part of an individual's essence. As Juliet knew, a name is not the individual themselves, but it *is* part of them. Imagine you once dated a man named John (or a woman named Jane) who left you heartbroken, despondent, or worse. I'd bet you my copy of *Romeo & Juliet* that when you met someone else with that name, you'll inadvertently have a reaction. Names have meaning. We remember them.

Like Marty Neumeier says in his book, *The Brand Gap*: “The need for good brand names originates with customers, and customers will always want convenient ways of identifying, remembering, discussing, and comparing brands. The right name can be a brand's most valuable asset, driving differentiation and speeding acceptance.”²

The right name. Yes. But what's in a name? If you haven't gathered this yet, I say everything. →



Many people theorize about meanings imbued by names. Some can be tangibly noted based on brand recognition or awareness, but many find other connections.

BRAND NAMES THAT have alliteration, rhyme, or other similarities tend to stick with us more. Think of singers Tina Turner or Joan Jett, actors Parker Posey, Courtney Cox, or Alan Alda — depending on your generation. Names with similar sounds are easier to remember. This is true during the jingle era of advertising, as songs helped us remember brands. Brands such as **Coca-Cola**, **Jelly Belly**, and **Kit Kat**, for example, use the same idea. They are sing-songy names that are fun to say, easy on the ears, and therefore, more simple to remember.

Like logos, names can take a variety of forms. In the book *Designing Brand Identity*, Alina Wheeler identifies six naming categories³: *Descriptive*, *Metaphoric*, *Acronym*, *Founder*, *Fabricated*, and *Combination*; however, we're adding some more categories to help define them a little further. →

¹I'm actually partial to *Much Ado about Nothing*, another great Shakesperian play with romance at its heart. The banter between Benedick and Beatrice as they unwittingly fall prey to their families' set-up — and ultimately fall in love — is beautiful.

²Neumeier, M. (2005). *Brand Gap*, The (2nd Edition). New Riders Publishing, USA.

³Wheeler, A. (2006). *Designing brand identity: A complete guide to creating, building and maintaining strong brands*. Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley.

Name Categories

■ DESCRIPTIVE NAMES

Many companies are easily described by their names: **Toys R Us** sells toys, **The Weather Channel** talks about weather, **E-Trade** allows you to trade the stock market, and **Sports Illustrated** is a magazine about sports. These easy-to-remember brand names are often used in a crowded market, or merely when they want to be super on-the-nose with their brand promise. Although these names were quite often used in early 20th century companies like the **Aluminum Company of America**, they ultimately succumbed to a 1950s corporate movement where everything was shorted to a catchier name and became **ALCOA**. Descriptive names are used less than ever, but can still be powerful when used properly.



■ EVOCATIVE NAMES

Also known as Metaphoric Names, these describe people, places, destinations, or even harken to ancient or foreign worlds to make a unique, memorable name. In ancient Greek mythology, the goddess of victory was named **Nike**. **Patagonia** is named after a region spanning Chile and Argentina. **The North Face** is the actual “north-sided face” of the Half Dome in Yosemite, California, but it’s also a nod to the north face of any mountain, which is typically the coldest, iciest — and thus, the hardest face to climb. The connection doesn’t necessarily need to be an obvious one: What did a river in South America have to do with selling books online? Well, with a name like **Amazon**, you sell books “from A to Z.” (Jeff Bezos actually named it Amazon for two reasons: First, he wanted a name that showed up at the top of alphabetical lists, and second, the Amazon is the largest river in the world, which reflected his hopes that his company would one day be the biggest in the world.)

While an evocative name doesn’t need to have a connection, many of them do. For example, fitness tracking app **STRAVA** is named after the Swedish word “to strive,” and Finnish GPS company **SUUNTO** after the Finnish word *suunta*, meaning “direction” or “path.” Evocative names are often the most fun to create as they usually have deep meaning and engaging stories behind them. This inherent meaning sets expectations for not only consumers, but also to internal stakeholders, the champions of the brand, to be able to internalize and better articulate the brand story to others.





ACRONYM NAMES

Using acronyms for names is common, especially when you're looking for an easy solution to streamline a long, clunky brand name. Many government agencies use acronyms (**NASA**, **NORAD**, **CIA**, **FBI**, **NSA**, etc.), as do well-known civilian brands such as **GM** (General Motors), **UPS** (United Parcel Service), and **CVS** (Consumer Value Stores). Usually, the acronym is a derivative of a name that falls into one of the other categories.

FOUNDER NAMES

Using a founder's name (or names) can carry extra baggage of the founder themselves, but it can also elevate the founder to another level. When branded properly, the name takes on another meaning altogether. Most fashion designers keep their own name as their fashion house rises to the top — **Paul Smith**, **Tommy Hilfiger**, **Ralph Lauren**, and **Marc Jacobs** to name a few. Of course, this tendency isn't limited to the fashion industry. Other brands such as **Ben & Jerry's**, **Abercrombie & Fitch**, **Barnes & Noble**, **Walt Disney**, or even **Dyson** are all named after their founders.

YOU MIGHT THINK that **Warby Parker** is a founder name, but it's actually the combination of two characters (Warby Pepper and Zagg Parker) from a Jack Kerouac journal that co-founder Dave Gilboa discovered at an exhibition. Kerouac has been so influential on the four founders, that every employee on their first day gets a copy *Dharma Bums*. While their trade name isn't a founder's name, the company's corporate name, **JAND, Inc.**, is an acronym of all the co-founders' names: Jeffrey, Andrew, Neil, and Dave.



VANS IS NAMED after the Van Doren brothers from Anaheim, CA. They began manufacturing and selling their vulcanized rubber canvas shoes in 1966 and transformed the skate world. Today, when you hear the name or see their signature product — the **Checkerboard Slip-On** — you're instantly thinking about the rebellious SoCal skate/surf culture. Check out Paul Van Doren's new memoir, *Authentic*, to learn more about his eponymous company.

FABRICATED/ABSTRACT NAMES

Some fabricated names that we could list under another category fit best in a category of their own: they have no meaning in-and-of themselves, but over time they come to not only identify the business or product they sell but help define an entire category. **Kleenex**, **XEROX**, and **TiVo** are most certainly the poster-brands here (if you recall from the intro). These names are great for their uniqueness, ability to purchase a domain, and their ability to stand out from the crowd. For example, when George Eastman was looking for his new company's name, he knew he wanted to create one that started with a "k," his favorite letter. His mother helped him fill in the void, and **Kodak** was born.

"A name should be short, easy to pronounce, and not resemble any other name or be associated with anything else."

— GEORGE EASTMAN

EMOTIONAL NAMES

Laundry and personal care product names are typically emotional: *Snuggle*, *Bounce*, *Tide*. Not quite onomatopoeia (writing a name for a sound, like *pop* or *wham!*), but a feeling you get when you hear it: *Snuggle* fabric softener makes your clothes soft, *Bounce* will kick the static cling, and *Zest* soap makes you "*Zest fully clean*," and *Cottonelle* toilet paper is soft like cotton.

COMBINATION NAMES

Names that are made from joining two other words are combination names. **Adidas** is the combination of founder Adi Dassler's name, **FedEx** was once called **Federal Express**, and **CONRAIL** is formed by the conjoining of "consolidated railways." My all-time favorite is German candy maker **Haribo**, whose name is simply the first two letters from founder Hans Riegel's first name, surname, and the first two letters of the town in which they started, Bonn.

A variation of Combination Names, Portmanteau Names, are also called *Blended Names*. While they are similar, these names are the result of blending two or more words — or parts of words. **Instagram** is a well-known example of this, as are **Pinterest** ("pin" your interests), **Netflix** (watch "flicks" on the Internet), and **Amtrak** (American trains running on tracks).

CAR BRANDS HAVE

lots of names, from the brand itself, to product lines and models. But where did they come from? *Jeep* is the sound of the letters "GP," a military abbreviation for a "General Purpose" vehicle. The name has taken on an entirely new meaning as the **Jeep®** brand is not only the oldest, original sport utility vehicle but also one of the best known.

On the other hand, when four car companies banded together to form **Audi**, it wasn't just a fun four-ring logo that was created (to represent each of the companies). Founder August Horch's last name means "listen" in German. And in Latin? It's *audi*.

DID YOU KNOW?

Flickr was originally going to be Flickr. “We tried to get ‘flicker’ with an e, but the guy who had the Web domain wasn’t willing to give it up,” the founders once told *Inc. Magazine*. They dropped the e and ushered in a new type of misspelling for the dot com world.

MAGIC SPELL, MISSPELLING, OR SENSATIONAL NAMES

This category is one that Wheeler missed in her book, but has become vital in today’s technological world. **Google** is an accidental misspelling of the mathematical number “Googol,” or 10 to the power of 100. But there are many others: **Krispy Kreme Doughnuts** is a variant of crispy cream; the British breakfast cereal **Weetabix** is a sensational spelling of the words “wheat” and “biscuits;” **Froot Loops** of the word “fruit;” or even Hasbro’s **Playskool** (a riff off “school”). Many modern tech or Internet companies use misspelled words as names to help position them in the market as a clear online tech company, most notably by dropping significant letters from a common word like **Flickr** (see sidebar), **Tumblr**, or adding letters like **Fiverr** or **Dribbble**.

When it comes to misspelled words/names, patience is essential. Words that are obviously misspelled — even intentionally — can be a little jarring. Of course, this can increase their impact and make them easy to remember, which is the goal. Over time, as the name/brand takes traction, it can actually feel strange to see the original word — the correct spelling — in anything. This happened with a client of ours called **Rock Solid Retail**. When we rebranded them as **Nucleous** in 2020, with a purposeful misspelling, it was hard at first to remember how to spell it. Now, the real English language word “nucleus” looks awkward on everything. It actually helps to strengthen the brand when, over time, the misspelling looks more correct than the proper spelling.

GEOGRAPHIC NAMES

Extremely popular a half-century ago, these names are simple in nature. By linking the principle business to its surroundings, Geographic Names serve a purpose: **Boston Market** (formerly **Boston Chicken**) was started just outside of Beantown. **British Airways** (also a descriptive name) flies routes from its home in Great Britain. **Nautilus** started as a fire and marine insurance company, but after petitioning the legislature of New York to become a mutual life insurance company, the name was changed to **New York Life**. **California Pizza Kitchen** began in Los Angeles, CA. However, when a brand outgrows its home or wants to associate with a larger audience, there are times when it’s necessary to rename. This was true for the **St. Louis Bread Co.**, which, when it expanded outside of the St. Louis area, changed its name to the Italian portmanteau name **Panera**, a combination of the words bread (*pane*) and time (*era*). ■



↑ **65%**

Recent rebrands choose *Evocative* or *Abstract* names

When researching corporate rebrand names, Irish researcher Laurent Muzzellac noted in his whitepaper “What’s in a Name Change?” that in a set of 166 brands that rebranded from older names, *Evocative* or *Fabricated* were the highest in frequency, representing 32.5% each. This is a stark change from their original names — most certainly traditional, heritage brands — where the lion’s share were *Descriptive* (55%) and *Founder* (42%) names.⁴

Like a recipe, a brand name needs to have certain characteristics or ingredients to make it not only unique, but palatable.

IMBUED WITH MEANING

Your brand name conveys the brand essence, brings to mind a certain emotion, and creates positivity with the brand.

UNIQUENESS

Books-a-Million may convey what they sell, but is it memorable like **Amazon**? Your name needs to set you apart from your direct competitors.

APPROACHABLE

You know how it feels when you go to a store and see a clerk’s nametag that’s hard to pronounce? Having an approachable name means it’s easy to say, spell, and remember.

OWNABLE

One of the maddening aspects of naming is getting ready to own it, protect it, and legally secure it or its domain. But more than that, ownability is also the ability to carve out its mindshare in the heads of consumers.

EVERGREEN

Having an evergreen name — or one that can last for decades — ensures longevity and the ability to stay relevant for years to come.

VISUAL

You can translate/communicate it through design, including icons, logos, colors, etc. This is a useful criterion to help you vet names, but there is really just one question to determine whether a chosen name is successful (note that we didn’t say “good” or “bad”). All that matters is this: Does it resonate with people?

A NOTE ON TAGLINES: If you’re using an evocative or abstract name, you should have a descriptive tagline. Like mentioned earlier, Amazon originally used “books from A to Z,” which helped give clear meaning to the name itself. The more descriptive the name, the less important it is to use a tagline.

⁴Muzzellac, L. (1987) What is in a Name Change? Re-Joycing Corporate Names to Create Corporate Brands, Corporate Reputation Review, Volume 8 Number 4, p. 309.

The Building Blocks:

THE SCIENCE OF HOW WE
THINK ABOUT NAMES

When naming a brand, it's not enough to have a name type and a reason why. Studies have shown that there are distinct emotional connections between the sounds we hear and the shapes we see, as well as connections between the sounds made when names are spoken.



→ Over 95% of subjects assign bouba to the rounded blob and kiki to the spiky star.

THE BOUBA/KIKI EFFECT

IN 1929, German-American psychologist Wolfgang Köhler conducted an interesting study.⁵ Survey participants were shown two shapes, one called “takete,” and one was called “baluba.” (He repeated the test in 1947 and replaced “baluba” with “maluma.”) Takete was spiky and pointed and had angular pieces to it, while baluba was blobby, rounded, and amoeba-like.

The study asked participants which shape was called takete and which was called baluba. 95% of the respondents named the spiky-shape takete and the blob-shape baluba.

Later, in 2001, scientists Vilayanur S. Ramachandran and Edward Hubbard repeated Köhler’s experiment using the words “kiki” and “bouba.”⁶ The pool of respondents included both American undergrad students and Tamil speakers from India. The question, similar to Köhler’s test, asked, “Which of these shapes is bouba, and

which is kiki?” In both groups, 95% and 98% respectively, individuals selected the curvy shape as “bouba” and the jagged one as “kiki.” This suggests that the human brain consistently attaches abstract meanings to the shapes and sounds. This behavior is now known as the Bouba/Kiki Effect.

This means that not only consonants (the “k” in kiki) but vowels like the long “o” in Bouba, contain inherent meanings. Vowels primarily carry meaning because so many of our sounds are bound-up in vowels that are soft or hard, formed in either the back of the mouth or the front.

Vowels produced in the front of the mouth, like the “i” in “Kiki,” convey the meaning of being small, feminine, fast, light, and angular; while vowels produced in the back of the mouth — like the “ou” in “Bouba” — convey the meanings large, masculine, slow, dark, and round.^{7, 8, 9}

⁵ Köhler, Wolfgang (1929). *Gestalt Psychology*. New York: Liveright.

⁶ V.S. Ramachandran and E.M. Hubbard (2001) Synaesthesia — A Window Into Perception, Thought and Language, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 8, No. 12, 2001, pp. 3–34

⁷ Ohala, John. (1994). Sound Symbolism.

⁸ Klink, Richard. (2000). Creating Brand Names With Meaning: The Use of Sound Symbolism. *Marketing Letters*. 11. 5-20. 10.1023/A:1008184423824.

⁹ Klink, R. (2003). Creating Meaningful Brands: The Relationship between Brand Name and Brand Mark. *Marketing Letters*, 14(3), 143-157. Retrieved February 27, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40216495>

What does this matter?

Well, just like most of those surveyed (and perhaps yourself when you looked at those shapes), consumers also prefer brand names that resonate with their “shape” — that is, their logo, business, product, or service.

NAMES THAT CONTAIN vowels that help facilitate this connection stay in the mind of the consumer, not only helping with awareness, but, ultimately, containing vowels associated with desirable product category attributes. Researchers Tina M. Lowrey and L.J. Shrum studied people’s taste for SUVs and convertibles to determine if front-of-mouth or back-of-mouth vowels within brand names are preferred.¹⁰ There was no surprise that back-vowel words (like that “ou” in “Bouba”) were preferred for SUVs, while front vowel words (like the “i” in “Kiki”) won out for convertibles. (It’s worth noting that when they tested for knives and hammers, results were also split: 66% preferred front vowel words for knife brands while 66% opted for back vowel words for hammers.) According to the researchers, they “were able to show that the preference for words with particular vowel sounds varied as a function of products and their associated attributes.” This is because back vowels convey largeness while front vowels convey smallness.

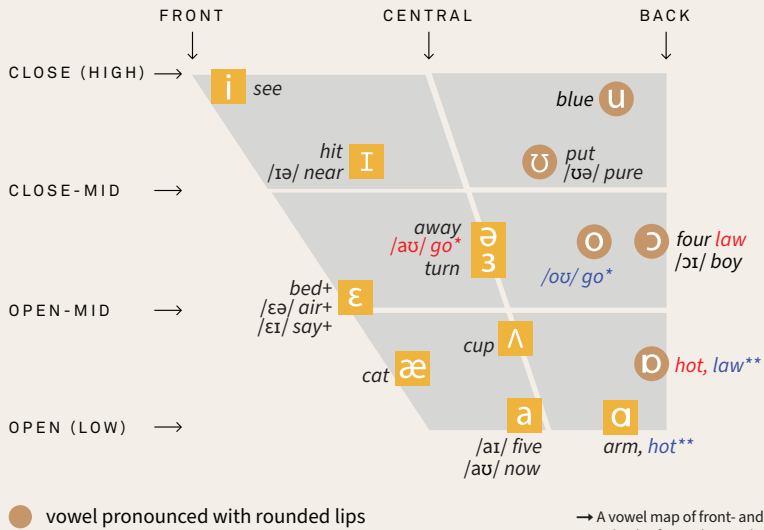
Lowry and Shrum further explored “generally positive” and “generally negative” perceptions around vowel sounds. The “o”

sound in *posh*, for example, is generally considered positive, while the “oo” sound in *puke* is generally considered negative.¹⁴ These types of associations have been long studied. In 1922, Otto Jespersen wrote in his book, *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin*, that “There is no denying [...] that there are words which we feel instinctively to be adequate to express the ideas they stand for, and others the sounds of which are felt to be more or less incongruous with their signification.”¹¹ This is exactly the sentiment that encourages us to find or create a suitable brand name.

Think about smaller words like “teen,” “ping,” or “fly.” The ee, long i, and short i sounds feel smaller, more dainty, and less powerful. According to Steven Pinker in his book *The Language Instinct*, these high front end vowels are often associated with small things. In fact, 90% of languages use high front end vowels for diminutive words.¹²

Pinker goes on to say that low, back end vowel sounds (“oo” as in “boot,” “a” as in “father,” “o” as in “core”) are often associated with objects of greater size and more power, like “humongous” elephants that roar. →

Because there is such a strong correlation between words and shapes and meaning, further research has been ongoing. As recently as July 2020, studies have found that words and their sounds spark differing levels of “emotional arousal” on a scale from calming to exciting.¹³ This makes sense, inherently. “Kiki-like” words not only sound like the pointed object but also elicit an exciting emotional arousal, while Bouba-like names are more calming.



Vowels aren't the only letters to understand while choosing names. While not as daunting to understand as vowels — and their combinations and different pronunciations — there are still meanings imbued to consonants. “Stops,” or consonants that stop the flow of words, are harder and sharper. Thus, in linguistic terms, they are more masculine. These may include letters like K, P, and T. “Softer,” or more feminine consonants, let the mouth and airflow move. They are more soft and round, flowing more readily. They may include letters like L, M, and N. ■

SUMMARY

While a name that matches your brand is important, its spelling, pronunciation, and letter make-up can ultimately imbue an unintended meaning. Make sure you run any potential names past a group of individuals and see what resonates with them.

¹⁰ Lowrey, Tina & Shrum, L.. (2007). Phonetic Symbolism and Brand Name Preference. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 34. 406-414. 10.1086/518530.

¹¹ Jespersen, O. (1922). *Language: Its nature, development and origin*. London: G. Allen & Unwin.

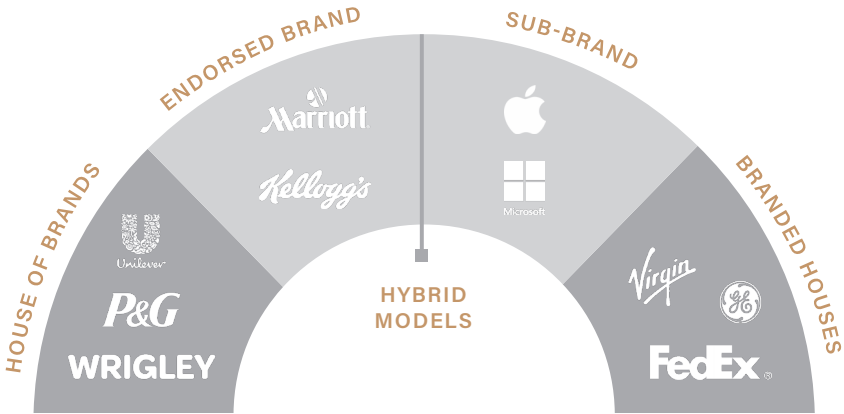
¹² Pinker, S. (1994). *The language instinct: The new science of language and mind*. London: Allen Lane, the Penguin Press.

¹³ Aryani, A., Isbilen, E. S., & Christiansen, M. H. (2020). Affective Arousal Links Sound to Meaning. *Psychological Science*, 31(8), 978-986. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797620927967>

¹⁴ Puke sounds negative. This is just funny. Do we need a study for this?

Brand Architecture & Nomenclature

For companies that own other sub-brands, businesses, or have sister companies, there's a consideration of how to handle your brand architecture. That is, multiple brands under or alongside a parent brand. You have several options to consider — a scale, if you will.



→ Ok, so you named your brand. Where does it fit into your larger corporation?

HOUSE OF BRANDS

Many multinational conglomerates such as **Proctor & Gamble** and **Unilever** use a typical House of Brands structure. This is where the parent company (for example, P&G) is over its individual sub-brands. These sub-brands (think of *Tide*, *Pampers*, *Gillette*, *Bounce*, *Tampax*, and *Folgers*) all operate independently from each other and the parent company. They have their own P&Ls, presidents, marketing teams, etc. The benefit is the power and scale of the parent company.

HYBRID MODELS

Endorsed and Sub-brands. An endorsed brand associates the power of the brand with its parent, either as a prefix or a suffix. Think of cereals: *Kellogg's Frosted Flakes* tells you that the cereal is from **Kellogg's** — and they know breakfast. This is also true of **Westin's** new **Element** hotels, which are listed as “*Element hotels by Westin.*” This is especially helpful when introducing a new concept or brand to the market.

A sub-brand, on the other hand, is very common. Sub-brands can have their own specific brand identity, but together, they help embolden and further establish the parent. Look at **Apple**. Their sub-brands of *iPad*, *iPhone*, *Mac*, and *AirPods* act independently but look and feel like the Apple brand. They have a focused base of target customers and careful naming strategies. Apple goes even further by aligning all its sub-brands via the same colors, typography, and layout.

BRANDED HOUSE

Branded House (aka Monolithic or Masterbrands), is where the name of the company/brand is the leading name. For example, there are nearly two dozen **Virgin** companies out there globally: **Virgin** Records, **Virgin** Trains, **Virgin** Mobile, **Virgin** Care — the list goes on. Their affiliation with Virgin and what the Virgin brand stands for (innovative, first-class service) helps propel the other companies further in the customer mindshare. **FedEx** uses a similar paradigm where all their services (**FedEx** Ground, **FedEx** Express, etc.) use the **FedEx** brand as the primary name.

Product Naming

Speaking of **Apple**, when creating a product — or a family of products or brands — it's important to follow consistent rules across all of the similar names. In 1998, when Apple first introduced the iMac, it was called as such, according to Ken Segall¹⁵ from Chiat/Day, who pitched the name to Steve Jobs, that “The ‘i’ stands for ‘Internet,’ but also for ‘individuality’ and ‘innovation’.”¹⁶ When later they offered music, tablets, and phones, Apple and Jobs chose “iTunes,” “iPod,” “iPad,” and eventually, “iPhone.” The consistent “i” was notably Apple. They owned this style. →



Model Naming

Audi chose to go a step further, utilizing a letter prefix and numerical suffix for their vehicles such as the A4, Q5, or R8 models. This naming convention is easily explained: The letter “A” is used for the sedan/hatchback body shapes with the numbers differentiating their size — starting from the smallest (A3) to the biggest (A8). The higher the number, the bigger the car. The Q-line represents “quattro” meaning *four* – a term Audi uses to describe a “four-wheel-drive.” The smallest (Q3) is a five-door compact SUV; whereas Q5 is a compact entry-level luxury SUV, on up to their largest SUV, a Q7, which is a full-size model. And it goes on from there: S is for *Sport*, R is for *Roadster*, and RS is an abbreviation of “Rennsport,” the German translation of “Race-Sport.” RS models are Audi’s highest performing, most powerful vehicles and traditionally only produce one RS model at a time. The TT also has meaning behind its name, but breaks convention just a tad: named after the Isle of Man’s annual *Tourist Trophy*, a motorcycle race, the TT models are compact sports cars featuring transversely-mounted turbocharged engines. The TTs are also available in S and RS models. ■



AUDI MODEL NAMING

A models	Q models	S models	R models	RS models	TT models
A3	Q3	S4	R8 Coupe	RS3	TT Convertible
A4	Q5	S5	R8 Spyder	RS5	TT Coupe
A5	Q7	S5 Coupe		RS6	TTS
A6		S5 Sportback		RS7	TT RS Coupe
A8		SQ7		RSQ8	
		SQ8			

¹⁵ Raletz, Alyson (June 7, 2012). “Man who came up with iMac name tells what the ‘i’ stands for”. Kansas City Business Journal. Retrieved March 30, 2013.

¹⁶ “The First iMac Introduction.” YouTube. January 30, 2006. Retrieved July 6, 2011.

The Naming Process

Brief the Naming Project

Create a small document called a naming brief. This will have some guardrails for what's being requested from team or colleagues. Ask yourself some questions: What type of business are you naming? Who are its customers?

1

WHAT MAKES YOUR BUSINESS

- What's the offer? How will it evolve?
- Who's it for?
- What's distinctive?
- What's its personality?
- How should it make people feel?
- What should it make them do?
- Is there a parent brand and what's the relationship?
- What's the history? What's the context?

2

GENERATE

Based on the brief, one or more names create multiple name ideas (typically hundreds, if not thousands) and keep track of them in a master list.

3

SHORTLIST

Namers select a subset of name ideas in the master list to move forward through the rest of the process.

4

SCREEN

Shortlisted names are subjected to linguistic/cultural disaster checks and/or preliminary trademark screening. Only the less "risky" name ideas continue in the process.

5

PRESENT

Name ideas are presented to decision-makers, who select a smaller group of ideas to go through full legal searches.

6

LEGAL

An experienced trademark attorney performs a full legal search—a deeper assessment of legal availability and/or risk associated with each name idea.

7

SELECT

Decision-makers choose the final name from those ideas with an acceptably low level of risk.



Let's name something great together.

hello@thebrandleader.com