

Who's Your Product? Putting the Right Name on What You Sell

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As with people, products and services are inevitably identified by names and the ways they are experienced. Sales success for products and services depends largely on buyers' ability to **identify their superior value**, in a way that is **credible, memorable, and not confused** with competitive offerings. You want your product's name to do work for you, to make a personally meaningful connection and not merely function as a "label." And you want to choose well the first time—changing a product name is usually expensive.

Good product names

- Are easy to remember.
- Are easy to communicate.
- Create the right associations for those who purchase and use the product or service.

Bad product names

- Make your sales and marketing effort more difficult and more expensive.
- Can create legal problems.
- Cost money to change.

Is there any rational process for naming a product, service, or business?

1. **Know the positioning.** The "positioning" of your product, service, or business is the value and benefits actually or potentially perceived by the market relative to competing offerings and substitutes. Positioning is conveyed not only by the offering's directly experienced or measurable benefits relative to its competition, but also by the marketing messages and pricing that signal expectations about these benefits prior to purchase. "What is this product trying to be, relative to its competition?"
2. **Brainstorm.** You want to "recruit" a product name that works for, not against, your marketing and sales effort. Think of tens of names, perhaps more. Get the help of others—even make use of Facebook and LinkedIn to engage those who know you and what you are naming. Think of words and word fragments that evoke the purpose and distinct market benefit(s) of what you plan to sell. Use a dictionary or a thesaurus, and even try words from Latin, Greek, or another language.
3. **Eliminate:**
 - **Mismatches with positioning.** If a name steers the understanding away from the positioning of the product, service, or business being named, eliminate it. This includes the *potential* positioning of the offering; you do not want a name that restricts the offering from developing into its eventual, expected scope of benefits, or a name that is faddish (unless this fits the positioning). You also want to eliminate names that do not fit within your company's naming scheme and brand portfolio (adding *Deluxe* to the existing product names of *Bronze*, *Silver*, and *Gold* creates a mismatch, for example).
 - **Legally unavailable or indefensible.** Search the Web and specifically <http://uspto.gov> to be sure a proposed name for your offering does not already exist among competing

offerings. Also, be certain a potential name is more than just a common descriptive word for the product or service, so that it has some likelihood of being trademarked.

- **Confusable with competitors'** If a proposed name seems likely to be confused with that of a competing offering, it could cause you legal and marketing problems.
- **Inherently unappealing:** not pleasant-sounding, not easily pronounced, not intuitively spelled, and not memorable. There is a computer on the market named *Eee*, by the company ASUS. Ask someone to spell or google *Eee* and see what happens!
- **Likely to be abbreviated.** A lengthy name is often shortened into an often-meaningless or even misleading acronym. For example, the name *Augment Business Consulting, Inc.* has a reasonable likelihood of being called "ABC" in practice (though efforts could be made by the company to use *Augment* as shorthand for the company name, as a way of mitigating the tendency of others to call it "ABC").
- **Not linguistically adaptable to all relevant markets.** Do you remember the Chevy Nova? While it is apparently just an urban legend that its name conjured up the idea of "no go" ("no va") in Spanish-speaking markets, the point remains: be mindful of how a name may be translated. You may even want to hire the help of a translation service.

4. Investigate:

- **Available, intuitive related domain names**, .com preferred. For the names that survive the elimination process above, search for related domain names that are intuitively spelled, memorable, and, if possible, available as a .com domain. Search for domain names using <http://www.networksolutions.com/domain-name-registration/index.jsp>, for example.
- **Extent of legal protection available** (U.S. registered trademark, other markets?). For your final name candidates, you may want to retain the help of an intellectual property attorney who can help you in the market(s) in which your offering will be sold. Realize also that you want a name that can be trademarked—a generic description (such as *power drill, mailbox, computer*) cannot be.
- **Perceptions about the name** (and its product's positioning relative to competitors and substitutes) **by those in your target market(s)**, both potential *buyers* and potential *users*. Informally ask people you know in the target market, or, if your budget and risk level so merit, hire a market research firm to conduct formal research. But much of this feedback can be gathered easily, inexpensively, and anonymously using online survey tools. You will want to uncover initial impressions and especially any *negative* associations associated with your high-potential name candidates.

5. **Choose and implement** or go back to brainstorming. Probably no *perfect* name exists! But naming a company, product, or service in a slapdash manner can end up making your sales and marketing efforts more expensive and less effective than they could be. It can also get you into legal trouble.

Jeff Smith has been helping business-to-business companies improve sales results with go-to-market research, planning, and programs for over 15 years. Jeff has helped several companies choose effective product and service names, and has likewise helped them avoid costly naming mistakes. He is an MBA graduate of UNC's Kenan-Flagler Business School and is Pragmatic Marketing Certified.

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