

Name Your Business in 3 Easy Steps

First impressions are everything, so here's how to choose a name your customers will bond with.

April 03, 2006

By John Williams

Naming your [business](#) is one of the most crucial decisions you'll make as an entrepreneur. Not only does your company name serve as a first impression of your business, it serves as the heart of your brand. Branding is about bonding. You want a name that bonds with your target customer - a name that creates comfortable, positive thoughts and feelings.

So how can you come up with a compelling, legally accessible, URL-available name? I recommend this three-step process.

Step 1: Brainstorm. First, write down anything and everything that enters your mind, especially ideas that seem to "come from nowhere." This means no self-editing. Your initial responses are key. Ask others for input as well.

Prime your mind with the following questions:

- Who are my target [customers](#)?
- What are they looking for?
- What's my [competitive advantage](#) (e.g., quality, speed of service, etc.)?
- What adjectives would I apply to my company (e.g., smart, easy, etc.)? Can I combine any of these words to form a catchy new word or phrase?
- Are there any metaphors or symbols that come to mind? For example, an apple is a common symbol for [education](#).

Step 2: Evaluate your names, then narrow them down to a short list of five to 10 names. Appraise the names on your brainstorm list using the following criteria. Strike any name that you can't answer "yes" to on the first five questions.

1. **Is it easy to say?** Names are said more than read. After all, when words are read, they're also spoken in the mind of the reader.
2. **Is it easy to spell?** Can customers find it in the phone book or "Google" it without trouble? Usually words that are easy to spell are also relatively short. Avoid acronyms (e.g., "K.A.T.G. Enterprises") and "clever" names that require analysis from your reader (e.g., "CU4 Lunch").
3. **Does it have a positive connotation that'll appeal to customers?** Words carry both a literal meaning and an emotional meaning. You want to create a positive emotional tie as well as a positive cognitive one. For example, "Li'l Sis" carries more emotional meaning than "Little Sister."
4. **Is it legally available?** Start by checking with the [U.S. Patent and Trademark Office](#).
5. **Is it, or some logical form of it, available as a URL?** (.com or .org, preferably.) This is less important if the internet won't play a large role in your distribution methodology. However, virtually all [businesses](#) these days maintain some kind of web presence.
6. **Is it interesting or unique?** Generic names like "Bikes For Less" are descriptive but not emotionally compelling. What's more, generic names usually have less stamina from a branding perspective, since our minds tend to remember things that are unique.

7. **Do you visualize anything when you read the name?** "Victory Real Estate" might bring to mind a trophy. The addition of a visual element reinforces the name, making it more memorable.
8. **Is it descriptive?** If it's not, that's okay. You can always add a tagline or byline for description.

Step 3: Get feedback from potential customers. Present your shortlist for feedback to as many potential customers as possible. Don't simply hand your list to family and friends who are of a different gender/age/socioeconomic background, etc. than your potential customers. The name for a business targeting women should be evaluated by women, not men, because (believe it or not) men tend to be attracted to different things than women. Also, gauge people's initial reaction--don't let them dissect the names. Actual customers won't take the time or effort required to study your name, so don't require it from your test customers. In this case, it's possible to overthink something.

Finalize a name based on your personal opinions and the feedback of others. Try not to second-guess yourself. When in doubt, go with your gut--that's what customers do!

John Williams is Entrepreneur.com's ["Image & Branding" columnist](#) and the founder and president of [LogoYes.com](#), the world's first do-it-yourself logo design website. During John's 25 years in advertising, he's created brand standards for Fortune 100 companies like Mitsubishi and won numerous awards for his design work.