
How to choose a great name.

Seven rules for a strong, compelling brand name, and 33 real names, strong and weak, to show how they work.

How to choose a great name.

When I named my consultancy, Game Plan, I used Marty Neumeier's seven rules for creating strong, compelling brand names as the basis for my decision. These rules say that a great brand name is:

1 Differentiated

It should stand out from competitors' names, as well as from other words in a sentence. This is sometimes called speech-stream visibility: the quality that lets the eye or the ear pick out the name as a proper or different word, instead of a common word.

3 Appropriate

But not so descriptive that it sounds generic. A common mistake is to choose a name that doubles as a descriptor, which will cause it to converge with other descriptive names. A strong brand name can actually be blind, meaning it gives no clues as to its connection with the product, service or company it represents, yet still feels appropriate.

5 Satisfying to pronounce

A good name has mouthfeel, meaning that people like the way it sounds and are more willing to use it.

7 Legally defensible

The trade marks office wants to make sure that consumers are not confused by sound-alike names or look-alike trade marks. A good name is one that keeps legal fees to a minimum.

2 Brief

Four syllables or less. More than four and people start to abbreviate the name in ways that could be detrimental to the brand.

4 Easy to spell

When you turn your name into a spelling contest, you introduce more confusion among customers and make your brand difficult to find online, or in a database that requires correct spelling.

6 Suitable for brandplay

The best names have creative legs. They readily lend themselves to great storytelling, graphics, PR, advertising and other communication.

Strong names and weak names, side by side.

To help you a little more with naming, here is a table that also comes from Marty Neumeier of Neutron LLC. I've learned a lot from him, and I think it will help you too. It's fun to read and will only take a few minutes. The comments in the table are Marty's own. They come from his book *Zag*, published in 2006, so some of these companies and products have since changed their names, merged or disappeared.

Category	Strong name	Weak name
Retail bank	Citibank What makes this name strong is its brevity. It's fairly descriptive (the "bank" part), but it's still more distinctive than most competing bank names.	First Bank & Trust This is the worst of the worst: totally generic, like a bank in a comic strip. Have you ever been to a Second Bank & Trust? What do they mean by First? Is it on First Street? Is it the first bank ever? Is it the number-one bank? Not likely, with a name like this.
Movie studio	DreamWorks The company's full name is DreamWorks SKG. The initials represent the three founding partners (Spielberg, Katzenberg and Geffen), but DreamWorks is what people call it. The name refers to the notion of Hollywood as a "dream factory". It's brief, distinctive and easy to spell.	United Artists There's a good backstory to this name, since this was the first studio owned by the actors themselves. But it sounds more bureaucratic than revolutionary. They eventually shortened it to UA, which is even weaker.
Shipping	FedEx The company started as Federal Express. FED-ER-AL EX-PRESS: five syllables. It breaks the four-syllable rule, so people started calling it FedEx instead. It turns out that FedEx is a much better name according to the seven criteria, so FedEx stuck.	DHL Quick: what does it stand for? Give up? It stands for Dalsey, Hillblom and Lynn, who founded the international shipping company called DHL. Never was there a less memorable or less felicitous trio of initials. "Diane, could you send this package out by... what's the name of that company? Oh, never mind, send it FedEx."

Category	Strong name	Weak name
SUV model	4Runner <p>The name makes this Toyota four-wheel-drive vehicle sound like a pioneer, as in "forerunner". My only concern is the numeral four, which makes it difficult to find in databases. A better spelling might have been FourRunner.</p>	Touareg <p>Is it pronounced TU-A-REG, TWO-REG, TOE-RAG, TOUREG or TWAR-EG? Even when you know how to pronounce it (TWAR-EG), it sounds weird. I'm sure VW is selling these cars, but it's not because of the unpronounceable, unspellable name.</p>
Skin products	Olay <p>Beautiful name. It's the verbal equivalent of soft, smooth skin, which fits the promise of the product line.</p>	Noxzema <p>The opposite of Olay: ugly, hard to spell, inappropriate. The name originally stood for "no eczema", which is bad enough, but the "nox" part reminds us of nasty words such as noxious, obnoxious and pox.</p>
Farm equipment	John Deere <p>"Nothing Runs Like a Deere," goes the tagline of this farm equipment company. Now that's a name with legs. Incorporated as Deere & Company, John Deere sounds even stronger and more approachable. The company is to be commended for not abbreviating the name to D&C or some other "professional" sounding derivation.</p>	AGCO <p>Okay, we can work out that AGCO is an agricultural company of some sort (they sell farm equipment), but it doesn't exactly roll off the tongue like John Deere, and it doesn't create a mental image. Initials are like invisibility cloaks: perfect if you want to slip in and out of business unnoticed.</p>
Investing	Charles Schwab <p>Schwab isn't a pretty name, but Charles is, and Charles Schwab together is the name of an impressive man, a fact that the company has exploited from day one. Real names can be quite powerful when the founder is visible, credible, and has a personality that's aligned with the meaning of the company.</p>	Wachovia <p>This investment company has a difficult-to-pronounce name, but with some effort, they're teaching people how to say it. Unfortunately, the pronunciation is WALK-OVAYA, not exactly the image the company wants. They'd be better off changing the pronunciation to WATCH-OVA-YA.</p>
Magazine	Dwell <p>After all the shelter magazines with descriptive titles (<i>Home</i>, <i>House Beautiful</i>, <i>House & Garden</i>), <i>Dwell</i> seems fresh and inviting. It helps enormously that the premise of the magazine, sustainable modern architecture, is also fresh and inviting.</p>	Architectural Digest <p>This seven-syllable mouth-filler makes the magazine seem more academic than it really is, and guarantees that the logo of the magazine will appear small on the newsstand. Even the editors shorten the name to AD whenever possible, throwing the invisibility cloak over their own brand.</p>

Category	Strong name	Weak name
Sports apparel	<p>Under Armour</p> <p>You wouldn't go into battle without your armour, would you? Under Armour sells the secret protection that keeps athletes safe during competition, using the tagline "Protect this house." I'm not sure what that means, but I like it.</p>	<p>InSport</p> <p>InSport makes athletic clothing too, but under a more generic-sounding name. I think I'll take Under Armour.</p>
Cat food	<p>Meow Mix</p> <p>"The cat food cats ask for by name." Brilliant. It sounds good, it stands out, you can spell it, you can picture it, and it has great advertising legs, as proven by the "meow meow meow meow" TV spots. A-plus for naming.</p>	<p>Eukanuba</p> <p>EEK-A-NU-BA, NUKE-A-YUBA, OY-CAN-A-BA. I'm sure the product is good, but I think I'll take a bag of Meow Mix. My cat's not asking for Eukanuba.</p>
Bus service	<p>Greyhound</p> <p>How do you make a bus look sleek? Put the image of a racing dog on it. A classic name that just seems right.</p>	<p>Intercity Transit</p> <p>If you had a choice between Greyhound or Intercity Transit, which would you take? For me, Greyhound would win paws down. Intercity Transit sounds like "inner city transit": tough and gritty, rather than sleek and luxurious.</p>
Handheld device	<p>BlackBerry</p> <p>This is a terrific example of a non-descriptive name that seems appropriate. Following Apple's lead, the name BlackBerry creates a mental picture, which is reinforced by the "seed" design of the keyboard. This is a major save for a company with a clunky corporate name: Research In Motion.</p>	<p>Anextec SP230</p> <p>Who could live without a BlackBerry-type product called the Anextec SP230? It just rolls off the tongue. Right onto the floor.</p>

Category	Strong name	Weak name
Coffee and tea shop	<p>Starbucks</p> <p>Talk about mouthfeel. Starbucks has it. This is another non-descriptive name that rings the bell by feeling appropriate instead of trying to describe the product. Starbucks strikes a strong, energetic note, like black coffee on a misty morning.</p>	<p>Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf</p> <p>The Coffee Bean was one of the original bean shops at the beginning of the coffee craze in the seventies. As a name, however, The Coffee Bean sounded like a million competitors. Years later, in an effort to bolster its shrinking market share, the company added "& Tea Leaf" to its name, which made the problem worse by exceeding the four-syllable limit and unfocusing the brand.</p>
Mobile phone service	<p>Orange</p> <p>Also like Apple, this name for a European mobile service not only borrows the goodwill of a friendly fruit, but also its friendly colour. This is the perfect name for a company bent on simplifying the mobile phone experience.</p>	<p>MetroPCS</p> <p>The Metro part is okay. But the PCS? In the ultra-competitive mobile business, you need every advantage you can get. A stickier name would have been a good start.</p>
Natural care	<p>Burt's Bees</p> <p>Burt Shavitz is a real person whose bees provide the ingredients for natural skin care products. It's a great zag in a market dominated by the big, scientific brands. You can picture Burt and his bees, busily working to improve your skin, from a safe distance of course.</p>	<p>Herbal Luxuries</p> <p>This isn't a brand name, it's a bland name. It sounds like a bargain-basement knockoff, which is fine, as long as low price is your key success factor.</p>
Refrigerator	<p>Sub-Zero</p> <p>Something about this refrigerator name seems memorable, but I can't tell you what. It does pass the test of brevity and spellability, which may be enough for such a well-respected product.</p>	<p>Thermador</p> <p>A Thermador refrigerator? Doesn't "therm" mean hot to most people, as in thermal bath? This is an example of a name that doesn't easily stretch in the direction the company would like to take it.</p>
Law firm	<p>Orrick</p> <p>Orrick is short for Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe, a large corporate law firm. Their stroke of genius was to drop all the names but Orrick, then symbolise Orrick with the letter O. Tradition stops competing firms from following in their footsteps, which gives them a large lead.</p>	<p>Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati</p> <p>Eleven-syllable names are not uncommon for law firms, but it's not good naming practice. People just call them Wilson Sonsini anyway. Sorry, Goodrich and Rosati, but a shorter name would be better for all the partners.</p>

Category	Strong name	Weak name
Office equipment	<p>Xerox</p> <p>Despite an early pronunciation problem, this is a catchy name that helped the company enormously. The word became synonymous with "copy", as in "I'll make you a Xerox," or "Can you Xerox this for me?" They misunderstood both the power and limitations of the name, and tried to make it mean something it couldn't. I still Xerox my documents. I just use an Epson.</p>	<p>Kyocera Mita</p> <p>KY-O-WHAT-A-WHAT-A? I'll stick with my Epson.</p>
Online payments	<p>PayPal</p> <p>Short and sweet. While other payment companies with "pay" in their names may come along, they'll find it difficult to compete with this alliterative combination of syllables.</p>	<p>Click & Buy</p> <p>I have little faith in names with "and" in the middle, mostly because they ask you to keep two thoughts in your head instead of one. It doesn't help when the two words are so generic.</p>
Network storage	<p>Brocade</p> <p>This is a near-perfect name for a network storage company. The sounds of "bro" and "cade" are tough and chewy, and the "cade" trails off into a satisfying finish. Of course, brocade, a type of heavy woven fabric, makes a nice metaphor for networking.</p>	<p>Network Storage Corporation</p> <p>The eye sees capital letters, but the ear hears lower case. This name is so generic that it would make a better descriptor than a brand name. For example: Brocade, the network storage corporation.</p>
Oil and gas	<p>Shell</p> <p>This may be the strongest of all the oil company names. One syllable, easy to spell, easy to picture. You almost forget about global warming as you picture a sandy beach with clean, blue waves.</p>	<p>Unocal</p> <p>When the oil companies consolidate, I predict this name will be one of the first to go. It's so opaque and impersonal as to have no meaning at all.</p>
Erectile drug	<p>Viagra</p> <p>One of the greatest drug names of all time. Viagra sounds like Niagara, but with more vigour. It says implicitly that the honeymoon is not over.</p>	<p>Cialis</p> <p>This name runs a poor second to Viagra. Cialis sounds soft and sibilant, more like a flower than a drug for erectile dysfunction. In addition, the C makes the spelling trickier.</p>

Category	Strong name	Weak name
Billing service	Department B The B stands for billing. It's a company that lets doctors outsource their bookkeeping and insurance paperwork instead of tying up time that would be better spent on patients. It can also be abbreviated to DeptB without losing its identity. (My own firm developed this one.)	American Billing Service A more typical, and generic, name for a billing service.
Car model	Crossfire The Chrysler Crossfire (don't those words sound good together?) makes you think of cutting across town in a racy sports car, all cylinders firing with perfect precision.	Achieva This name seems disingenuous and patronising. I understand that, for some people, buying a low-end Oldsmobile represents a step up, but does anybody really think it's a mark of achievement? To most people it says "Underachieve".
Car insurance	Progressive Car insurance companies have awful names, but this one's pretty good, especially since it aligns so well with the company's reputation as an innovator.	GEICO Conversely, this name is so bad that the company has to spend all its advertising dollars to correct it. But does turning GEICO into a gecko in TV ads really help? The AFLAC duck isn't quite as odd, but neither geckos nor ducks do much to clarify the meanings of these two brands.
Internet voice	Lingo A wonderful, slangy name for an internet phone company. The most surprising part is that they could get the name as a dot-com address.	iConnect Another internet phone company, but I can't see this generic name catching on. Can you?
Jams and jellies	Smucker's As the tagline says, "With a name like Smucker's, it has to be good." This implies, with self-deprecating humour, that the name of this company is bad. It isn't. Smucker's is not only the name of the founder, which gives it authenticity, but it sounds like yummy, lip-smacking jam.	Mary Ellen Okay, so maybe you're fond of Mary Ellen jam. But since the company has not properly introduced us to Mary Ellen, either with a picture or a story, the name just sits there on its hands.

Category	Strong name	Weak name
TV search	MeeVee Rhymes with TV, and lets you program your personal entertainment schedule. This is one of those names that seems inevitable.	Blinkx A competitor of MeeVee, but with a name that's not quite as inevitable. My guess is that Blinkx really wanted Blinx, but the name was already taken online. Unfortunately, using both a K and an X is like wearing a belt and braces. At least their pants won't fall down.
Office supplies	Staples "We stop for empty staplers," says the sign on the back of the Staples truck. The name Staples has a clever double meaning: staples (the products) and staples (necessities).	OfficeMart While the name has a satisfying sound, it's way too generic, creating confusion with other stores like Office Depot, MyOffice, The Office Store, OfficeMax and so on.
PC sound card	Mockingboard So many electronics companies forget that their customers need a way to remember the names of their products so they can buy them and spread the word. A name like Mockingboard is perfect for this sound-card product.	TerraTec EWS64 XL Or you could name your sound card the TerraTec EWS64 XL and cause some real excitement.
Optical lenses	Carl Zeiss Of course, Carl Zeiss is the founder's name, but the company deserves extra points for appreciating its strong linguistic qualities. The maker of precision lenses, Zeiss sounds like the words "precise" and "glass", with hints of advanced German engineering.	Sony lenses All things being equal, would you rather have a Sony lens or a Zeiss lens? Even Sony chose Zeiss to add extra brand appeal to their prosumer cameras.
Life insurance	MetLife As a shortening of Metropolitan Life Insurance (nine syllables), MetLife works pretty well. Much better than MLI or some other abbreviation. Good save.	American United There's no saving this insurance company name. American United? In trying to wrap the company in a flag, they've donned the invisibility cloak.

Category	Strong name	Weak name
Web search	<p>Google</p> <p>As the company tells it, Google comes from the word googol, a quantity written as the number one followed by a hundred zeros. What makes the name work for the rest of us, I think, is the image of googly eyes, a metaphor for search.</p>	<p>Ask</p> <p>The original brand name, Ask Jeeves, seems better. While Ask is a winner for its brevity, the differentiating part of the name was Jeeves. The fact that most Americans are unfamiliar with Jeeves (the resourceful butler in P.G. Wodehouse's stories) was an opportunity, not a liability. The company should have shortened the name to Jeeves and adopted the stories as a brand asset.</p>

Source: Marty Neumeier, *Zag: The Number One Strategy of High-Performance Brands* (New Riders, 2006).

NED COTEN

**Don't seek to be a person of
Importance.**
Seek to be a person of Value.

Email

ned@nedcoten.com

Website

nedcoten.com

LinkedIn

linkedin.com/in/nedcoten

Ned Coten AM is an investor, board chair, and passionate volunteer in basketball & other sports. He has over 30 years of experience at every level of business, sport & technology within Australia and globally, based in Melbourne, Australia.

nedcoten.com