

*A Winthrop & Weinstine blog dedicated to bridging the gap between legal & marketing types.*

## How Do You Know?

August 9, 2011 by [Steve Baird](#)

—Mark Prus, Marketing Consultant at [NameFlash](#)<sup>SM</sup>

I received a lot of terrific feedback on my recent Duets Blog post "[When Should You Change Your Name?](#)" Consider this Volume 2 in the series.

After you have decided to change your name, "How Do You Know When You Have Identified a Great Name?" This could also serve as another checkpoint before you change your name—if your name meets the criteria below, then don't change it!

In my NameFlash<sup>SM</sup> name development business, I usually present 30 – 50 names for a company's product/service, so picking a great name from the assortment of terrific names we present is often a challenge. Smaller companies usually pick a name and run with it while larger clients often have a series of Management/Board of Director reviews, and sometimes they do consumer research in order to get additional input.

So how should you determine if you have identified a great name? There are some obvious keys—one is that the name should be easy to pronounce, read and spell. It should be simple, concise and protectable. However, there are some other things you should consider.

Great names will have:

1. **Powerful differentiation** – This encompasses two related thoughts. First, the name must clearly be differentiated versus those of the competition, and second, it must differentiate in a highly relevant manner that is consistent with the strategic positioning of your product or service.
2. **Strong associations** – One of the founding principles of my naming business is that names must connect to ideas that consumers already have in their heads (unless you have unlimited funds to create meaning).



The power of associations was acknowledged in Vannevar Bush's seminal essay "[As We May Think](#)," written in the July 1945 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*. Bush identified that the most pressing problem facing science and technology was humankind's growing inability to efficiently access what it already knew. He stated that the human mind "operates by association" and foretold the development of "associative trails" in documents—these are now called links that we use to follow from one document to another on the Web.

A similar problem exists in today's barrage of advertising toward consumers, as studies show consumers are exposed to thousands of messages per day. A name that connects with positive associations that are already in consumers' minds is a very strong name.

3. **Deep resonance with your Target Audience** – I once ran a Twitter Poll (follow me @NameFlash) on the name for an anti-chafing product "[Anti Monkey Butt Powder](#)". The results were overwhelming as 70% of people thought it was a horrible name. However, when I dug into the comments made by a few people, I was stunned. The people who thought it was a good name were people who suffered from what might be described as a "chafed butt" due to extended horseback riding, motorcycle riding, or truck driving. Some of the people who responded were actual consumers of the product and were very defensive about the name—they thought it was perfect! The lesson from this example is clear—naming is not a popularity contest, but rather a search for meaning among the targeted few.
4. **A sense of familiarity** – Instant disclaimer: I am not suggesting that a computer-generated name like Exxon is bad! All I am saying is there is a body of evidence that indicates [people prefer names that are familiar](#).

Further research indicates that "hard to say" names [are viewed as](#) "risky." If the name sounds familiar to consumers and is instantly likeable, you may have a winner on hand, but if the name sounds like it belongs on the back panel ingredient listing of a highly processed food (e.g., calcium stearoyl lactylate) then maybe you are trying too hard. People are comfortable with names that make them comfortable.

5. **Emotional impact** – The Gallup organization measures emotional attachment to brands, and the [types of questions they ask are enlightening](#).

Consider the difference between these two skin care brand names: Olay and Noxema. Olay is a smooth, beautiful name which fits their product offerings and generates warm emotional feelings. Noxema is a harsh name that has very negative emotional impact...think "noxious" or "obnoxious." If your Target Market connects with the name on an emotional level, then you may have a winner.

Now for the downside: what are some indications that you have NOT identified a great name? Poor names have:

1. **Negative cultural meaning or language issues** – You really do need to consider the various ways you might impact people with your name. For example (and I am not trying to make fun



of anyone's name here), there is a Crapo Insurance company in Indiana - I don't know about you, but I'm not buying any "crapo" insurance! My blog has some other interesting "naming faux pas" examples including a [few from other countries](#).

2. **No meaning outside the company** – If the only people who understand it are insiders, please avoid it. Xobni is Inbox spelled backwards but consumers would find it hard to pronounce and use. Six Apart is a software company that was named because the two founders were born six days apart. What that has to do with their products is anyone's guess.
3. **No relationship to the family** – If the name does not reflect the history of the company and its other brands, you might be making a mistake. The acid test is to ask whether this sounds like something your company might introduce or whether it sounds like a competitor's product. Names that appear to be random usually go away or get modified down the road to make them look like they are part of the family. There is a reason why BMW and Mercedes have well-established naming conventions—it works!
4. **Constraints on growth** – I bet the owners of 7-Eleven (which was named as a result of the "7 AM to 11 PM" hours the chain was open) more than once regretted that name choice. Of course if you pick an acronym, you can change the name's meaning over time (CVS originally stood for Consumer Value Stores, but now the CEO uses it to represent Customer, Value and Service).
5. **Weak trademark implications** – One of my favorite posts on this blog is the "[Spectrum of Distinctiveness](#)." With Steve Baird's permission, I always present this idea to my naming clients to inspire them to seek distinctive names. Some clients get it, and they seek names that are rich in meaning without being overly descriptive. Some do not get it, and they tend to fall back into functional, generic names. While there may be a short-term benefit to using a functional name (because consumers will "get it"), there is lost opportunity to create a powerful brand.

Quick—name a website that you can use to find a job. I'll bet Monster.com was in your top 3 names. Did anyone think of the generic name JobHunt.com? Probably not. Yes, Monster spent quite a bit of money to establish awareness, but once they did that they truly created a "monster" of a brand, and the distinctiveness of the "Monster" name in the job hunting space was the reason why.

What other things should be considered in deciding if you have identified a great name?

