

## **Naming a Business Can Be Risky Business**

by [Patricia Kutza](#)

Marketers hired to address naming challenges of any business may hardly find solace in the fact that there are no hard-and-fast formulas for hitting on the correct name for a company. But, there is good news! There is a wealth of insider insights and company experiences available from those companies who've had to name or rename their businesses recently. Here are some helpful tips from those who have paved the way to help you try to avoid the potholes.

### **Moving to the Web Can Sometimes Produce a Need for a Name Change**

Should adding a Web presence be a major trigger for considering a company name change? There is no cookie-cutter formula here. Most experts agree that the real question at hand boils down to positioning; who represents the customer core and does the Internet really change that focus? If adding a web presence changes the customer or if the web presence changes the company's focus, then perhaps it is time to consider a name change.

In 1992 the Capitol Hill Software company provided software applications. They produced two packages: Groffice for government relations and Proffice for public relations executives. By 1998 the company had expanded and offered client-side applications as well as interactive websites for grassroots advocacy groups. Capitol's vice president of marketing, Kay Bransford, recalls her company getting signals that the name Capitol Hill Software no longer fit. "People in PR heard the name (Capitol) and assumed we wrote software for politicians. People would say they used Groffice and Proffice instead of saying they use Capitol Hill Software." According to Bransford, the incident that drove them to finally change the company name was when they moved their entire application line to an Application Service Provider (ASP) model. In the case of Capitol Hill Software the catalyst that initiated the name change was a shift in the delivery of the product via the web rather than creating a new web presence.

### **Blame the Difficulty of Naming a Company on the New Economy**

Even if a company wants to change their name they will need to accept the notion that selecting a new name will be increasingly harder to do. The proliferation of new companies capitalizing on the booming economy, says Steve Rivkin, president of the naming consultancy Rivkin & Associates, is quickly eating up new names and putting more pressure on marketers in the battle to differentiate themselves within their market. To the victors will belong names that are compelling, meaningful and perhaps more importantly, memorable.

In the case of Capitol Hill Software, Bransford is quick to admit that picking a new name was a struggle. "All the real words area taken, plus normal combinations of real words are taken either through trademark or as a Website. Rivkin, in a survey he has been conducting since 1991, says that more than half of the 600 firms surveyed in 2000 is feeling Branford's pain. And, finding a unique name will continue to be more difficult.

Ironically, in the case of Capitol Hill Software, the very success of their original products sped up the need for the company to undergo a name change. "Our product names," Bransford explains, "had eclipsed the name of the company." That awareness gave Bransford's marketing team another strong signal that it was time to change the company name.

### **Resist Dotting the Com!**

The web is the great equalizer between the brick-and-clicks and the e-tailers. Both find themselves navigating this frontier without a roadmap. One thing that looked easy in this unexplored territory was to follow the path towards the naming trend dot-com.

Capitol Hill Software decided on renaming the company, Vocus, Inc. But, it was not done without asking the question with which so many marketers have recently struggled. These days, should a company add the dot-com to their name? In the summer of 1999 Bransford recalls that adding dot-com to a company's name was very in vogue. "I had a strong opinion on that. My feeling was that it wasn't needed because all companies should have or would be expected to have the Internet involved in their product line," she said. "We are glad we did that (not add dot-com to our new company name). We've already seen a few press announcements from companies saying they are dropping the dot-com from their name."

The dot-com trend in naming a company may be passé but there is still benefit to linking a company or product name to a domain name with the dot-com suffix for search reasons. Jim Comerford, an Internet strategies consultant, told Rivkin's *Naming Newsletter* that a common search strategy which customers employee is to add the dot-com to the company or product name in the browser's

URL window. Customers have a tendency to use this technique before eventually going to a search engine to locate information on a company or a company's product. Armed with this knowledge it is even more important to pick a company or even product name that is unique and memorable.

### **Outsource? Or Should We Stay In-house?**

Naming campaigns for Internet startups as well as brick-and-click companies can be expensive propositions. One way of saving money is to carry on the campaign in-house. Companies must weigh the pros and cons of outsourcing the naming campaign before embarking on this costly venture.

Amigo Travel tried to rely on their in-house talent to produce a new company name. They eventually outsourced the job to Greene Communications following an intense period of trial and error. "Before going to Greene," explains the travel company's president and CEO, Monique Elwell, "we attempted to come up with a name, and it had to be the hardest thing I tried to do. After several failed months of this, we decided to go with people who were more creative than we were." With Greene's direction, Amigo Travel was renamed Amisto and Elwell says she was pleased with the decision to outsource and if the need arose, would do so again.

As vice president of marketing at Vocus, Bransford was in the position of driving the naming process. "We discussed outsourcing it and talked to a few firms." The feedback received had a major impact on the decision to outsource or not.

"We asked around," Bransford continues. "Most of our colleagues said they tried firms and either got a list they didn't like and went with the favorite before the search, or said that it did help, but none of the names they got were the one they ended up with. We also heard it was expensive – \$50k was kind of a number people seem to throw at us. That feedback, plus our own experiences with outsourcing, resulted in us deciding to keep it in-house."

Both Bransford and Elwell agree that no matter which route a company takes, the naming process itself offers companies opportunities for growth. According to Elwell, the months when her company tried to rename on their own produced some key learnings.

"We came up with some important information. First, we decided about five important characteristics that we wanted our name to have. Second, we wanted to extract thoughts and feelings about our product and services from unbiased people." Elwell says that they sent an email to a network of friends, asking them to rate words and phrases that they felt best represented the Amisto experience. "We asked them to tell us what three colors, what three adjectives and what three descriptive phrases came to mind. That gave us the basis," says Elwell, "for not only our name, but our website design, our corporate colors and our corporate image."

While Bransford is also pleased with the in-house route her company chose, she doesn't discount the value of outsourcing. "Consultants add a lot of value," she says. "But they also require a lot of time to make their services worthwhile."

### **Staying In-house for the Naming...Now What?**

One of the results of Rivkin's 2000 naming survey suggests that using an internal task force represents the best strategy for naming success. It was rated not only the most common method of generating new names (74% of responses) but also the most effective (68% of responses). Other methods listed in this survey included (in order of frequency): using the extension of an existing name, using an advertising agency, holding a naming contest among employees/customers, using a naming consultant and using naming software.

At Vocus, the process became a family affair. "The president and CEO Rick Rudman and I did most of the brainstorming and discussing, but would also solicit staff feedback as well as discuss it at executive staff meetings," says Bransford. "I wanted to get general staff buy-in to the name switch and discussed the change with most managers and executives at some point during the 4 months. It was a joint decision to select Vocus between myself and Rick after I gathered comments and customer votes."

### **Dealing with the Naysayers**

No matter what naming process is chosen, there's a high probability not everyone in or outside the company will like the new name. Getting their buy-in requires work, timing and more than a dollop of finesse.

Bransford solicited lots of feedback while crafting the name change, and followed no strict guideline for timing the execution of the change. "Only advice, just like having a baby," Bransford says, "it that there is never the perfect time - just bite the bullet and do it! However, unlike naming your child - involve your clients and staff when you can."

Rivkin, in his *Primer on PR* column for the *Naming Newsletter*, stresses the importance of not only giving employees the first peek at the new name but also the rationale for its creation. Key to the success of the name, he advocates, is an integrated rollout which uses every opportunity (through imprinted collateral, press releases, advertising) to help massage customers so that they, as well as the company employees, feel comfortable with the new name and hopefully will start using it immediately.

### **Avoid Documented Naming Mistakes!**

There are no Ten Commandments published to ensure naming success. But Al and Laura Ries, authors of the book *The 11 Immutable of Internet Branding*, suggest that there is at least one mortal sin waiting to be committed by unknowing namers. The largest sin they talk about is the nondescript name. According to Ries, the name should be proper (rather than generic) and have the following attributes: short, simple, suggestive of its category, unique, alliterative, speakable, shocking and personalized. That's a big order! It's no wonder that cash-flush companies will seek out professional namers for such a daunting task.

With a bit of creativity and due diligence, Mohan, co-founder of Garam Chai, a web information portal positioned for US-based Indians, seems to have found a site name that captures much of the Ries formula. "While toying with names," Mohan explains, "we didn't really want another IndiaXYZSomething.com since there were just too many of them on the web. We started thinking, what was our site really about? And it struck me – we were building an information portal."

"What do Indians do when they need some information?" he continues. "They bring up the queries and concerns during the next gossip or chai session while hanging out with their friends! Garam Chai literally translates to hot tea. To any (Asian) Indian, it also conjures a vision of the proverbial water cooler, since Indians generally like to hang out, exchange news and views and gossip over a cup of hot tea."

Rivkin, on the other hand, says the worst naming mistake a startup company can make, is to "pick a lookalike, soundalike or copycat name trying to latch onto the reputation of an established firm. The startup will probably get sued – and deserves to be!"

When facing the challenge of naming a company, keep in mind the Chinese proverb that says the beginning of wisdom is calling things by their right names. And while there are no tried and true methods for finding the right name, take the time to make certain your organization is comfortable about what the new name says about you as a company, your products and your employees.



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