

# HOW TO NAME ANYTHING

*in an Afternoon*

The Art & Act  
of Naming Well

Willem Van Lancker

A TERRAIN PRODUCTION

*Terrain*



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Picture the moment a stranger first meets your idea.

No glossy presentation, no polished product,  
just a single word rippling across the air or  
in a few pixels on the screen.

That word is a handshake, a greeting, a preface.

If it's thin and literal, it slips through the fingers - lost.  
If it's rich with suggestion, it taps the spine - reverberating.

Long before the product works or  
the logo's contours snap into focus,  
the name has already filed its quiet report:  
This is worth a second look, or our business here is done.

Naming, then, is not a clerical act but one of authorship.  
It gives life to the thing you make and then sets it on its way.  
A name is the one-word novel you will spend years adapting.

So let's write something worth re-reading.



## Who I am and why I wrote this guide

As we are on the topic of names, my name is Willem. My parents wanted to give me a Dutch-Belgian name and were fond of the Dutch-American Artist *Willem De Kooning*.

I am a designer and investor. As a partner at Terrain, I back early-stage technology companies. My work is blended creativity and commerce. My career began as a designer at Apple and Google Maps, continued with founding Oyster (which we sold to Google), and evolved working in venture capital, leading incubations at Thrive Capital.

Because of this, I approach early-stage investing as a product builder and designer. I see our work in two ways. First, to provide early-stage capital to founders at the outset of their journey, and second, to support them in ways that meaningfully increase their odds of success.

Naming is something that may be overlooked, but it is one of the few things every founder must do.

Your name ships first. Before anyone watches your launch video, lands on your website, or tries your product, they encounter your name. Names travel further than features, stick around longer than campaigns, and either buy you credibility up front or bleed it before you've earned the right to spend it.

This process is more critical and complicated than ever. In 1996, a desirable domain name might cost \$50; these days, you're often looking at seven figures. Social media handles are often claimed long before incorporation (with clearing prices rivaling domains). The real estate of language has become impossibly crowded. Brands, startups, memecoins, codebases, and influencers are all occupying words and demanding attention.

What you're looking for is a hook that sets itself into a person's mind, linking their brain back to your idea, product, and company. The act of finding this word, the name, has always symbolized the beginning of something, the moment it becomes real: the founder, the artist, the lawmaker, the developer, the parent, at that moment when they arrive at the name.

Despite this almost divine act, the process of naming is usually messy: gather the team, throw words on a whiteboard, argue, and when the deadline looms, finally settle on "good enough." Similarly, most naming advice remains stuck in a 2000s-era creativity workshop: cutesy contrived exercises, random walks through dictionaries, and tired ideas of what cutting-edge looks like.

The recent explosion of AI-powered "name generators" has only highlighted the problem. These tools promise to solve naming in a single prompt, but they rely on models that have been trained on the same publicly available advice. Their outputs look plausible but lack spark, context, or wit.

I've been working in and around names for years, first by accident, now by design. Nearly a decade ago, I found myself repeatedly helping founders I'd backed as an angel investor establish their brand and identity, starting with the name. This became a ritual in my work with incubated companies at Thrive. I began collecting resources: guides, thesauruses, lists of obscure terminology, rhyming websites, domain hacks—anything that might help crack the code. This eventually became Onym, a widely used naming resource that I built with a friend.

But even that felt incomplete. What was missing was a systematic method for naming. So I set out to build a repeatable process, distilling the work of developing a successful name into something any focused founder can complete in an afternoon. The result was a clear sequence that combines structured exploration, ruthless editing, and decisive ownership.

Through extensive trial, error, and refinement, I've developed two tools. The first is this guide, and the other, Untitled, is an AI copilot designed to walk you through a similar approach.

You might wonder if I'm actually good at this—that's fair. Ultimately, each process relies on founders to make the final call; I've simply helped them reach a name they can use with conviction. Here's a sample of names I'm proud of and brief idea behind each:

- **AIUC:** a strong acronym for *Artificial Intelligence Underwriting Company*. Allowed them to buy the (relatively affordable AIUC.com)
- **Assembly:** the Lego-like assembly of buildings.
- **The Browser Company of New York:** a winking institution-grade seriousness for something as foundational as the web browser.
- **Cadence:** Rhythm in chronic care management..
- **Check:** “Check” the box for payroll-as-a-service powering a new wave of software.
- **Console:** for an AI IT management company, evoking calm, empowering visibility, and control at your fingertips.
- **Cove:** a protective harbor to keep migraines at bay.
- **Evens:** reflux care that helps you keep an even keel.
- **Fabric:** interlocking solutions woven into one company.
- **Folio:** tidy, portfolio-driven organization for hospitality organizations.
- **Free Agency:** a program for founders to select their startup idea, before founding and funding
- **Garner Health:** cultivation of meaningful healthcare insights.
- **Imprint:** a historical facet from checks and credit card stamps, signaling durable brand-customer relationships in card issuing.
- **Keeps:** confidence and commitment; you're “playing for keeps” (of your hair).
- **Modern Life:** the energy and chaos of everyday life, harnessed in modern technology.
- **Neon:** electric, fast-moving energy fit for gaming and efficient payments.
- **Nava Benefits:** from Sanskrit, a new way of navigating healthcare.
- **Numeric:** precise automation for faster month-end close.
- **Oyster:** from Shakespeare's line, “The world's mine oyster,” for an app that gave access to millions of books on demand.
- **Parallel:** a parallel internet built for AIs.
- **Philadelphia Union (MLS):** anchors the club in Philadelphia's role in forming the U.S. union, nods to organized labor, and plays on the global “United/Union” convention.
- **Picnic:** allergy care for food and environmental triggers—simple, outdoorsy, friendly.
- **Sequence:** clear steps toward lasting weight loss; a subtle play on festive *sequins*.
- **Terrain:** for founders traversing new ground; rugged stability underfoot.
- **Universe Software:** a holding company that evokes a constellation of consumer tech brands.
- **A few happy children :)**

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*Version 1.0 - Published October 2025*

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## A Name's Four Jobs

Names, like most anything else in our world, have a job.

While humble, a name's job is a wide-ranging one. **A name is the brand's first impression, setting expectations at the start.** In those crucial early moments, a name does four essential jobs:

**It personifies your brand.** People relate to names as they do faces. They set a tone for what is to come. *Microsoft* sounds technical, serious, and professional. *Apple* feels friendly, irreverent, and natural. Names let customers anchor their own stories and meaning onto something concrete.

**It encompasses the experience.** MIT professor Patrick Winston observed, “A good name doesn't explain the idea, but it's enough of a handle to put you back in the mental state from when you first understood the idea.” When you hear *Uber*, the entire experience snaps into place: the app, the black cars, the convenience, the disruption of traditional taxis. The name carries all that meaning in two syllables.

**It serves as a rallying banner for your internal team and a billboard for external audiences.** Team members who will look to it daily for meaning in their work and ways of expanding on your mission. “We're building the next *Stripe*” conveys a distinct ambition and culture compared to “We're building the next *Salesforce*.” The name comes to be a symbolic carrier of the company culture and attracts people who want to be part of that specific story. The best names naturally produce great demonyms: *Googlers*, *Amazonians*, *Redditors*, *NVIDIANS*. Externally, customers, investors, and the general public will judge it based on snap decisions in a sea of other brands.

**It enables word-of-mouth growth.** Effective communication isn't drafting a thousand words; it's distilling them into one or two that convey the whole story or action: “Google it.” Customers recommend you first by your name. If that name resonates powerfully, your marketing efforts are already halfway complete.

# How to Name Your Company in an Afternoon

You can *absolutely* complete this process in a focused afternoon session. In fact, many need that urgency to break through analysis paralysis and make a decision. But if you have the luxury of time, consider spreading these steps across a week or two. Some of the best naming breakthroughs happen during those unguarded moments, whether on your morning walk to the office, in the shower, or while reading something completely unrelated. Your subconscious will keep working on the problem, offering up unexpected connections and creative sparks when you least expect them.

Whether you tackle this in one intense session or let it percolate over time, the framework remains the same. The process moves through six distinct phases: defining what you're naming, generating options systematically, cutting ruthlessly, testing strategically, deciding decisively, and executing consistently.

- 1. Orientation**      Set the table. What exactly are you naming? A product, a company, a movement? Gather raw materials: the story of why this exists, who it serves, what changes when it succeeds. This is a compass to refer back to so that you can ensure that the right candidates fulfill your needs.
- 2. Exploration**      Generate candidates systematically. Make it easy. Start with obvious words related to your space, then branch into adjacent concepts. Use metaphors from other domains. Play with sounds as well as meanings. Build a long list while withholding judgment.
- 3. Distillation**      Cut ruthlessly and quantitatively. Remove anything hard to spell, pronounce, or remember. Eliminate names that require explanation. Test each candidate: Could you shout it across a crowded room? Would it work as a domain? Does it scale from startup to global platform?
- 4. Validation**      Gather feedback strategically. Questions like "What do you think?" elicit vague responses. Instead, be specific: "Which of these would you remember tomorrow?" "Where would you place this word on a spectrum of Playful to Serious?" Test it with people who don't know your business; they'll catch problems you're blind to. Write it down in 50 fonts. See how its personality changes.
- 5. Commitment**      Committees find the safe middle. You are looking for memorable. The final decision needs a single owner willing to choose based on potential and ceiling. Check legal availability, secure domains, and never look back.
- 6. Stewardship**      Use the name consistently everywhere. Don't hedge with explanatory taglines or apologetic introductions. Confidence makes names work.



## The Guide

Most naming processes fail because they're either too rigid (corporate committee paralysis) or too loose (creative chaos). This process provides structure without suffocating creativity.

Before we start: I'm not trying to sell you anything. There's no catchy acronym, no secret sauce, no teaser for some half-finished process that you'll need to buy the rest of from a consultant. Most frameworks promise clarity but deliver confidence theater—tools to justify decisions, not sharpen them.

Like anything else, some people are definitely better at naming than others. Some talented professionals and agencies specialize in it and can be great partners on that journey. But there's no magic formula. No secret method. There is just the work. If you do it, especially a lot, I can guarantee you will get great results. The key is volume, iteration, and the willingness to push through where most people stop.

Therefore, these six steps are stripped down to the essence of what I have found in both my research and practice. They yield the best outcomes—namely, the right set of names for your company or project.

It may look like a lengthy guide, but I've erred on the side of being a bit more verbose in my explanation of steps, ideas, and processes. I recommend someone on your team reads this front-to-back ahead of time to know what to expect, but don't fear, it is a straightforward process that *can* be done (as advertised) in an afternoon.

As a final call out, maybe to make things easier and to lessen pressure: *I don't believe that you are naming your company or product at all.* You are, instead, detailing the positioning of your company and product, the unique tone, personality, ideas, and story you want your brand to express to the world. From this process, a name should emerge. All great names support the positioning of the business or product they speak for and find a unique way to reinvigorate or change the conversation that an industry has been having with its customers.

The naming process begins with understanding everything about your brand, where you want to go, and taking that through the lens of your competition and the entire industry.

## 1.0 Orientation

*Know what you're naming*

Many naming challenges happen before anyone writes down a single idea. Teams skip the conversation about who they actually are, what the goals are, and then spend hours generating names for a company that exists only in their individual heads.

In answering “*who are you?*” the more concrete, the better. No matter how competitive the category, it is easier to name a brand that knows exactly what audience they need to reach via what channels and what success looks like than it is to name a brand that aspires to be an abstract representation of a vision they do not yet fully understand.

Orientation remedies this. Some time dedicated to aligning on identity saves you weeks of arguing about exactly what you're naming. This may take a few minutes because you've already done this work or a few hours to nail down, but it will make everything move more smoothly.

You'll appreciate this as you're selecting the final name. One of the hardest things in art making anything is knowing when you're done. By clearly writing down your goals at the beginning, you'll have the closest thing one can get to objective criteria for gauging success at the end.

**A Rule:** While other parts of this process can have stakeholders come and go, it is important that the person or people who will make the ultimate decision on a name need to be in the room for this.

And for the express version of this, just answer these questions:

- What are you building?
- What are the main things you're trying to get your audience to do?
- Who is your most important audience?
- How do you want it to make customers feel?
- Are there companies with similar goals in other markets?
- What concepts do they use to describe their products?
- Why are you different from the competition?
- How would you explain your company to a five-year-old in a way that would keep them interested?

*But, if you have a bit more time, let's read on...*

## 1.1 Establishing Common Ground: *Purpose, Promise, Audience, Feeling*

**Set up:** Gather everyone with a stake in the name and project. Keep this group small. Creative groups thrive when there is not a push for consensus, which requires a small group. Block some time. Try to remove phones, laptops, and interruptions. Bring paper for everyone.

**Process:** Work through each section together. Challenge every fuzzy adjective. Fight about the hard choices; better to argue now than regret later.

## 1.2 Purpose

We'll start by writing a purpose statement. Most companies write statements that sound like they were generated by a committee of consultants who've never met a customer.

*"We help businesses streamline operational workflows to maximize productivity and drive growth."*

That's a feature list cosplaying as a meaningful statement.

Purpose answers one question: *"What breaks if you don't exist?"* Not *"customers use a competitor."* What specific thing goes wrong in the world? What do people feel?

Good purpose statements hurt to read because they're specific enough to exclude half your potential market. *"Vision for everyone"* (Warby Parker) turns off luxury eyewear customers. *"Increase the GDP of the internet"* (Stripe) ignores offline commerce entirely.

This should be specific to you and something that other companies in your category would bristle at.

## 1.3 Promise

Next, think about the promise you are making to your customer, whether explicitly or implicitly. What happens in the first five minutes someone uses your product?

Not your marketing promise. Not your long-term vision. Not what analysts say after six months of implementation.

*Answer: What happens immediately?*

*"Your food delivered quickly." - DoorDash*

*"Accept payments in 7 lines of code." - Stripe*

*"Fast video calls." - Zoom*

The promise should survive contact with reality. If new users can't tell whether you delivered, your promise is too vague.

## 1.4 Audience

Now take these together and focus on the audience. Who really matters here? Customers - certainly. Employees - yes, though for different reasons. Investors, press, maybe? As a startup, you're answering these questions already, so hopefully this is quick work, but have your primary audience (and their wants and needs and context) in mind throughout the process.

You can ask a few simple questions of your team and existing or potential customers, and open what really makes them tick:

- Who are your primary target audiences? Are there secondary audiences to consider?
- How do they use and think about the sector you are launching in?
- What drives them to purchase?
- What other (unrelated) brands do they value and love?
  - *Note: this is often overlooked but can be as important as competitors—if a beloved makeup brand shares a name for your sports drink targeting the same customer, you may be in tough shape.*
- What special, unique needs or wants might they have in a name?

## 1.5 Feeling

To get away from defining features or technical specs, I suggest that you take some time to isolate one emotion that you want the audience to come away with.

Emotions are singular and clear—excitement cannot coexist simultaneously with calm. Pinpointing a single dominant feeling anchors your branding strategy, ensuring that each subsequent choice consistently reinforces the emotional core. This builds powerful and memorable connections with your customers.

Most teams struggle with emotional focus, tempted to make their brand represent multiple emotional qualities simultaneously: trust AND innovation AND reliability AND excitement. Resist this temptation. Emotions aren't inherently blendable; many are experienced distinctly. And when it comes to a name, that focus is critical. The visceral, immediate feeling they experience upon interacting with your product.

Select a single feeling that decisively drives customer action in your category.

Here are a few examples:

- **Relief:** Problem solved, stress significantly reduced (*Uber, Allegra*)
- **Momentum:** Accelerating towards goals swiftly and effectively (*Zoom, Stripe*)
- **High-Status:** Signaling sophistication, success, intelligence (*Tesla, Equinox*)
- **Wonder:** Evoking curiosity and amazement through discovery (*Duolingo, Netflix*)
- **Rebellion:** Encouraging rule-breaking, independent thought, and unconventional choices (*Virgin, Rogue Fitness*)
- **Belonging:** Fostering a sense of community, tribe, and being genuinely understood (*Nextdoor, Etsy*)
- **Control:** Evoking mastery, precision, and command (*Ironclad, Facetune*)



## 1.5.1 Tonal Sliders

Now that you've identified the singular emotional essence your brand should evoke, it's time to define precisely how your brand's vibe and style reinforce that feeling. I've always found the classic brand strategy exercise of "tonal sliders" to be a useful tool. They help you transition from abstract emotional ideals to concrete stylistic choices, ensuring every aspect of your brand aligns cohesively.

The exercise below locates your brand thoughtfully within a nuanced range of possibilities, capturing subtle variations and complex layers of meaning. By clearly identifying where your brand sits along each spectrum, you create a detailed cultural and stylistic address that consistently communicates your intended message to customers.

Draw out this spectrum (on a whiteboard, in a slide deck) and have each person mark their position on the spectrum:

<b>Playful</b>	↔	<b>Serious</b>
<b>Innovative</b>	↔	<b>Traditional</b>
<b>Accessible</b>	↔	<b>Exclusive</b>

Spectrums offer a clear compass when evaluating names. It puts a stake in the ground on what you want to stand for. Each spectrum is a continuum, a gradient of possibilities, allowing subtle calibrations rather than stark extremes.

<b>Playful</b>	<b>Serious</b>
Entertainment companies, lifestyle brands, and consumer apps often lean into playfulness, building emotional connections through humor, spontaneity, or charm. <i>Lovable, Mailchimp, Yahoo!, Hugging Face.</i>	Brands in finance, healthcare, hardware, or legal tend to cluster here, relying on trust and gravitas. <i>Brex, Neuralink, Anduril, Anthropic.</i> Seriousness doesn't eliminate the potential for lighter touches; see brands like <i>Credit Karma</i> which blend playfulness with authority.
<b>Accessible</b>	<b>Exclusive</b>
Defined by openness and universal appeal. Accessible brands democratize experiences through affordability, ease of use, and broad availability—think consumer tools or mass-market platforms. <i>Target, Dollar Shave Club, Airbnb</i>	Associated with sophistication, premium, and exceptional quality. Premium brands evoke aspiration, whether in luxury goods, expert professional services, or high-end enterprise software. <i>NetJets, Veilance, Cartesia.</i>
<b>Innovative</b>	<b>Traditional</b>
Embraces innovation, disruption, and vision. Tech startups and companies driven by transformative ideas typically occupy this end of the spectrum. <i>SpaceX, Polestar, Impossible Foods, Perplexity.</i>	Anchored in tradition, timelessness, and enduring reliability. Heritage-driven brands emphasizing craftsmanship often position themselves classically (even if they're not). <i>San Francisco Compute, General Magic, Oak Street Health</i>

### 1.5.2 Contextual Positioning Matters

Your chosen position along these spectrums should be informed by both your intuition and your audience's existing expectations, competitive landscape, and cultural moment. Positions can shift subtly over time as meanings evolve—what once was perceived as premium or serious might gradually become more accessible or playful.

Each spectrum choice precisely defines your brand's identity, intention, and differentiation. Consider a financial infrastructure startup: they might position themselves as Serious (because financial trust matters), Premium (serving sophisticated, demanding clients), and Futuristic (leveraging innovative payment solutions).

Recognize these spectrums as dynamic, multidimensional guides rather than static binaries. Your cultural and stylistic address emerges from these careful calibrations, shaping how your brand is understood and remembered.

## 1.6 The Environment

As important as defining who you are is defining the world your name (and brand) will be inhabiting. Setting a table for the world, the non-negotiables, and awareness for where the name will be situated in culture.

### 1.6.1 Non-Starters

I like to start here with words, ideas, or signals that are forbidden. This is your “never list” of ideas that would kill the name regardless of how clever it sounds. Generate this systematically, some categories include:

- **Competitors:** You don't want to just sound like a market leader you aim to unseat
- **Legal constraints:** Avoid trademark conflicts early
- **Cultural taboos:** Research meanings in key markets
- **Founder hangups:** Personal associations that create resistance

Example Non-Starters:

- “Any name that sounds like *Salesforce* or *Microsoft*”
- “Religious references of any kind”
- “Words that are hard to spell over the phone”
- “Anything that sounds like a pharmaceutical drug”

### 1.6.2 Competitor Map

Competitor mapping can often feel random and difficult to categorize. Because we are just talking about names, not products or competitive features, we can narrow the scope to something more manageable. This is a process used by naming creative agencies and naming firms.

1.6.2 Create a spreadsheet. Column for each type of name: Descriptive, Invented, Experiential, Evocative. 6 rows, marked 0-5 to score quality.

- The five levels of the vertical axis represent the relative value of a given name, ranked from a low of 0 value to a maximum of 5.
- The Value ranking is, of course, subjective, but it is derived from factors such as how engaging a name is with its target audience; how many layers of meaning, story, myth, metaphor, imagery the name has: associations, imagery, multiple layers; how memorable the name is; and how differentiated from the competition the name is.

Plot every relevant competitor. You can see where everyone clusters and where open territory exists. More importantly, you can see naming trends you'd never notice otherwise.

Is everyone in your space going short and invented? Long and descriptive? The map shows you how to sound different without sounding out of place.

## 2 Exploration

*Flood the page; clean up later*

When naming your company, I have found it helpful to keep in mind two powerful forces that will pull at you:

- **Ego** whispers for something ambitious, clever, impressive; a name that can endure for decades and satisfy your vanity.
- **Logic** insists on something clear, direct, sufficient; a name easy to pronounce, remember, and type.

*Tesla* works because it feels visionary and bold enough to match Elon Musk's grand ambitions and ties to historical greats (ego), yet remains crisp, clear, and approachable to customers worldwide (logic).

The name you choose will travel between two audiences:

- **External** customers, investors, and the general public who will judge it based on snap decisions in a sea of other brands.
- **Internal** team members who will look to it daily for meaning in their work and ways of expanding on your mission.

As you wrestle with these dichotomies, you'll notice details others overlook: how the name sounds when you're tired, how it looks in all caps, and whether it translates reasonably. You envision strangers pronouncing it: investors, customers, critics. You test it quietly against futures you can't yet see.

Anyone who has named anything knows a secret: the name that wins rarely comes from the first brainstorm. It's from session seven, when you're tired of obvious choices and finally desperate enough to get weird. In other words, it is about volume. Most people approach naming like editing—start with good ideas and attempt to polish them. This is backwards. In my experience, great names come from volume, not quality. Pan for gold. Throw every shiny thing in the pan. Sort later.

You have to do it again and again. Disclaimer: this is where your process *could* swell beyond an afternoon. And ideally, if you have the time, luxuriate here. Name constantly over the next few hours (or days).

But how do you do it? This is where I have seen most guides fall apart. They typically just say “go for it” and come up with some words. We speak and type all day, after all, right? But like anything else, it takes focused, intentional work.

To start, it is helpful to get a sense of the landscape of words, the types of names that exist categorically. You can find my own categorization and examples at the end of this book ([link](#)). Your idea generation could cover all of these, but more than likely, the table we set in Orientation will narrow the range of what you're looking for.



## 2.1 Free Naming

To make things easy, let's start at the highest level. Just come up with names. Any name. Just write things down. Generate a bunch of names; it doesn't matter what they are.

Set a timer and have everyone write names for 5-10 minutes. Write them down on post-its, one name per post-it. Descriptive names, trendy names, nonsensical names. Doesn't matter. After, put them on the wall and make rough groups.

Set a low bar and get the juices flowing. Have someone get them all down in a spreadsheet. You can come back to these, or not. But now you've done it. The obvious ideas are out there, and you're in motion.

When it comes to generation, throw out your dictionary. Many internet dictionaries and guides are pretty thin. So you need to find novel sources (check out [Onym.co](http://Onym.co) and other resources to get started here.

There are many ways *in*, but each takes focus and structure. If you are doing this in one session, I like to break the group into teams to ensure good coverage over categories.

## 2.2 Springboards

Take the purpose, the promise, and feelings from the last round as raw material. Now let's think about themes. Bubble these words up to their bigger, broader ideas. Write down these themes and ideas that would match your brand. These are your themes. They'll sound obvious at first, that's fine. They're not final names. The name of the game is to get more specific as you go.

### 2.2 Here is how they work:

- Relaxed → Pillow → *Cool Side*
- Futuristic → SciFi → Famous Authors → *Asimov*
- Elegant Affection → Refined Languages (French) → *Câlin (to cuddle)*
- Calm → Sleep → Night Sky → *Orion*

This is also an interesting time to return to those names you generated in *Free Naming*. Using those (likely not great) names as a springboard, you can generate some more descriptive, emotive, and experiential words (not necessarily names). Just as in the examples above, take these words and assign famous people, places, brands, and things to them. These should highlight non-obvious details about your brand's feeling in a compelling way. Try to push these words to a level of specificity that goes beyond merely being descriptive and enters into being evocative and imaginative. Real things have a three-dimensionality to them. They exist in our world (often across media types) and have a depth of personality that allows us to hang more meaning onto them. From there, some suitable names will likely begin to emerge.

### 2.3 Meaningful Facets

Create a long list of associations with your category, product, and industry. Maybe even the history and preferences of the founding team. These could be locations, languages, media (books, characters), or historical figures.

Go deep into this list and read up on their work, pick up their books, read dialogue between characters, and research backstories. This is especially great in history books on your subject — the vocabulary can often be more varied and dynamic than you’d see elsewhere.

A few examples working backwards from their names:

<i>A24</i>	Named for the Italian highway the founder was driving on when he had the idea for the production company.
<i>Stripe</i>	Pulled from the magnetic stripe on credit cards, the company was moving online.
<i>Cisco</i>	Derived from the ending of the company’s hometown, San Francisco.
<i>Palantir</i>	A magical seeing stone from <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> ties back to the company’s technologies and mysterious air.

Some things to consider when brainstorming here:

- What draws people in?
- What is unique to these themes?
- What would an insider know about these places?
- What are ideas one degree away from these concepts?
- How do you identify the feeling you want the name to embody?
- What is the emotional wavelength for this theme?

### 2.4 Lexiconical Rabbitholing

Get specific to your sector and story. Use tools like [Onym](#) to find obscure dictionaries and get beyond the Greek gods and goddesses and common startup tropes. In particular, using sites like Wikipedia and certain dictionaries allows you to follow a daisychain from one idea to another, where connections can often be more surprising and original.

Another way to spur creative ideas in this “rabbitholing” is to pass your list to another team member. Try this: after ~30 minutes, pass your word list to the person to your right, receive a neighbor’s list, and highlight their “best” words. Take those and go further in your own way. You will almost certainly come up with ideas they wouldn’t have.

## 2.5 Modification & Hacks

While often an exercise when distilling to attempting to make something fit for trademark or domain viability, thinking through modifications and hacks can be a useful way to get outside of the normal register:

- Creative misspellings
- Portmanteaus (combining two words)
- Dropping vowels or adding letters (be careful here to not fall into feeling like a dot-com era bust)
- Adding descriptive endings or associations (see the [list](#))

## 2.6 Taking Stock of Your Raw Materials

Throughout the process, you should be able to regenerate from new words. Give each word a row in a spreadsheet and try to generate new ideas specific to that.

At the end of this brainstorm, you should have a very large list—ideally 250+ words. If you haven't hit that, keep going. Quickly categorize them into a simple hierarchy: Promising, Interesting, and Raw.

## 3 Distillation

*Imagination, refinement, and testing*

You now have a gorgeous mess: 250+ names spanning every category you could think of and several you couldn't. Time to be ruthless. As a first step, have each team member go through the full list and “nominate” possible candidates. Be liberal here; you don't need to limit anyone, just bear in mind that these are names that are *good enough* to spend a bit of time to test and evaluate.

### 3.1 What makes a name great?

It is helpful to establish what makes a name really work, so you will know it when you see it. The best names are appropriate in their form and context. They both **situate** (where does this thing live in the world, what is its context, its category) and **differentiate** (what makes it unique, special). They have a strong sense of who they are serving and the goals they want to achieve. The more concrete, the better. It is easier to name a brand that knows exactly what audience they need to reach and what success looks like than it is to name a brand that aspires to be an abstract representation of a vision they do not yet fully understand.

When done right, a great name compounds over time. It grows richer, deeper, and more powerful with each repetition, embedding itself into culture, conversation, and memory. But how do you measure something so intangible? **It is admittedly subjective, but I've found 6 dimensions that are the most relevant when evaluating a name:**

<b>Depth</b>	Does it have layers of meaning? What's its tone, attitude, and character? Can it carry metaphorical significance without being cumbersome? Does it match your culture and customers' expectations? <i>Virgin</i> suggests rebellion and rule-breaking, <i>Amazon</i> moved from bookstore to boundless selection, signaling scale and possibility.
<b>Temperature</b>	Does it feel warm and inviting or cold and distant? Technical correctness isn't always optimal; approachability can matter more. <i>Mailchimp</i> feels approachable and human; <i>Blackstone</i> conveys stability and force; <i>Anthropic</i> bucks high-tech convention and opts for the Greek word for “human” to convey a sort of high-brow warmth.
<b>Voice</b>	How does it sound aloud? Does it flow smoothly or create friction? <i>Zoom</i> sounds crisp and quick; <i>Etsy</i> is playful and cute. <i>OpenAI</i> , coined by Elon Musk, gives a unique mix of regular words and acronyms, creating a memorable rhythm (as a bonus, <i>OpenAI</i> also plays on one of Elon's favorite naming tricks: contractions ( <i>SpaceX</i> = <i>Space Exploration Technologies Corporation</i> )).



<b>Visual</b>	How does it look on tiny screens or billboard signage? Does it have visual rhythm and balance? Do capital characters change the aesthetic? <i>SONOS</i> is an elegant ambigram. <i>Hewlett-Packard</i> feels cluttered and traditional, but <i>HP</i> renders as fast-moving and tight.
<b>Differentiation</b>	Does it clearly stand out from competitors or blend into background noise? Is it viable from a trademark perspective? Amidst countless names like <i>Cloudera</i> or <i>MongoDB</i> , <i>Snowflake</i> immediately stood apart.
<b>Special Wrongness</b>	This concept is borrowed from designer Ben Pieratt and author Peter Mendelsund. A name should have “ <i>an unforgettable newness. A new shape. 1+1=3.</i> ” and the idea that it can spark a new trend that “ <i>in the future, this will be done a lot.</i> ” It can manifest in many ways: a slight misspelling, unique pronunciation, unexpected pairing, or intriguing origin that makes it memorable yet accessible. This is why <i>The Browser Company of New York</i> felt fresh, and gives <i>Teenage Engineering</i> its distinctive edge.

### 3.2 Meaning, Memory & Range

There are many ways to shortlist your candidates, but I’ve found a simple exercise helps rate a name with a bit more objectivity:

**Memory:** Will people remember it after one encounter? Can they spell it without asking? Does it stick in their head or slide right out?

**Meaning:** Does it connect to your brand? Not just literally but emotionally. Does it suggest the right things about what you do or how it feels to use your product? Is it compelling in an interesting way? Are you excited to say it every day, probably more than your own name? One great exercise here is to bring back the associations you generated when coming up with candidates

**Range:** Can it grow with your company? Will it work when you expand beyond your current product? Does it trap you in one category or give you room to evolve?

Look at three leading corporate card and expense management companies:

	Memory	Meaning	Range
<b>Mercury</b>	X Too common, exists in many contexts, diffusing recall.	✓ Relevant: God of commerce, trade, messengers	✓ Scales beyond banking, but pretty rooted in commerce
<b>Ramp</b>	✓ Short, punchy, and phonetically distinctive.	✓ Suggests acceleration and growth, reinforcing benefits.	X Feels anchored to finance/ops; transactional tone limits.
<b>Brex</b>	✓ Brief, angular; unusual visual letterform aids recall.	X Feels synthetic and empty; evokes generic fintech.	✓ An arbitrary form gives freedom to evolve beyond a category.

Each hits at least two of three. That's usually enough. Three of three is rare and magical. Zero or one of three likely gets deleted.

### 3.3 Reality Checks

Names that pass this filter still need to survive contact with the outside world. Three quick tests eliminate most glaring problems:

**Legal scan:** Three minutes on USPTO.gov searching for identical marks in your category. If you find really obvious conflicts, it's likely time to kill the name now. Deep trademark research (with real lawyers) comes later.

**Language check:** Say it out loud ten times. Check slang dictionaries. Translate it into a few common languages. Ask yourself: could this embarrass us somewhere important?

**Landscape check:** Plot it on your competitor map. Does it camouflage you among giants or help you stand out? Will customers confuse you with someone else? Any other adjacent companies using a similar name?

Most names fail reality checks for boring reasons. They're too hard to spell over the phone. They mean something unfortunate in another language. They sound exactly like the market leader.

Better to catch these problems now than after you've fallen in love. Notice that domains and social handles aren't on here... Don't fret, we cover that in diligence, and I offer some [strategies here](#).

### 3.4 Shortlisting

Go through your potential list (should be roughly 25 names). Now, be honest about weaknesses. Sentimentality is the enemy of good judgment.

Document everything in a simple spreadsheet. When you find problems, note them, but don't auto-eliminate unless they're deal-breakers. As mentioned before, some issues can be fixed with different spellings, additional words, or slight modifications.

Target 12-15 names that feel genuinely viable. If you have fewer than 10, go back to Exploration. If you have more than 20, raise your standards.

## 4 Validation

### *Getting perspectives*

By now, maybe you've fallen for a few of your names. This is seductive. Dangerous. Your attachment means nothing. Yet. Market reality means everything.

It is time to test with people who don't care about your feelings.

Validation answers three questions: Do these names evoke the right feelings? Can real humans actually use them? Will they survive legal scrutiny?

#### 4.1 The Live Test: 8-Seconds

This is one of the more critical exercises and would advise most not to skip it, even if time is tight, as it gives a wider view from a less passionate audience.

- Make simple slides: big name, one-line description of your company, strip it back to black and white.
- Show these slides to your employees, customers, and friends for eight seconds — long enough to read, not long enough to overthink.
- For each slide, ask one question: *“What do you expect from a company named \_\_\_\_\_?”*
- Write down their exact first sentence. Don't paraphrase. Don't interpret. Don't help them find better words.
- Once you have gone through all of them, ask them to repeat the names back. Note which ones they stumble over or forget immediately.

Do this with 5-8 people per name. Mix ideal customers with intelligent outsiders. You want both domain expertise and a fresh perspective.

Look for patterns. Do people consistently get excited? Confused? Bored? Do they mention competitors you don't want to be compared to?

Most importantly, do their impressions align with your primary feelings and purpose? If you marked “Momentum” but everyone says “Feels expensive and fancy,” best to reassess.

#### 4.2 Stack Rank Polls Voting

Some people love getting quantitative feedback; they want to poll a big group of people and get their take. As someone who has run a fair number of these, I know there are ways to get useful results and less useful ones. Here is the format I recommend for polling.

- You can use any polling software like Google Forms or [Untitled.new](#), which has polling tools built in.
- Show each name and ask them to rate each name 1 (lowest) – 5 (highest).

- After voting on each, ask them to perform rank choice voting to stack all the names from “most interesting” to “least interesting.” Don’t define “interesting,” let them decide what it means.

Look for names that consistently rank in the top 3 across different people. Also watch for names that polarize—with some love, some hate. Polarization is often a good trait and certainly better than universal indifference.

Names that everyone forgets or ranks last should likely get eliminated immediately.

### 4.3 Deeper Diligence

Once you have a few favorites, it is important to evaluate them against viability. Your top performers need thorough vetting across several vectors:

#### 4.3.1 Trademark research

Start with a quick *knock-out* search in your relevant class (see [here](#)). I’ve found [TMView](#) to be a great tool for this. You can filter by classes, jurisdictions, and dig into detailed records to spot obvious conflicts.

It’s important to understand how trademarks work in the US: a trademark doesn’t mean you “own” a word outright. What you own is the exclusive right to use that mark in connection with specific goods or services, and only to the extent that it’s distinctive. On the flip side, you *can* call your company something very general (like “Energy” for a battery startup), but you won’t be able to stop competitors from also using that word. General or descriptive terms aren’t protectable in practice, because enforceability is the core of trademark law. If you can’t enforce it (read: sue people who are infringing), you don’t really have a trademark. Distinctive names (suggestive, arbitrary, or invented) are far easier to protect.

Once you’ve settled on a final candidate, I definitely recommend hiring counsel to run a comprehensive search. They’ll review federal, state, and common-law uses, then provide a legal opinion, typically rated **Green** (clear), **Yellow** (some risk), or **Red** (high conflict). From there, you decide whether the strength of the name outweighs any risk of challenge.

#### 4.3.2 Domain strategy

Look, don’t get me wrong, owning the [.com](#) for your name is *great* to have, but it is certainly not essential. Many companies launch with modifiers that fit naturally with the brand, prefixes like *get-*, *try-*, or *use-*, or suffixes like *-team* or *-hq*, and alternative TLDs such as [.net](#) (a personal favorite), [.ai](#), [.dev](#), or [.io](#) have become common in certain categories (tech, AI, SaaS). For many years, *Square* didn’t own [square.com](#) (which is owned by Japanese game maker *Square Enix*) and instead had a redirect to [squareup.com](#).

Further, acquiring premium domains and “real word” handles will likely cost six or seven figures and be brokered through opaque processes, adding friction to the experience. When you are starting out, unless your business depends heavily on direct-to-consumer online

traffic or extreme trust, don't sacrifice your seed capital for domain purity. I've included more on domain strategy [at the end of the guide](#).

Social handles follow a similar logic. For some categories, fashion, art, beauty, lifestyle—a perfect Instagram or TikTok handle may carry outsized weight. But for SaaS, B2B, or ecommerce, memorability of the brand itself matters more than an exact handle match. The web today isn't just direct URLs and profiles—it's about *owning the name in the mind of the consumer*. This is increasingly true on platforms like TikTok, where successful brands will run hundreds of handles, where the clean primary handle matters less and the content more.

#### 4.3.3 International/cultural review

If you plan to operate in multiple markets, always run a native speaker check. The two main risks are **(1)** pronunciation challenges that make the name hard to say or remember, and **(2)** unintended meanings, slang, or negative associations in local languages. Automated translation tools and online dictionaries often won't catch nuance. When in doubt, ask people from those cultures/countries directly. A quick review can prevent a name that works well in English from becoming confusing, unpronounceable, or embarrassing abroad. There are some great slang and culture dictionaries to support you in this.

#### 4.3.4 Phonetics Fast-Pass

Some quick sanity checks on visuals and voice:

- **The phone test:** Call five people. Speak the name over the phone. Ask them to spell it back, use it in a sentence, and guess what the company does. Names that consistently fail the phone test create customer service problems forever. Try to have Siri and other AI voice agents read it, which gives you a sense of possible errors.
- **Open vs. closed ending:** Vowel-end feels lighter (*Carta*), hard-stop feels punchy (*Ramp*). Match tone.
- **Homophones & mishear risk:** “*sight/site*,” “*phase/phase*.” Run the phone-spell test.
- **Ambiguity scan:** Any unintended rhymes, slang, or brand collisions?
- **Consonant clusters:** Limit to one cluster like *str* or *ndr*.
- **Look-alikes:** Avoid *l/1/ll*, *O/0*, *rn/m*, *vv/w* as these cause collisions in UI and all-caps.
- **Sibilants & plosives:** Too many *sh/zz* can hiss; *p/t/k/b/d/g* add punch, aim for balance.

#### 4.4 Mockups

Don't stop at reading the name on a list; see how it behaves in the real world. Drop it into a headline, an app icon, a social handle, or a product label. Write it in ALL CAPS, lowercase, and a few different fonts. Still legible and balanced? See how differently a word renders: *GOOGLE*, *Google*, *google*. The personality of a name can shift dramatically depending on context and typography. A strong name should feel flexible yet consistent across formats, from a splashy billboard to a tiny app icon.



#### 4.5 Future Proofing

It can be hard to anticipate how your project or business will grow, but it is a helpful screening exercise to test the name in various situations. Try pairing it with future product names, endings, and descriptors. Does it lend itself to a demonym (*Google* → *Googlers*)? Is there anything about it that screams right now (Two examples: in 2025, Meta's *Vibes* product arrives pretty stale, and anything riffing on *The Thing Company of Place* feels pretty uninspired and copycat).

—

Exit this stage with three to five finalists who passed each test. If you don't have three solid options, go back. Don't settle. The next decade depends on this choice.

## 5 Commitment

*Make the call, lock it in*

### 5.1 The Decision

Now comes the hardest part: *choosing*. When do you know you're done? Oftentimes, this is driven by other deadlines: incorporation, fundraising, launch, domains, etc. Ideally, you can avoid that, but real timelines aren't terrible. There are a lot of ways to decide. By following this process, you have the benefit of a solid foundation of what the name needs to accomplish (see outputs from step 1). With this, one person (ideally the CEO) can usually step away for a bit, pull together all the materials and options, reflect, and return to say, "*This is it.*" Honestly, if you can swing it, this is the optimal way.

#### 5.1 There are some methods to support this decision.

My favorite: write your top finalists in clean text (try different cases to see what looks best), then set each as your phone background for a few days. You'll see those words hundreds of times—every unlock, every glance at the time. This constant, low-pressure exposure reveals what conference room debates can't. You'll notice which name you get tired of seeing and which feels natural. Usually within 3-4 days, one option typically starts feeling obviously right.

But, if you'd like to run a more democratic process, here is what I recommend: set up a dedicated time to decide. Time-box the conversation. 45 minutes maximum. Longer meetings breed overthinking and committee paralysis. Keep the group small, and have only the decision-makers in the room. If someone can't live with the outcome, they need to be in the room. If they can live with it, they don't.

Walk through each name on the slides you made earlier. Hold a brief conversation where someone argues for it and someone argues against. If there are no takes to argue for it, it should be easy to cut. Have everyone vote (secret ballot) on their favorites. If it's tight, go to the golden rule: the CEO or ultimate decision-maker holds the final veto. Clarity always beats consensus. Someone has to live with this choice for 10 years—make sure it is the person who is going to be there. This is particularly important if you bring in consultants; you wouldn't let the doctor name your kid, would you?

#### User Evidence:

- Best quote from user testing that shows correct expectation-setting
- Ranking performance vs. other finalists
- Any concerns that emerged, and how significant they are

5.1

**Legal Status:**

- Counsel's assessment (Green/Yellow/Red with brief explanation)
- Trademark filing strategy and timeline
- Any risks and mitigation plans

**Domain & Social Strategy:**

- Exact domain availability and cost
- Social handle availability across major platforms
- Alternative domain strategy if needed

**International Considerations:**

- Any language/cultural issues discovered
- Pronunciation difficulty in key markets
- Translation or localization needs

**Future Flexibility:**

- How does this name work as you expand beyond the current product
- One concrete example of future expansion that it could accommodate
- Any limitations it might create

**The Case For:**

- Why this name wins (2-3 strongest arguments)
- What makes it better than the other finalists

**The Case Against:**

- Honest assessment of weaknesses
- What could go wrong
- Why you might regret this choice

5.2

**The Lock-in Process****Same Day Actions:**

1. **File trademark application** within 24 hours
2. **Purchase domains** or get in touch with a broker
3. **Secure social handles** across all major platforms
4. **Draft a quick name story** for internal communication (see Stewardship section)

**Why Same Day?** Doubt is the enemy of decision. The longer you wait, the more second-guessing creeps in. Make it official before buyer's remorse kicks in.

### 5.2.1 Handling Regret and Doubt

Naming always feels harder after the fact. The day you decide, it's exciting; the next morning, it can feel terrifying. That's normal, and if it is the case, here are some ways to remedy it.

The psychology is predictable: once you've committed, your brain starts hunting for problems. You notice how another company has a similar-sounding name. You wonder if it's too playful, too serious, too generic, too weird. You start second-guessing whether "that other option" might have been better. This isn't weakness; it's how decision-making works when the stakes feel high.

Remember a few truths:

- **You didn't pick at random.** You ran a process, weighed options, and landed here for good reasons. Trust the work you did.
- **No name is perfect.** Apple was "too simple." Google was "too silly." Amazon was "too long." The best names become great through use, not because they were flawless from day one.
- **The brand you build around it is what makes it powerful.** Names grow in meaning over time—they don't start with meaning baked in.
- **Every alternative you're now romanticizing had its own flaws.** The grass isn't actually greener; you've just forgotten why you eliminated those options.
- **Give it time before changing course.** Live with the name for at least a few weeks before seriously considering a change. Try it in real situations: customer calls, investor pitches, team meetings. Watch how it feels as it becomes familiar. Most founders who stick it out find their anxiety fades as the name starts to feel natural.
- **Get specific about your concerns.** Instead of "I hate it," ask yourself what exactly bothers you. Is it the sound? The meaning? How might others perceive it? Often, naming anxiety is really anxiety about the broader challenge of building a company. The name becomes a convenient target for deeper fears about market fit, competition, or success.

## 6 Go-Forward Stewardship

*What you name, you must own.*

Choosing a name is just the beginning. That moment of inspiration—the late-night scribble, the “aha” in a meeting, the word that suddenly felt inevitable—is only 20% of the journey. The other 80% is what happens next: the long, deliberate work of stewardship of the brand. The best names don’t arrive fully formed; they grow stronger through consistent use, clear storytelling, and careful protection.

Think of stewardship as tending a garden. You water it through repetition, prune it with guidelines, and protect it from weeds that confuse it. The brand requires attention, not once, but quarter after quarter, for as long as your company lives.

Every strong name also carries a founding myth. The story of how it came to be—the joke that stuck, the metaphor that lit up the room—becomes part of the brand’s DNA. Employees retell it, customers repeat it, and over time, it transforms from anecdote to lore. That story gives the name meaning far beyond its letters, and it anchors how people feel about your company.

From there, you build outward. Your parent brand becomes the foundation for product names, feature labels, and campaign themes. Each extension should feel systematic—a family resemblance rather than a pile of random words. The more consistent you are, the faster the brand compounds in recognition and trust.

Over time, equity accrues in the smallest details: the way your team owns the name (demonyms are fun, but keep them natural), the way it shows up in logos, the way partners and press write it. And when you expand into new markets, the same stewardship applies, checking how the name travels across languages, cultures, and pronunciation.

A name is not a one-time decision. Your job is to guide it, protect it, and give it stories worth telling. That’s how a good name becomes a great brand.

### 6.1 The Long Game

Names that hit can become magnetic. They shine just enough to spark imagination, yet remain simple enough to travel the world unburdened. They feel both familiar and surprising, the combination that our brains (and hearts) find irresistible.

Great names resonate across registers. They are felt as much as understood—emotional, visual, linguistic, cultural. On the surface, they are plain words, yet they carry hidden machinery, compressing stories and aspirations into something you can fit in your pocket.

- 6.1 And over time, great names deepen. Each repetition lays down another layer. A name gathers meaning the way a river gathers silt, slowly reshaping the landscape around it. *Nike* means victory not only by definition but by decades of triumph. *Google* means search because it delivered relentlessly. *Amazon* once puzzled; now it reads as the everything store.

This is the relief: you don't need the perfect name. Perfect names don't exist, only names that work for what you're building, for who you're serving, and for how boldly you stand behind them. You need one you'll use with conviction. The compounding of consistency and time will do the rest.



## A Additional Resources

A.1 [Onym.co](#) - one of the most comprehensive collections of naming resources on the web: dictionaries, guides, vetting resources, and more.

[Untitled.new](#) - the best AI naming generator on the web.

### A.2 Name Taxonomy

This name taxonomy offers an overview of types of names, as well as some names I feel are unique standouts from all different categories. Sometimes reviewing lists like this gives you some inspiration for your own naming.

#### A.2.1 **Descriptive: says what it is and does**

Descriptive names are exactly what they say on the tin. They tell you what they're going to give you or how you're going to get it. They're utilitarian tools, reliable as street signs, quickly guiding customers to exactly what they're looking for.

*Pros:* Immediately clear what you do, easy to understand

*Cons:* Impossible to own, hard to trademark, limits expansion, and commoditizes your offering

Descriptive names work when you're entering an established category and need to signal membership clearly. Law firms, medical practices, and local restaurants often benefit from literal description. But descriptive names have a ceiling—it is challenging to build mystique around “Cloud Storage Solutions Inc.” They optimize for the first conversation but handicap every conversation after.

**Initialisms & Acronyms:** pronounced or spelled out.

- AOL
- ASICS
- AT&T
- BMW
- NASA
- TBPB
- TCBY
- UNESCO

**Numbers / Symbols:** visual shorthand or pairing.

- 1Password
- 21st Century Fox
- 23andMe
- 3M
- 4chan
- 5-Hour Energy
- 7-Eleven
- 8 Sleep
- a16z
- A24
- Airbus A380

**Compound:** Link two relevant ideas together and make a name (see also: Portmanteau)

- AirPods
- BuzzFeed
- Citymapper
- Dropbox
- Facebook
- Land Rover
- LinkedIn
- OpenTable
- Paypal
- ProductHunt
- Quickbooks
- SeatGeek
- ServiceNow
- Snapchat
- SubZero
- TripAdvisor
- YouTube
- VitaminWater
- WhatsApp

**Descriptive Names** examples continued.

**Generic Descriptor:** says exactly what it is.

- Ace Hotel
- Airbus
- The Browser Company
- Christmas Tree Shops
- Cinnamon Toast Crunch
- Diapers.com
- Electric Boat
- General Motors
- Hotel Tonight
- Misc. Goods Company
- Paper (numerous companies)
- Pencil
- Scrubbing Bubbles
- Standard Hotel

**Prefix & Suffix Trends:**

- Airtable, Airbnb
- Barkbox, Birchbox
- Coinbase, Supabase
- Dollar Shave Club, SmileDirectClub
- Instagram, Instabase
- SpaceX, X.com
- The Browser Company, San Francisco Compute

**Synecdoche:** based on what it's made of.

- Blue Bottle
- Chainlink
- Glassdoor
- Inkling
- Milk Bar
- Steelcase

**Authoritative & Utilitarian:** sturdy, straightforward signal of function.

- Best Buy
- Bi-Rite
- Common Projects
- Goodwrench Service
- The Honest Company
- Madewell
- Toys R Us
- True Value Hardware
- Whole Foods

### A.2.2 **Experiential: conveys the experience of using it, the outcome, and the benefits**

What they are: Experiential names describe the emotional outcome, the benefit, or the experience rather than the product itself. They promise transformation, resonance, or a subtle shift in how customers perceive themselves.

*Pros:* Emotionally resonant, memorable, suggests benefits rather than features.

*Cons:* Can be too abstract, may not age well if your experience changes or product expands to new areas..

Experiential names tap into motivations rather than methods. People don't want “workplace communication software”—they want *Slack* in their day, breathing room in their schedule. They don't want “on-demand food”—they want *DoorDash*, something that shows how the product will feel.

These names work because people buy feelings, not features. *Slack* suggests ease and informality. *Uber* implies superiority and elevation. *Zoom* conveys speed and focus. The names promise emotional outcomes that transcend specific product capabilities.

**Emotional:** evokes a feeling or outcome.

- Audible
- Base Power
- Canopy
- London Fog
- Outdoor Voices
- Saturdays
- Seamless
- SoulCycle
- Tinder
- Wrangler
- ZipCar

**Sensory & Onomatopoeia:** driven by sound/phonetics or mouthfeel.

- Buzzfeed
- Coca-Cola
- Gusto
- Meow Mix
- Ring
- SONOS
- TikTok
- Twitter
- Whoop
- Zapier

**Action & Statements:** verb-driven, value, or declarative phrases, solution-oriented.

- & Other Stories
- Forever 21
- I Can't Believe It's Not Butter!
- iHeartRadio
- Into the Gloss
- Managed by Q
- Seamless
- Seven for all Mankind
- The Art of Shaving
- The Boring Company
- Turbo Tax
- Zoom

**Edge & Attitude:** bold, playful, or specific stance.

- Mr. Clean
- Red Bull
- Shazam
- Speedo
- Obey
- Vice
- Virgin

### A.2.3 **Evocative: bring to mind a specific feeling or image**

What they are: Evocative names borrow common words and transplant them into surprising new contexts, leveraging existing mental imagery and emotional associations to forge immediate connections.

*Pros:* Familiar yet surprising, metaphorically rich, memorable.

*Cons:* Risk of confusion, may seem forced if the connection is weak.

Evocative names hijack existing neural pathways. You already know what an apple is—familiar, organic, approachable, something you'd want in your kitchen rather than fear in your basement. Applying it to computers in 1976 created cognitive resonance: technology that's human-centered instead of machine-centered.

*Square* suggests fair dealing, geometric precision, things fitting together perfectly. *Nest* implies learning your patterns and keeping you comfortable. *Stripe* represents the most basic design element—clean, functional, universal.

The best evocative names feel inevitable once you understand them, but surprising before you do. They create a bridge between the familiar and the new, making complex technology feel accessible and understandable.

**Metaphors:** borrow meaning by association.

- Acorns
- Alphabet
- Amazon
- Beyond Meat
- Bridge
- Lemonade
- Safari
- Nest
- Oyster
- Robinhood
- Swarm

**Mythological:** Borrowing from history or legendary characters.

- Alibaba
- Casper
- Godiva
- Kryptonite
- Mercury
- Nike
- Pandora
- Robinhood
- Ursa Major
- Yeti

**Natural World:** the natural world, animals, legends.

- Arc'teryx
- Caterpillar
- Oyster
- Reebok
- Tide

**Facet:** Borrows an individual component or detail of an object associated with the business.

- Capsule
- Hue
- Medium
- Segment
- Stripe
- Threads

**Suggestive:** hints at benefit without stating it directly.

- Calm
- Caviar
- Notion
- Street Easy
- Swarm
- Swiffer
- Twitter
- Tinder

A.2.4 **Invented: created from scratch**

Invented names are newly minted words, deliberately crafted often from existing language or inspiration that sets your company in its category. Initially empty, they hold the potential to become powerful symbols—but only after substantial investment and development.

*Pros:* Completely ownable, unlimited meaning potential, strong trademark position

*Cons:* Can often sound like gibberish until it doesn't, requires investment to build meaning

Invented names work best when you're creating a new category or have the marketing budget to define the word. George Eastman invented Kodak because he wanted a word that was easy to say in any language and impossible to mispronounce. Google meant nothing in 1997; by 2025, it's synonymous with search, knowledge, and technological capability.

The challenge with invented names is the initial hurdle—they sound like nonsense until they accumulate meaning. But once they cross that threshold, they become incredibly powerful because they mean exactly what you want them to mean.

**Neologism / Coined / Derived:** newly minted or familiar-but-new.

- Arc'teryx
- Asprin
- Duolingo
- Expedia
- Frigidaire
- Glossier
- Google
- Hulu
- IDEO
- Kleenex
- Kodak
- Nespresso
- Panera
- Rogaine
- Shopify
- Spotify
- Thinx
- Venmo
- Verizon
- Viagra
- Withings
- Xerox
- Zappos
- Zippo
- Zynga

**Spelling Play:** misspell/add/change/drop letters; mimetics; unusual pronunciation.

- Canva
- Flickr
- Krispy Kreme
- Lyft
- Tumblr
- Vimeo

**Domain-dictated:** Using domain availability and domain hacks to drive naming.

- Art.sy
- Bit.ly
- Calm.com
- Clara.ai
- Jot.ly
- Hotels.com
- Musical.ly

**Special Wrongness**

- Band of Outsiders
- Browser Company of New York
- Electric Objects
- Impossible Foods
- Liquid Death
- Nothing
- Teenage Engineering

A.2.5 **Identity: who we are, where we come from**

Identity names are rooted in origin — who created the company, where it comes from, or what cultural lineage it draws upon. They project a sense of self and authorship, offering customers an anchor in a world of abstraction. These names tell you something about the people, place, or heritage behind them.

*Pros:* Personal, human, rooted in story; conveys authenticity and legacy.

*Cons:* Can feel limited if the company evolves beyond its founder, geography, or origin story; harder to globalize if tied to a specific culture or language.

Identity names are built on the idea that provenance is power. They draw legitimacy from real people (*Hewlett-Packard, Ralph Lauren*), real places (*Patagonia, Tom's of Maine*), or real traditions (*Land O'Lakes, Old Spice*). Even when fictionalized — *Warby Parker, Tommy Bahama*, they suggest personality and character.

This category works best when who you are or where you come from *is the story*. These names signal craft, care, and credibility—a face, a map, or a heritage you can trace. As industries become more anonymous and automated, identity names remind people that there are humans and histories behind the brand.

**People:** Derived from a person or founder.

- Adidas
- Baby Ruth
- Ben & Jerry's
- Burt's Bees
- Dell
- Dior
- Dr. Bronner's
- Ferrari
- Hewlett-Packard
- J.P. Morgan
- Ralph Lauren
- The Trump Organization
- Wendy's
- Yeezy
- Alexa
- Dr. Pepper
- Good Uncle
- Harry's
- Oscar
- Siri
- Tesla Motors
- Tommy Bahama
- Warby Parker

**Place:** Tied to a location or origin.

- America Online
- Boston Market
- Cisco
- Hudson Bay Company
- Baxter of California
- Malibu Rum
- Patagonia
- Tom's of Maine

**Heritage & Legacy:** History, tradition, or cultural/linguistic roots.

- Liberty Mutual
- Old Navy
- Old Spice
- Royal Enfield
- Southern Comfort

**Culture & Language:** Culturally Integrated; Foreign (sounding); Latin

- Clinique
- Glacéau
- Häagen-Dazs
- Le Labo
- Moncler
- Novartis
- Uber



## A.3

## Endings and Suffixes

It can often be useful to pair a more generic word with a descriptive or evocative ending. They can be particularly helpful with domain and trademark availability. Tonally, the right suffix can instantly signal scale, industry, or personality. Some endings make a company sound institutional (“Group,” “Holdings”), others make it feel creative (“Studio,” “Collective”), and some are purely functional (“Labs,” “Technologies”). I’ve compiled a set of these here as flexible building blocks to help shape how a name is received.

## Corporate / Institutional

- Partners
- Group
- Associates
- Alliance
- Holdings
- Enterprise

## Enterprises

- Company / Co.
- Corp / Inc / Ltd
- PLC
- Trust
- International
- Worldwide / Global

## Financial / Investment

- Capital
- Capital Partners
- Fund
- Ventures
- Advisors
- Asset Management
- Partners Group
- Management
- Syndicate

## Professional Services

- Consulting
- Consulting Group
- Solutions
- Services
- Development
- Office
- Bureau
- Research
- Institute

## Creative

- Collective
- Studio
- Atelier
- Works / Works Co.
- Productions
- Guild
- Endeavours

## Scientific / Technical

- Tech/Technologies/Technologic
- Analytics
- Data
- Dynamics
- Robotics
- Systems
- Lab / Labs
- Scientific
- Sciences
- Innovations

## Medical / Wellness

- Medical
- Pharmacy
- Hospital
- Care
- Clinic
- Wellness
- Life
- Specialties

## Industrial / Supply

- Industrial
- Industries
- Logistics
- Supply
- Foundry
- Properties

## Retail / Consumer

- Apparel
- Outfitters
- Provisions
- Goods
- Mercantile
- Market
- House

## Heritage / Family-Style

- & Sons / & Daughters
- Brothers / Sisters
- Heritage
- Prestige
- House of
- Associates

## A.4

## Domain Tricks &amp; Tips

Domain names rarely line up perfectly with the brand name, especially for newer companies. The trick is to explore short forms, creative extensions, and wordplay that still feel natural. In general, I think most startup founders overvalue a .com in the very early going. It is not going to land you that large enterprise customer or cause millions of consumers to flock to your site. It will lend legitimacy to what you are building, yes, and it is certainly *cool*, but chances are it is not the silver bullet you may wish it to be.

Below is an example using a sample name *Ultraviolet*, showing how variations across TLDs, abbreviations, and modifiers can unlock good options even when the exact .com isn't available. Here's a process to unlock a better domain:

## Exact Match

- Of course, try the full name in .com first. If unavailable, look at .net, .co, .io, .ai, .so
- *Notes:*
  - *When possible, I prefer more specific TLDs than .co (particularly .ai or .dev) as they signal focus, whereas .co predominantly reads as a fallback when .com isn't available.*
  - *For whatever reason, .net is particularly out of fashion, but I don't understand why. It has early internet credentials, it looks great with all kinds of words, and tends to be more affordable than other options.*

## Industry or Category Cues

- Use endings tied to your market or niche: Tech: .io, .ai, .tech, .cloud; Creative: .studio, .art; Finance: .vc, .capital, .fund.

## Geographic

- Anchor to place if relevant: .nyc, .ca, .us, .fr.

## Modifiers

- Sometimes having the .com is best.
- Add small words before or after your company name.
- Action-oriented: **getname.com**, **tryname.com**, **joinname.com**, **helloname.com**
- Add **namelabs.com**, **namehq.com**, or **nameapp.com** to abbreviations.
- Embracing the collective: **wearename.com**, **teamname.com**, **madebyname.com**.

## Word Variants

- Drop vowels, tweak spelling, or abbreviations.
- Add or remove a character or try a variation: **namee.com**
- Repeat the word: **namename.com**

## 7. Playful / Domain Hacks

- Split the word across the TLD.
- Use rare TLDs for clever endings: .one, .run, .world, .global.



**How to Name Anything in an Afternoon**  
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Willem Van Lancker

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