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SMALL BUSINESS

Running the Show Name That Firm

What should you call your business?

It's more important than you may think.

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Selecting a name is one of the most important decisions a company will ever make. But a lot of small businesses don't give it nearly enough thought.

When Damien Wolf christened his branding and design business, for example, he did what a lot of professional-services firms do: He slapped his own last name on the office door.

The trouble was, Wolf Creative wasn't the only design firm in Minneapolis with Wolf in the name. It wasn't even the only one in the building. What's more, Mr. Wolf later discovered that the name made some people think the company was strictly an ad agency or a Web developer. And many clients wrongly assumed that Mr. Wolf would handle their accounts exclusively himself. Clearly, a better name was needed -- and Mr. Wolf ultimately found one.

There's so much riding on a company's name. It has to stand out, and be easy to remember and look up. And the pitfalls are many. To name a few, in addition to the headaches Mr. Wolf encountered, a bad name can fail to engage customers, or become outdated as the company grows and adds products and services.

But many small companies don't understand the basics of choosing a good name. They put little thought into the process, says Peter Montoya, president of a financial-services marketing firm in Tustin, Calif., and end up settling on names that are meaningful to them but not clients. Mr. Montoya named his business after himself: Peter Montoya Inc., which is perfectly appropriate in some fields, he says, particularly professional services. In such industries, people themselves are brands with their own distinct qualities and skills, Mr. Montoya says.

Some companies hire professionals, such as branding consultants, and pay them \$15,000 and more to help find a name and develop an overall company brand. Others save money by coming up with their own monikers in brainstorming sessions with colleagues and family, or office-wide naming parties. Except for party costs, these companies wind up paying only for a trademark search, sometimes about \$1,000, to determine whether a name is already registered.

It's not necessary to spend a lot to come up with the right name. But it is necessary to follow some guidelines. Here are a few gleaned from interviews with companies and naming experts:

FIND THE UNIQUE

The first step is usually pinpointing the company's unique value or service. Companies should ask themselves, "What are you doing to bring value to potential customers and what's your vision?" says Scott Kuehl, president of BrandResolve LLC, a St. Cloud, Minn., brand-consulting firm.

Mr. Wolf decided that since his business is helping other businesses grow, that was what his company's name should reflect. So, after a search that lasted three months, Wolf Creative became OrangeSeed Design.

People always ask where the name comes from, Mr. Wolf says, which is just what he wants. "It helps us engage with clients on a new level," he says, by telling them a story. Mr. Wolf used to eat oranges at the office after running, he explains, and once tossed the seeds into a flowerpot. The seeds sprouted weeks later, to his surprise, and out of this grew a vision of an office in which orange trees blossomed during the winter. The image became a metaphor for the firm's creative efforts.

"We plant a seed and do anything we can to make it grow," says Mr. Wolf, who has taken on a partner since developing the new name. "It just represented the continual work it takes to grow a small business."

Sometimes, an idea for a business can be so unique that the name comes easily. Brothers Tariq and Kamran Farid owned four flower shops in Connecticut when they decided to start a business selling fruit baskets designed to look like flower arrangements.

In a day, Tariq Farid came up with a short list of names that he discussed with his employees. None seemed quite right. Then he asked the group to help him describe the product. But it was his own description that proved a hit.

Edible Arrangements International Inc., Wallingford, Conn., has now been in business for roughly a decade and is an

international franchiser with \$195 million in revenue. Tariq Farid is chief executive and Kamran Farid is chief operating officer.

BUT DON'T BE OBSCURE

Hugh Martin, CEO of Pacific Biosciences of California Inc., Menlo Park, Calif., says changing his company's former name -- Nanofluidics -- was among his first critical decisions. It sounded like the company was involved in the study of fluids, Mr. Martin says, while it's actually working on technology to make it easier to map a person's DNA sequence. Moreover, he says, scientists and suppliers constantly butchered the name, calling it "Nanofoldics," for example, and "Nanofluids." Everywhere he went, Mr. Martin says, he had to spend two minutes "trying to get someone to learn how to spell our name."

To find a new one, the company tapped its own talent. It invited employees to three after-work "naming parties" that cost about \$200 per night. Guests ate pizza, sipped pinot noir and blurted out names. "For the first hour, you get a lot of good ideas, and then it trails off," Mr. Martin observes.

A shrinking number of available domain names prolonged the process. Whenever a possibility emerged, an employee checked online to see whether the domain was available. At the third party, Mr. Martin mentioned the word "Pacific" and Stephen Turner, the company's founder and chief technology officer, immediately blurted "Biosciences." The domain for the combined names was available, so Pacific Biosciences was born.

Mr. Martin says the new name works on several levels: It associates the company with a hub of biotechnology on the West Coast, and it suggests broadly what the company does while remaining vague enough to accommodate the business as it grows and adds products and services.

AVOID THE MUNDANE

Indeed, companies trying to create a unique brand sometimes err by choosing a name that describes too closely what they do. "When a company tries to describe its services, it usually makes the company sound generic," says Mr. Montoya. The names of many successful companies don't describe what they do, he says.

Names that describe a company also require a greater investment to promote the name in the marketplace, says Steven Winokur, CEO and founder of Turning Point Strategies, an Atlanta-based branding consultancy. "The only way I know how to do that is through repetition," he says. "You have to get people to see it many times." Josh Robbins, managing partner of Geckotech LLC, a Chicago-based VOIP service provider, says he and his wife, Ramie, ruled out telephone and communications terminology as they brainstormed for a name for his company. He says he wanted a name to convey a unique and fun approach to an otherwise dry and complicated technology.

It was the 1987 movie "Wall Street" that ultimately inspired the name of his company, Mr. Robbins says. It's his favorite movie, he explains, and the name of Gordon Gekko, the callous Wall Street titan played by Michael Douglas, had a better ring than other names in the movie. So he took the name, changed the spelling slightly, and added "tech" to the end.

Mr. Robbins says he changed the spelling because he didn't want anyone to associate his company with the "greed is good" mentality famously expressed by the Gekko character, or even to think there was a connection with the movie. The association with gecko lizards, he adds, was just a bit of good luck. The company adopted a lizard as its logo, and Mr. Robbins says people's reactions show the name has helped convey the company's mission to combine light-heartedness with professionalism.

GET REACTIONS

The best way to gauge the effectiveness of a small-business name is to find out how it resonates with people outside the company. It's an "ask people" question, says BrandResolve's Mr. Kuehl.

If people respond using phrases that echo the company's mission, that's good, he says. A catering company whose goal is to create irresistible, sinfully delicious food, for example, would know a name was right if people said it made them think of food that is "wicked good" or "devilishly tasty," he says.

When Mr. Wolf was researching a new name for his company, he asked 10 customers and 10 vendors about their perceptions of its original name and services. Only a few correctly knew it was a generalized design firm. That led him to include "Design" in the new name, to better reflect the range of services that OrangeSeed Design offers, from initial brand development to creating brochures and sales-support materials.

Mr. Montoya says that people also should find a name memorable and easy to look up, either in phone listings or on the Web. The easier a name is to remember, the more it will benefit from referrals, he says. Similarly, a name that's hard to spell makes a company hard to find.

David Placek, president and founder of Lexicon Branding Inc. in Sausalito, Calif., notes: "You want to make people think a little bit -- not a lot. But if we don't make them think at all, they will walk past."

DOMAIN DO'S AND DON'TS



Josh Robbins of Geckotech.

Check on the availability of a domain name, as Pacific Biosciences did, before making a final decision. An Internet domain name should be closely related to the company's name and make sense to users, says Mr. Winokur, who recalls the difficulties at his earlier design firm, Desert Moon Interactive, when he settled on www.Dm-I.com⁵. People just couldn't remember it, he says, and had difficulty typing it both as a Web and email address.

Mr. Winokur advises settling on three to five finalists for company names, with potential domain names for each, then choosing the best combination. "You may have to pick the second-best name because the domain-name options for the first choice are not good," he says.

Mr. Placek, however, cautions against sacrificing an effective name if the domain isn't available. He notes that many people surfing the Web don't look for corporate Web sites by remembering a domain name. Instead, he says, they type the company's name into Google, and then click on a link that is listed.

"Companies shouldn't sacrifice memorability and creativity [in a name] just to have a URL," he says