

JUNE 29, 2010, 2:05 P.M. ET

And Now, the Tricky Part: Naming Your Business

By [EMILY MALTBY](#)

Jake Schwarz, an attorney, spent months trying to settle on a name for his law firm.

He considered using the founders' names, as many law firms do, but "Iida, Schwarz and Prenton" was awkward to spell and pronounce. He contemplated "Lighthouse Law Group" and "Summit Legal Partners" but thought they sounded like motivational posters. Some of the more promising names he mulled were "Consilium" and "Acuity Law Group," but he realized that half his clients, based in Japan, would struggle with the phonetics.

"Literally, I was banging my head against the wall," Mr. Schwarz recalls.

As many entrepreneurs can attest, deciding on a name for a new business is no easy task. One with pizzazz can set a new company apart; one that misses the mark can make a burgeoning start-up fall flat.

[View Full Image](#)



mono

Owners of the advertising agency Mono used a short and simple name. Read how they and other business owners came up with their name in the photo gallery at bottom.

The problem, marketing and branding experts agree, is that there is no magic bullet to picking the best name. Business monikers can run the gamut, from straightforward names that summarize the company's offerings—say, General Motors Co.—to so-called "empty-vessel" names that have no apparent association to the product or service, until they create their own meaning over time— think, [Yahoo!](#) Inc.

For a small company with tight resources, a safe bet is to pick a name that's neither boring nor obscure. "If your marketing dollars are limited, opt for a more descriptive or suggestive name," says Nina Beckhardt, president and creative director of The Naming Group LLC in New York

The process can require some brainstorming. (Please read how entrepreneurs came up with their business names in gallery at bottom.) Alexandra Watkins, chief innovation officer at Eat My Words, a San Francisco firm that generates names and taglines for businesses, suggests using glossaries, baby name lists and rhyming dictionaries. She also encourages associative thinking, such as jotting down a list of loosely related terms or phrases that conjure up your concept. "If you want to name a clothing line, think of [names of] hip places, like London night clubs," she says. "If it's a new energy drink, look up the names of race horses."

Experts don't recommend using the entrepreneur's name in most cases, as it's typically not descriptive and can limit future endeavors, such as a merger with another firm. It can also be problematic for the next owner, if the business is successful enough to sell or even pass on to the next generation.

Is it Trademarked?

All too often, a business owner will fall in love with a name that has already been legally trademarked.

Diane Dassow was set on the name Bridging Generations for her personal historian business in Lombard, Ill. But one day, after having announced the launch of her business in her local paper, Ms. Dassow discovered through a [Google](#) search that a funeral home in Pennsylvania was using the name to market its services. Under the guidance of legal counsel, she checked to see if the name was already registered with the U.S. Patent and Trademark office. It was.

"I was feeling frustrated, but once I got over the shock, I started making more lists," she says. Several months later, in September 2004, Ms. Dassow finally settled on Binding Legacies, and trademarked it. (See related story, [What's in a Name? Sometimes, a Lawsuit](#))

Jeb Brooks and his family, for instance, are now running the sales training firm that his father started in Greensboro, N.C., some 30 years ago. His late dad named the firm after himself, William T. Brooks & Associates and later changed it to The Brooks Group. But the name says little about the company's mission – in fact, Mr. Brooks says he has to repeat the word "sales" at least three times when pitching new clients. He'd like a catchier name, but won't likely change it "because we'd lose the recognition in our industry."

One of the least effective ways to come up with a name is to "crowd source" on sites set up for that purpose, or ask too many customers, clients or even family and friends for their ideas. Both Ms. Watkins and Ms. Beckhardt caution against that strategy, arguing that too many chefs in the kitchen can clutter the process.

In the end, the most successful names are the ones that are easy to say and spell, and summon an image or meaning that can last as the business grows, the experts say. Once you've narrowed the field, make sure to test the candidates out in a real-life setting. Ms. Beckhardt suggests pretending to answer the phone using the name, and typing it as a url. "HomesExchange.com could be HomeSexChange.com," she warns. "Take those precautions and get comfortable with it because you'll have to live with it for a long time."

For attorney Mr. Schwarz, the months of struggling to come up with a name for his law firm finally came to an end when he stumbled upon inspiration in—of all places—the shower. As he reached for his shaving cream, the name on the label, Pacific Shaving Company, reminded him that his clients in Japan and the U.S.'s West Coast shared a common ocean border.

Mr. Schwarz eventually named his firm Pacific Crest Law Partners in 2008. "The name is perfect for what we're doing," he says.

Copyright 2009 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved