

STAMFORD, Conn. ([TheStreet](#)) -- Starting a company can be a life-consuming venture for entrepreneurs, so it's understandable that they're often tempted to name their companies after something personal -- a family pet, a street name, the girl who turned them down for prom. But naming a company is not like naming a garage band.

"Brand names are under the goodwill line of your balance sheet," says Lisa Singer, president and creative director of **Namebase**, a branding company in Stamford, Conn.

In fact, it's a big enough deal that branding companies charge up to \$150,000 for a [corporate](#) appellation. Here are some tips of the trade from some of the nation's professional namers.

### 1. Think about the message you're sending

Ask yourself where you see your [business](#) in five years. "We ask clients, 'What do you think will come out of this company or product line long-term?'" says Singer.

The same goes for a [company's](#) products. "It's not just the fact that we're naming the product," says Clayton Tolley, chief executive officer of **Addison Whitney**, the Charlotte, N.C., company responsible for product names such as "Outlook" for **Microsoft**([MSFT Quote](#)) and "Kissables" for **Hershey**([HSY Quote](#)). "We also have to look at how the name is going to be affiliated with the corporate brand."

When **General Motors** hired Addison Whitney to develop a name for a new line of SUVs, the company noticed that competing vehicles featured names that highlight their ability to navigate rough terrain, such as the Ford Explorer, the **Nissan**([NSANY Quote](#)) Pathfinder and the **Toyota**([TM Quote](#))Highlander. "But Cadillac is not about trying to get there," Tolley says. "You've already arrived when you're in a Cadillac."

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Addison Whitney came up with the name "Escalade," a cross between "escalate," which connotes achievement, and "glade." "The 'glade' part means I'm in a safe, sound environment," Tolley says.

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**2. Don't pigeonhole**

Entrepreneurs are often science-minded folk who choose names that describe what a company does at the time. "The engineers want numbers and letters," says Namebase's Singer. "They want a descriptive name, descriptive of the technology."

A company founded as "Video54" in 2004 changed its name to "Ruckus Wireless" in 2005. The original moniker was an engineer's take on the dance club Studio 54, with "Video" referring to the company's initial focus on video services for wireless networks. The "54" represented the top speed of WiFi networks at the time, 54 megabits per second. But the name hampered the company's prospects for expansion into new product lines and faster technology. "Ruckus," on the other hand, generally reflects what the company hopes to cause in the market.

**Apple** used to be called "Apple Computer," but it dropped "computer" from its name three years ago, boosting its chances for world domination.

And when Namebase came up with the name "Picture Maker," the self-service photo kiosks offered by **Eastman Kodak**([EK Quote](#)), it deliberately avoided terms such as "digital," "print" or even "photo." "Had we named it something related to the technology, the name wouldn't be extendable," Singer says.

**3. Avoid meaningless strings of letters**

Yes, there's a chance that your company could become the next **IBM**([IBM Quote](#)) or **CVS**([CVS Quote](#)). But, in general, it's a bad idea to choose a string of initials, unless they form a pronounceable acronym like **Alcoa**([AA Quote](#)), which stands for Aluminum Company of America.

"We did a lot of work with a company that was called "NBT Technology," and literally, in their minds, it meant 'Next Best Thing,'" says Danny Altman, CEO of **A Hundred Monkeys**, a branding company in Mill Valley, Calif. "But it was just a string of initials. It didn't mean anything, and it didn't distinguish them from the competition." The company ended up changing its name to "Riverbed," reflecting both support (the bed) and movement (the river), not to mention the founders' fondness for flyfishing.

**4. Do some research**

Before selecting a moniker, check for similar names through the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. But don't stop there. Look for other ways the words have been used to avoid unintended connotations. The "CB3000" is the name of a wireless client bridge from **Motorola** ([MOT Quote](#)), but it's also the name of a male chastity belt from **A.L. Enterprises**.

"We have a client who was going to use a brand name that turned out to be a contraceptive in Europe, and they didn't find it on the trademark list," says Singer. "That's why you hire naming companies."

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If you can't afford a naming company, Tolley suggests approaching the marketing or linguistics department graduate students to do some pro-bono research in exchange for real-world experience.

**5. Consider the logo and the sound**

It's a good idea to run a name by a graphic designer to gauge a memorable logo, such as the stylized Golden Gate Bridge emblem that was named for San Francisco.

Many branding companies employ linguists, who analyze names for obstruents and sonorants and their potential effects on the psyche. They also consider whether customers in other countries will be able to pronounce the names.

"A 'puh' is explosive and a 'k' is explosive, and they're very positive sounding," Singer says. "A 'guh' would be a sound to avoid; it has a negative dragging down sound."

Not everyone adheres to the scientific approach.

"We look for the poetry of words, how much electricity they have," says A Hundred Monkeys' Altman. "There are people who will tell you that you need a name that begins with a hard consonant and this and that. There are a lot of people who are rule driven. We are not rule driven."

-- Reported by Carmen Nobel in Boston.

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