



# Be different

The benefits of a blank  
canvas naming strategy

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# Too difficult. Unoriginal. Hard to remember.

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These are the words that no company wants to hear about their latest brand name. This is especially true in the pharmaceutical industry, where the name of a drug is crucial to its approval and success. Pharmaceutical companies already face many obstacles to getting brand name approval.

First, the name must get approval by regulatory bodies such as the FDA and EMA, which is proving more difficult every year. Not only does the name need to be significantly different from drug names already in the market, but it also needs to be devoid of letter strings that would wrongly insinuate a specific molecular structure or chemical compound. The FDA will also scrutinize a name that is too promotional in nature, because it is too over promising. Even when a proposed drug name manages to get through all the regulatory obstacles, it still needs to pass from a legal trademark perspective. The US Patents and Trademark Office (USPTO) designate class 5 for pharmaceuticals and preparation for medical or veterinary purposes, which currently contains over 140,000 active trademarks.

Even if the company manages to navigate both FDA and legal issues of the name, there is still a significant marketing concern: **Will our name stand out against competitors? Will it be too difficult to pronounce?** All of these are crucial questions to ask while deciding on the naming strategy.

# So how does a drug name avoid being “too difficult,” “unoriginal,” and “hard to remember”?

Using a blank canvas naming strategy can address all of the concerns above. Blank canvas names, also known as empty vessel names, are simply crafted names devoid of overt meaning. Blank canvas names have the following advantages:

- **They are typically shorter in length and easier to say**
- **They tend to use look and tone to tell a story**
- **They roll off the tongue more comfortably and are stickier to the memory**
- **They offer a breath of fresh air to a very crowded therapeutic space.**

These key benefits often get overlooked for fear of having a meaningless name. While a blank canvas naming strategy can sound abstract, there are times when it can be the right plan to differentiate in the market. Below we explore how a blank canvas naming strategy can lead to a more successful brand name.

# Blank canvas names tend to be short and more natural to say.

A blank canvas naming strategy allows for the freedom to be short and simple. There's no need to cram specific word parts to create a name that becomes complex and difficult. By taking a blank canvas approach, the focus gets shifted onto the ease of pronunciation and the overall look and feel of the name. These names also tend to utilize an easy to read structure by using intuitive consonant pairs or by alternating between vowels and consonants. While blank canvas names are devoid of meaning by nature, the simple look and feel of the name can still tell a great story.

An example of this is Lialda. Lialda, owned by Shire, is a treatment for Ulcerative Colitis (UC). Looking at Lialda, there are no overt meanings that come to mind. However, it easily rolls off the tongue and can evoke a feeling of soothing and balance, which certainly appeals to the UC market. It is also interesting to note that most of the UC market utilize "asa," "col," or "uc" to connect to more scientific and descriptive attributes of the treatment. In comparison, Lialda looks and sounds short and different makes it more memorable. Sometimes the way the name looks and sounds can still accomplish evoking a positive feeling even when the name itself cannot connect to a specific attribute.

# Blank canvas names tend to be less risky and offer differentiation.

Blank canvas names can more easily clear regulatory and legal hurdles while still standing out in the market. The pharmaceutical naming process is rigorous because there are both legal and regulatory obstacles to overcome. These obstacles make it very difficult to get a name approved, let alone to get approval for a name that is based around a specific word or attribute. Timing plays a crucial role in this process, especially for drugs with novel MOAs. If a competitor is further down the pipeline and has an asset with a similar MOA, then they are more likely to get names approved that capitalize on that MOA. This is undoubtedly the case for Opdivo. Opdivo, owned by Bristol-Myers Squibb, claims the spot for being a PD-1 inhibitor that truly distinguishes itself in the market with its name. Now if any other company tries to submit a name with “pdi” in the same oncology space, they will immediately run into conflicts with the Opdivo trademark. Given this frantic race to the finish line, a blank canvas naming strategy can give peace of mind and a refreshing way to differentiate.

## How to decide if a blank canvas name is right for you

To decide if a blank canvas name is right for you, you need to ask the following questions:

- **Does the asset have a highly unique MOA that should be highlighted?**
- **Does the asset have a proven function benefit that stands out from the competition?**
- **Is there an emotional benefit or image that you feel that this asset embodies?**

If you’ve answered no to the questions above, then a blank canvas name is likely to help the asset stand out in a crowded space and can be used to be memorable. When there is a possible MOA, functional or emotional story that the asset can tell, then having a meaningful name could be the best strategy to use.

# In closing, a blank canvas naming strategy provides an excellent opportunity to be memorable in the market as well as compliant and less risky.

However, it is important to note that no naming strategy can make a brand successful by itself; every name, especially blank canvas, needs to have strong marketing power behind it to help bring life to the brand as a top of mind treatment. There will also be times when a naming strategy that revolves around emotional and scientific attributes will make more sense than blank canvas. Finally, every name will inherently have some risk, which is why it is crucial to hire a firm that can thoroughly pre-screen name candidates and provide in-depth guidance on the naming strategy.

At Addison Whitney, we pride ourselves in our thorough, unparalleled VETT™ screening process that will help companies to only consider the name candidates with the best chance of approval. We also encourage exploration of multiple naming strategies, including blank canvas, and we guide our clients through prioritizing key attributes with our proprietary Brand Compass. While a name can't do everything, it is certainly important to be strategic about the naming process, and Addison Whitney is the perfect partner to help find your ideal naming strategy.



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