

# My name is Frank.

How to create a company name that doesn't suck.

# Introduction

We've been naming companies for 17 years. Startups, legacy brands, sub-brands, consumer and business brands - in all categories. Over that time we've developed a framework that yields great names that actually work.

This deck is an outline of that framework. It's presented in chronological order and can be used as a step by step guide.

Use this if you're:

- A founder or marketer naming a new company
- A strategist needing a process for client work
- A creative looking to level-up their naming game

Write a plan BEFORE you start coming up with nonsensical names.

Start by taking an inventory of your category norms. Your sector will likely have a naming convention. If you want your name and brand to align with the sector, stay on convention. If you want to stand out, go in a different direction than your peers. List your top 10 competitors and identify their name styles.

Naming conventions include:

- Acronyms (IBM + KPMG)
- Descriptive (Home Depot + General Electric)
- Invented (Google + Verizon)
- Mythological (Nike + Oracle)
- Personality (Wendy's + Tesla)

# Learn the conventions.

Naming conventions come with positive and negative attributes. To make a good decision on which to adopt, research the implications **first**. Some examples:

## Acronyms-

- **Brevity and Simplicity:** Turn long or complex company names into something short, simple, and easier to communicate or remember. For instance, “IBM” is much snappier than “International Business Machines”.
- **Easier Global Adoption:** Acronyms can make brand names easier to say and use in different languages or regions, sidestepping translation issues or linguistic challenges.
- **Low Emotional Impact:** Acronyms rarely evoke emotion or convey meaning by themselves, potentially weakening brand resonance or making the company less memorable compared to descriptive or unique names.
- **Confusion and Alienation:** Customers may not know what the acronym means, leading to confusion or even alienation, especially if the acronym does not represent something meaningful to the audience.
- **Brand Equity Loss:** Overuse of acronyms may erode brand heritage, distancing the business from its original story or mission.
- **Difficult Trademarking:** Securing exclusive rights to an acronym—particularly if it overlaps with common words or other brands—can be challenging.
- **Requires Investment:** Acronyms often need greater marketing effort and time to build awareness and associations around the abbreviated name, especially for startups or lesser-known firms.

## Descriptive Names -

- **Instant Clarity:** Descriptive names quickly communicate what your company does, sells, or stands for. Examples: “General Motors,” “PayPal,” or “The Home Depot.”
- **Brand Credibility:** Customers can immediately recognize your business category, reducing uncertainty and fostering trust—especially important for new or lesser-known companies.
- **SEO and Discoverability:** Descriptive names can improve online search visibility, as customers often search for generic terms matching the business function or service.
- **Lower Marketing Barriers:** Less time and money may be needed to educate the market, since the name itself tells a story or sets expectations.
- **Positioning:** They help anchor your brand within a specific industry or category, making your value proposition obvious and differentiating you from less-specific competitors.
- **Limiting to Future Expansion:** A name that’s too narrowly descriptive (e.g., “BooksOnly.com”) can box you in if you later diversify products or services beyond the original focus.
- **Less Distinctiveness:** With many competitors using similar descriptive names, standing out becomes difficult, and your brand may be confused with others (e.g., “Tech Solutions,” “Consulting Services Inc.”).
- **Trademark Challenges:** Descriptive names are harder to trademark and protect legally, as they’re often deemed “generic” or “not distinctive” by regulators and courts.
- **Resonance and Appeal:** Descriptive names may lack emotional qualities or storytelling potential, making them less memorable or compelling, especially once brand loyalty is established.

## Invented names-

- **Unique and Distinctive:** Invented names (e.g., “Kodak,” “Verizon,” “Google”) are highly unique, making them more memorable and easier to distinguish from competitors.
- **Trademark Strength:** Since these names aren’t generic or descriptive, they’re generally much easier to trademark and legally protect.
- **Flexible for Growth:** Because they don’t tie the business to a specific category or product, invented names give maximum freedom to diversify or pivot as your business evolves.
- **Brand Storytelling:** You have the opportunity to build a new narrative and personality around the name without pre-existing associations—allowing your brand to “own” the meaning entirely.
- **Global Appeal:** Invented names can more easily transcend language barriers, can be selected for positive or neutral connotations in multiple markets, and avoid negative meanings in other languages.
- **Low Immediate Meaning:** Invented names carry no inherent meaning, so their relevance and value must be established through sustained brand-building and marketing.
- **Higher Marketing Investment:** It may take significantly more time and resources to educate customers and build associations between your invented name and your business or product.
- **Pronunciation and Spelling Issues:** Some invented names can be difficult for customers to remember, pronounce, or spell, especially if they’re abstract, awkward, or stray far from linguistic norms.
- **Potential Confusion:** Without careful design, an invented name might be confused with unrelated brands, misunderstood, or simply ignored as “nonsense.”

# Determine what you need the name to do.

The name has a job to do. It should help the brand move into position and encourage the prospect to think & feel about the company in a predetermined way.



If your brand is about high performance, then the name should reflect that. Perhaps it needs to sound elite or absolute.



If your brand is about feeling happy, the name should do some of that work. Perhaps it needs a buoyant phonetic bounce.

Remember - The name can't do **all** of the work so, choose what you need it to do and leave the rest to advertising, marketing and product/experience design.

# Determine the style & tone.

So that you can develop name options that are suitable, figure out what the tone needs to be. Normally this is derived from the brand model where the brand archetype or personality are detailed.



**Formal:** Serious and authoritative names - great for naming dominant/power brands in the corporate sector.



**Casual:** Friendly and familiar names - great for consumer brands with a conscience or strong cultural contribution.



**Witty:** Playful and clever names - great for brands that intend to develop a reputation for creativity and intellect.



**Evocative:** Aspirational and emotional names - great for brands that want to gather an audience around a feeling.

# Tagline & Comms

Given it's usually just 1 or 2 words, the name can't do all the work. Strategy is sacrifice - so figure out whether the tagline is going to pick up some of the slack.

For example, you can pair an **evocative** name with a **descriptive** tagline and create way more impact than trying to do it all through a name alone.

Knowing this early in the process will help you refine your thinking in the ideation phase, and prevent you pulling your hair out looking for a silver bullet that doesn't exist.

It's very likely that the stakeholders will want an epiphany when they hear the final name, but that rarely happens. It's important to help them understand that a great name is part of an ecosystem of elements that come together. I'm sure Virgin wasn't immediately adored when proposed.

# Pronunciation & Translation

If the company is international you'll need to determine whether the name will need to be understood, translated or articulated verbally by non native English speakers. If so, phonetics and simplicity are important.

For example, if some of your target audience are Cantonese, names with 'th' or 'v' or 's' will be hard for them to pronounce and they'll likely avoid saying it.

Also, be aware that if the name is layered (with meaning or irony) or is culturally loaded (slang or social legacy references), that you'll need to localize it or risk losing that layered dimension.

**You now have a naming strategy.**

# Create a brief and align the stakeholders.

Naming is very subjective and unless you manage the thought process of the stakeholders, it's likely that arbitrary suggestions will plague the process. Before you start ideating names, write down the strategy and explain it to your stakeholders.

- The naming convention
- What the name needs to evoke or describe
- The style and tone
- Whether the tagline or comms will do some of the work
- Whether the name needs translating

**Now comes the creative part.**

# Ideate some 'root' words - Phase 1

This is the part that people dread the most but if you've taken the time to do the prior steps it's much less daunting because it's much less arbitrary and subjective.

We typically look for root words that address the brief. Sometimes they are literal, sometimes abstract...but nothing is ruled out in phase 1.

Its a non linear and creative process that requires quiet time and reflection - and many open tabs, including:

- Thesaurus
- Wikipedia
- Chat GPT
- Google Search
- Word Hippo (Dictionary)

**Come up with at least 150 roots.**

## Now create 'associated' words - Phase 2

If you have a creative partner, now is the time to bring them into the frame. Go through your root words and dialogue them - ferreting for terms that are relevant.

For example, the root word 'Space' is a cousin of LightYear, Close Orbit, Gravitass or SuperSonic.

Look for associated terms that have the potential to connect to the brand idea. For example:

- Lightyear could fit a company that position themselves as being innovators that make things happen fast.
- Gravitass could fit a company that position themselves as having a lot of pedigree in their chosen field.

**Come up with at least 3 associated terms for each root.**

# Streamline your list - Phase 3

Now go through your list and kill words that no longer resonate. Rely on your creative partner for objectivity. You should end up with the just the cream of the crop.

Arrange the remaining terms (should be around 30) into groups. They will naturally categorize.

Discuss the groupings with your stakeholders, without trying to land on any specific singular name. Gather consensus on which category has the most value - you should focus on that group for the next phase.

**Reduce your options to around 30  
viable names. Group them.  
Discuss with your stakeholders.  
Identify a winning group.**

# Scoring Mechanism

Names are loaded with personal subjectivity. To remove that, we score names using a 10 factor scoring mechanism. Score each name in your shortlist out of 10 for each criteria (do it with your stakeholders). Names that score 80 and above are qualified to the next round.

# Scoring Criteria

## **1- Positioning:**

How accurately does the name support the brand position.

## **2- Appearance:**

Does the word look attractive.

## **3- Distinction:**

Is the name memorable enough for people to recall.

## **4- Energy:**

Does the name have the right energy level and type.

## **5- Humanity:**

Can people relate to it on basic human terms.

## **6- Phonetics:**

Does the name phonetically resonate. Are there other words that sound similar that confuse?

## **7- Spelling:**

Is the spelling intuitive. Especially for ESL.

## **8- Buzzworthy:**

Does the name have enough edge to build an interesting story around.

## **9- Graphic Reach:**

Does the name have enough fuel to power some distinctive graphic treatments.

## **10- Depth and Layers:**

Does the name have a layered or meaningful quality outside of its literal aspect.

**Align with stakeholders on the scores. List the names in priority order and proceed to screening.**

# Screening your shortlisted names

Now that you have 10 to 15 viable names, and you have stakeholder approval...you need to screen them for existing trademarks, company registrations, domain availability and search noise.

## **Trademark Screening:**

Enter the names into the Canadian trademark search database and see if there are registered trademarks in existence. Use singular and plural terms. The <sup>TM</sup> office classify infraction as 'market confusion' so even similar names can result in a lawsuit.

# Screening your shortlisted names

**Company Registrations:** Search for the name options in the provincial and federal business registries to see if any similar companies exist. Try singular and plural terms and alternate spelling.

# Screening your shortlisted names

**Domains Availability:** Use a domain search tool to look for top level domain suffixes for the names. Sometimes they are parked and purchasable, but often they are in use and that's a conflict. Take a look at lesser used suffixes like .io or .xyz or .space to see if there's a marketable URL opportunity.

# Screening your shortlisted names

**Search Noise:** Google the company names and see what the top 3 pages yield. This is the traffic your digital marketing efforts will need to beat in order to list organically. If it's dominated by large brands - marketing budgets will need to be big and your digital marketing efforts will need to be sophisticated. You also don't want to appear alongside brands that deal with salacious topics.

**By now, you'll likely have around 5 names that passed screening. Prioritize them and send the first one to an IP lawyer for deep screening.**

# Screening your shortlisted names

Once your screening has concluded, send the names 1 by one (starting with the favourite) to have them professionally screened.

When the results come back - dialogue with the stakeholders on the pros and cons and if they are happy with the implications, open the champagne.

If not, keep going through the names until you get a hit.

**Inevitably, <sup>TM</sup> register the name and  
move into graphic design and  
collateral development.**

Frank Strategy is a Vancouver based branding agency that helps category leading businesses use brand as a competitive tool.

Branding that means business.

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