



Selecting Business, Organization and Domain Names

by Michael Foster, STC Network Systems

Any new business or organization has to factor in the Internet and the World Wide Web when developing a name and a slogan. A name has to be unique, both from a legal standpoint as well as from a search engine point of view.

Worst-case example

A name should not be made too clever.

When the logotype (using a name as a logo) for DirecTV® was chosen along with the name, yes it's unique, but when many people sought that company on the Internet, they typed "direct tv", "directtv" or even "direct television" not realizing that there was only one "T". That allowed the porn industry and competitors to buy up variations on the name leading users to incorrect or inappropriate Web sites ("directtv.com" vs. "directv.com"). DirecTV® ended up paying a lot of legal and registration costs to combat this.

Best-case example

A name should be relevant to what it represents.

One of the best, most well thought out names in the last 10 years was the science fiction television series, "FarScape®". The original writer/creator of the series chose to make a new word, a combination of two recognizable syllables "far" and "scape" (as in "far away" or "far in outer space" and "landscape", "dreamscape" or even "escape"). His thinking was that nowhere else did the word "farscape" exist, so when people searched for "farscape" on the Web, every single reference would be the TV series, fan mail, reviews, books, comics, conventions, merchandise, appearances, sponsors, etc., etc. And, it worked! To this day, the only real use of the word "farscape" is related to FarScape®, the original series.

Case Study

1. Company Name - Wehrheim Systems, Inc. (WSI), a legal software development company, began as "Advocate Systems" in the 1980s. They quickly changed their company and software title when it was pointed out by clients in some major cities that "The Advocate" was the name of "alternative lifestyle" publications in those areas and that it may represent inappropriate behaviors and commentaries not conducive to doing business in the legal community.

2. Domain Name – During the early 1990s, WSI began providing Internet access for their clients in support of their installed software applications. When they decided to get their own domain name, wsi.com was already taken by a network company in Washington state. So, they chose

“wsi.net” as their second choice. At the time, the top level domain (TLD) “.net” was generally used by companies who provided Internet access to others.

(Once, .com meant “commercial”, .net was “network”, and .org stood for “organization”; those lines are very much blurred now when companies register all TLDs for their names.)

Still, having “WSI” in the domain name was significant and unique.

3. Product Name - In 2001, WSI released an upgrade of a version of their application, “Expense and Cost Recovery System (ECRS)” calling it, “CostWare®”. All of their competitors used some variation of “cost recovery”, “expense recovery”, etc. so they chose to use the “FarScape®” scenario and combine two syllables into a new word. This was unique in so far as their application was concerned and it followed the rule of not creating an obscure word that doesn’t have anything to do with the product or service.

However, when developing a product or service, businesses have check to see what the competition is using AND check to see if anyone is using the new word for anything. WSI did not research the new name, “CostWare®” to see that other businesses, outside of the legal market, had already published and distributed the word “costware”. So, although it was not confused with other products or services in their industry, WSI doesn’t get the only hits on “costware” when using search engines.

Name Selection

Martin Jelsema, CEO of Signature Strategies, developed a list in 2008 called, “15 Criteria for Creating Domain Names”. Jelsema is an advocate of the naming brief, a document that sets the direction and relevancy of name candidates. Mostly, the content of the naming brief comes from your business plan and identifies market segments; competitors; your business model; your internal values, mission, and vision. It may also give guidance to the tone and style of your Web site and other branding elements.

Here are the criteria in no particular order

1. Can the domain name also be your enterprise name?
2. Does the domain name contain your major keyword?
3. Is it available as a “.com” name?
4. Is the domain name the same as someone else’s enterprise name?
5. Is it available for other domain categories besides “.com”?
6. Does it use tricks in order to be available as a “.com”?
7. Is it short?
8. Is it memorable?
9. Is it similar to competitive domain names?
10. Is the name representative of the site and the business
11. Does it flow naturally?
12. Can it be trademarked?
13. Does it translate well globally?
14. Has it been owned previously?
15. If someone else owns it, can it be purchased from them?

A note about the sixth criterion: if you must use hyphens within the domain name or insert words such as “online” or “now” or “blog”, you are creating a name that will be difficult for most people to remember and or to type.

You can weight each of these attributes, or even ignore one or two if they are not relevant to the business

Mr. Jelsema also writes, on his Web site, www.businessnamingbasics.com,

“I’ve not been a raving fan of completely invented words as names for products or companies. However, I do find some forms of coined names desirable.

“Those are names which start from a root word that is relevant to the product, service or business being named. For instance, if you’re marketing a new telephone device, I can advocate a name using the root, ‘phone’ or ‘fone’.

“The reason, as I’ve stated previously, is that people don’t like new words. They are comfortable with the familiar. So to make a name with a familiar root and with some coined ‘flair’ to go with it produces comfort, easy pronunciation and meaning almost instantly.

“It’s providing the flair that makes the name unique, and possibly trademarkable.”

This expert agrees with the concepts that led to both “FarScape®” and “CostWare®” and that is something that should be considered when high placement and multiple references are desired via Internet search engines.

-- Michael Foster <mfooster@stcllp.com>