Naming your startup? Here are five things to remember

By Andrus Purde, AchooJul. 7, 2012

Great names do some of the work for you. They market your company just by being out there: Last.fm, SoundCloud, KissMetrics and Groupon all come to mind. One of my favorite company names in tech is [Wildfire](#), a company that makes social media marketing apps. Once you hear the name in context, the name will forever be stored in your brain. It clicks because it contains a strong hint of what the product does: it makes your promotion spread like… you know what.

Most of the names out there are just OK. They don't make your life any easier or harder: Highrise, Yammer, Spotify. But it's OK to have an OK name.

Where you *don't* want to be is in the third category — having a name that associates your product with the wrong things and acts as a show-stopper. Think [Pen Island](#) or a name I once proposed for a networking service – Loopus.in (which associates with lupus for anyone who has watched even one episode of House).

So how do you make the right decision?

I've recently been involved in choosing a name for a couple of startup projects, and it gave me an opportunity to try and understand how to do it better. Here's what I found:

Decide where your name should fit

Will your name be descriptive like Internet Explorer and Facebook or abstract like Badoo and Skype (s MSFT? Most names are word mutations somewhere in the middle, like Klout, Flattr and Pinterest.

When you have a big marketing and media budget, you have more of a choice, but for most name hunters this isn't the case — so homework is needed. The first step in the naming process is to do a few broad Google searches and check relevant directory/app store listings. You'll soon have a good idea where you want your name to fit. If everyone is zigging with 'awesome' web 2.0 names, sometimes you want to zag and go for something old school like ITT Electron Tube Company. Other times you want to blend in, for example if you're making a golf application, you might want to have 'golf' in the name somewhere. Then, of course, there are often SEO considerations to bear in mind.

Write a brief, and make sure everyone agrees on it

Unless you work on your startup idea by yourself, write the result from the previous exercise down. It's also helpful to create list of words you want your name to associate with and stick it to your screen or wall until you've found your perfect name. For example: "instant" and "coaching" when you're naming a real-time sports feedback app, or "news" for a content curation tool.

Then make sure all the founders and stakeholders agree with the brief. One recent naming experience involved switching back and forth between names that contained a strong hint at what the company does

and abstract names because one of the founders wasn't quite sure at the beginning. It wasted a lot of hours for everybody on the team.

Don't brainstorm

Perhaps it's just me, but I have yet to attend a useful naming brainstorm. Time is much more efficiently used if the same people do some thinking on their own and then exchange their ideas via very short meetings and/or email. This allows for creative exchanges to happen, unlike "brainstorms" where someone is forced to write bad names on a whiteboard and others are forced to look at that person's backside.

So instead of summoning everyone to a meeting, go for a walk or jog or swim or whatever, keeping the list of desired associations in mind. Say the words out loud, look for rhymes, synonyms, legends, stories and expressions that come to mind. Often the best ideas come when you're not sitting by your computer and your brain is relaxed.

Use generators and crowd sourcing – but with caution

It may be worth the time to check out name-creating services such as NameJet and Domainsbot. Sometimes you'll hit the jackpot of discovering a great name which is on sale for a reasonable price. Wordoid and LeanDomainSearch are also worth a shot.

Crowd-sourcing is not ideal for naming, because a few people spending a lot of time on a name usually yields a better result than a lot of people spending a little time. But it is much more useful when it comes to *validating* a name. Services like Pickfu allow you to get a second opinion quickly if you're stuck between two options. If you're looking for more in-depth feedback, you can set up a survey with SurveyMonkey and have your customers, followers or strangers over at Mechanical Turk give you their two cents. The main thing is not to ask your friends alone — your target group has a different taste and your friends are sometimes simply too polite.

Remember that the most important thing is memorability

Sometimes name searches end with one strong candidate which is everyone's favorite — and the domain is available too, yay! More often than not you need to make choices and compromises. Do you go for perfect name with .me domain or the second best option with .com domain? One that passes the "I can say that over the phone without having to spell it out" test or the one that all team members prefer?

Jason Calacanis has written a great post about naming a startup where he concludes that being able to spell the domain correctly and having a short name are the most important criteria. In my experience the most important view of a name is memorability. Google has gotten pretty good at handling typos, and a bit of SEO work will land searchers in the right place even without a .com domain. If people remember your name, they'll find you. If you don't believe me, ask Buffer, AngelList or Pocket.

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