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# The Aims of Names

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**Cultural Forces Driving Names of People and Brands**

By Susan Schwartz McDonald, Ph.D. and Mike Kelly, Ph.D.

## 'A Boy Named Sue'

Different societies tend to have distinct naming conventions but everywhere names matter. Throughout recorded human history, infant names have been chosen to shape character, guide destiny, and create social standing. Contemporary Western cultures may be less literal about it than many others, but we always name our children with a point of view and a purpose. To fit in or to stand out, to honor traditions or to defy them. No matter how we approach it, the consequences are real. As Johnny Cash famously reminds us, names can have a profound effect on life experiences.

Naming conventions are never static, and major social upheavals have especially significant effects. With the arrival of the Norman invaders from France, the English language began shedding old Norse names like Ethylrud. Later, the invention of the printing press and the Protestant Reformation led to a run on Old Testament names, and, for the first time, biblical virtues (Faith, Hope, Charity). Nineteenth-century industrialization, migration, and literacy all expanded the English-speaking bank of first names, today numbering in the thousands. As point of contrast, roughly a third of all English men were named John in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.



### When Times Change, Names Change

While often meant to anchor us in our traditions, names are also leading indicators of where we are going. Like all aspects of the social media-driven world around us, naming conventions are shifting more rapidly than ever before, and in ways that say a lot about what we value and who we admire. Three hundred years ago, we might have named our children after kings, queens, and saints.

*The naming of a child is the beginning of a conscious branding process. We are marketers of our children from birth, and we are looking to signal a 'USP'.*

Today, we follow the lead of rock stars and celebrities, whose esoteric naming practices have launched (among other trends) the rush on use of common nouns like Moon, Apple, or North. We may feel ourselves to be in charge of the names we give our children (let's face it, so little else is under our control) but we are nonetheless guided by the culture and times in which we live.

## What Do We *Name* to Be?

Taking liberties with personal names signals a broader set of possibilities and dreams for our children, especially our daughters. The goal of rising above gender stereotypes and empowering women has inspired the popularity of ostensibly “gender-neutral” names like Madison or McKenzie – used far more often for girls than boys, who fare better with traditional male names. Globalism has broadened our naming vistas too, encouraging us to reach across borders or back to ancestral countries for names like Claudia or Astrid – or to countries that never existed except on **Game of Thrones**. (Arya is now a fast-emerging option.) The spread of place names (from Savannah, where place names were always more common, to Brooklyn, where they were not) blurs and stretches boundaries in yet another way.

Yet even amid all this improvisation, there are curious signs of romantic nostalgia: the return of disused biblical and Victorian names like Noah, Caleb, Hannah, Charlotte, or even Norse names exhumed from Old English, like Freya. When vintage names return, it’s because history is being repurposed.

*All these cross-currents in our naming trends represent a simultaneous press toward invention and rediscovery, secularism and romanticism, recklessness and rootedness, individuality and conformity – in other words, a profound ambivalence about the world we want.*

## Brand New – What’s Trending in *Commercial* Names

Just like our babies, our new *brands* are being named based on hipper principles and fashions. There has been a documented rise in the use of fanciful names like Zappos, and a strong trend toward portmanteaus created by combining English language building-blocks (Microsoft, Groupon, Travelocity). This is not an entirely new phenomenon. Nabisco was derived from National Biscuit Company. But today, brands are literally *born* as mashups of more obscure linguistic ingredients, many available for purchase. In fact, the proportion of company names containing no dictionary words has virtually doubled in the past 10 years. Company names are also getting shorter. Short and whimsical = hip and cool.



Trends like these owe something to the cautionary advice of trademark experts, who advocate for the memorability and the legal protectability of arbitrary brand names. More than that, though, creative *word-chemistry* better fits with our notion of technology and progress. Trade names, like personal names, can influence brand destiny, and they continue to signal the cultural norms of a company's formative years well into maturity. When **National Analysts** rebranded itself eight years ago as **NAXION**, we understood the importance of trading the nostalgic word “national” for something forward-looking and fanciful – and picking up 8 Scrabble points in the process. Algebraic symbols, Q, X, Y, and Z signify science and ingenuity.

## Naming Rights

Names are such an important component of brand equity that many millions of dollars are spent in litigation each year to adjudicate their protections. “Confusingly similar” names are often the subject of pitched battles that can lead to a verdict requiring companies to change names in order to avoid source confusion. US law recognizes four types of names – descriptive, suggestive, arbitrary, and fanciful – although the lines between them are not always bright. A dispute over the protectability of the name “Booking.com” has just been decided by the US Supreme Court—unusually lofty heights for trademark challenges. At issue was whether the addition of “.com” to a brand name may render an indisputably descriptive term protectable if a sizeable proportion of consumers now perceive it to signify a single source of goods or services. The relevance of “secondary meaning”, as it is referred to in trademark law, has helped to establish a critically important role for consumer surveys in trademark disputes. In determining what qualifies as a brand name, consumers are often the ultimate “deciders.”



Arbitrary and fanciful names like Google or Xerox have great intrinsic strength but they are not without their own vulnerabilities. The true Achilles heel of a wildly successful innovator brand is the phenomenon dubbed “genericide”—the prospect that, over time, the brand name will establish itself in our vocabulary as a common verb or noun, and ultimately risk seeing its registration cancelled or its value as a unique source signifier seriously diminished. Trademark rights can ultimately be lost if not zealously guarded. Google is intent on doing that.

Even though Google is now widely used as a verb – one of the most indispensable, in fact – Alphabet has been successful in blocking attempts by other companies to register marks with the word “google” in it. And when a server tells a customer who asks for Coke that the restaurant serves Pepsi, that’s not just scrupulous honesty; that’s brand policing.



True brand innovation comes with the ironic risk that a brand name may come to define a *thing*. The words, aspirin, escalator, and trampoline were all once trademarks, but have no commercial protection today.

Companies inventing names that are resistant to genericide might want to consider taking account of implicit rules of language that might inoculate against appropriation in common speech. For instance, nonsense nouns may be better protected if they end in s.

## Using Company Names to Predict Company Behaviors

Just as you can lay safe odds that a woman (or man) named Sue is likely to be over age 55, you can look to company names for clues about their business strategy and style of operating. D&B database variables like company revenue, number of employees, industry, and years in business – along with variables we can feature-engineer from those – are often significant predictors of segment membership.



It turns out that we can take speculation to a statistical level by using company name characteristics to predict whether that enterprise might be a promising target for B2B marketing initiatives.

We have found that it is possible to group names into categories and use them to boost modeling accuracy beyond levels achieved with more traditional variables. With the rapid evolution of business names in response to cultural and technology change, we anticipate that names will become even more predictive of enterprise behaviors and orientations.

## Safe Naming Practices

More generally, in a large sentiment analysis of US business names, we've found that, across industries, companies with names conveying negative sentiment (e.g., "Rent-a-Wreck", "Failure to Launch Productions") have significantly lower revenues than companies with positive or neutral names. Whether that's merely a correlate of the business judgement or aspirations of those who form the company is, of course, hard to say. On the other hand, there are some names you just can't get past. The Canadian city of "Asbestos" has just renamed itself Val des Sources (Valley of the Springs) to revitalize its economy with more positive connotations.

## A Company by Any Other Name

Never was a company more aptly (or more portentously) named than Amazon, the mighty source of nearly everything, whose efficacy rivals – in many ways, *exceeds* – what we have seen from governments.



Would Amazon have been as successful had it been named Home Delivery, Inc., or even something like Source.com? Presumably yes – if they had gotten the job done. But the happy confluence of technology, commercial competence, and metaphor represents an unbeatable combination. Amazon redefined the way we think of buying things and that deserves nothing short of a vivid metaphor. Fledgling entrepreneurs with big ambitions need to invest their company and brand name decisions with at least as much careful intentionality (and originality) as 21<sup>st</sup> century parents.

Still, brands – like people – are named for the long-haul, and the long-haul is a tough road to see. The good news is that while brand names do matter, they matter mostly in the relative short-term. *A successful brand, like the boy named Sue, doesn't have to worry so much about what the name sounds like, so long as it protects what the brand ultimately stands for.* Some of the most common "common" names are likely to surprise you. For an interactive link showing name trends by state, [click here](#).

## About the Authors



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## About NAXION

NAXION is a broadly resourced, nimble boutique that relies on advanced research methods, data integration, and sector-focused experience to guide strategic business decisions and shape the destiny of brands. Our century-long history of innovation has helped to propel the insights discipline and continues to inspire contributions to the development and effective application of emerging data science techniques. For information on what we're currently doing and how we might help you with your marketing challenges, please visit [www.naxionthinking.com](http://www.naxionthinking.com).