

## Before naming your startup, read this.

I've learned a lot from the development of [NameLayer](#), and I'm ready to divulge every trick in my arsenal. In this guide, I provide realistic solutions to the frustrations encountered when naming a company. Plus, I'll have some fun analyzing both good and bad company names.

This guide is divided into three, independent sections: Why Bad Names Hurt You, Coming Up With Names, and Examples of Strong and Weak Names.

### Why Bad Names Hurt You

*If you don't need to be convinced that a good name is important, skip to the next section. That's where the juicy stuff begins.*

Almost every bad naming decision can be traced back to one or more of the following attitudes. You must learn to recognize them:

- **Mobile:** "It's a mobile app. Who cares what the *name* is. If people recognize the icon on their dashboard, then that's all the brand recognition we need. It's the mobile Web, baby! Get ready for the revolution."
- **Settling:** "There's a shortage of good names. Consequently, consumers are getting used to silly 'Web 2.0 names. They only care about the product."
- **Politics:** "I won't spend more than the cost of a domain's registration fees. Domain squatters are pirates, and I would never pay their inflated prices with my hard-earned money."
- **Tired:** "To be completely honest, I'm just short on ideas. I think I'll stick with the one I like best so far and just prefix 'get' or 'try' to my domain name. Later, when we're big, we'll buy the official domain." (On the surface, this is one of the better excuses, but we'll deconstruct this approach at the end of this section.)
- **Short-Sighted:** "What are you talking about? Our name is loaded with meaning. It has a very rich and personal history amongst the team. It represents **us**."
- **Deprioritizing:** "I'm building a business with many more important tasks that need my attention. I refuse to spend more than two meetings talking about our naming options."

- **Naïve:** “Pff! I’m a pretty creative person. I can easily come up with something hip and original. I see companies with decent names like Zobonko and Furtzii – I can do *even better* than that!”
- **Stuck:** “Honestly, we brainstormed for ages. We couldn’t find anything we loved.”



All these excuses are valid to varying degrees, but they’re ultimately just that – excuses. Entrepreneurs who use them are in danger of signaling the following to investors and early adopters:

- **A lack of self-awareness:** The company didn’t realize that their name was *too* lousy to settle on. They didn’t have the self-awareness to thoroughly gather and assess feedback about their naming decision. (What else will they not bother gathering feedback on?)
- **A lack of attention to detail:** They didn’t take the company naming process seriously. (Can they be expected to take the naming of their individual products or services seriously? Can they be expected to pay attention to the very fine details of their brand, marketing, and design strategies?)
- **A lack of diligence:** They didn’t have the sustained drive to find a good name at a good price. They failed to navigate the (admittedly) rigorous process of naming. (Will they fail to thoroughly execute on other arduous necessities?)

Before we get carried away with these abstractions, let's be clear: A mediocre name will not blatantly signal these red flags. A bad name, however, will.

No one will ever see the name Zobonkii.com and think, "Oh, what a creative company." In reality, anyone with even a tenuous grasp on the tech industry will think, "Great... Another trivial startup that's piggybacking on social media trends." You should never underestimate how many choices consumers have. Stand out. It can all start with your name, which people will be typing, clicking on, or tapping on every day.

Conversely, a great name conveys the opposite of these red flags. To put it bluntly, I can get ten seconds of complete focus and attention from nearly anyone in tech if I start a pitch with, "We're Nest.com." Does *your* name elicit, "Oh, interesting, tell me more!" when you share it with others? **Never forget that your name is the first thing to come out of your mouth every time you pitch your company.**

You might be thinking, "Dude, chill out with this elitist naming talk. I'm just developing a JavaScript library / a piece of desktop software / a mobile app Web-front." Indeed, these are all reasons to not care much about having a good domain, but **they are not valid excuses for having a bad name.**

**Before we wrap this section up**, we must dive into one of the excuses listed above, as it has recently become phenomenally popular: "...when we're big, we'll buy the official domain."

This strategy is usually not as simple as it seems. It comes down to this ugly paradox: As consumers become more aware of you, you'll be able to raise more money, but the owner of the official variant of your domain (e.g. the DropBox.com to your GetDrop-Box.com) will also become increasingly aware of your growth. He or she will then hold out for a bigger payday. After all, **they have nothing to lose:** They know there is a slim chance that you would ever change your established name and that you will – in all likelihood – come crawling back to them.

**So, what exactly makes Get[NAME].com weak in the first place? Let's take a look:**

- **Inefficiency:** Be prepared for lost emails, which will have been sent to the official variant of your domain name. You can imagine how destructive this could be.

- **Frustration:** Many customers will be annoyed when they're unable to intuitively reach your site (they'll be visiting [NAME].com expecting to see you).
- **Annoyance:** When you approach investors or fellow entrepreneurs about your company, you'll often get nagged with, "So, how are talks going with that domain owner?" Don't underestimate the annoyance of being continuously bugged about a problem you can't afford to solve.
- **Ineffectiveness:** Your marketing campaigns will be less impactful (you will lose potential traffic) because your audience won't fully grasp or recall your domain name like they would your actual company name. Remember: The mind looks for anchors, and that anchor will simply be your **name**.

Each of these factors will likely exist for the entirety of your company's lifespan. So, before going down this route, try coming up with a name for which you can acquire the exact-match domain.

Ultimately, Box.net bought Box.com, Flickr.com bought Flicker.com, and GetDropBox.com bought DropBox.com. They were only able to make these acquisitions because they had enormous capital.

**Yes, these companies were successful in the interim despite their initial domain choices, but that's irrelevant: The point of this guide is not that you can't be successful with a bad name, but rather that a bad name will hurt you, and that there's no reason to inflict this damage upon yourself when you can avoid it with only a couple days' worth of work.**

Let's get to it.

## Coming Up With Names



In spite of the frustration startups experience, coming up with a name is a straightforward process.

In this section, I will fully include and explain every resource you'll need. Bookmark this page and come back to it each time you name a company.

- **Compile a list of keywords:**
  - Browse through [The Next Web's Insider section](#) and copy-paste all the startup names that strike a chord with you. Identify your favorites and study how they were formed.
  - As you think over these selections, keep a log of all the new names and keywords that you come up with in the process. You can source these original keywords by thinking about your company's market, what makes your company unique, and what your value proposition is. (Spend a few minutes converting each of these concepts into keywords.) Finally, use [Thesaurus.com](#) to find the synonyms of your favorite keywords.
- **Plug your keywords into generators:** First, enter your keywords into [LeanDomainSearch.com](#) to see if there are any quality word combinations available for registration. Next, use [Domai.nr](#) to generate clever abbreviations. Finally, use [Wordoid.com](#) to generate fictitious word derivations. The purpose of using these

tools is to study the generated results in order to build an understanding of how your keywords can be branded into company names. Once you've thoroughly considered the possibilities, you'll then be prepared to holistically assess and appreciate the more costly domains you'll encounter in the next two steps.

- **Search the top aftermarket for your keywords:** Focus on [BuyDomains.com](http://BuyDomains.com) and [Sedo.com](http://Sedo.com), as they have large databases with extensive filtering tools. Filter your results so that you only see domains with set prices that are under the maximum amount you're willing to pay. Thanks to the array of inexpensive choices you have from Steps 1 and 2, you are now in a position to assess whether the prices of your favorite aftermarket domains are worth paying. However, before you start making offers, you have one final step: Expose yourself to curated domain portfolios so you can consider names that wouldn't be generated from your keywords.
- **Browse through domain portfolios:** Look through [NameLayer.com](http://NameLayer.com) (my company) and [Namecore.com](http://Namecore.com). Personally speaking, I designed NameLayer to be a small and premium inventory where you can quickly go through each and every domain. The importance of doing this is to get inspiration for names that aren't based on obvious keywords. For example, if you're naming a game development company, you might be thinking of names like Game[WORD].com or [WORD]Labs.com. But, in a domain portfolio, you'll stumble into abstracted names like [FinishingMove.com](http://FinishingMove.com) and [HiddenCoin.com](http://HiddenCoin.com). Both of these are relevant abstractions of your naming concept, but they don't actually contain your keywords. This is the power of domain portfolios: you can exploit them for novel ideas.

**Perform these steps in order, and you'll find yourself with a handful of great names at reasonable prices.** That's all there is to it; you don't have to hold a bunch of name brainstorming sessions or wander around hoping that you'll eventually bump into your perfect name one day.

With your top name choices in mind, there are two things you need to do before making your final decision: You must decide how much money to spend, and you must collect feedback.

How much money you should spend is largely dependent upon three factors:

- **How much "gravitas" your company requires for customer acquisition:** Gravitas,



in our context, is the perception of how connected, funded, and relevant your company is in its market (that is, to what degree people perceive you as the “real deal”). For example, I wouldn’t use a domain extension hack (where the name’s spelling continues across the dot) like Securit.ee for the domain name of a security consulting firm (which would acquire customers under the perception that it’s reliable and trustworthy), but I could certainly name a photo sharing app using this technique.

- **Whether you’re B2C or B2B:** Many B2C businesses depend on advertising, virality, and social discovery for customer acquisition. All of these acquisition methods are supercharged by a company name that can be easily communicated, remembered, and liked. Conversely, many B2B businesses are grown exclusively via existing partners and connections who couldn’t care less about the company’s brand, but instead focus on the company’s team, pricing, and ability to execute on their services. Certainly, there isn’t a razor-sharp divide among these two business models as they relate to naming, but I’m painting with broad strokes in order to make the following point: **Seriously consider what methods of customer acquisition you will focus on, and then decide how big of a role “name equity” will play in the execution of those methods.**
- **How much cash you have:** If you have the money, set aside a few thousand dollars in case that’s what it ultimately takes to secure your perfect name. When you don’t adequately invest in your name, you’re missing out on having all of your marketing endeavors supercharged.

Finally, you must collect feedback:

- **Pay close attention to the emotional responses that your name provoke:** You can gather helpful feedback by observing the initial reactions that your honest family, friends, and colleagues have. Sure, a name you love might be a *compatible* choice, but what does it *actually connote* in the hearts and minds of your customers?
- **Make sure that your employees are supportive of the name:** These are the people who hold themselves closest to the company’s motives and actions. If your employees aren’t comfortable with your name, you never will be either.

Once you’ve decided on the perfect name for your company, do not be discouraged if you learn that the domain is owned by someone else and isn’t marked for sale. My [do-](#)

[main acquisition guide](#) lists the strategies that you can use to negotiate with the current owner(s).



With all of the advice we've gone through so far, we still haven't covered what makes a name strong or weak. Let's do that now.

## Examples of Strong and Weak Names

Use this section by comparing the examples below against your own top name choices. Bookmark this page then rinse and repeat with your future company names.

### Weak Examples

*Each example below is a fictitious variant of a startup I came across during my research.*

**MarketHear.com (Fails the "Bar Exam"):** The "Bar Exam" refers to deducing the spelling of a startup's name (so you can type it into your browser when you get home) when someone is screaming it to you in a bar. The problem with MarketHear.com is



that it fails this test so miserably that you could be in a library and shout the name at the top of your lungs, and no one would know whether you said MarketEar.com, MarketHere.com (the most logical spelling for this phrase), or MarketHear.com. Further, MarketHear.com doesn't own MarketHere.com, so they don't have the luxury of being able to forward it.

**ForkBug.com (Irrelevant keyword & negative connotations):** You're probably using the word "bug" for no other reason than that you've seen it used elsewhere many times. "Bug" works for FireBug, FogBugz, and BugZilla because they do in fact help you deal with software bugs. ForkBug, however, not only has nothing to do with bugs (the name is derived from a restaurant deals site), but the connotation of bugs is self-destructive: Who would want to think about jabbing a bug with a fork while they're eating a nice meal? This is certainly not how you create a brand unless you're purposefully trying to leverage negative imagery for some strategic purpose.

**Choosarity.com (Suffix mismatch):** This is an example of a bad derivation: It sounds bad and it will confuse anyone who hears it. The core problem is that the suffix doesn't match the root word, since the suffix "-ity" is defined as a "state" or a "quality." (Something like "Soundarity" would make sense, because we can deduce "sound quality" from it. Dissimilarly, "choose state" and "choose quality" are very obscure.) Plus, how would anyone know whether there should be an "e" between the "s" and the "a?" (Indeed, you are sometimes able to buy the spelling variations and have those domains forward to the primary domain, but the fact that someone has to worry about whether they're spelling your name correctly is an issue unto itself.)

**IOBits.com (Intimidating to a large portion of the potential userbase):** To all non-techies, this name is confusing and meaningless. (Conversely, something like GitHub.com is perfectly acceptable given its userbase and the assumption that they never plan to expand beyond their "git" niche.) Unfortunately, not only would the average consumer not know what "IO" is, but the suffix "bits" seems "too geeky" to most undiscerning individuals. **You should only go with a "niche name" when you're confident that you'll be exclusively addressing that niche market for the lifespan of your company.**

**DataOracle.com (Lawsuit waiting to happen):** Would you ever name a company

EmailApple? DataOracle is no different: Not only does this name potentially infringe upon the rights of an enormous company, but it also refers to one of their active markets (data analysis)! You can only brand around a major company's name when the context of your use is clearly distinguishable from the incumbent's use. The following examples would have a better shot at working: AnAppleADay.com, AppleWorm.com, and RedApples.com.

**Xobonko.com (Unintuitive spelling):** Only make up a word when there will be little to no confusion about how it's spelled. "Did you say, Zonbonco.com?" The company might respond that this is a foreign word, or a play off a foreign word, or some sort of niche term with cult meaning. If so, none of this actually matters to anyone visiting the site. Think twice before you jeopardize the name of your startup on the mere fact that you find it clever.

**Xort.com (Lazily settling on what you already own):** This would be a great example of laziness: it would indicate that the founders settled on a domain that they already owned – for no other reason than it was short and relatively easy to pronounce. In reality, however, this would be a strange and distracting name for most startups.

**BettrBoom.com (Modification of an inexpensive name):** The properly spelled domain (BetterBoom.com) isn't particularly good or valuable, so you should not consider going with an arbitrarily modified version of it.

**MobileMonkey.com (Piggybacking on overused keywords):** You've probably heard of SurveyMonkey. Or perhaps MailChimp? How about SpaceMonkey? This is an example of copycat keywording. Doing this puts you at risk of sounding so generic that you will be preemptively judged as entrepreneurs with a copycat approach to business. You also run the risk of people assuming that your company is associated with or owned by an already established company that has brand recognition for your generic keyword. This might sound good on paper (due to brand recognition rubbing off on your company), but it puts you at risk of having a dead-end brand once the established company decides to start branching out into your space.

## Strong Examples



What I love about all the examples below is that I doubt they were expensive to acquire. In fact, I'm sure many of these were freely registered for \$10 from a domain registrar. Case in point: **You don't need a lot of money; you just need a sustained drive to secure a good name. You need to hustle.**

**Localytics.com (A portmanteau that doesn't negatively affect other criteria):** This is slightly difficult to hear, pronounce, and spell, but it's a good example of a highly brandable and logical portmanteau. I can hear a homebuyer using it in a conversation, "Yeah, but we need to get some locallytics of the area."

**IntenseDebate.com (Evokes wonder by triggering emotions):** It immediately riles up emotions by subconsciously triggering memories of your past "intense debates." Plus, it gives you a clear indication of the services provided.

**Sendoid.com & ReMail.com (Short root word with an instantly recognizable appendage):** ("Appendage" refers to an affixed phonetic spelling, e.g., "oid" as observed in "asteroid.") A clear and familiar root word ("send" / "mail") extended by a well-known appendage ("oid" / "re") is a reliable approach to branding: People are already familiar

with the spelling and sound of “oid” thanks to words like factoid, asteroid, and Motorola’s Droid. And, of course, everyone is familiar with “re.” Further, not only do I instantly have interesting ideas as to what the companies do (because they contrast concepts that I’m very familiar with), but I also intuitively know how to spell their names.

(Perhaps the best historical example of this naming technique is Jonathan Abrams’ Friendster.com. He played off of the notoriety of “Napster” by extending the prevalent root word (“Friend”) with the appendage “ster.” The result was an original brand that relevantly connoted the **generation of new friends.**)

**CardPool.com (Highly relevant pun):** A pun that holds **extreme relevance**: CardPool pools together gift **cards** (as kids are pooled together in a **car pool**). This is a level of naming quality that every entrepreneur should strive to achieve. This is a fun and completely unforgettable name.

**SendGrid.com and BackType.com (Clear and professional word combinations):** “Send” connotes the purpose (the *what*), and “Grid” connotes the infrastructure (the *how*). “BackType” connotes suave technical prowess, it sounds like it’s a common technical phrase, and it’s relevant to the services provided.

**Chart.io, Like.fm (Extreme obviousness meets extreme brandability):** I know *exactly* what these companies do before I even visit their sites. Plus, their names roll off my tongue. Chart.io naturally offers a technical (“input/output”) approach to data visualization, and Like.fm naturally deals with expressing and sharing interests surrounding music.

**Envolve.com (Seamless word creation with powerful meaning):** It’s beautiful, it rolls off the tongue, it’s relatively quick to grasp, and it has truly relevant meaning: alluding to customer **involvement** (as in, customer **engagement**) through the aid of their live chat product. Envolve is also a pun on the word “evolve,” which conveys propulsion into the “next generation” of customer chat software.

**Etsy.com, Veri.com (Unique and unmistakable once you’ve learned it):** These word creations only work well because they’re short – just four letters in length. You can’t pull this off with longer words, and you should not try it with alternatives to the .com extension (people will reliably remember the four letters, but they won’t necessarily re-

member the domain's custom extension).

**Weebly.com (Fictitious word with semi-intuitive spelling):** Thanks to the proliferation of the “-ly” suffix, one would assume that the “lee” sound at the end of this word is indeed spelled as “ly” (and not “li” or “lee”). Further, “wee” is an English word, and if it is isolated (perhaps for the sake of onomatopoeia), it would always be spelled “wee.” Thus, the prefix's spelling is also semi-standardized. (However, it can certainly be misheard as “We”.) Lastly, the name is short and doesn't look or sound too foreign or ugly. **If you insist on creating an entirely fictitious word that is more than four letters in length, then this is the base level of quality you must achieve.**

### Case Study: Digg.com



**Digg.com** is a rare example of a word modification that worked better than its official variant (Dig.com) probably would have: Not only does the name remain simple (a repetition of only the last letter), but the repetition happens to be of a consonant **whose doubling doesn't alter the original pronunciation or cause excessive spelling confusion** (it's easy to remember two “g's” instead of one). Further, the name is short enough to withstand the modification.

Digg also designed a logo that evoked the act of “**digging**” (in the form of a little guy with a shovel), and they gave this connotation extreme relevance by coining the act of down-voting as “burying.” In fact, their appropriation of this term was so strong that I oftentimes found myself typing “digg” instead of the intended “dig” when chatting over IM.

Digg might be the best Web 2.0-era example of the power of name equity. “Yeah, I dug that story.” Wow, you win.

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