

# Success Starts with Your Name

*Is your name an asset—or a liability? The answer may surprise you.*

BY KEVIN MURLEY

**D**oes your name help or hinder your efforts to be recognized by your market? The right name opens doors, invites people in, and sets the stage for the marketing process to begin, while a poor name may not get you to step two. It is the single most important marketing decision you can make.

## WHY CHANGE?

As your organization evolves, its strengths and services may become attractive to new target markets. If these new people see your organization's name and decide it's not for them, it may be time for you to change. Perhaps words in your name have taken on negative connotations in the market. Or maybe your name is unclear or unmemorable. Or perhaps the purpose of your organization has changed, and your name no longer reflects your mission properly. For example:

- **The American Association of Retired Persons** was increasingly targeting its services to people who weren't retired. It replaced the words in its name with an acronym (AARP) to avoid communicating the word "retired."

- **The American Electronics Association** found that the word "electronics" was outdated in the eyes of their high-tech audience and didn't appeal to their fastest growing segment, software providers. They dropped the words in their name and began using the acronym AeA with a tagline, "Advancing the Business of Technology."

- **The American Nursery Association** added "Landscape" to their name after deciding that landscaping had become an important part of their mission.

## THE PROBLEM WITH ALPHABET SOUP

While acronyms work for some organizations, they're risky for most nonprofits. An organization must be extremely well known—such as AARP or NRA—to make the strategy work. In addition, the organization needs to spend heavily to support recognition of the acronym.

Although using acronyms is rarely a good marketing ploy, the vast majority of nonprofits rely on acronyms rather than their full names. Over 90% of nonprofit organizations introduce themselves on their Web sites by their acronyms. The full name may be mentioned once, but the acronym is used to market the organization.

That's a mistake. For most nonprofits, it makes no sense to reinforce an acronym that holds no meaning for potential audiences. The acronym alone doesn't communicate a market position.

The goal is a memorable name with few syllables that can be clearly positioned in the minds of members, potential members, and other constituents. In some cases, such as MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving), an organization has carefully developed an acronym that fits its mission. But far more cases reinforce how confusing acronyms can be. For example, NABE uses an acronym prominently in all communications. Which NABE? The National Association for Bilingual Education or the National Association for Business Economics? Both.

Friends of the Earth has a very nice logo to support an easy-to-remember name. Its Web site, however, repeatedly uses the acronym FOE. Do you want to be a FOE or a friend? You decide.

A growing number of nonprofits have, wisely, dropped their acronyms. For example:

- **The Association for Biodiversity Information (ABI)** became NatureServe. Which sounds more inviting—ABI or NatureServe?

- **The American Crop Protection Association (ACPA)** is now CropLife America.

- **Zerotothree** now uses its full name instead of the acronym ZTT—a much better way to reinforce its mission of helping children from birth to age three.

## THE EIGHT-STEP PROCESS

A name is an emotional bond of the highest order. It's not surprising to find vigorous debate when an organization ponders a name change. Even when it's obvious that the costs of

standing pat outweigh the costs of change, there will probably be members, employees, founders, or board members who perceive a change as painful and unnecessary.

To achieve buy-in from key decision-makers and complete a successful change, you need to manage the process carefully from start to finish. Here are the steps to take:

## 1. Plan an Objective Process.

First, ask these questions to clarify the process you will use:

- **How will the final decision be made**, and by whom?
- **Do we need to investigate** whether a change is necessary, or will we move right to the development of new names?
- **Will we handle the process ourselves** or should we hire consultants to help? What process will be used to hire a consulting company?
- **What is our budget** and time frame? Some organizations brainstorm a new name and launch it within a month. The vast majority take more time—usually six months to a year—to identify steps, include members and employees in the process, perform research, and prepare for roll-out.
- **Who will lead** and coordinate the project?

## 2. Study the Market.

Research is the key to understanding market opportunities for your organization. Qualitative research, which you can gather through focus groups and customer feedback, gives depth to the reasons your name may or may not work for people. Quantitative research, gleaned through written questionnaires and telephone surveys, puts statistical evidence behind the decision you make. This information will make it clear to the skeptics on your board or in other key positions that change is needed.

## 3. Establish Criteria for a Name.

Interview the key decision-makers in your organization to pinpoint three to seven criteria that your new name must accomplish. For example, you might decide that the name must be attractive to software and hardware developers, must not injure current brand equity with key audiences, and must be more inclusive of international prospects.

## 4. Develop Name Options.

Now that you have determined the need for a new name, know your target markets, and understand the criteria for selection, it's time for the fun work—picking the name that suits you best.

One way to generate creative ideas is to run a contest among staff and constituents. This approach creates excitement about the change and helps people feel involved.

Another strategy is to hold brainstorming sessions with staff. Exercises that combine different word roots, synonyms, or odd letter combinations can be fun for all. Bring your dictionary, thesaurus, or language translator and you're on your way.

You may also want to hire a naming consultant. Such a consultant may push you to consider directions you haven't considered.

Your goal should be to come up with three to seven possible names to consider.

## 5. Be Sure Your Options Are OK to Use.

Next, make sure your final three to seven options are clear to use in the marketplace. Domain name ideas can be found on search sites such as:

<http://www.NameBoy.com>

<http://creatorhomepagenames.com/>

Numerous companies provide tools to search name availability and registration. See, for example:

<http://www.checkdomains.com>

<http://availabledomains.com>

If you own a domain name registration, you don't automatically own a trademark. You still need to perform a trademark search before you begin using the domain name. One way to accomplish this is to visit:

<http://www.marksonline.com>

You can also use the free online trademark search system at: <http://www.uspto.gov/web/menu/tm.html>

Most organizations will want to pay for a more thorough background search. A full search will provide background on whether similar names fall into competitive categories that could result in a trademark infringement. The leading organization that provides such reports is Thomson and Thomson:

<http://www.thomson-thomson.com/>

After you've completed your background search, consult with a trademark attorney to be sure you've covered all the bases.

A final part of this process is to monitor your trademark once you've established it. One company that provides this service is:

<http://nameprotect.com/>

## 6. Get Feedback on Your Ideas.

Once you have a final pool of names, it's essential to get market feedback. Many organizations prepare for this step by developing several logo alternatives to go with their new name options.

Focus groups are a good way to gather the feedback you need. Ask focus-group participants questions such as these:

- **What are your impressions** of the different name and logo alternatives? Which do you like best, and why?
- **Do you see any potential problems** with any of these names and logos?
- **Which name** is most memorable?
- **What image** does each name project?
- **Can you think of ways** to improve on these options?

Results of your research will undoubtedly give you new ideas or alert you to potential problems. Your research will also tell you how well each name compares to your original criteria.

## 7. Choose the Best Name.

Which is the right name for your organization? Base your decision on the focus-group results and the criteria you established in step 3.

There are always a few people who will disagree with the final choice. But, confronted with a clear rationale for how the decision was made, they will almost always come on board and put their full efforts behind the new name. The more careful you've been to include key people as part of the whole process, the more likely that everyone will back the decision.

## 8. Get Ready for Lift-Off.

A successful roll-out starts with your staff members. They can serve as the primary communicators, educators, and enthusiasm builders for your new identity. Here's a to-do list for this final step:

- **Prepare a list of tasks**, and decide who should accomplish each one. Set up a timetable.
- **Develop a new set of brand standards and templates** for your public relations efforts. Use these templates to ensure that your messages about your new name are consistent.
- **Create a list of answers** to frequently asked questions, and have staff members learn and practice them.
- **Introduce** your new identity to your key constituents. Explain the rationale for the change. Tell them what it will mean for them.
- **Plan an event** to announce your new name to the public.
- **Celebrate!** You have completed a well-thought-out process and created a new identity that can serve as a capstone for all your marketing messages. ■

## Resources

- Bosc, Joyce, "Brands: They Need to Work Just as Hard as You Do," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 20, No. 1.
- Brinckerhoff, Peter, "Using Surveys & Focus Groups to Gather Market Data," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 13, No. 3.
- Rosenberg, DeAnne, "Eliminating Resistance to Change: The Magic Formula," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 10, No. 5.
- Simon, Judy, "How to Conduct Focus Groups," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 17, No. 5.
- Valley, Chris & Glenda Morgan-Jackson, "Just the Right Name: How One Nonprofit Solved an Identity Crisis," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 11, No. 1.

These publications are available from the Society's Resource Center, [www.snpo.org](http://www.snpo.org).

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