

What's in a Name?

Company owners can avoid the mistakes of the name game by giving it some thought

by Rocky Womack

Besides reeling in that necessary financing, a business owner must also name the business. Easy work you say? Not necessarily. Shooting from the hip in this instance can leave you with empty pockets or rob you of any profits you may squeeze out.

Step one in choosing a name involves figuring out who your target audience is, suggests Theresa Nartea, agribusiness and marketing specialist with North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University in Greensboro, N.C. "Knowing who your target audience is will ease the name-game process," she says.

One of the least thought about things when choosing a name for a business centers on the first letters of the alphabet. "Searching for businesses in the phone book and on the Web, the order is alphabetical," Nartea says. "If your business is Roots and Shoots, it will be way down on the pecking order. Also, typically, if a customer does not have any idea about any businesses, they will make their selection based on speed, access and impulse. Therefore, the names closest to the top of the choices will be chosen over the names that are way down the list."

Choosing a name that can easily be remembered as a Web or e-mail address is another important consideration, Nartea says. For example, a Web address for the business Carter's Landscape or Carter's Landscape and Design could easily be recalled by the potential customer or current client as *www.carterslandscape.com* or *www.carterslandscapeanddesign.com*. The e-mail address can simply be a person's first name, such as *todd@carterslandscape.com*.

"In addition, keeping the name in a Web address brief is better than having a Web address with a long name," she says. For example, Nartea points out that *www.carterslandscape.com* has fewer characters than *www.carterslandscapeanddesign.com*.

"The more keystrokes a customer must type leads to a greater chance of mistakes," Nartea says. "Therefore, customers may give up on Web communication or inquiry."

Pete Bryant, with Southern Exposure Landscape Management in Greensboro, N.C., chose to go with *www.WeMakeDirt-LookGood.com*, a catchy name that he uses as one of his slogans. He wanted existing customers and potential clients to remember



PHOTO BY ROB MCDORMAN

Pete Bryant of Greensboro, N.C., started out naming his company with a traditional name, Bryant's Lawn care. After a year in business he changed it to a nontraditional name, Southern Exposure Lawn & Landscaping, to give the prestige of professionalism. Seven years after being in business he changed the name again to Southern Exposure Landscape Management because his services had grown into more than lawn care.

his company for being able to transform dirt into something they will marvel at for years to come.

When choosing a Web address, Nartea also points out that the tech-savvy public automatically types the ".com" at the end of a domain name rather than the newer domain endings of ".biz" and ".net," because they have been programmed out of repetition having done it for so long. Many of these well-established companies already have a ".com" ending. "Therefore, when buying a Web domain for your company, attempt to acquire a '.com' first," she advises.

Another important point when choosing a company name involves being aware of your competitors. "Take a moment to go through the current phone book and search for the companies that you are most similar to," Nartea says. "Note the names and do some more research. Which companies are the most successful or have the most customers? Can you name your company in a similar fashion legally, not verbatim, but somehow create a name that builds on the feeling established by that company with their name?"



PHOTO BY ROCKY WOMACK

Mark Boyer, of Roots & Shoots Landscaping, Inc. in Danville, Va., kept a nontraditional name for his company because he thought people would easily remember it better than a traditional name.



The company name and slogans are strategically placed on the Southern Exposure Landscape Management trucks and trailers to set the company apart from its competition.

Nontraditional names

In analyzing a nontraditional name, such as Roots and Shoots, Nartea says the choice suggests targeting a high-end audience whose customers are highly educated with a bachelor's or doctorate degree. She suspects customers of Roots and Shoots understand botany terms.

"If this segment is not your target audience, this name is not particularly a good one," she says.

Mark Boyer purchased the tools and equipment for Roots 'N' Shoots in Danville, Va., in 1986 and kept the name. He changed the name slightly to Roots & Shoots Landscaping, Inc. in the same year.

"We just thought it was catchy," Boyer says. "It's something people would remember when they heard or read it. If they went back and looked in the Yellow Pages, hopefully it would jump out at them."

He admits it has. When he answers the phone from customers or receives calls from distributors, most say the name is cute and ask how he came up with it. "Unfortunately, I can't take credit for it," he laughs.

Looking back, Boyer says he isn't sure the name has brought more business, but when potential customers see the Roots & Shoots trucks with their logos around town, the name hopefully is easy for them to remember in case they did pull out those local Yellow Pages.

At one time, the Boyers did think of changing the name to something entirely different because they thought people might consider it too cute, but they shrugged off the idea.

Traditional names

Many lawn care and landscape companies decide on traditional names like Carter's Landscape and Design. First off, it likely recognizes the owner right off the bat. Second, it explains exactly what the company does.

But, does the name mean anything to the target audience? "For example, in a logo, the name and the establishment date shown in the logo will imply a business that is high quality and usually a family business that has endured the test of time and remains in business, because their customers value what they are selling," Nartea says. She also reiterates that the higher the name is in the alphabet, the better.

Boyer says he and his brother never considered using their names as a company title. "A lot of people like to see their name all over their trucks and business cards," he says. "We weren't up for that."

They did opt to include the Roots & Shoots name and logo on all their trucks. The Boyers also maintained a blue color theme to make them recognizable by the public. "People see the trucks on the road and may see the same truck everyday," Boyer says. "They say, 'I see your trucks all over the place. I see them everyday.'"

At age 16, Bryant started out naming his business Bryant's Lawncare. After a year in business, he switched that name to Southern Exposure Lawn & Landscaping. "I didn't want to be seen as a small, one-man operation," Bryant says. "Plus, our market is covered with companies using their own name. There's nothing wrong with that, but it just wasn't professional enough for me."

Mixture of names

Bryant says it took him nearly a month to decide on Southern Exposure Lawn & Landscaping. "I decided this was the name because it was a big deal for me," he says, "and I didn't want to change it down the road."

Never say never. Five years ago, after being in business seven years, Bryant renamed his company Southern Exposure Landscape Management. He changed the name because his business had grown, and the services he

offered had expanded. Rather than limiting his opportunities for more business just in lawn care, Bryant searched out a name that would "give the impression that we were able to manage the entire landscape," he says.

Not only did Bryant worry about limiting the perception of his services, but focused on maintaining a positive image for his business, himself and his employees. He believes that keeping that image in his forethoughts has set him apart from his competition.

Taking time to think of the right name is a wise choice, Nartea says. She believes a name choice must grow on the owner. As Bryant did when naming his business for the third time, Nartea advises to choose references to a product and service such as landscape, design, etc. "This leaves you open to more products in the future," she says.

Avoid mistakes

No business likes to make mistakes, especially even before they perform their first turf job. It can happen. Improperly naming the company can make or break the business.

One of the biggest mistakes a company can make is failing to research the legality of the name, or perhaps finding out after doing business that another company already owns the name.

"A legitimate business would be wise to employ a legal research company or attorney to perform a comprehensive search of the business name, slogan and logo in question," Nartea says. "This is important due to the ever-present issues with intellectual property and idea ownership."

Can college students help name a business? You bet. Nartea says students in a local community college, small business center or a major university business class can take on naming a company as a research project or practicum to earn their degree. "Why not be a guinea pig and use young minds to help you be your best?" she asks. "Usually this costs nothing but your time, and it is a free business advertising, in that you are exposing more of the community to your name, in a roundabout way!"

The third big mistake company owners make when naming their business involves failing to think. They act rather than think it through. "This happens," Nartea says, "and it is a business killer. Take the time, or else your wallet will be very thin." 🌿

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