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Companies resurrect abandoned names, ditch ".com"

By [Rachel Konrad](#) - Staff Writer, CNET News.com
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Agilent, Avilant, Consilient, Covisint, Levilant, Naviant: Who could blame customers and investors for being *confusant*?

Naming experts say the explosion of e-commerce start-ups and technology spin offs in the late '90s has created a run on the English language, forcing young companies to adopt names that at first blush seem little more than a collection of syllables.

Adding to the hodgepodge of odd names: Many companies feel compelled to have a one-word tag that can be registered as a memorable Web address, or universal resource locator (URL). Because so many common words are already taken--Jewelry.com, Wine.com, Business.com, Superconductor.com--many companies create their own words, in part to stake claim to the unoccupied URL.

"They want to have the exact dot-com because their buddies do--there's a certain macho-ness to it, and I think it's a big mistake," said S.B. Master, founder and president of Berkeley, Calif.-based naming company Master-McNeil.

"We'd rather have people live with a slightly longer name, maybe a few more keystrokes, rather than a weirdly spelled, curious coinage, where the dot-com happens to be available," said Master, who seized the URL "www.naming.com" in 1996. "When you settle on a weird name, you have to ask, 'Is the dot-com available because you're so creative, and you were the first to think of this great new name--or because there's something wrong with it?'"

Increasingly, it seems, companies are realizing that maybe there is something wrong with nontraditional, newfangled names that came into vogue in the mid-'90s.

Struggling software maker Inprise announced Wednesday that it would [revert](#) to its previous name--the stately but slightly boring Borland.

Two-and-a-half years ago, Borland shed its name in favor of a word that invokes both "Internet" and "enterprise." But Ted Shelton, senior vice president of business development, said the clever contraction simply didn't resonate with customers or carry the brand awareness of "Borland."



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Inprise isn't the first tech company to backpedal on a name. Modem maker U.S. Robotics became part of 3Com when the network equipment maker acquired it for \$6.6 billion. When 3Com spun off its modem business earlier this year, the new company resurrected the solid-sounding U.S. Robotics name.

The danger of sounding dated

The Internet has sparked scores of names that start with a lowercase "e" or "i" and end in "net" or "systems" or the ubiquitous ".com"--or several of the above, such as "iPrint.com." But increasingly, companies are dropping the ".com." InfoSpace was among one of the first companies to [drop](#) the ".com" when it did so in March as part of a broader strategy to revamp its image.

Naming experts say that companies should think twice before picking ".com" names and other time-stamped monikers: The stock market crash of April, which particularly hammered e-commerce and other technology companies, has taken away much of the cachet once associated with being a pure-play Internet company.

"Those naming trends that specifically leverage the top-level domain suffixes are short-term solutions that don't have the legs to carry a company forward--and in fact, could have liabilities associated with it now," said Anthony Shore, senior associate director for verbal branding and naming at San Francisco-based marketing company Landor Associates. "A lot more companies have been skittish about putting eggs in the Internet basket."

Although experts caution against picking words that are tied uniquely to a single era or technological movement, naming fads have always reflected the era in which they flourished.

At the turn of the century, dozens of automobile companies tacked on the word "Motor" or "Motors" onto a family surname. Around the time of World War I, the suffix "-ine" became popularized because of its Latin roots, which could translate across the widening European market on post-war products such as Ovaltine and Vaseline.

During the space race of the 1960s and '70s, many companies found the "tron" suffix too tempting to resist for individual products, brands and entire companies.

Other names came in moments of inspiration--or perhaps desperation. George Eastman, who founded Kodak in 1888, knew he wanted his company's name to begin with a 'K,' which he called "a strong sort of letter."

"Then it became a question of trying out a great number of combinations and letters that made words starting and ending with 'K,'" Eastman said at the time. "The word Kodak is the result."



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Capturing the here and now

These days, the most cutting-edge name seems to be a two- or three-syllable word that ends in the Latin-sounding suffix "ent," "int" or "ant"--ostensibly adding a sense of historical significance and timelessness: Lucent, Aquent, Navigant, Conexant, Candescant, Telegent, and so on. Other made-up names are a misspelling of traditional words or a conglomeration of sensible-sounding syllables: Nortel, Meritel, Verizon, Visteon, OnStar, Navistar, Tempstar, Nynex, Qwest and Cingular.

Although those names may fall on deaf ears among some consumers, Master likes such monikers far more than anything with a ".com" attached. Names created by Master-McNeil include Adexa, Athlon, Andavo, Veriton, Vividence and FatSplash.

"I obviously think the Internet is wonderful and will persist...but these terms come and go, and to build a corporation's name and brand around something so faddish is a mistake," Master said. "Avoid trends and fads that may seem overwhelming at the time--they'll rapidly become underwhelming."

At least one Internet company stands above the synthetic "-ant" and "-int" crowd: Yahoo. Jerry Yang and David Filo originally created the Internet portal as a Stanford University thesis project in 1994, calling it "David and Jerry's Guide to the World Wide Web."

Not satisfied with the clunky title, they thumbed through the dictionary for words that began with "ya," the universal computing acronym for "yet another." Filo stumbled upon "Yahoo," fondly remembering that his father used to call him "Little Yahoo" as a boy. They liked the name and rigged a more complete acronym: "Yet another hierarchical, officious oracle."

"They didn't go to a naming company," said Yahoo spokeswoman Diane Hunt. "They just went through Webster's dictionary."

For the record, the standard definition of yahoo is "a member of a race of brutes in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* who have the form and all the vices of humans." The secondary definition is decidedly unprofessional: "a boorish, crass, or stupid person."

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