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## Man's Search for Meaninglessness

**What's in a name? Ideally nothing, but the connotations your company gives it, and about 40 grand, give or take.**

By Jeremy Kahn, [September 2001 Issue](#)

Athol Foden likes to say he has broken a lot of hearts over the years. Never mind that the 50-year-old South African native isn't much of a looker, although he does have a certain rumped charm. Looks don't matter a lot in this case, because the hearts Foden breaks are those of CEOs. And it's not Foden they fall in love with -- it's his names.

Foden has one of today's trendiest jobs. He's an independent naming consultant for NameTrade, a division of branding firm Cintara in San Jose. He helps companies create new names for their products and themselves. You may be familiar with some of NameTrade's work. It's the force behind Qrium (PCs from Daewoo), Velocitus (Internet service provider), and the ever-popular Earjam (online music company). As for the heartbreak, it comes when executives discover they can't have the name that they've become infatuated with during the course of an expensive, time-consuming "naming process" because it has already been registered or means something dirty in Swahili.

Until the boom of the 1990s, deciding what to call a new business was simple. Something descriptive (Ye Olde Tobacco Shoppe) or ego-enhancing (Ford) or both (Bob's Diner) usually sufficed. But after years of startups, spinouts, and new product launches, there just aren't very many good names left to go around. Most words in the English language are already trademarked, says NameTrade consultant Chris James. In a lot of cases, if a company wants a new name, it has to make something up.

That's where naming consultants come in. Today there are dozens of competing nomenclature shops -- from branding giant Landor to a two-man outfit called A Hundred Monkeys. Some firms use computers to assemble thousands of potential names from assorted prefixes, suffixes, morphemes, and phonemes. Others, including NameTrade, prefer a more humanistic approach, employing live "namers" -- often academic linguists -- to generate the next Lucent and Acelas. "Computers don't get the nuances, the subtle connotations of words," Foden says.

Most consultants offer "name audits" in which they analyze potential names for linguistic attributes such as phonetic transparency (is it spelled the way it sounds?), sound symbolism (does it convey reliability or speediness, masculinity or femininity?), and multilingual functionality (will it play in both Kathmandu and Kalamazoo?). They also run extensive legal checks to avoid any trademark or Internet domain name infringement. After all is said and done, the typical name costs \$25,000 to \$60,000, although some of the best-known firms charge more. And some names -- such as Agilent, the Hewlett-Packard spinoff -- can wind up costing upwards of \$1 million. It all depends on the length or urgency of the process, the number of consultants engaged, and the extensiveness of the copyright check.

What are companies really paying for? To find out, we visited OfficeTempo, a Boston startup desperately seeking a new name. OfficeTempo's problem was that it helps companies buy office supplies and IT contracts over the Web, but because of its name, potential customers frequently assumed it was a temp agency. The company hired NameTrade to help it develop an alternative.



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Foden and James, who were consultants on the project, first asked OfficeTempo executives to fill out a questionnaire about what they were looking for in a future brand. High on their list was a name that would convey ease of use, technical superiority, and quality. It needed to be "assertive and sophisticated," as well as "ubiquitous."

With these insights in hand, NameTrade's freelance namers got to work, generating a master list of 1,000 names -- from Abraxas to Zivera -- in less than a week. After several more rounds of winnowing, NameTrade and OfficeTempo arrived at a shortlist of four: Apropro, Kivero, Semprio, and Spirigo. At first blush, none may exactly sound like the next Nike, but that's OK. They were smitten with Semprio. Linguistic analysis made a compelling case for the moniker. According to NameTrade, Semprio's "dactylic rhythm pattern begins with a surge of energy, then continues with two unaccented syllables, suggestive of confident completion or peaceful repose." Additionally, "with an initial 's', strong phonetic suggestions of speed, precision and compactness are indicated," NameTrade wrote.

But wait a second. Isn't this just linguistic sophistry? Semprio is, after all, a made-up word. It doesn't actually *mean* anything. Sure, Foden admits, but "phonetic analysis helps clients justify their decision. It gives them a story to tell." Further, he explains, meaningless words don't load a company down with any "connotative baggage" or confine it to one business plan. Joe's Donuts will have a hard time selling software, but Semprio can do whatever it wants. "Semprio is meaningless and therefore completely brandable," Hardy gushes. But doesn't that name look a lot like "semipro"? Not to NameTrade's James. "The 'rio' ending is too exciting," he says.

Anyway, a new venture wants a name it can define, not one that defines it. But if a nonsense word is what a company is after, why use consultants at all? Andersen Consulting, for instance, renamed itself Accenture ([ACN](#)) based on an employee suggestion. The real answer may simply be that naming professionals help executives feel better about the choices they make. They put a scientific veneer on what is ultimately a fairly arbitrary, subjective decision. "Taste is inextricably part of the decision-making process," Hardy says. "But the consultants layer on a kind of objectivity." At the end of the day, a manufactured name might not guarantee business success, but Hardy says that to his mind, "Semprio" is worth every penny. ♦

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