



BRAND STORY

Module 9: The Name Game

How to Secure a Name that Highlights Your Brand Position

Learning Guide | with Bruce Miller

This learning guide captures the full content of Module 9 of the Brand Story course for readers who prefer text over video. All key concepts, examples, and insights from the video are preserved below.

Select Your Business Name Last

You may have wondered why I've waited until Module 9 to name your business. The answer is straightforward: you cannot effectively name a brand until you have positioned it. The name must carry the position — and you can't invent a name for a Brand Story you haven't defined yet.

Donnie's lawn care business from Module 8 illustrates this perfectly. His name needed to reflect his brand position. But which one?

- *Lilliputian Lawn Care: The Tiny Yard Specialist* — the original position.
- *Carbon Free Lawns: The Sustainable Choice* — the refined position after listening to customers.

Donnie adjusted his brand position after engaging with customers, an example of how the right name emerged after the discovery process was complete. If you name first, you risk locking yourself into the wrong brand story before you've found the right one.



Key Insight: *Position first. Name second. The name must carry the brand position — and you can't do that until you know what the position is.*

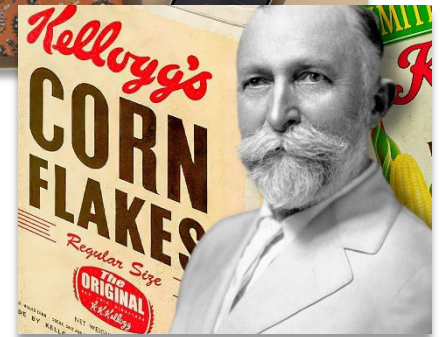
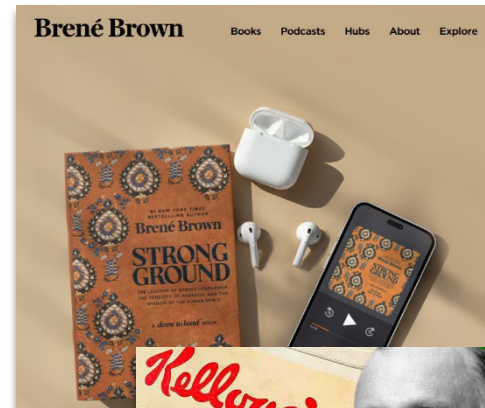
Four Categories of Brand Names

Every business name falls into one or more of four categories: **Vanity**, **Descriptive**, **Lyrical**, or **Positional**. For non-Vanity names, the *hat trick* is to be Descriptive, Lyrical, and Positional all at once.

Vanity Names

A vanity name uses the founder's personal name as the brand. This approach conveys authority and thought leadership — it puts a person's reputation behind the product. It works particularly well for public figures, consultants, and knowledge businesses:

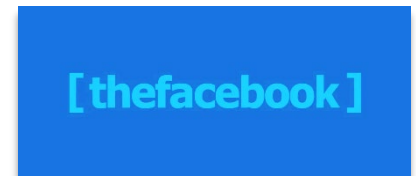
- *Brené Brown*, *Tony Robbins* — personal brands built around expertise.
- *Dell Computer*, *Hewlett-Packard*, *The Walt Disney Company*, *Kellogg's* — founder names that became product empires.



Descriptive Names

Descriptive names tell you exactly what the business does or sells. The advantage is instant clarity; the risk is when they feel generic and are hard to protect legally (see Chapter 11: Trademarking).

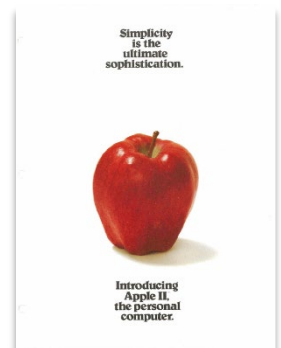
- *Kentucky Fried Chicken* — exactly what it says.
- *The Athletic Shoe Shop* — no mystery here.
- *Facebook* — originally The Face Book, named for the social directories used at Harvard.



Lyrical Names

Lyrical names are thematic — they evoke a feeling, a world, or an idea rather than describing the product literally. These are often the most powerful and enduring brand names:

- *Apple* — made computing feel friendly and approachable.
- *Amazon* — Jeff Bezos chose the world's largest river to suggest the world's largest bookstore.
- *Design Coup* — born when my team at CheckFree was asked by the CMO to copy a competitor's design. We ignored him: "Forget that; time for a Design Coup!" We quit and started our own firm. Descriptive (design business), Lyrical (coup = revolutionary), Positional (edgy, bold work).



Positional Names

Positional names explain why you need the product or service – their differentiator in the marketplace.

- *Untuckit* — shirts designed to be worn untucked.

The ideal name works three ways: Descriptive enough for clarity, lyrical enough to be memorable, and positional enough to differentiate. (see next section).



Names That Carry Their Brand Position

The strongest brand names don't just identify a business—they communicate its brand position. A few examples:

- **Smart Water** — electrolytes make water smarter to drink. The benefit is built into the name.
- **OneBlade** — single-blade razors deliver a smoother shave. The position is the name.
- **Everything Breaks** — sells home protection plans. Buy the product before something expensive breaks.
- **Dropbox** — the no-brainer way to store your files. Dead simple and immediately understood.
- **Farm Burger** — farm-to-table, grass-fed beef burgers in my neighborhood. The sourcing story is the name.



The



Granola bars offer a master class in positional naming:

- **Luna** — aimed at women.
- **Clif Bar** — targets rock-climbing men, or at least men who imagine themselves rock climbing.
- **Kind** — suggests “doing kind things for your body.”

The Gold Standard: Four Criteria for the Perfect Name

It is difficult to satisfy every criterion, but hitting all four is the jackpot:



#	Criterion	What It Means
1	Descriptive	Conveys what the brand does or sells.
2	Lyrical	Sounds good, feels memorable, rolls off the tongue.
3	Positional	Communicates the brand position — the Big Idea.
4	Short	One or two words. Easy to remember, easy to design around.



OneBlade hits all four: it's descriptive (one blade), lyrical (clean and confident), positional (smoother shave), and short (two syllables). That's the gold standard in action.

Key Insight: *One to two words is the ideal length. The world's most famous brands compress to two letters — GE, GM, HP. Oprah publishes a magazine called O. Brevity is power.*



What to Avoid: Seven Naming Pitfalls

1. Cumbersome Long Names

Successful brands condense their names when they create challenges for logo designers, domain registration, and customer recall. The pattern is consistent:

- Kentucky Fried Chicken → KFC
- Federal Express → FedEx
- Dunkin' Donuts → Dunkin'
- PriceWaterhouseCoopers → PwC
- Home Box Office → HBO — Home Box Office shortened successful – then, a cautionary tale: The subsequent rebrand to MAX destroyed years of brand equity. The eventual compromise, HBO Max, was arguably no better. The brands with the most resources often make the biggest brand mistakes.

PRICEWATERHOUSECOOPERS 



2. Be Careful with Foreign Words

I helped a French couple launch Au Pan Crêpe — *the crêpe pan restaurant* — a stylish name with a real problem: people in Georgia couldn't pronounce it. ("Is that 'Oh pan creep'?") The owners renamed it French Gourmet Bistro. Style without accessibility is a liability.



3. Avoid Creative Spellings



Lyft and Grindr can survive unusual spellings because they invested millions in brand recognition. You probably haven't. Creative spellings force you to spell your name in every conversation, over the phone, and in every elevator pitch. That gets old fast. The financial consequences can be steep:

- The founders launched *Kabbage.com* with a K when they discovered the K name was \$73,800 cheaper. Ultimately, they had to purchase Cabbage.com (as a redirect with a C) for a significant sum.
- *Flickr* lost an estimated 3.5 million visitors per year to mistyped traffic going to Flickr.com. Yahoo ultimately paid \$600,000 to acquire *flicker.com* as a redirect.



- *Grindr*: if you ask Siri to open it, she routes you to the Grinder restaurant chain.

4. Avoid Fake Words — Unless You Can Afford Them

Made-up words require massive investment in brand promotion to take hold. A few that had the resources to make it work:

- *Blinkist* — speed-reading platform for nonfiction books.
- *Zillow* — now a multinational real estate brand.
- *Fiverr* — the freelance marketplace.
- *Spotify* — the granddaddy of invented names. Remarkably, a name that sounds like a laundry spot-remover became the defining global music brand.



And a few fake words that failed:

- *Kiip* — mobile advertising platform. Forced into foreclosure.
- *Xobni* — “Inbox” spelled backward. Utterly unpronounceable. They folded.
- *Qdoba* — This Mexican food chain has survived, but one could argue that the name does not work for the brand.



The Domain Name: Your Digital Brand Position



With over 350 million domains registered, finding a .com that matches your company name requires creativity. The shortage of available single-word .com domains is precisely what drives bad spellings and invented words.

Ideally, your business name and your URL should be identical, both ending in .com. That’s likely not possible; but there are six legitimate workarounds:

Tactic	Examples
1. Add a Descriptive word	OneBlade Shave .com, GoGo Air .com, Mute Snoring.com, Snyder sofHanover .com
2. Add a Prefix	The Guardian.com, Its Marta.com, Get Quip.com, GoFund Me .com
3. Add a Suffix	Shop ify .com (from “Shop”)
4. Sneak In Initials	Joes PH .com (for Joe’s Plumbing & Heating)
5. Invent a Proper Name	MackWeldon .com — a fictitious name for a clothing brand that connotes masculinity and practicality
6. Avoid Hyphens	Python-Publishing.com forces you to spell it out every time. Don’t do it.

Approximately 50% of all websites use .com.

It remains the most trusted and recognized extension.

Newer extensions like .guru, .ninja, or country-code extensions (.io, .ly) can work in specific contexts — .io has become a recognized shorthand in the tech industry — but some extensions carry risk for general business use.

The Smartly mobile app *Smartly.io* started as *Smart.ly*, which used the country code of Libya. Yes, awkward.

Traditional Domains

.com
.net
.org
.gov
.edu
.info
.biz
...

New Domains

.guru
.plumbing
.realtor
.space
.design
.cloud
.ninja
...

Country Domains

.ca
.tw
.uk
.fr
.de
.in
.br
...



When Your Desired Domain Isn't Available: A Three-Step Process

If the domain you want shows as unavailable, don't give up immediately:

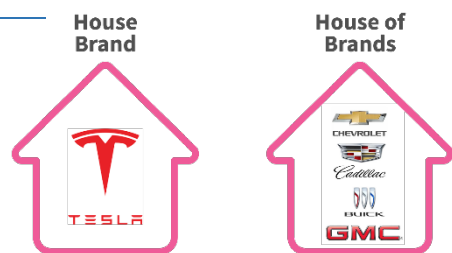
1. **Check the usage.** Type the domain directly into a browser. A registered domain that returns nothing — no active site — may be negotiable.
2. **Check the ownership.** Go to Whois.com to find out who registered it, when, and through which registrar.
3. **Go to the registrar.** For a fee (around \$99), services like GoDaddy will contact the owner on your behalf to explore a purchase. Be prepared to spend real money.

Sara Anderson, a mom creating art in a spare room, paid \$1,200 to secure *SaraAnderson.com*. It was a significant investment — and a smart one. The domain signals that she is a legitimate designer brand, not a hobbyist.



Product Names: House Brand vs. House of Brands

When naming products, every company faces a fundamental strategic choice: build a **House Brand** or a **House of Brands**.



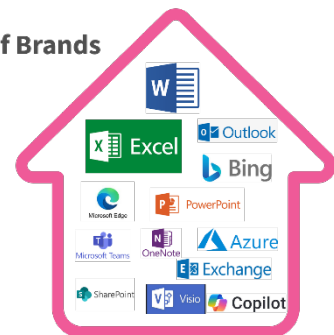
House of Brands

A House of Brands gives each product its own independent name and identity. General Motors is the classic example — historically selling 43 different automobile brands, now whittled down to four: Chevrolet, Buick, Cadillac, and GMC.

Microsoft has followed a similar path, launching countless products under different names.

The challenge: each brand requires its own marketing investment. Maintaining many brands dilutes resources and makes it harder to build cumulative equity.

House of Brands



House Brand

A House Brand applies the same master name to every product. Tesla carries the Tesla name across all its vehicles. Google names all its products Google. Apple's product names all begin with a lowercase "i" or carry the Apple name directly.

In practice, the smaller the company, the more tempting it is to create separate product brands — but this is usually a mistake. Smaller companies have fewer resources, which means every branding dollar needs to build the same equity in the same name.

House Brand



A single house brand is almost always easier to promote, easier to build recognition around, and more durable over time.

Key Insight: *Take it from the big guys: a single house brand is easier to promote and build. The smaller your company, the more important this rule becomes.*

In a nod to Shirley Ellis,

who recorded the hit single "[The Name Game](#)" in 1964: [bonannafanna.com](#) is currently available for \$4.99.

Go have fun with it.

One more fun Name Game:

How many GM brands, past and present, can you name?



House of Brands

