

Linguist is a natural as a branding expert

East Bay Business Times - by [Katy Lieber](#)

Laurel Sutton was one of those students in high school who got an 800 on the verbal section of her SAT.

She loved English so much she became the first student in the history of Rutgers University in New Jersey to graduate with a degree in linguistics the study of language.

Little wonder then that she's in the word business.

Sutton is a founding principal and linguistics director at Oakland's nine-employee brand development firm Catchword, started in 1997 with partners Burt Alper and Maria Cypher. The three partners previously worked for Master-McNeil, another branding company in Berkeley.

But finding the perfect words for businesses, not creating cash for herself, is still what's most important to Sutton, who's working on getting her linguistics Ph.D. at UC-Berkeley while still helping to run the startup.

"We didn't start in this business to get filthy rich. We don't care (about money) that much; we're in it for the names," Sutton says.

She previously was a teaching assistant at UC-Berkeley and edited Inquisitor, a zine she put out with some friends.

Business philosophy

The basics: "Try to accommodate clients however you can, creatively or otherwise. Sometimes clients give us specific requests; sometimes their requests are quite broad. We try as hard as we can to accommodate everyone whether it be working on the tactical side of things, a budget or hand-holding."

Best way to keep competitive edge: "Keep evolving the business to meet the clients' needs."

Guiding principle: "Always treat clients and partners with respect."

Self-portrait

First job: "Managed a record store."

Words that best describe you: "Working mom, wife, daughter, linguist, reader, writer, feminist, skeptic, science fiction fan. Smart, funny, tough. My nickname is Vinnie (jokingly called that because she's regarded as the toughest of the partners and she's from New Jersey)."

Like best about job: "When our names are released to the public. There's nothing like seeing your work on billboards or on TV commercials."

Like least about job: "When great names go away because the product isn't launched, the company runs out of money, etc.; it's heartbreaking!"

Pet peeve: "Misplaced apostrophes (it's vs. its)."

Most important lesson learned: "Being right isn't always the most important thing."

Most interested in meeting: "Steve Jobs, so I can ask him why Apple is really called Apple."

Most respected competitor: "Lexicon, a branding company in Sausalito."

Three greatest passions: "My family, books, and friends that I've met online."

Judgment calls

Best business decision: "To start the business."

Toughest business decision: "To start the business, it's a huge risk. We put all our own money into it. We really wanted to be our own bosses."

Biggest missed opportunity: "Not registering a bunch of generic names as domain names when they were available. Business.com, wine.com, etc."

Acquired tastes

Status symbol: "I don't really have one."

Favorite movie: "Local Hero"

Favorite book: "'Life and Loves of a She-Devil,' by Fay Weldon."

Favorite restaurant: "House of Nanking in San Francisco."

Favorite vacation spot: "Orient Bay in St. Maarten."

Set of wheels: "Saturn."

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