



Ask An Expert

## The Name On The Door

Megan Johnston, 03.09.06, 10:00 AM ET

*Have burning questions about how to run your small business better? E-mail [askanexpert@forbes.net](mailto:askanexpert@forbes.net) with your query, and we will track down the advice.*

### I'm trying to come up with a name for my new business. Should I use my own?

A rose by any other name might smell just as sweet, but some small businesses might flat-out stink.

The world is filled with successful eponymous companies: The Walt Disney Co., Dell, Ralph Lauren and Heinz, to name a few. The strategy has its merits. By using their own names, entrepreneurs communicate that they stand by their services--an important message for professional types such as doctors, lawyers and accountants. Then there's the psychological benefit: Nothing says "You da man!" like slapping your name on the door.

Yet entrepreneurs should think hard about this decision before giving in to a rush of pride, says **Burt Alper**, co-founder and strategy director of **Catchword Branding**, a San Francisco-based marketing boutique that specializes in naming companies. Some issues to consider:

#### Is The Name Taken?

An obvious question, perhaps, but one with real ramifications if it's overlooked. If your last name is Disney, and you're unrelated to the famous trademarked family, then you're out of luck. "They would sue the pants off of you as soon as you started to open your business," says Alper. This problem also applies to domain names on the Web. If [www.yourname.com](http://www.yourname.com) is already taken and your business has a large online component, you run the risk of confusing your customers by using another Web address.

Another related consideration for serial entrepreneurs: When Pearl Meyer sold her eponymous executive compensation firm to Clark/Bardes Holdings (now Clark Inc.) in 2000, she also relinquished the rights to her trademarked name. That made things a bit difficult last August when Meyer, fed up with working for a publicly held company, decided to leave Clark to strike out on her own. She ended up calling the new firm **Steven Hall & Partners**, after her longtime partner.

#### Is It Intelligible?

Don't laugh. An unusual last name may still be available for use, but if it's difficult to pronounce and nearly impossible to spell, it's unlikely to stick in customers' heads. "In the mass market, it's not quite effective," says Alper.

#### Is It Brand-Worthy?

If you're hanging out a shingle as a lawyer or accountant, boring last names and commas are better than Litigators R Us. Not so for less staid professions such as retailing and design (or a naming consultancy). Says Alper: "A made-up name gives you some sense of relevance, and some sense of charisma." Unlike, say, Alper Inc.

#### What If The Business Fails?

While entrepreneurs shudder at the thought of defeat, the fact is that it may well take a few tries to launch a successful business. If your first eponymous attempt flounders, you may not want that name associated with your next venture.

#### What If You Get In Trouble?

A founder's run-in with the law can tarnish an eponymous firm's good name. Shares of Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia cratered 75%, to \$5 from \$20, in 2002 during the ImClone Systems insider-trading scandal, though the indomitable domestic diva has made a mighty comeback. Alper points out that an entrepreneur's legal liability does not increase because her name is on the door. Then again, angry creditors might have an easier time finding the bum.

