Should You Use Your Own Name or Create a Brand Name for Your Business?

By Rob Meyerson

Is there a correct answer to the question?

- Using your personal name means presenting yourself as an individual contributor and keeping the focus on you. Coming up with a brand name, on the other hand, will require a thorough naming process and will create some "daylight" between you and the business. Either path can work and deciding which is right for you depends on a range of personal factors.
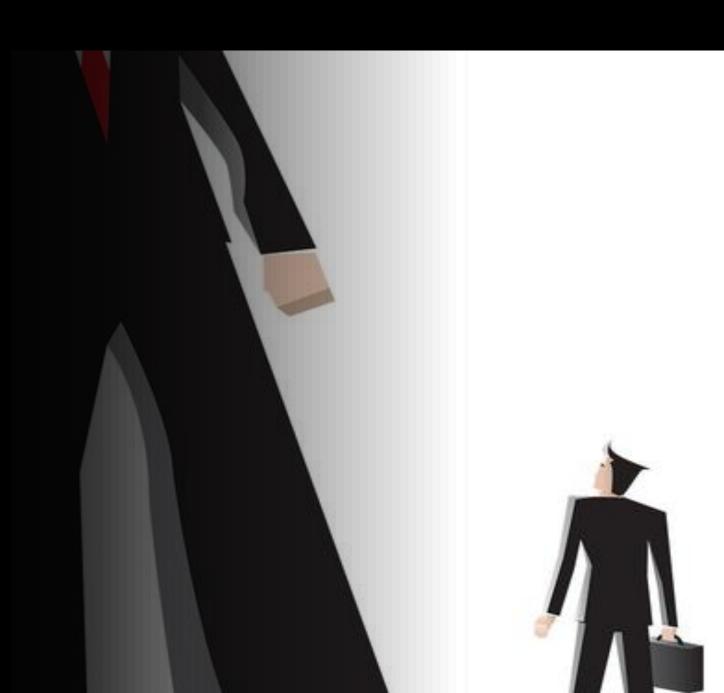
A brand name suggests scale

- In the past, many companies took on their founder's names. Think Lipton, Ford, or Charles Schwab. But these companies' modern-day counterparts are more likely to develop unique brand names like Starbucks, Tesla, or Robinhood (For the record, Starbuck is a fictional character from Moby Dick, Nikola Tesla died 60 years before the founding of Tesla Motors, and it's unlikely Robin Hood was a real person, much less had any involvement with the financial services app.). Because of this shift, a unique brand name, rather than a founder's name (i.e., yours) can create an impression of a larger organization, which implies more breadth and depth.
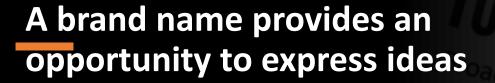
A brand name suggests scale

- If you're thinking, "But I don't want anyone to think I'm more than one person," don't underestimate the disadvantage solo freelancers can face in competitive situations. Remember that people who'll never meet you - whether they're decision-makers or procurement personnel - may be making judgments based on your name alone. For example, imagine having to select one of the following brand consultancies: Catchword, Lexicon, or Sally Flakowitz. The personal name creates an awkward, apples-to-oranges situation you're probably better off avoiding.

A brand name gives you room to grow

- Speaking of scale, another benefit of a brand name is its potential to stretch as your business changes. You may not plan on building a 15-person team - but plans often change. Should your business become more than a one-person operation, a brand name provides room to grow.

- This logic applies even on a project-to-project basis. When you take on a large assignment, you may need to subcontract work or hire other freelancers as teammates. When showing up at a client's office with a colleague, introducing yourselves as independent freelancers who happen to be working together at the moment does not inspire confidence. It creates a temporary, noncommittal feeling. It's much easier - and sounds more professional - to say, "Hi, I'm Rob, and this is Sally. We're from [Brand Name]."
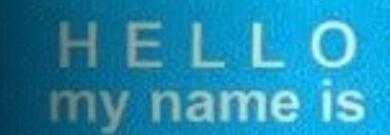
A brand name provides an opportunity to express ideas

- What ideas and feelings does your name evoke to those who hear it? Hopefully, amongst your family and friends, at least, a host of positive adjectives are associated with your name - perhaps smart, creative, and hardworking. But for those who've never met you? Never heard of you? It's just a name. Unless you go by "Sting" or "The Rock," your name doesn't really convey any meaning. It doesn't tell prospective clients that you're smart or creative. It's not even a name you chose.

- But creating a brand name allows you to say something. Some brand names are straightforward and descriptive (e.g., Best Buy), while some merely suggest an idea (e.g., Zipcar). Others venture into the abstract - they don't carry any relevant meaning but can nevertheless convey a sense of personality, like Apple (simple) or Virgin (irreverent). No matter what approach your brand name has, you can use it to tell people something about yourself and the work you do.

A brand name may be easier to spell and pronounce

- Some first and last names are easier to pronounce than others, but chances are the brand name you create will be shorter than your personal name (one word rather than two, for example). And since you're building the name from scratch, you'll have an opportunity to ensure its ease of use. While there are exceptions, most of the best brand names are short and sweet. Names built from one or more real English words are more likely to be understood, pronounceable, and correctly spelled than many people's names.

- If you have any interest in doing business overseas, you may find your personal name has additional drawbacks. Names that are commonplace in one language or culture may appear strange or unpronounceable in other parts of the world. Your name may lead people to assume - accurately or not - that you're from a particular country or region and, whether or not it's fair, that assumption may come with prejudices. English, however, has become the lingua franca of global business. A real English word or two is likely to be understood and pronounceable by many businesspeople for whom English is not a native tongue.

A brand name may be more distinctive

- The flip side of the point above is that, in some cases, personal names are so common that they fail to stand out. If your name is "Niamh Moloughney," good luck getting people to spell and pronounce it correctly. But if you're one of the over 11,000 Ann Millers on LinkedIn, your prospective customers may have trouble remembering you or telling you apart from other freelancers.

- Reviewing competitor names is a critical step in any brand naming process. In creating your brand name, you can choose to use a different naming style, pick one that's significantly shorter or longer than competitors, or find an initial letter that's unique to the category.

- Ultimately, this decision depends heavily on your given name and surname. How common are they? Are they hard to spell or pronounce? Will they associate you with a specific language, country, or region - for better or worse? Some people's names almost beg to be used as brand names, like Smart & Final (named after founders J.S. Smart and H.D. Final) or Fox Racing (named after founder Geoff Fox). They're short, simple, easy to remember, and have built-in meaning or imagery. Unless you're lucky enough to have such a distinctive, evocative name, consider creating a brand name for your freelance business.