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WHAT'S IN A NAME?

How tech startups craft interesting, pronounceable and affordable monikers



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As a 21st century society, we have become so used to technology startups having odd or made-up names that we often don't give a second thought to the meanings behind them. But in truth, a lot of sweat, brainpower and mad word science goes into crafting those company monikers.

Most founding teams rely on the same basic naming criteria:

- Is it creative?
- Does it relate well to the field in which the company operates?
- Does it evoke appropriate feelings or images among potential customers and investors?
- Is it recognizable and easy to pronounce?
- Is it unique and not too close to any other copyrighted names?

Using this framework, some startup companies wind up with names that are pretty self-explanatory. For instance, there's Baltimore-based ClearMask, which makes — you guessed it — clear surgical masks intended to help break down communication barriers in medical settings.

But other startup names are a little tougher to parse out. For example, unless you are fluent in the dead language of Latin, you likely wouldn't know the meaning behind "Protenus," or why that name was chosen for a health care technology company. (No, by the way, it doesn't have anything to do with professional tennis).

Local startup executives recently shared the stories behind some of the company names you've probably heard many times, but never quite understood.

Protenus Inc.

Nick Culbertson, CEO of health IT firm Protenus Inc., said his favorite part about his company's name is that he knows it is an unfamiliar term, but most people don't ask questions about it until they've been working with the company for some time and suddenly realize they don't know what it means. He likes getting to tell the naming story.

The founding team behind Protenus came up with some of its own, more specific criteria for naming the firm, Culbertson said. The name had to be unique, meaningful, memorable and three syllables or less. It had to evoke the concepts of "confidence, science and cutting-edge." And very importantly, it had to have an available, mainstream domain.

Culbertson said one of the hardest parts of choosing a name for a startup company is securing a good web domain, which can be expensive. Sometimes startups have to add hyphens or extra words to make a domain name unique, or they resort to nontraditional online addresses, like those ending with ".co" instead of ".com." Those adjustments can potentially make the company more difficult to find online, Culbertson said.

"Switching domains is way more complicated, costly and confusing than you'd think, so many companies are stuck with whatever domain they start with," he said. "That's why getting it right early matters so much."

Culbertson and Protenus co-founder Robert Lord mulled a handful of name options and ultimately settled on Protenus, which was recommended by an adviser to the company and is Latin for onward or upward. The name hit all the criteria, and fit with the company's vision of working to help move health care compliance forward with artificial intelligence and automation, Culbertson said.

"The cherry on top is that the domain protenus.com was owned by a Czechoslovakian marketing company, and they were willing to part with it for \$200 because they were not using it," Culbertson recalled. "At the time, I thought that was super expensive but looking back, what a steal."

ZeroFOX

Baltimore cybersecurity company ZeroFOX had to pivot away from its original name because it did not pass muster when it came to one of the standard naming criteria — being easy to pronounce.

The firm was founded under a different name: Riskive. But it only stuck around for the first 10 months of the company's lifespan, said Chief of Staff Clara Gustafson, because the founding team

“quickly realized their mistaken efforts to invent a word.” The name was intended to be a hybrid of the terms “risk” and “predictive,” but no one could pronounce it the way the founders had intended. Common mispronunciations included “Risk-IV, Risk-ivie, Risk-i-vey, and the list goes on.”

“Once we knew that Riskive could not be our name, we ordered pizza and beer to our then-office...and sat down to brainstorm,” Gustafson said.

The parameters of the new name included that it had to be associated with cybersecurity, and part of the word had to relate to an animal or mascot — because how can you have a cool new tech company without a cool mascot?

“We Googled the top-10 most globally recognizable animals and made a huge list of cyber-oriented words. In our opinion, the best combination of these words ended up being ZeroFOX,” Gustafson said, adding that the “zero” represents the cyber concept of zero-day threats, or threats that haven’t been seen before, and relates to concepts like zero hardware and zero downtime.

The ZeroFOX founding team had finalized the renaming right before the popular “What Does the Fox Say?” song came out in 2013, which Gustafson said felt like a “good omen” for the new name.

Tenable Inc.

Perhaps one of the most recognizable names among Maryland cyber companies is Tenable Inc., formerly called Tenable Network Security. Although he is no longer an executive at the publicly traded firm, Tenable co-founder and former CEO Ron Gula recalls some of the challenges of picking a name for the company in the early 2000s.

Gula knew he wanted the name to involve real words, not made-up ones as has become fairly common for tech companies. And he is partial to names that plainly present what a company does. He offered the example of another Maryland firm, Cybrary, which has a name that pretty clearly indicates its mission of being an online library of cybersecurity content.

The Tenable founding team settled on a name that means maintainable and defensible, and secured the tenable.com domain. They felt the name was representative of the struggle many IT organizations face in staying cyber secure, Gula said.

Interestingly, the name did end being a bit close to that of an Ohio-based company. But that firm, which is called Tenable Protective Services and has the domain tenable.net, offers an entirely different kind of security service.

“Every now and then, we'd get calls for armored car executive protection for trips to Brazil and Africa,” Gula said.

emocha Mobile Health Inc.

When CEO Sebastian Seiguer first heard the name “emocha,” he was concerned it may conjure images of a coffee drink rather than a health care technology.

It turns out the lead word in emocha Mobile Health Inc., is actually an acronym — it stands for electronic mobile comprehensive health application — and the name of the technology predates the company, Seiguer explained. It was created by a group of researchers and educators at the Johns Hopkins Center for Clinical Global Health who launched the platform in 2007.

Seiguer confessed when he first took over the company, he was tempted to change the name. His previous venture was a coffee chain, and he worried some people might think he had named the startup after a beverage. But in partnering with the team at Hopkins, it became clear that the term emocha was known in research circles, Seiguer said.

“Once we licensed the technology, we found that we could generate revenues immediately from the name recognition combined with the clinical guidance of our Hopkins advisers,” he said.

Catalyte

Baltimore's Catalyte, a company that specializes in training and deploying people from diverse backgrounds as qualified software developers, has had a few names in its over 20-year lifespan. It was founded as Catalyst IT Services in 2000, and was later renamed Catalyst DevWorks. But all the while, the firm referred to its teams of retrained developers as “Catalytes.”

“This was a combination of the ideas that they are the catalysts for our clients, and a guiding light that helps illuminate a path for others from non-traditional backgrounds to enter the tech industry,” said Adam Curtis, senior marketing manager at Catalyte.

Finally naming the company Catalyte was, in part, a way to honor the company's employees and to highlight its unique mission, Curtis said. The name serves as a reminder that Catalyte's

strength is not just in the development work it does, but also in the well-trained engineers it produces.

Curtis is pretty sure this latest name is the one that will stick for good. He said as the company has continued to grow and retain hundreds of software developers across the country, it has built up employee and alumni networks that have a strong identity as Catalytes.

“It’s how they see themselves and how they describe themselves. It’s a point of pride in their careers and lives,” he said. “There’s a common bond of shared sacrifice and achievement. We want to continue to honor that and the most public way to do so is with the name Catalyte.”

Tetragram

Although Otha Smith III and his business partners built their startup’s technology specifically for use by consumers in the medical cannabis industry, they did not want to take the typical route of using buzzwords like “canna” or “leaf” in their name. Smith spent much of a Caribbean vacation trying to come up with something more creative and versatile.

“I was literally wracking my brain and driving my wife crazy as I would throw out random names and say, ‘What about this one?’” Smith recalled. “On the second day of our trip, we were at the pool...I remember jumping off the diving board, and once I surfaced I yelled the word ‘Tetragram’ at the top of my lungs.”

Smith’s wife and his fellow pool-goers were taken aback by the outburst, but he was excited to call his partners right away to share the news. The name is a combination of two fairly common terms used in the cannabis industry, he explained. “Tetra” is short for tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC, the cannabinoid that causes the psychoactive effects of cannabis, and “gram” is the most common unit of measurement in cannabis sales.

In addition to wanting the name to be unique, Smith said the founders didn’t want the name to be too obviously cannabis related. Because cannabis remains classified as a federally illegal substance, companies involved in the industry can face a level of stigma and it can be difficult for them to access standard business-building services, like banking. Like many people close to the industry, Smith is confident the federal rules will someday change, but in the meantime he hopes the name Tetragram will be more readily accepted.