

DON'T CHANGE A THING

(ABOUT YOUR NAME)
(UNLESS YOU HAVE TO)

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.....

BY CAITLIN BARRETT

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**WHEN SHOULD
YOU CHANGE YOUR
NAME?**

NEVER.

**(EXCEPT WHEN
YOU HAVE TO.)**

Name changes suck

They're expensive.

They throw out whatever equity you've built into your name.

They can shake up the confidence of both your customers and your employees.

They're expensive.

They tend to be more painful than creating the name the first time around because everyone's attached to the name you need to change.

Oh, and they're *expensive*.

But. Sometimes, there are reasons to consider a name change...

REASON #1

You're ditching bad baggage

Taint happens.

Sometimes, your business will be tainted by its own controversies. Bad practices + negative public opinion is a rough equation, and it can take a lot of effort to demonstrate you're better now. A name change is a strong signal of change: Just be sure you've really evolved as an organization, or all that stinky taint is going to trash your new name, too. (We all still know what Altria is, right?)

Other times, something bad will emerge in the world and it will taint your once-good name. The rise of the terrorist group ISIS meant a lot of name changes, from a mobile payment platform to a Danish dessert company to the workplace on *Archer*.

REASON #2

You're shapeshifting (M&A, divestitures)

You might divest a business. That business might need its own name and identity, completely unlike the business it came from.

You might acquire a business. Occasionally, you won't want to (or be able to) change its name. And of course it make sense to integrate it entirely into yours, and leave its name behind. But in a lot of circumstances, you'll want to evolve, or completely change, the name of that business to reflect its new value, now that it's brought to the market by you.

Mergers are often the trickiest to manage, because both sides of the agreement often have *strong* feelings about which name to keep—or whose name goes first. (If you're two titans joining forces, just pick a new name: It will spare both sides some embarrassing ego flexing.)

REASON #3

You've really changed

Not like, “new hair, new you.” More like, “head transplant, new you.”

A drastic change in the way you're positioned, or what you offer, or the *way* you offer it can be a good reason for change. Say you opened a store called Just Butter, and since opening, you've found a loyal following selling vegan nut-based cheeses.

Suddenly, you've got a potential non-dairy-goods empire on your hands, and it's being held back because its name implies it's literally the opposite of why people love it.

Change that name.

REASON #4

You're ceasing and/or desisting

Cease-and-desist letters are not fun, though they do give us a delightfully grim malapropism: cease-to-exist letters.

Get a lawyer of your own and see what you can do. If you guys decide together not to fight (or if you fight and lose), it's time to change your name.

(It hurts. It happens. We can make a really terrific new one together, though, if that helps.)

REASON #5

Protecting your property

Remember when Sci Fi Channel became SyFy? Sci Fi Channel, according to trademark law, isn't protectable because it could describe *any* channel that featured science-fiction. Mess with the spelling, and you've got something (slightly) more distinctive and protectable.

A local brand going national (Lenny's had to become Lenwich by Lenny's to expand outside of NYC), or expanding its reach to include more types of goods and services, might need to change its name to own its name in all the geographies and trademark classes where it shows up.

We're biased, but we're big believers that it's kind of important for a brand to confidently own its name, so so it's worth the extra effort to get it right.

**A NAME CHANGE
SHOULD SIGNAL
OTHER KINDS OF
CHANGE**

So be clear about what's changed

A name change signals that something is fundamentally different. Ask yourself:

What will support the story of your name change to the audiences that know and trust you?

How can you both tell them *and* show them that there's substance to the shift?

**IT'S A CHANCE TO
(RE-)DO IT RIGHT**

New ways, new name

A new name is your chance to:

- Tell the story of the organization you've become, rather than who you thought you'd be when you were founded
- Suggest the promise of the business you're growing into
- Say something in the voice that's true to the way your audience speaks
- Work, linguistically, with the places where your name is spoken out loud around the world
- Be more distinctive in all the trademark classes where you do business

**IT WILL BE AN
EMOTIONAL
PROCESS**

It's hard to part with a name

Line your halls with tissue boxes. Even people who recognize the shortcomings of a faulty name sometimes find it very hard to imagine life with a new one.

Plan for this. Pick your decision-makers. Set aside your budget for managing trademark searches and registration. Assign a project manager to fight for everyone to pick a name, commit to it, and move on.

**ONE LAST
THING:**

**I HOPE YOU
NEVER HAVE
TO DO THIS
AGAIN.**

About the author

Caitlin Barrett likes to do creative things. Strategically.



Caitlin Barrett is a writer, namer, and brand strategist based in Brooklyn. As a partner in Doublebit Narrative, she spends all day bossing words around.

In her spare time, she lifts heavy things, restores antique axes, and tells jokes to herself on Twitter @badnewsbarrett.

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