

# A NAMING HANDBOOK

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# 1

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# WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

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## What's in a name?

Organizations don't build reputation on company or product name alone. A name is rarely encountered in isolation, bound in a little product-experience-communication cosmos, and a good one won't save a misconceived or badly executed idea. That said, a strong name can't be underestimated. It's a tool in a bigger armoury, but a crucial one. It opens the conversation with a user and it'll be hanging around every interaction thereafter.

When we name our kids, we author the opening lines of their chapter one. We give them names they can grow into, names that fit our vision of what they'll become in the world. Without needing to pour over the evidence, we understand that beyond hypothetical hopes, names have actual consequences in later life. There's evidence people prefer politicians with simpler names and professionals with names that are easy to pronounce climb the corporate ladder more quickly.

The link between name and outcome is true for brands too.

“

**A bad, boring,  
or sound-alike  
name dramatically  
dilutes the brand  
equity and potency**

- Fast Company

”

## A NAME IS A SIGNAL

A name can be a literal signal, describing a specific offer in a matter-of-fact way. This is often the case in technical, B2B worlds, where buyers make speedy, pragmatic decisions. More often than not though, a name's a figurative signal. It conveys how an organization thinks and behaves in a neat little nutshell.

At best, it's a distillation of an organization's purpose, alluding to and setting expectations around an experience.

This means that beyond the straightforward demarcation of A from B, names guide us in one direction or another. They influence our choices and shape our behaviour. We hold them close, give them nicknames (Maccy D's anyone?) and get cross when there's unilateral change. The fierce reactions to the Post Office's disastrous re-naming attempt are testament to that, and almost a million people pleaded with Kellogg's to bring back the humble Coco Pops. Turns, out they wouldn't rather have a bowl of Choco Krispies.

Naming is a perilous little pocket of the branding world, but when it's done well and names are recognized for the right reasons, they provide edge. When they flourish, they set businesses on the road to prosperity.

**“Great companies prosper from the ubiquity of their brand names.”**

- *Wordcraft: The Art of Turning  
Little Words into Big Business*

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# 2

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# WHY IT'S TOUGH

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It's easy to think anyone can come up with a good name, but it's more complicated than that. An idea can come from anywhere, but getting buy in and seeing it through is tough. In fact, naming can be one of the hardest parts of a branding project. Here's why.

# IT'S PERSONAL

Although we whole-heartedly recommend living with and weighing up a name in context over at least a couple of days, it's impossible to avoid knee-jerk, idiosyncratic response.

**“The hardest bit of naming is staying objective. It's virtually impossible not to infer your own personal experiences and prejudices on to the meaning and suitability of a name”**

*- Matthew Weiss, Coley Porter Bell*

As brands and publishing platforms proliferate, we're exposed to language in gloriously creative forms. We're sensitized to nuances and sophisticated in our preferences. As a result, subjective response to an idea for a brand name is natural, welcome in fact. If your gut feeling tells you it's terrible, it probably is. Though it mustn't dominate, instinct has a rightful place at the table.

# IT WON'T BE AVAILABLE

Often a favourite name candidate won't be available as a url. Anyone can freely and cheaply register a web address, meaning there are more owned than properly used. The trademark repository is ever-growing too. Trademarks can be held indefinitely and only need to be renewed every 10 years. Once they're secured and protected, they tend to stay that way.

# IT'LL MEAN SOMETHING ELSE

A word in one language will resemble a word in another through sound or spelling, and inevitably, the word that looks or sounds similar will mean something you'd rather it didn't. There's a plethora of cautionary tales here. French brand Bic changed its name from the original 'Bich'. Chevrolet launched the Nova car in Latin America, where it literally means 'doesn't go'.

The list goes on, and the lesson is it's worth investing in research to check possible connotations. This is especially true when there's potential for launch in global markets, or there's a significant diaspora within the target market (Spanish speakers in the US, for example). Initial investigation can be desk-based but specialist linguistic and cultural sensitivity checks are invaluable.

# PROCESS IS KEY

Finding the 'right' name is never easy, and neither is defining what's right. To structure conversations, it's vital to establish clear parameters and process at the outset. Lateral thinking is great, but rigour never goes amiss. Developing ideas within boundaries and presenting a well-considered argument holds the project together.

**"The best naming projects began by laying out objectives, determining what the name must convey... and understanding what message [it] must communicate."**

- *Wordcraft: The Art of Turning Little Words into Big Business*

# TRENDS COME AND GO

Like anything, naming trends come and go. When someone breaks the mould well, others follow suit and before you know it, there's little difference between names. A name should live as long as the brand does, so it's important to avoid and anticipate fashions. Here's a brief look at a few of the biggest.

### Founder or product

At the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth century names were linked to 'who' – the founder (as in Ford, 1909; Chanel, 1909; Selfridges, 1909), or 'what' – the product (as in General Motors, 1908; International Business Machines, 1924 and General Electric, 1892).

### Location

Geographic names became more common in the sixties, especially when places had positive associations. British Airways (1974) based their brand on polite traditionalism, DKNY on Big Apple glitz. Taking this further, some used their name to bring to mind a different place. French-sounding British company Pret a Manger (1984) used the country's reputation for exacting gourmet standards to suggest a better culinary experience.

1900

1960

1970

2000

### Attitude

At the end of the twentieth century, attitude-based names took hold, like Virgin (1970), Apple (1976) & Orange (1990). They stood out and many survived the test of time. They quickly convey a value that lives at the heart of the brand. For Orange and Apple, it's that telecoms and technology design respectively should be simple and human-centred. For Branson, as a 'virgin' in business he set out to be the ultimate iconoclast, always challenging business conventions.

### Invention

Proprietary names are easy to protect and recently we've seen inventions (Skype, 2003; Zynga, 2007), compounds (Facebook, 2004; YouTube, 2005), and misspelled or mimetic words (Tumblr, 2007; Flickr, 2004). Coined Latinate words have also become popular with multi-nationals looking to optimise market share (Aviva 2000; Centrica, 1997). They can be trademarked and lack tricky consonant clusters. They apply anywhere and are familiar to Spanish, French and Italian speakers whose mother tongues have Latin roots.

There's currently a debate about whether single letter domain names, like a.com should be made available to register. If they are, this could be the source of another new trend.

# IT TAKES COURAGE

If nobody objects, you've probably got the wrong name. A name should spark intrigue and polarize people. ProMail, an early candidate for the product we know as BlackBerry, would probably have been an easier sell-in to RIM's execs. When Jeff Bezos created Amazon in 1994, major competitors Borders Books and Waldenbooks were bemused, and who'd have thought a Wii would achieve market dominance?

It takes a brave CEO to run with a bold name, and it's not easy. At the slightest wobble, the media pounce. Consignia was announced as the new name for the holding company that owned the UK's post offices in 1991. It was only ever supposed to be the corporate name in European markets. The Post Office was always going to be so-called and postmen weren't going to become ConsigniaMen overnight. But Consignia didn't explain the strategy. The British public whipped themselves up and the name fell away, to be replaced by the much less objectionable Post Office Group.

Though Consignia isn't a brilliant name, clearer communication and conviction would have given it a fairer chance. That's what Centrica did. The word was clearly established as the new name for the holding company behind British Gas. It was to help the company diversify beyond energy. British Gas would still appear at the top of bills and on uniforms. The explanation and commitment were clear, and both brand names are still going strong.



# 3

## WHAT MAKES A GOOD ONE?

It's hard to define what makes a good brand name and you'll link measurement to the specific objectives in the brief. Broadly speaking though there are four factors to consider.

### **semantic value**

Does it convey the right idea or attitude?

### **strategic impact**

Does it align to your business objectives?

### **phonetic structure**

Is it easy to say and remember?

### **availability**

Is it legally ownable?

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# 4

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# NAMING FRAMEWORK

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The framework on the following pages lays out three naming categories. There aren't hard and fast lines between them and they apply to organizations, products and services alike. We'll also look at other considerations when choosing a name, and there's a neat summary at the end of the section.



## TYPES OF NAME

### DESCRIPTIVE

This type of name, like The British Museum, lowcostholidays.com and Royal Bank of Scotland, does what it says on the tin.

#### WHEN IT'S RIGHT

It describes a particular feature or benefit. If focused on a point of difference, it can set a product apart from competitors. It's literal, easy to get and not costly to build. It can reinforce a masterbrand, when launching an entirely new name isn't necessary. It's ideal for products with a short life cycle and low marketing budget, and it's often used in B2B and technical markets where consumers want to cut to the chase.

#### WHEN IT'S NOT

If there's potential for the proposition to evolve, it's either restrictive for the organisation or misleading for the consumer. (Lastminute.com was once an eye-catching USP. Now it allows users to book experiences a year in advance, it can feel disappointing.) It can also be difficult to secure and protect this type of name. Mass-market retailers with copycat private labels can easily steal the charge given their distribution advantage. If it's too literal it won't sound like a brand name at all and won't be remembered. And a descriptive name is only so in one language - it won't work in the same way in a foreign language market.



## EVOCATIVE

There's a scale in this category. At one end, a descriptive evocative name provides a connection to something real that relates to an aspect of the organization, service, product or experience. Crunchie bars are crunchy, Ray Bans block the sun's rays, and First Direct offer straight-talking banking services.

At the other end of the scale, there are abstract evocative names. They take a lateral leap and have symbolic value. They're metaphors or mnemonics – shortcuts to bigger concepts. Rather than describe what a product does, a USP or an actual element of the experience, an abstract evocative name might allude to how it makes the consumer feel or what it allows them to do. It's another step removed and sometimes involves taking a real word and placing it out of context for impact. Examples include Amazon, Dove, Innocent and Visa.

### WHEN IT'S RIGHT

Evocative names are multi-dimensional, suggestive and pack more emotional punch. They're useful when a product is differentiated from competitors for expressive rather than functional reasons, and can philosophically like to a brand purpose. They can be effective for early entrants in a business sector and tend to be easier to trademark. They're open, allowing room for business development in a number of directions, so they're helpful for propositions that might evolve in time.

### WHEN IT'S NOT

People may need help understanding the nuts and bolts of the offer, so evocative names require initial marketing spend and careful messaging planning.





## ABSTRACT

These are invented words that aren't obviously linked to a product, like Spotify, Skype & Kodak. They're sometimes constructed by truncating two or more 'starter' words.

### WHEN IT'S RIGHT

As this type of name is proprietary, protection is straightforward. An abstract word can be created to appear familiar to speakers of lots of different languages, and it's a blank canvas – an empty vessel – ready to be imbued with meaning. It uses the 'Juliet principle', which links to Shakespeare's idea that a rose would smell sweet by any name. Once this type of name is established, it can come to completely define a category.

### WHEN IT'S NOT

It requires significant spend to get embedded and understood. Abstract names can also be so overly engineered that they become bland and cold. As Frankel puts it, 'there's nothing much to get hold of, no emotion to piggyback into your brand...When they don't work, they're horrible.'

# LINGUISTIC CONSIDERATIONS

There's more to a name than semantics. To build robust recommendations, you should think about the linguistics too. These considerations fall into three areas.

## **Phonetics**

In other words, the sound of the word. Is there a good balance between consonants and vowels? Does it have a good rhythm? Do people always place the stress in the same place? All this dictates how memorable the name is. Coca Cola, with its alternating vowels and sing-song rhythm, is a perfect example in this respect.

Beyond this, how easy it is to say for speakers of different languages? In 2000, Unilever spent £2 million changing 'Jif' to 'Cif' as the 'j' letter represents diverse sounds internationally. In English it's the hard sound in 'jelly'. In French it's softer, in German it's like the 'y' in 'young', and in Spanish it's the 'h' in 'hot'. X is tricky too and some letters don't exist in other languages. Japanese doesn't have an 'l' sound and Pepsi is 'Bebsi' in Arabic as there's no equivalent for the English 'p' sound. All this seems detailed, but considering troublesome phonemes upfront avoids cost later.

## **Poetics**

To shape phonetics, naming consultants draw on creative writing techniques. Two of the most common are rhyme (to make fun, humorous names like PigglyWiggly, Nutter Butter and HobNob) and alliteration (for friendly, approachable names like Burt's Bees, Dunkin' Donuts and Mr Muscle).





## Phonosemantics

Phonosemantics, or sound symbolism, refers to the innate meaning in sounds.

Whether a sound can hold meaning is a fascinating and massively debated topic. Following Saussure (1949), the dominant view in contemporary linguistics is that ‘the sign is arbitrary’, i.e. there’s no relationship between a word and the thing it describes. As Pinker puts it, the word ‘dog’ ‘does not look like, walk like or woof like a dog’.

Although this perspective isn’t seriously disputed, neuroscientists have found exceptions. The most notable is based on a series of experiments by a German-American psychologist. To investigate the relationship between phonemes and meaning, Kohler tested whether sounds could be mapped to visuals. He found that native speakers of completely different languages identified a rounded shape with the word ‘naluma’ and an angular shape with the word, ‘taketa’, concluding that meaning and sound can never be fully separated.

There are a couple of areas of phonosemantics that are interesting for naming consultants, identified in *Sound Symbolism*.

## Conventional sound symbolism

...which is linked to a specific language. If a sound is repeated in a group of words with a similar meaning, that sound can come to be associated with that meaning by native speakers of that language. For example, the phoneme ‘gl’ is used in glimmer, glisten, glint, glow and glitter, so a word that starts with ‘gl’ might make me think of shiny things. Or, as ‘sl’ is slippery, sliding and slithering, it might evoke wet, fluid imagery.

## Synesthetic sound symbolism

...which relates to sounds that consistently represent visual or tactile properties. They have universal associations and apply no matter the native language.

The diagram consists of two light red hexagons. The top hexagon contains the letters 'p', 't', and 'k' in a large, white, sans-serif font. The bottom hexagon contains a smaller red hexagon with the text '= hard, sharp and masculine' and a paragraph of text at the bottom.

p t k

= hard, sharp and masculine

These are obstruent consonants called stops, meaning they obstruct airflow. They're perceived as being harder, sharper and more masculine.

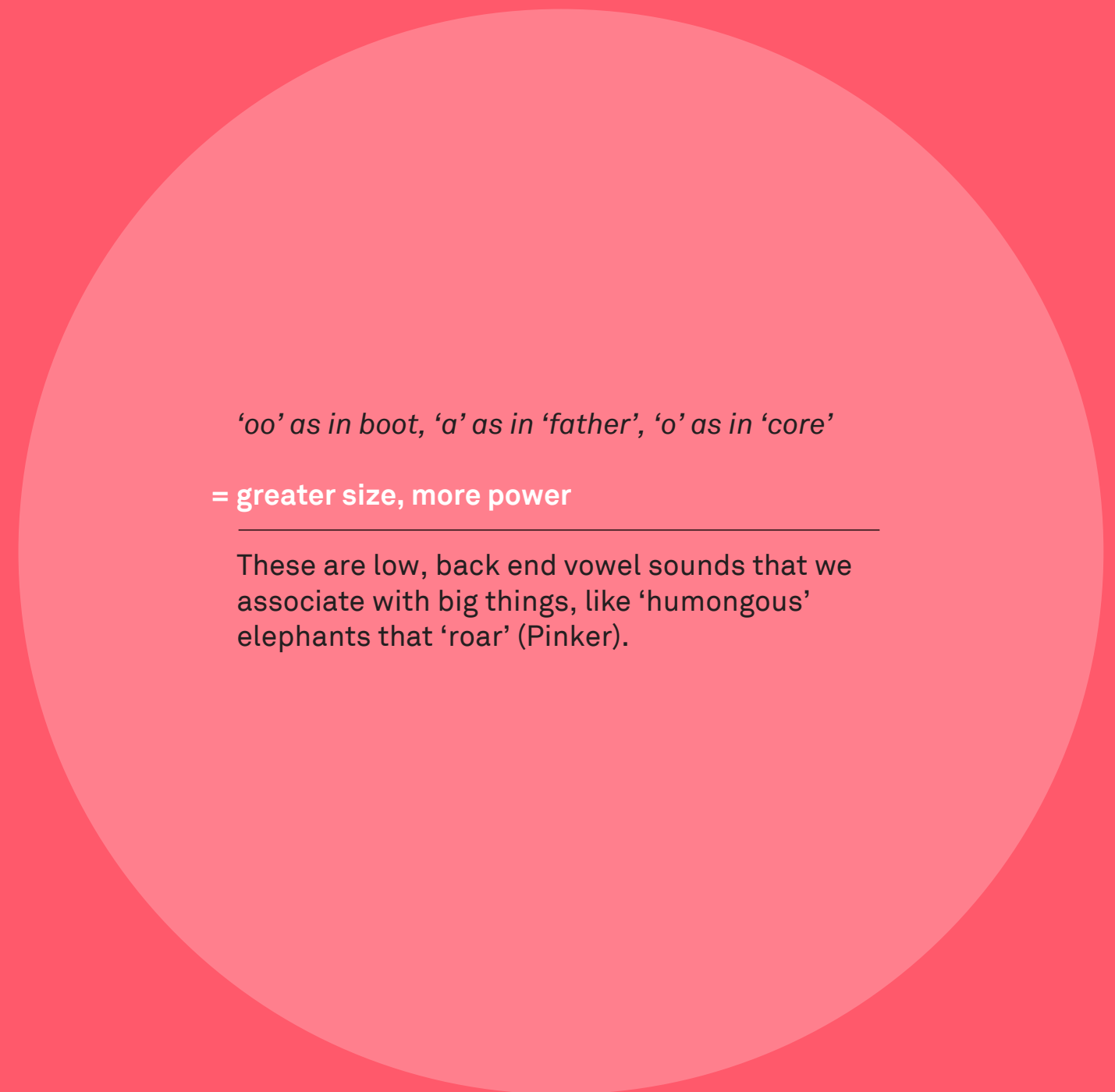
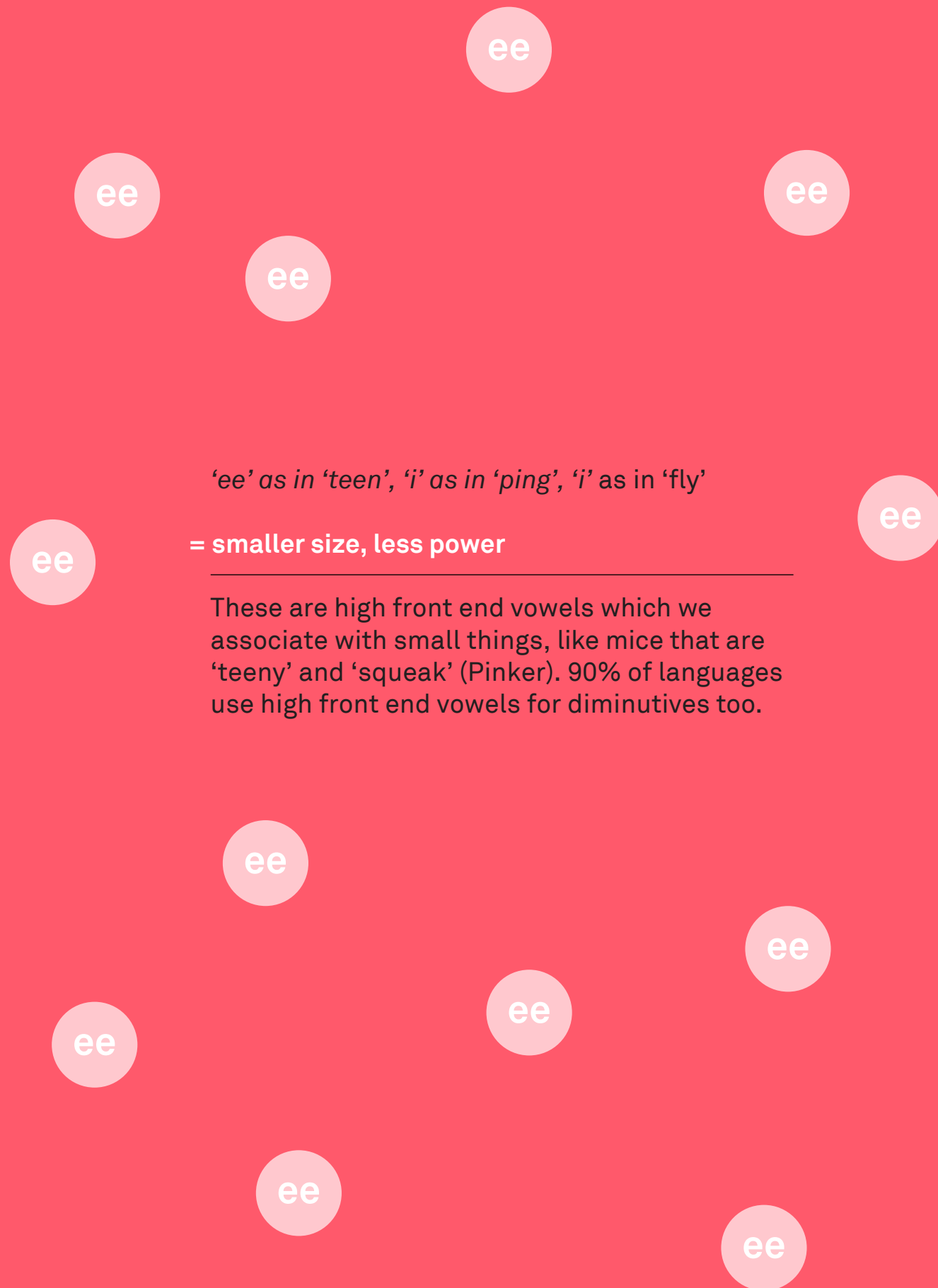
The diagram consists of two light red circles. The top circle contains the letters 'l', 'm', and 'n' in a large, white, sans-serif font. The bottom circle contains a smaller red circle with the text '= soft, round and feminine' and a paragraph of text at the bottom.

l m n

= soft, round and feminine

These are sonorant consonants that let air flow in the mouth. They're perceived as being softer, rounded and more feminine.





Some consultants are big on phonology, but we think a basic awareness of sound symbolism is enough. It can enhance associations or avoid bad ones, but it's normally nowhere near as important as semantics.

# OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Aside from the type of name and the linguistic considerations, there are three important questions to bear in mind.



## DOES IT LOOK THE PART?

The way a word looks can transform a name and design brings a whole new meaning. The name might be a wordmark, or it might be used alongside a visual symbol - one that replaces the letters in time (like Nike's swoosh). Upper and lowercase can be employed strategically too. When BlackBerry was introduced - an unlikely name for a mobile - the capitalization mid-word helped it stand out as a product.



## DOES IT NEED EXPLANATION?

If the answer is yes, a descriptor might be used. Descriptors sit alongside abstract or evocative names, particularly when the concept is new to market. It may fall away once the name is understood, but in the first instance it provides helpful context. Whereas a tagline is a call to action, the essence of the brand, or the driving force behind a campaign, a descriptor should be very literal, and different in kind from the name itself. 'GO - the low cost airline from British Airways' is a great example of an evocative name plus a literal descriptor.

## LETTER

iMac  
iPad  
iTunes

## NUMBER

Audi A3  
Audi A4  
Audi A5

## PREFIX

McBites  
McMuffin  
McNuggets

## SUFFIX

Punto  
Bravo  
Qubo



### DOES IT FIT THE BIGGER PICTURE?

If a company has multiple offers, consumers need to understand the relationship between them. A naming system brings cohesion. It helps people choose what they want, see distinct propositions and understand hierarchy - 1 series BMWs are more affordable than 7s for example, and 3s are in the middle.

The system should reflect the brand architecture. It doesn't have to mimic the corporate structure - in fact, the corporate name can be different from the brand name, like Camelot and the National Lottery. It should align with the way the company wants consumers to understand its portfolio.

In a monolithic structure or branded house, all products take one name, like Nike. In an endorsed model like Nestle, all sub-brand names are linked to the name of the umbrella.

There are lots of ways of approaching nomenclature to convey relationships propositions and some shown to the left. These are straightforward methods that let the masterbrand do the talking. Some systems go further, creating metaphorical links that are rich in meaning in themselves, like Orange's pay-as-you-go tariffs - Dolphin, Canary, Raccoon and Camel, or Google's Android operating systems - Gingerbread, Honeycomb, Ice Cream Sandwich, Jelly Bean and, most recently, KitKat.

In a house of brands like P&G, the corporate brand name operates as a holding company and each product or service is independently named, with nothing linking names across the portfolio. That's how Wella, Tampax, Head & Shoulders, Gillette, Duracell and Fairy can all live under one roof.

# FRAMEWORK SUMMARY

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

PHONOSEMANTICS

POETICS

PHONETICS

DESCRIPTIVE

EVOCATIVE

ABSTRACT

## DESCRIPTIVE

Easy to understand and can emphasise a USP  
Not costly, reinforces a masterbrand, ideal for short life cycles  
BUT restricts proposition development and hard to secure  
Only understood in one language and not necessarily memorable

## EVOCATIVE

Multi-dimensional, expressive and can pack emotional punch  
Easier to trademark and gives space for the offer to evolve  
BUT the value proposition isn't instantly clear  
Requires initial spend and careful messaging planning

## ABSTRACT

Easy to trademark and protect  
An empty vessel that can come to define a category  
BUT requires significant spend  
Can be over-engineered, cold and bland

## LINGUISTIC CONSIDERATIONS

Does it sound good and is it easy to say? (phonetics)  
Are creative writing techniques helpful? (poetics)  
Does the sound have suitable associations? (phonosemantics)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Does it look the part?  
Does it need explanation?  
Does it fit the bigger picture?

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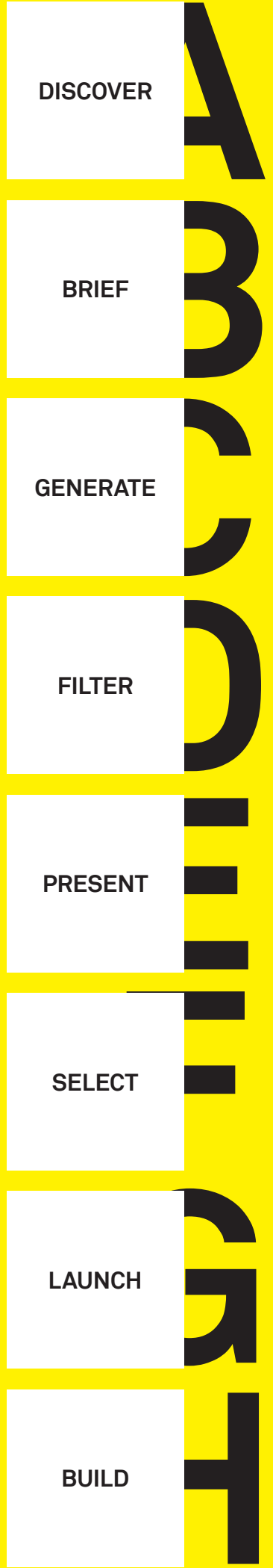
# 5

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# HOW TO DO IT

Naming is a creative process so there's little common practice. At Lexicon, it's about breadth of input. At Idiom, another prolific San Francisco-based consultancy, it's about consensus. They invite the client into a 'super session' and use language games, like 'Synonym Explosion', as prompts. NameLab digitally combines morphemes and calls the process 'constructional linguistics'.

At Wolff Olins we like to make it straightforward.



**A** **DISCOVER**  
First, we experience. We go to the shops, the offices, immerse ourselves in the literature, speak to and act like the customers. We look at competitors too. Which naming categories do they typically fall under? Is there a gap we can exploit to stand out?

**B** **BRIEF**  
The importance of the brief can't be stressed enough. In it, we synthesize everything we've learned during the discovery phase and we'll include questions like:

What's the offer? How will it evolve?  
Who's it for?  
What's distinctive?  
What's its personality?  
How should it make people feel?  
What should it make them do?  
Is there a parent brand and what's the relationship?  
What's the history?  
What's the context?

We'll propose a strategy for name generation and set out the criteria. These are vital as they'll be used to judge ideas later on.

# C

## GENERATE

We'll brainstorm a long list, using different thematic start points as conceptual springboards. Some we've found useful are:

**locations** of the offices and production facilities

**communities** of people who'll use the product

**outcomes** that relate to the thing you're naming.

**tools** that link to the experience

**actions** the product facilitates

**moments** that are somehow pertinent

**names**, which can be useful when trust is key

**numbers**, which can link to a neat little story

**acronyms or initials**, which can be tactically useful. International Business Machines sounds like a dinosaur but IBM's ok, and KFC doesn't scream cholesterol in the way Kentucky Fried Chicken does.

We bring lots of heads together, many of whom will have no context beforehand. We plan the briefing depending on what we want from the session. If we think a masterbrand might shape suggestions in a way we want to avoid for example, we won't mention it. We lead thinking in unexpected directions, keep it short, and write everything down, filtering later.

# D

## FILTER

We filter to a short list using the criteria from the brief. At this stage, we'll do an initial check of domain names, trademarks, cultural sensitivities and similar local brand names in important markets. This avoids wasting valuable time on names that aren't available.

Unless the offer is predominantly digital, we don't get hung up on domain names, especially given the dominance of search engines and the importance of SEO in organic listings.

Trademarks are more integral as they dictate whether a name can be legally protected. Of the 45 international categories, which are important? If there's anything similar in the same class, that's a problem. On the other hand, you can use a name that already exists, as long as it's being used in a completely different class. Think Ford Explorer and Internet Explorer. Or Polo mints, VW Polo and Polo Ralph Lauren.

While we're on the subject, it's worth noting the reason for fierce policing of this area. There's a fine line between a widely used but protectable brand name, and a brand name that becomes so ubiquitous it's impossible to protect. This is what marketers call 'genericide' and it happened to jacuzzi, trampoline, frisbee, aspirin, cellophane, thermos, yo yo, rollerblade and ping pong, amongst many others.

# E

## PRESENT

We do the shortlist justice by presenting recommendations in a bold and impactful way. We imagine broad usage - what would an ad say? What could brand extensions be called? Does it lend itself to product spin offs? How could the name influence the brand's verbal identity? How will it sound in years to come?

“Brand names are funny. What you thought about them at first isn't what you think about them now. Many of them take on new meanings as a result of years of personal experience and marketing effort... So, in order to assess a potential name, you have to try and project forward five years....You need to understand if the name has longevity, or will it quickly date.”

- Glynn Britton of Albion,  
quoted in Neil Parker's  
*The Name of the Beast*

# F

## SELECT

We ask the client to make a selection at this stage. Some organizations require research groups to double-check associations and pronunciation. Groups are useful if the client's corporate culture is consensus-driven. However, they're only ever data gathering exercises. We don't use them for decision by committee.

# G

## LAUNCH

The name needs to be officially registered and applied to internal and external collateral. After launch, we encourage the client to be vigilant about the name, apply it consistently and quash any tendencies to abbreviate. Remember that the name a company trades under doesn't need to be the same as the company name so can be left alone, if desired. Mobile brand 3 is operated in the UK by Hutchinson 3G UK for example.

# H

## BUILD

Beyond the name, we aim to build a voice for the brand, focusing on tone and messaging. We'll also train writers to apply it well.



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# 6

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## WHAT'S NEXT?

We've covered the history of naming, looked at the framework and the process. So how will all this evolve and what does it mean for people generating and selecting brand names?

Language is a living thing and lexical possibility means better self-expression. When brand names help us quickly and easily express what we mean, we absorb them. I jot notes on Post Its, not pressure sensitive sticky papers, and I spend a disconcerting number of waking hours using PowerPoint, not a presentation graphics programme.

We cling to euphemistic brand names that spare our blushes, which is why Viagra and Prozac entered the OED in 2001. When brand names are words for new technologies, we can only embrace them. What else would we call Velcro? The same goes for new behaviours. When there isn't a pre-existing verb for an action that quickly becomes commonplace, the brand name is used as a verb. This is why I Skype and Google (but I don't Bing – brand-verbs can't co-exist). It's something etymologists call anthimeria.

Because of western capitalism and the scale of the English language, English speakers have been front of mind for name consultants. Organizations with international market ambition chose English names regardless of origin, hence Thai government-owned Thai Airways, Korean conglomerate LG Electronics, and Middle Eastern investment managers, Investcorps.

Tricky words were simplified so they were easy(ish) for English speakers to say. Tokyo Tsushin Kogyo became Sony, from the Latin for 'sound', and consumer electronics firm Haier took off the 'Qingdao' part. Seikikogaku kenkyusho became Canon, Lianxiang - Lenovo and Nintendo Koppai dropped the last bit. At the same time, as western brands grew and Roman letters became a sign of sophistication in some markets, local brands like Korean café Twosome Place and retailer Bean Pole jumped on the bandwagon.

But the English language won't forever be the biggest. The British Council predict Hindi, Arabic and Spanish will claim at least as many native speakers in 2050 and Mandarin leads the charge on that front. Chinese webpages are multiplying and as the Far East becomes a bubbling hotbed for the science and technology sectors, English may well be displaced there too.

Rising consumer power adds fuel to the fire. Despite some spluttering, the goods market in China is still growing by 13% annually and behemoth brands with western names are coming unstuck. Chinese relies on characters, rather than a phonetic alphabet, and every character is a drawing with layers of meaning. In this context, names have deep significance. Phonetic representations of brand names look limp and intentional meaning, literal or associative, is lost. Brands are now looking for homonyms that pack a semantic punch – no light undertaking – and specialist cross-cultural consultancies have been quick to fill a lucrative gap. This is how Reebok became Rui Bu, meaning 'big steps', Colgate is known as Gao lu jie, 'revealing superior cleanliness', and Coca Cola is Kekoukele, 'happiness power'.

Beyond this new off-shoot of the naming industry, the language shift is having a more fundamental impact on brand names. Qatari telco Qtel leveraged its linguistic roots in a recent rebrand, becoming Ooredoo – the Arabic for 'I want'. Chinese telco Huawei, pronounced wah-way, decided to stick with their name in America and make a feature of the fact it's hard to pronounce. Xiaomi, China's answer to Apple with a larger market share than its American rival, hired an ex-Gogler to focus on international markets and has no intentions of changing its distinctly Chinese name.

The evidence is limited at the moment, but I've no doubt the movement will gather steam as markets gain confidence and stature. This means English speakers will be increasingly exposed to unfamiliar sounds. Initially challenging letter combinations will become recognisable and we'll be able to pronounce them with ease.

And when a brand comes along that's impossible to describe using existing English words, we'll absorb it. Language protectionists worry about the impact of Anglo-saxonisms in other languages – borrowed words in Chinese, the rise of Arabizi in Arabic, Gairaigo in Japanese and Franglais in French. Languages are already changing shape around the edges and English will too.

When choosing a brand name, this linguistic shift means you should:

**Carefully consider the potential of future, non-English speaking markets** at the outset.

If Chinese or Arabic-speaking consumers are likely to form an important target either now or in future, feed this in to the naming brief. Having foresight at an early stage avoids clumsy retrofits or costly re-brands at a later stage.

**Co-create with the specialists** like linguists and native speakers of foreign languages. They're invaluable. Bring them into brainstorming sessions and spend time face-to-face to explore possibilities. For existing brands, consumers should be considered specialists too. Why not open up the exchange with consumers and consult them directly? (For more on this exchange see our recent Game Changers report.)

**Carry out cultural and local checks early** because understanding potential problems at the outset saves time and heartache longer term. An initial disaster check will ensure your name doesn't mean something unfortunate in another language or dialect. It'll weed out issues linked to similar-sounding local brands. Google searches only go so far and it's impossible to get the full measure of this stuff from your desk.

**Play, invent** and turn what may seem like frustrating parameters into positives. They'll make your approach more creative, which isn't necessarily a bad thing. It might have all kinds of unexpected advantages.

# FURTHER READING

## ACADEMIC ARTICLES

A Sound Idea: Phonetic Effects of Brand Names on Consumer Judgments  
*Eric Yorkston, Geeta Menon*

What’s in a name change? Re-Joycing Corporate Names to Create Corporate Brands  
*Laurent Muzellac*

Sound symbolism effects across languages: Implications for global brand names  
*L. J. Shrum, T. M. Lowrey, David Luna, D. B. Lerman, Min Liu*

## NOTABLE NAMING CONSULTANCIES

Lexicon Branding

Idiom Naming

NameLab

A Hundred Monkeys

Catch Word Branding

## BOOKS

Wordcraft: The Art of Turning Little Words into Big Business  
*Alex Frankel*

Sound Symbolism  
*Hinton, Nichols & Ohala*

The Language Instinct  
*Stephen Pinker*

The Name of the Beast: The perilous process of naming brands, products

An overview of the naming process from a freelancer who worked in some of the San Francisco consultancies.

Very scientific – for those with an academic interest in phonosemnatics.

A fascinating take on language, arguing it’s a biological instinct, powered by a distinct part of the brain

A compelling read and a well-informed take on the British naming industry.

Accor

Affinity

Diageo

Duxx

EE

E.ON

First Direct

Goldfish

hollandgreen

Hyder

Ilori

Kayak

Kingfisher

Liverpool One

Living Proof

Make

Marbles

Mathaf

Monday

More London

M-Real

Nutmeg

Oi

Opodo

Orange

Powwow

Q8

(RED)

Sen

The Public

True North

Unison

Very

Vivo

3i