

Naming billion dollar companies isn't just vibes, here's the science behind it.

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SUMMARY

David, a naming expert, emphasizes the critical importance of choosing the right name for a startup, arguing that it can significantly impact a company's success. He shares insights on how a well-thought-out name can create a strategic advantage, attract attention, and foster brand recognition over time.

- *A strong name is essential as it will be used frequently and can compound its value over time.*
- *The right name should be original, easy to process, and surprising, avoiding comfort and sameness.*
- *Examples like Swiffer and Impossible Burger illustrate how impactful naming can lead to market success.*
- *A structured process for naming involves understanding the product, market landscape, and consumer needs.*
- *Creative curiosity and exploration of various linguistic roots can lead to unique name ideas.*
- *Testing names through trademark checks and consumer feedback is crucial for validation.*
- *Encouraging a culture of creativity involves separating idea generation from evaluation to foster innovation.*
- *Names should evoke emotion and energy, which can be polarizing but ultimately beneficial for brand identity.*

So, listen, David, here's the deal. I don't believe that naming your company is that important. And over the next hour, I want you to convince me why I'm incredibly wrong, why picking a good name is going to help me build a billion-dollar startup, and how to name a startup effectively. Well, I love right behind you. You have for people who are just listening on audio, they can't see this, but if you're on YouTube, you see this.

Right behind you, you have a bunch of almost like a music artist would have platinum records. You have platinum records of names that you've created. So, the Impossible Burger, BlackBerry, Swiffer, Veriselle, Windsurf. You've had the I remember the Intel Pentium processor, uh Febreze, Sonos. >> Sonos is crazy. The hits go on and on. Slim Fast. Oh my god, Slim Fast. That is one of the greatest names ever. You know, Microsoft Azure. You've done all these incredible names. And so, how lucky are we? We get to hear from you today because I suck at naming. I've always sucked at naming, and it's bothered me because if you're going to pour your sweat and you know, tears into something for 5 years, you kind of want to have a name that you feel that you like, that you feel proud of, that gives you the best shot at success. And so, I guess to Sam's initial question, which we said at the beginning here, which is he's like, "I'm not sure that names are that important.

Can you know, change my mind, tell me I'm wrong." Well, let me start off with this. First off, nothing that you will do in your in your brand will be used more often or for longer than your name. And it's not so much, you know, is one good name better than another good name, it's getting the right name. And that's really what our success has been built on or based on is you got to think through what the right name can do for you cuz if you get it right, first off, it's the highest frequency a leverage, you know, something that happens all the time. That's

leverage for you.

And the name compounds over time, right? So, the difference between an okay name and the right name that actually creates a strategic advantage. We our goal is to always create asymmetric advantage. Impossible does that. Swiffer does that. I mean, I'll give you a very recent example. We changed Codium to Windsurf. Now, nobody knew about Codium, really. No one knew how to spell it. They couldn't search it. Their SEO was bad.

We worked with them over a 6-week period, changed it to Windsurf. I mean, there's a story behind that, but we don't need to get into that now. And boom, that brand took off. Now, that that's an example of the power of a name. Doesn't do everything, but the right name can launch something. It does really three things for you. First off, you have to get attention. I mean, you had to get attention 50 years ago, but now it's almost impossible to do that. Secondly, you got to hold their attention. Here's a kind of a \$10 phrase. It has to be processing fluent. In other words, not only can I sort of pronounce it, but there's something in it that I can understand. And the third thing is, and this is what most people get wrong and why we have so many poor or okay names, it has to be surprising, not comfortable, not popular. There's something unexpected about it.

>> I want to ask you about the comfort thing cuz that's amazing, but can you set the stakes here? Can you give an example like, you know, it's crazy. You have Febreze up here. So, like you've been doing this for a long time and you've had some amazing outcomes, it seems like. Are there examples? Can you kind of give us like the price of success here where the product was the same, the team was the same, and you changed the name and there was a different outcome? Look, uh Procter & Gamble came to us, right? They said, you know, we we're really disappointed. We wanted Pro Mop. We can't have it legally, and we want you to work with us on on this. They had a a mop, I guess, and they wanted to call it Pro Mop. That's exactly right. Okay.

>> Okay. >> So, so they sent out samples to us. And the first thing we said was, first off, this isn't a mop. There's no stringy cotton on it. It was It was really easy to use. We did some research, and we found out it turns out whether you're a man or a woman, in housekeeping chores, there are things people really like to do. Some people love to polish their furniture, other people love washing windows. Nobody wants to mop.

It's dirty. It's inefficient. All this stuff. So, we went back to P&G and said, "Look, let's bring this alive. Let's put some fun in this." It also had some materials and a little bit of magic, so it picked things up, so it's more efficient. So, boom, Swiffer, right? So, you changed Pro Mop to Swiffer. Yeah. Okay. Great decision. Almost the same time, the Clorox company came out with Ready Mop, okay? Now, that's a comfortable name. Okay. That's probably a popular name. It probably did well in research because people said, "What do you think this is?" Well, I think it's a mop. Okay, we got it. We nailed it.

Swiffer's a five uh a five billion-dollar brand. I think the Clorox's Ready Mop is a couple hundred million dollars. There you go. >> You think that that what percentage of the difference do you think was the name? I think the name makes all the difference in that first, I'm going to say, 90 to 120 to the first 12 months because that's where you're getting interest, you're holding people's interest for a while. You're generating interest with retailers, right? They had to get into stores and say, "Hey, we're changing this business of cleaning floors. It's not

a mop, it's a Swiffer, right?" And so, now, after that, all the other marketplace dynamics come into gear. But, our whole thing here is to provide value, to create value. And it's We want it to be instant value.

Swiffer does that. Impossible. Look at the press Impossible got when they launched that, right? And that was something where we started with they really wanted something sort of I, you know, kind of crunchy, hippie, something that that fits into Whole Foods environment and that psyche. And we said, "You're just going to fit in. You can't do that. You have to make a claim here that you're better than the other guys." And we did it. Hey, I got something pretty cool to share with you guys. So, if you're like me, you listen to podcasts or YouTube videos, and you like to take notes, you're here to learn, and that's a lot of effort. Sometimes you're on the go and you can't do it. And so, the folks at HubSpot, who are sponsoring the podcast, have done something pretty cool for you. They have created the MFM Vault. It's a place to go find notes and resources that they pull from the different episodes that we do. So, if we have a guest on that shares their five-point framework, they write down those five points with the examples that the guest gave, and they put the notes there for you. So, if you want to access the vault, it's totally free. All you got to do is click the link in the description below, and you can access all the notes and the stuff in the vault. We're going to keep adding to this, trying to make it better over time. Thank you to HubSpot. This is a very cool way for them to sponsor the podcast, but by instead of telling you to go buy their stuff, they're actually giving you something instead.

I like it. And so, we you kind of hinted at two things just now. You said a good name versus a And instead of saying great name, you said the right name. So, I picked up on that. Sounds like you have some distinction there. And then you also said, um you know, what I would normally ask is what are the biggest mistakes founders, companies make when it comes to their name? And it sounds like what you're saying is they do something that's safe and comfortable, which causes them to be lost in the sea of sameness with everybody else. Is that the right way of thinking about it? Can you talk about those two things, the right name versus just saying a great name? Yeah, so so let me address the founder thing because I think that that there's a sequence that people end up with relatively comfortable names. A very common response when we ask the question, "Well, how did you get the this name that you have right now?"

They'll say, "Well, you know, our attorney called and they said, 'Listen, we got to put these documents together. We need a name. You guys got to figure this out.'" So, we spent a few hours doing this, and there it is. And now they're spending up the time, the money to to do it again. For your first question about, you know, what's the difference between a right name and a good name or an okay name. Right names always do three things. First, they're original, you know, in the category, in the context. That doesn't mean they have to be original like a Pentium, like something that's coined.

And that that begins that sort of you're on a slippery slope if you want something comfortable or popular because things that are original are, you know, humans like comfort for sure. Second thing is, you really do have to know something about linguistics and how the brain processes information. And that's this processing fluency thing. So, that it's there's something familiar and yet something surprising. And that that's our creative strategy here is to really develop names that are surprisingly familiar. Cuz the brains Our brains are a little lazy, if you will.

Uh this is going to be easy for me to process, but oh, there's something interesting here. That's where you get that attention. So, those are those two things. And then I mentioned this before, you have to be unexpected, right? And an unexpected word can be something different for one company versus another. Azure for Microsoft that typically has very descriptive and not so interesting words in their portfolio. Azure got people's attention. If we'd given that to Google, it wouldn't have been that attention-getting because people would expect that from them. Can we play a game to make this sort of real? So, I'm a founder, I'm listening to this. If I presumably if I'm listening to this cuz I want to get better at naming and naming a company. And we could talk generally about how to do it or we talk specifically. I like specifics. Okay, so let's pretend I came to you David and I said, "Hey, I've got this great fiber brand. I want to bring a new fiber brand to market. And if you look at the fiber market today, there's What is it?"

Metamucil, which I think is an all-time worst name. There's What are the big What are the other big fiber brands out there?" >> Fiber One, is that one? Yeah, fiber Yeah, Fiber One which is a very ready mop. Benefiber, that's what my mom's drinking. Benefiber. It's got some benefits to fiber, I guess. And I say, "David, we can disrupt this market. We're going to We have a We have something so much better, right?" Step one, what are we going to do? Okay, our process is driven really by two things.

It's a combination thing. It's We We call it or I call it creative curiosity. So, the first thing we would do for you is we'd say, "Okay, well, let's look at the category. What's out there? What's the landscape?" We would find a lot of fiber this or something fiber and we would say, "That's not the way to go." Generally speaking, that would be our first hypothesis about this. So, you you you you you look at the landscape and you put everything into a bucket and you say, "We just have to make sure that we aren't like that or we aren't that."

>> where we're going, but we know we're not going there. Yeah. We know we're not going there. We may go back to that uh once we find out more about what your product So, we would look now hard at your product, right? And we would have a list, right? Uh of those things that you have. Then we would look to the consumers, right? Well, why are they doing this? What what is their need? What's their expectations?

We'd go up that ladder of what's the ultimate benefit, right? Okay. Then we would step back from that That's just kind of logical, practical stuff, right? Then we say, "Okay, we go through a little series of questions that that there's almost no exception to this. It It pays off greatly. First, we say, "Okay, how do you define winning here, right?" Now, if you get in a room with six clients and you ask that question, I will tell you that every client will have a different definition.

Then we say, "Well, what do you have to win?" And you would start talking about how your fiber is made, how it's ground differently, those types of things. Then we say, "Okay, what do you need to win?" Well, we got a breakthrough, right? We got to communicate people that fiber done this way is better for you than fiber done this way. I'm making this stuff up cuz we're playing a game here. And then, well, what do we need to say?

That's the last sequence of questions. And so, from there we begin to uh articulate with you a strategy for the name because your fiber is going to do something on its own. Your packaging, things like that along the way will

do other stuff. But we have to understand what you need to say. Sean, do you Do you Do you know enough about fiber to go through this exercise with him? Um we could try. I Actually, I think it's kind of almost funny to to assume that you don't have a magic bullet in the product, right? Let's say that the it's like most commodity products on the shelves where like we think we're better, we have clean ingredients, we're going to have cool packaging, we're going to have We're going to be great at grow go to market, you know, we're going to try to do all those things. So, let's assume for a second I don't have a absolute innovative novel solution.

Yeah. I have a very good solution. >> looking to break into the market. Now, just to increase the level of difficulty here and say I didn't have some totally new out of left field angle cuz I think that does happen a lot. Most people are not coming out with a absolute groundbreaking approach. Now, we might find something in the in the process that, you know, what's the old Mad Men thing? Like our Our cigarettes are toasted or whatever. You know, it's like a version of that. But let's assume for a second I don't have a magic bullet feature that nobody else has of efficacy or anything else. All right. So, the second hypothesis of mine would be that everybody there is describing that they have fiber in this package, right?

And they're making the assumption that people will know that fiber is good for them and has certain benefits. So, I would say we're going to we're going to move away from that and we're going to talk about the ultimate benefit of that. So, then then Let's just play the game here, Sean. So, what do you think is the ultimate benefit of of me taking fiber on a daily or a weekly basis? Um you know, there's a couple ways to do it.

Some people would say gut health. Okay, you have a clean gut. Some people would say, you know, regular bowel movements or you know, fix your bowel movements. There might even just be an argument that like I think there's not a person I know on Earth that doesn't want to have better metabolism. You know, just I have high metabolism. Wow, wouldn't that be great? And so, maybe there's some way we could go there that this is a metabolism booster, that this helps you process, digest your food better. So, one of the things as you were talking I was thinking about is I think one of the real benefits here would be it's lighter. You You feel lighter.

>> Right. That's a rich area there, I think. And so, we would go down that category. >> Sam, how good is he? I didn't even say the word like >> was good. He just saw how my posture changed and I like did an upward motion and he's like So, what you're saying is you know, after all that, the real ultimate benefit would be you feel lighter. Great. So, so so then then we would explore that and and we would look for and we have databases here and we have software that helps us. We We We be the And there's some really tactical things that we would do just because this is really for us a treasure hunt.

You need to look at the all the possibilities of that, right? Um Have you ever read the book Ship of Gold in the Deep Blue Sea? No. Oh, you guys would love it. Um So, very quickly, a ship left San Francisco loaded with gold, gold coins, right? From the Gold Rush. So, this is in the 1850s. It sank off the coast of uh Southern California. Estimated at a over a billion dollars of gold. Of course, everybody tries to find it.

One guy who's a scientist develops it takes some sonar booms and he goes, "Everybody is getting excited. They find a shipwreck down there." And there's a lot of shipwrecks because of the storms off the coast. And then they

spend all their money on that shipwreck. Cuz I am going to map out the entire area here. I'm going to make some decisions about what pays off and then I'm going to dive. He found Ship of Gold in the Deep Blue Sea. Okay.

Now, >> Wow. Same thing happens here. Just ordered. So, we're we're going to go, "Okay, what are Greek word units for lightness, you know, for air, for less volume, for, you know, anti-gravity things, you know, those types of things. We're We're going to look at expressions around I'm feeling light. I'm feeling better. We're looking at aerodynamics. We would have someone for 15 minutes look at what makes an airplane lift up, okay? And along the way we would have all this stuff. We typically internally call that trash. You know, it's just things, just concepts. And we would start eliminating things.

And along the way, you know, >> you're calling it trash, but you're not like disparaging it. You're like, "This is necessary. It's the necessary things." Or what Why trash? Because in this business, and it's very counterintuitive, quantity leads to quality. Quantity leads to quality. Often we will get a list from a client saying, "You know, we're really stuck now and I'll say, "Okay, well, we How How many names you generate?" We will get back a list of 50 or 100 names. And that's where they they got stuck and they stopped, right? And they We we can't do that. We We're We're looking at maybe 2,000 names, right? Again, these These are aren't all the right names.

They aren't even good names. Some of them There's something >> written down? So, for example, pre pre-AI, you're It sounds like you have like multiple categories where you go treasure hunting. So, Greek names is one. Maybe like I have one where it's like streets in my hometown. Like I like look at all the streets in my hometown or like, you know, you I'm sure you have like which I actually do want to ask you. Like what are the all categories?

And you go through all of them and you would literally sit there in a group and write them down? Yes. No, well, they're they're they're either written in a small We work in small two-person teams here. We don't use brainstorming sessions. Oh, I like it. What What's the problem with brainstorming? Well, first off, you have, you know, in the classic ones, you have peer pressure, right? So, so and then you stopping that cascade of evaluation when you have you know, four or five or six people, let alone 10 people, it's just is it's a slow slow grind. And we really documented that. And this is going back now 30 years ago doing research cuz we used to do brainstorming here.

And we used to have freelancers, right? And so, the combination of that and over an 18-month period, I mean, we just asked the You know, it's always in life the questions you ask, right? And and we said, "Where are names really coming from, right?" And at the end of that 18 months, even though the collection was a little sloppy and a little crude, we said, "This is really interesting. First off, it doesn't come from freelancers. Not because they're not creative, it's just they're not inside. They're not They don't They don't have that esprit de corps. It's not coming from brainstorming sessions. It's coming from individuals or people working in two-person teams. And so, we stopped all that brainstorming, never hired a freelancer again, and we work in three teams now. So, so usually it depends on the budget and the timing.

One team knows everything about your fiber product, right? Next team, we're still in fiber, but now with that team we're going to say we're adding ingredient an ingredient to this. We're It's got energy in it, okay? Well, what happens there? It changes their perspective and their names are going to be completely different than that first list. And the third team, we're not even talking about fiber. We're talking about uh probably something uh an athletic performance. Now we've got three distinct types of names that we're generating.

>> searching the deep blue sea, searching the whole ocean of possibilities. >> I'm sorry, that second one was what? So you have there they know what's fiber, they know everything about our product and then you add something unrelated. >> Yeah, and it would have would have been like uh energy, you know, that this now has it's it's fiber so it's digestion plus it's going to give you some some energy. It might be a package of minerals. I mean we these things I call it the the blueprint for a for it for a program, what we're going to do. And then we try these things out and you know, there's a lot of failure and creativity and you know, everybody here has complete permission to fail. Uh if we're not failing here, we're not doing our job, right? Because it's again, you're looking for that ship in the deep blue sea.

And so along the way, you know, we're going to uncover something like, you know, well, what's about lightness? How do you feel like, well, it's feather. All right, so then we'd say, well, what would this what would this feel like if I walked into Walgreens and there's fiber plus and there's Metamucil and now in a new package, there's a brand called feather, right? And now there's got to be copy that supports it, right? So that you got to figure can we create a sentence or a little phrase where people get it, I get it. It's going to have fiber on the label. Okay, so, you know, it could be feather, the the lightweight fiber you need or something like that. All right, I got it, right? You know, consumers aren't stupid, right? This is like the Swiffer.

Swiffer is not called a mop, but it's the quicker picker-upper. >> Exactly. So we would go through that drill and eventually we would have, you know, a list of 10, sometimes 15 names. Now it goes to our trademark group here which we have paralegals and a trademark attorney and they're looking at I'm going to stick with feather for now. Is feather available? Probably would be in this category, right? And so now what do we have? We have something original, we have something that's easy to process because it's a real word and it's familiar, but all of a sudden in fiber it becomes surprising. Right away you said you know, you said light and we both lit up and you were like, now let's look at the the Greek words for light. You said that very quickly as if this is just one of the many the many places where you go treasure hunting. What are the other handful of places that you like to dig?

Yeah, so in terms of databases that anybody would have access to, we we we do look at Latin roots, Greek roots, Roman mythology, Greek mythology, those really basic things which sometimes yield things. I mean Pentium came out of, you know, we have a database not only of the periodic table, but a lots of information about the periodic table. You said lots of those basic things. They're not basic to us. Okay, you know, we're we're we're we're dummies.

We're we're a few brain cells away from being just talking monkeys. So like what are some of the what are the other few what are the other simple databases? Yeah, okay. So so there's your periodic table, but you got to go you have to have databases where we build have built them out. It's not anybody can just you know, okay, I'm

going to go and look at the the periodic table. We've taken that table and then we've loaded it up with other articles and information about it.

So now it's a richer base of words relating to that periodic table and and that's where kind of the gold can be. Then what we've done is when we have an assignment uh let's say it's a it's a small car for Nissan, all right. All those names go into a database not called small cars, but small things, okay? And a processor for Intel, that's small, that would go into that. So now what's happening is that gives us I'm a real believer in the synchronicity, right?

The connecting of seemingly irrelevant things, right? That that's the fundamental layer of creativity. Impossible is seemingly irrelevant to what they're doing, but look how it performs in the marketplace, right? >> What what would have been the comfortable name for the Impossible Burger? It would have been like when we came to the client and they said, yeah, we want to fit into Whole Foods, it would be something like natural farms. Right. >> Okay. Okay, so so you I don't know if you still come up with names yourself or you're >> I I do. the king of the kingdom and you you let the the scribes do that. But how do you get in flow? So like what do you do let's say it's a name day and you need to you need to get into a creative mindset flow. What do you actually do you do anything in your routine? It's more difficult to keep in the flow because of because of interruptions here, right?

But what I really try to do is I first sit down with a pad and a and a pen and I just start kind of free associating thoughts about where to go with this. You know, I I sometimes might draw a treasure map with a grid and and put ideas down there. And you know, we use the I mean everybody's addicted somehow to the web. I'll I'll use I mean we use all the AI things, Claude, Co-work, you know, chat GPT, you know, all these things and I'll start asking questions. I I don't ask it for names, but I'll I'll ask about different things relative in your case to fiber um and I'll get stuff like that. And then at a certain point this is really like a 20-minute kind of thing. So so it's not you know, very arduous for me. So I'll just start generating names and I'll write down other directions and then I'll pursue that. It might be okay, I think this I think Greek would be a good thing to look at. Um I I think aviation and aircraft for things that are lighter, right? Uh I would go and I would look at other words for light and then that would lead to sunshine and and and sole and you know, SOL, things like that. And then I just start crafting names. So my my guess is that I'm just we've only talked to you for 30 minutes.

And I've already gleaned from you that A, you're probably just incredibly talented at this, but you seem very process-driven. You seem like you have acquired you seem like you were creative and then you've made this into a skill which implies it's somewhat teachable. When we're trying to when China and I are trying to man we both have companies when we're trying to manage creative people to come up with these bits of brilliance whether it's just a name or it's anything else that's creative, you seem really good at this because you just seem like you know what you're doing.

What mistakes do you think that we are making with our team or a lot of our listeners are making with their employees on managing people when you're asking them to come up with something unique or creative or dangerous a little bit, you know, things like that. It's a little bit of search for the Holy Grail of how how to how to manage creative people. And and that's where your kind of first mistake is or clients make this mistake is I try

to lead everybody here and I really try to encourage people and you know, the root word of encouragement is courage, right?

And so it may be that you're not giving the people you're asking these things to do that you're not actually letting them just flow free. I mean here when people develop a list and they give it to me, right? Because I'm I'm still the creative director here and I still generate names every week. They know that I'm not going to look at that harshly, that I'm not going to I'm not going to evaluate it, I'm going to speculate with it, right?

And now eventually we do have to evaluate things. It all we're working for clients and we got to do the right thing for them. But you know, go back and look at how you're communicating with your team and and and see if you can't move it from leading versus managing and encouragement versus evaluating. It seems like one important part of having people have courage is to not get smacked down on their first bad idea. And you talked about separating when you judge an idea versus when you're generating idea and then put doing both at the same time, you know, everything I've read about creativity that tells you that basically that's one of the most key things you can do. I think Disney had three different rooms in his office, one to dream ideas, one to plan out which ideas to do and then one to judge the the result. And then you you don't you don't judge when you're in the dreaming room, right? Cuz that would sort of kill the creative flow. Do you guys do something similar or do you have any rules around when you judge? And then also how do you judge? Like how do we know if feather's a good name? How are we going to know? Is it just we just go on our gut or do we have some testing? We do have testing. I'll talk about that in a moment, but going back to your issue with your your creatives, there's two things that we do and these are kind of magical phrases that I mean just trust me on this. I know you don't know me very well.

I'll coach people to say, listen, when you have trouble, when you feel yourself leaning into the urge to say that's too expensive or that'll never pass legal, say something like I wish we could make that so it wasn't expensive or how do we how do we modify that word so it's legally available? What you've done there you've given someone a problem-solving proposition. You haven't slammed a name down. You're getting people to think about Okay, well, let me think about cuz humans love to solve problems. We do. That's in our DNA. It's how we survive. And so try those things.

Someone comes to you with an idea and go, "You know, that's an interesting idea." That's the first thing I say. Okay, it's interesting or I'll say, "I would not have thought of that." Okay. Which is just being honest. Which is code for I, as a smart person, would not have thought of that, but I wouldn't say it that way. Yeah. The other day I was talking about this guy I met this guy at a conference and he was making his argument about why AI we peaked. And I was like, "Well, I understand your argument.

I'm not low IQ, so I don't agree with you, but I I totally get your I totally get your argument." He was like, "What?" Okay. Okay, so you you don't do that. You just say you give them credit. I wouldn't have thought of that. And then and then you sort of redirect towards the problem. Yeah, we try to redirect. And then there's a certain point where, you know, you you do start just eliminating things. But you have to give There's a moment. There's a period where things just live in our system, right?

And then and then we start pairing them down. And our course trade trademark pairs things down automatically. It's very precise, right? In the in the When you're going to switch gears, like do you tell the team or you wait till tomorrow and you say, "Okay, now we're going to narrow down" or like how do you switch gears from the divergent phase to maybe converging on an idea? Yeah. We In our process there we're we're going through a cycle. There there's an initial cycle where we're just trying to figure out are these were these assignments right?

Was did did we get anything out of fiber plus energy? Do we get anything out of this sports medicine thing that we had over here? Should we redial? But after we've gone through really about two cycles, which is a two two and a half week period, cuz people are working not on not on this one project for two and a half weeks. They they might have three or four things that they're working on, right? Then it's time to really look and say, "Where are we? Are we, you know, and then of course we have we go back and we look now at the objectives." We call it the creative framework.

And there's a reason for that because we want more of a window for people to walk through and create as opposed to conform to these five things. So, we'll look at that creative framework and we'll say, "Hey, I think we're I think we're getting there. Let's ship this off to legal." Most of our products are our projects have to do with two or three or four or five markets that our clients want to do, you know, global in a sense, right?

And so we have linguists that work for us around the world and we're shipping those out. We also have software that we built here that takes certain language principles and certain cognitive science principles and that's all in there in the software and now it's AI powered. So that I can put a name in and it will come back and it will talk about processing fluency, memorability. The famous thing is CVCV, consonant vowel consonant vowel.

That's how children learn language. That's the only thing you'll a child will pronounce is mama dad. You got it. That's it. You'll never hear anything until about a little bit past the age of two. That's like Sonos. Are there other names that you might have had? What what are the other like power letters? Aren't there some letters that have like you know, just like you know, not all letters are created equal. You know, if some if they're all the letters were in a bar and one letter walks in and everything goes to [__] Yeah, who who's He's here?

Okay. Oh my god. What what are the key letters? Yeah. Well, you're really talking about an area that we know a lot about, which is sound symbolism. And and so you just said K and that actually is one of the power letters. So you're I don't know. You maybe you want to work for us at some point. But But so the those letters that are strong I mean this is many ways just intuitive, but think about some people you know, you can call them plosives. There's other technical terms, but you talk about P and K and B.

Those sounds are if you want something reliable and fast, you're going to at least formulate that into your names. So in our software now, I mean we used to do this hand-eye coordination, but now we just say, you know, to our platform, which is called predict. We say, "Okay, for this project this name has to move fast. Sort these 10 names out as to which one's faster."

Right? And it's looking at all of the research we've done on sound symbolism and it's going well, D is fast, P is fast, Z is really fast and it's looking for those letters. It's not it's not commenting really on the semantics of the word or even on the project. It's just saying, "Okay, this is faster than that." And that's really helpful to us, right? So I'm I'm a self-taught copywriter, which means I'm pretty good, but I'm not world-class, but I have a process and I would like to explain my process to you and then maybe you can give me a process that you can that I can use at home to be a better namer. So when I when I when I write, I always have up top I have general knowledge, which means I'm reading books constantly and they're on any topic that I like and I just I'm learning I'm generally learning. Then when I have a project, I I get specific knowledge, so I dive deep on that one thing, so I can I can learn.

Then I I get my draft out. In my draft, I know it's going to be horrible and I just I say I don't care. I'm just going to like just get horribleness out there. Then I do what's called the incubation period, so I drop it and I go for a walk. It could be a 1-hour walk or it could be a 24 hours or I could come back to it in a week, but some amount of period cuz that's like when those weird shower thoughts happen. And I think there's like a reason for those shower thoughts. And then finally I'll do the edit and the edit is where brilliance comes up. And in this process I I just stole. I probably I think I stole from David Ogilvy where he said like I'm not even a good writer, but I'm a world-class editor. Is there a process?

Let's say I have a new company. I have a fiber company. Is there a process that I could do in 5 days that you could like bullet point out of like if you do this, this, this and this, you'll be 80% of head ahead of where most people are. You may not be as good as as me, but you'll be pretty good. Okay. Yeah. There's at least one thing I would add maybe maybe two and I'll I'll go back to what I said earlier that I'm a real believer in synchronicity, right?

You know, looking for connections from things that are seemingly irrelevant. So as you get to before you go to that final draft and if this was, you know, we'll stick if this is helpful fiber for for you writing this article on fiber. I would go to a bookstore and I would either get a book or be easier get a couple magazines that you never have read before, right? And I would spend 30 minutes on those two magazines just looking for connections that might be moved into your article. And I guarantee you that at least 30% of the time by doing that you will find a new perspective or you'll put a new spin on that article that you're writing or a new insight that will be in the article because you've gone out and you suspended You got to suspend logic and evaluation and just speculate. What what could these two magazines or what, you know, I've never read a book on Thomas Edison. So what what what can he teach me about this particular project? Does that make sense to you? I love that.

Yeah. Do you what what names did you present to clients that they turned down because they were fearful of that you think was a big miss? Every name behind me has been rejected by clients. Every single one of them. So I see BlackBerry, Impossible, Sonos, Toro, Febreze, Swiffer. They all were turned down at first? >> BlackBerry's an interesting one. Is there a good BlackBerry story? Yes. There is. So so when we named BlackBerry we so we're in Sausalito.

You may or may not know this, but during World War II Sausalito was a shipbuilding area. I mean lots of people

worked here and we were in another naval building built by the US Navy and part of our office was in a vault where they stored the plans for these ships, okay? So these Canadians come from Waterloo, Canada and they're sitting down in a vault. So so right away they're going like, "What? God, we're in here in Sausalito. We're in California."

And then we present to them BlackBerry, okay? And one of the clients, I can't even remember his name, just said he goes, "Man, this is this is something else. You know, I'm here in a vault. I'm in Sausalito. There's no windows and you know, I'm looking at BlackBerry." And so that that was, you know, off the table, right? But But one of the things I said there in that conference room was hold on. You know, let's take it off the table for now, but I'm going to bring it back, right?

Because there's things in this that that are of real value. And and that was it was just fortuitous for us our first wave of research on sound symbolism where we went out and and we did testing in in about six different languages, six different countries. By the way, it wasn't inexpensive. I said, I can tell you that B is one of the most reliable sounds in the English alphabet. That's number one. Two, black is going to be, you know, recognized across multiple languages.

And not all, but some people will recognize berry, right? And a blackberry is kind of a delightful thing. And I said, there's one other quality here. And they were they were, you know, their arms were crossed. They were you were kind of listening, but not. I said, your current competitors, who are all big companies, would never have the courage to put blackberry on a device. Then, the arms dropped, and you could see people going, okay, maybe this guy knows something I don't know.

And then, I had to I had to fly to Waterloo, Canada, a couple times just to for extra sessions and talk to them about this. And then, finally, we all they went with blackberry, which was the best decision that they ever made. I mean, talk talk about a name that just took off, right? Can I give you Can we play a little game where I give you the name of current tech companies, and I want you to give me a one to 10 score as the naming guy.

Just your your gut gut reaction. You love it love the name, it's a 10. You hate the name, it's a one. All right? Here's the rule. One more rule. No sevens. No sevens. Sevens are for wimps. Okay. All right. I'll I'll give you one rule. I don't know anything about these companies, so it's just going to be sort of a based on it's arbitrary and creative on my creative judgment. Yeah. Fire away. All right. Open AI.

Mhm. Okay, that's that's a four. Okay. Good. Anthropic. Uh well, it's better than Open AI. Let me start there. Okay. So, we're making progress. At a moment in time when that was out, I I'm going to give that an I'm going to give that an eight. I'm going to give it an eight. Okay. Eight, that's a that's a strong score. I like it. Um Grok. Mhm. That's a four. Maybe a three. Okay, I like >> Very unpleasant. Very unpleasant.

Agreed. >> SpaceX. Uh okay. That's that's a 10. 10. All right. Uh why is it why is that a 10? You want to give us a little quick why on that one? Totally expected. They make spaceships and rockets, space. But, boom. But, we you know, now I know I I know something about the letter X, right? Okay. And X always says innovation to

people. It does You put it in a car, you put it on a tech device, whatever. So, that's a 10.

That is a 10. >> so now we're going to compare two. You tell me which name you like better. x.com or the old name, Twitter. Yeah. That's, you know, we I get that question a lot. You know, people The setup is always, don't you think Elon Musk, you know, made a mistake? And I always say, I don't know what he was thinking, so I can't say he's making a mistake. But, I'm going to say that Twitter was probably the better choice to stick with, right? How about our podcast, My First Million? Oh, it's I think it's a good name. And I'm not saying that because I'm I'm on your show. It's just intriguing, right? It's a good title for for for something, right?

>> Sean named it. Thanks, we hate it. Um All right, here we go. HubSpot. I'm going to give it an eight because there's alliteration there. HubSpot. I I It's It's memorable. Yeah. What are names you were jealous of that you didn't get to you didn't get to name? You saw it, you're like, ah, well done, perfect. Yeah, well, there's two, really. I DreamWorks, the film entertainment. I think I think that's a beautiful name, right? >> Yeah. And I think the car Lexus is just, you know, perfect structure. That X in the middle, there's that X again.

So, yeah, they fabulous job. Yeah. You know how So, like in our internet world, there's like this niche of person. Sean and I have a bunch of these buddies where they will acquire domain names, and sometimes jokingly, but not always jokingly. Sometimes they actually do it. They'll start a company just around a domain name. Do you have a list of names where you're like, you know, you should start a company just around this name. You know, we have Sean and I had this guy named Eric Ryan on the podcast, and he started Ali Wait, is it Ali Bandaid's? Is that what it's called, Sean?

>> Ali Gummy's Welly Bandaid's. Yeah, Welly Bandaid's and Ali Gummy's. And then, he had like three more amazing companies. Method Soap is one of them. And he was like, I'll start companies just around like what form of the bottle I can I can like get the soap bottle. You know, Method bottles Method soaps are famous bottle. Are there names where you think are company worthy? Well, I I'll tell you one one that we we had and we now have a small little, you know, venture just an LLC where we make investments with with our our our clients. And we had phase change, which I is a lovely. I you know, phase change, water to ice, ice to water, those types of things. And boom, we we we use that.

>> Yeah, it is a cool name. Yeah. You had this cool slide in one of your decks that I I really liked, which was that you don't just give the clients like a list of names. You know, here's 40 things on a spreadsheet, pick your favorite. You kind of present it in context. You show it I don't know. Is this what you actually you show it in a news headline or on a shirt or like in motion on a bus somewhere, and and that gives you the feel for it very differently. Is that right? Yeah, we call that proof of concept, right? So, so we we look at this internally, right?

We Before we would show it to a client, we would look at this, you know, two or three of us, and we would say, and there's just really one rule, which is, okay, is that unbelievable, right? Be- because that's really the most important thing is in that first less than a second, they have to some lean towards, ah, this I think I believe I think I believe this, right? I think Microsoft could have a brand called Azure for clouds. I think there's something interesting and believable, though.

So, we're typically putting it in, you know, things like the Wall Street Journal. We'll take a famous actor or a tennis famous tennis player in in a kind of beautiful photograph, black and white. We'll say, you know, companies that run well run on blank. And there's this You know, so there's an a sponsor, if you will. And then, if we say, yeah, that's believable, then we show it to the clients. And And there's a psychological reason for doing it.

You know, most of the people we work with don't have a lot of practice in making creative decisions. And so, you have to make these things come alive, right? So, you have to give them an advantage to to uh sort these things out. I want to ask you about this. This was like the most brilliant slide because I'm pretty obsessed right now with at my company like getting people to be creative because a lot of times the founder's the creative person, but that doesn't particularly scale past a certain size.

You need to like empower others. You have this really cool slide, and you call it the comfort trap. And it basically says like there's the tension zone. This is where half the team hates what you're doing or hates the name. The energy is high, but it's very polarizing. And then, below that, when things get incredibly familiar, but have very little distinctiveness, that's when things get invisible. You're in the invisible zone. There's a lot of consensus. There's a lot of it's a safe choice, and basically, it's not remarkable at all.

This makes a lot of sense. How do you A, convince people just to go with it? Like, I know you think this is a bad idea because it's dangerous or it's different, but just go with it. And how do you convince yourself, maybe, to like release things that are polarizing? I will never forget I I learned a lot from working with Andy Grove on the Pentium project and Xeon and, you know, other things. Andy Grove being the former CE- CEO of Intel, and he like wrote the book on like management. Yeah, he did. Still used at Stanford GSB, and he wrote the book Only the Paranoid Survive.

I was in a meeting with him. Now, there's another thing. It was not not Promax, but ProChip. The engineers at Intel, you know, hey, they're engineers, and they wanted to What What is this? It's a professional chip. It's got more parallel you know, what's the deal? And Andy uh he gave he had me present what we'd found and why Pentium worked. And we'd done we'd done a lot of research with consumers on this. And he said, listen, this is a good name because it is so polarizing. That means it has energy to it. There's energy inside. And I I remember thinking, man, that guy is so smart. And that's that's where I began this kind of the value of And we encourage people. We say, listen, this is polarizing for your organization. That's good. You may not decide to use it, but let's really think about what's going on in that word that's creating that kind of energy.

What do you say to founder who kind of wakes up and realizes, we don't love our name. Yeah. And but obviously switching is a dangerous thing. It's a time-consuming thing. It's an expensive thing to re-educate the market sometimes. You're taking some personal risk doing it. I mean, do you have a framework for kind of the when to do it, when to not do it in terms of changing your name? Well, the simple answer is, and you heard this from me earlier, you know, the advantage of the right name is it's compounds, right? It's Names give you cumulative advantage. The longer it's in the marketplace, the more advantage you will have because it becomes familiar with people. So, that's why it's really important to get it right from the very beginning, not not just, you

know, have that Friday afternoon session and and and do it.

But, when people come to us, and and we spend time making sure they should change their name. Like, you know, you know, now if they're being sued, okay, it's a simple decision, but we'll figure out the plusses and minuses. We don't want to work on a project where they're just kind of I really want to keep this name. I want to keep it. And so, at that point, and here is this is really counterintuitive because the biggest the biggest reason people don't change their name is they think they're going to lose whatever equities they have and they're going to lose momentum.

We have never seen that as evidence in the marketplace. Never. I want to emphasize that. Provided provided that their launch is done with enthusiasm and they and they have a story to tell that we were here and now we're going this way and the benefits for you are A, B, and C. People know that they're not losing that technology or the software they're using. The name is changing and they're going to add stuff to it. And so rather than struggle with something bad names create friction, right?

They just do. And and so why put up with that friction when over a 6-month period or a 9-month period you have to devote extra resources and if it particularly if it's a young company in a series A or B it's not it's not dramatic. If you're Coca-Cola, that's a different story, you know, and then you really have to have a compelling reason to change your name. Right. If you were to run for president do you think that you could take your naming ability and come up with cool slogans and do you think that those slogans could meaningfully impact the outcome of an election? Yes, without any hesitancy.

So what's Can you give an example of of this done well? Or an example of a candidate that could have done it better had they tightened up some of their stuff? Well, the slogan that I think it's the best slogan certainly in American politics is uh written and developed by Hal Riney here in San Francisco. It's morning in America, the Reagan campaign. I mean that in a world where there was a lot of negativity in the stock market and you know, fuel costs and all this sort of stuff. He gave people not false hope, real hope. It's morning in America. Tremendous commercial. If if we wanted to go down the rabbit hole and learn the stuff, what would be the couple of books you would point people to to to really start to master the the art of marketing and positioning and thinking differently. You know, what are what are the best books that would get us get us going?

One, David Ogilvy on advertising is a simple book. It's it's it's just good. I mean, you can read it you know, over well, not I mean, maybe a couple glasses of wine or something like that. But there's a lot of great principle in there. I mean, he truly was an advertising genius. I love his second book, Confessions Confessions of an Ad Man. I think it's equally as good. Have you read that one, Sean? Yeah. Okay. I have for sure. Yeah, it's brilliant. Then I I'll switch and and I I would recommend simply because it's about creative curiosity and it's the book on Leonardo da Vinci written by the you know, the famous guy that wrote the one on Steve Jobs. Yes, yeah. I think that's a great book and it's really is creativity takes a lot of persistence and tenacity. You have to keep going, right? And that's exactly what da Vinci did. And the third from a marketing standpoint I like reading books by Roger Martin. He wrote a book called New Ways to Think.

I am familiar with him because we've done so much work at Procter & Gamble and he you know, I don't know if he still is, but he was a very close consultant to A.G. Lafley who is you know, one of their great presidents and he's he's written two or three books. One of them with Lafley which is called Play Playing to Win. And I I think those are really good. They're very direct. There's no BS about them. There's no word salad throughout his books, you know, there's there's a lot of marketing books out there that it's just a bunch of word salad spun different ways. Are you happy or angry at the rise of AI? Like is there any type of thing where you're like, this is going to put us out of business or are you thinking this is helps us so much? I'm happy about it for a couple reasons. One, it does I mean, anybody now can generate you know, 200, 300 names using chat or Claude.

So it does move our competitive advantage to our ability to judge names to separate the right names from the good names and the okay names because we have a lot of data that we've invested in and that software which is now you know, we spent the last 16 months integrating AI into that. So and then that that So that's the first reason. Second reason is you know, we we have we have 12 projects in here now or 13.

Six of them are AI driven, you know, and I mean we we are seeing the future and some of this future is really very very positive. How much does it cost to work with you? There's a range of things that it really depends. Most of our our projects are somewhere between you know, a low of 75 to a high of about 150. Big corporate name will go to maybe 200. And when you give the name, you gave it to Swiffer, you said, all right, here you go. Have at it. Or are they like asking you for further slogans and things like that? Yeah, sometimes we'll we'll do the the what's called the nomenclature around it, you know, what what is this? How do you define it?

What's the positioning line? We'll help them write a short story. We'll do what commonly called tracking research. So you know, we'll look at how it's going over the the next 90 days, 120 days. Small quantitative study. We have a small research group here that does that. So but basically it's it's you know, we're we're giving them the name which is one of their most valuable things they will ever have. And now I know I've convinced you of that.

You have. >> You you changed your mind? Yeah, man. You've you've convinced me that I would love to be your your friend if you would if you would be okay with being friends with me. And yeah, man. I I I totally am bought in. I Yeah, I mean, my premise was always that like a bad name is no excuse to to fail. But yeah, like you you've convinced me to take way more thought into this process.

Well, I'm going to give you guys I know you you want and by the way, happy happy happy to be your friend. Happy to talk more about your creative process and if we can make it better, I certainly will. There's a little chart I'm going to get or a little just draw a line on it and on one side put bizarre, absurd, illegal ideas and on the other side put safe workable ideas, right? In the middle write the word approximate thinking, right?

And if you show that to your teams who are doing creative work for you and say, you know what? As we start this thing you can move from bizarre through approximate and then we'll let's just stop there. Let's let's let's look at these approximate ideas. They're not baked out. They're not full. They may be bad and need If you give people permission to do that, you will see that your creativity will spike. Wow, I like that.

Wonderful. David, thank you for coming on. You're very welcome. It's been my pleasure, really. It's really been a privilege to to be totally honest. >> And ours, too. We we learned a lot today. Yeah, man. You're you're you're just wonderful. Thank you so much and we appreciate you. All right, that's it. That's the pod.