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How to Create
Brand Names
That Stick

ALEXANDRA WATKINS

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—**Matt Ruby, founder and CEO, Vooza**

Hello, My Name Is
AWESOME

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How to Create Brand Names That Stick

ALEXANDRA WATKINS



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Hello, My Name Is Awesome

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To my awesome mother, Joan Casale.

Thank you for being there
for every chapter of my life,
and every page of this book.

*The meaning of life is to find your gift.
The purpose of life is to give it away.*

—Pablo Picasso

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PREFACE

Whether people see it on your storefront, read it on your badge at a trade show, or see it on their caller ID, your brand name makes a critical first impression. Even more than your shoes.

I wrote this book to show how anyone, even the most non-creative person, can come up with awesome brand names and have fun doing it.

Creating names is not a science. Yet naming firms spout ridiculous jargon about “verbal identity engineering,” “rigorous methodologies,” “computational linguistics,” and “scientific scrutiny applied to the unstructured and undisciplined process of brand name creation.” Others try to invent names using math. They take a completely fine word, crunch it with another word, and get a name that doesn’t compute. Or, they subtract a few letters from a perfectly good word and end up with a random name that looks like it was made from the miscellaneous Scrabble tiles left at the end of a game.

Does any of that sound even remotely creative?

Consumers don’t fall in love with brand names created by scientific processes, linguistic voodoo, or mangling the alphabet. Those kinds of names don’t resonate with us because they don’t make emotional connections.

The most powerful brand names connect with people and move them to buy because they are based on familiar words and concepts that they understand and appreciate: Kryptonite locks, Mayday tech support, Obsession perfume, Leap Frog toys, Ninja blender—these are the names that speak volumes.

As an advertising copywriter at Ogilvy & Mather, I learned the art of making emotional connections with words. Years later, I

began creating names and discovered that, just as a clever print ad headline will turn heads, generate buzz, and spark sales, brand names can have those same magical powers.

I am going to give you my bag of tricks.

INTRODUCTION

“Hello, my name is Alexandra.” Sounds simple enough. But people often butcher my name: “Alexandria,” “Alexandrea,” “Alexia.” And much to my annoyance, the 100 percent male version, “Alexander.”

What about your first and last names? Are they tricky to spell? Difficult to pronounce? Hard for people to remember? This trifecta of trouble is rampant among brand names: Sur La Table, Iams, Flickr, Saucony, Eukanuba, Xobni. Those are just a handful of head scratchers that consumers struggle with. But unlike the name you were born with, or married into, these easily bungled names were intentionally created by companies. At the time, these businesses may have thought they were being clever. But even after being in business for years, these brands still have to explain, spell, pronounce, and apologize for their names.

I am going to prevent you from making the same mistakes.

As the founder of a nationally known naming firm, Eat My Words (www.eatmywords.com), I have spent nearly a decade creating names for everything from consumer electronics to cupcake stores. Clients including Disney, Microsoft, and Wrigley hire my firm because they have discovered what I have known for years—the kind of brand names that resonate the most with consumers are names that people *get* and like. We want to feel clever not clueless. (Have you figured out what Xobni is yet?)

I’ve packed this book with firsthand knowledge that will enlighten and entertain you. You won’t find any junk science, branding jargon, or linguistic mumbo jumbo. And I haven’t included the etymology of famous brand names. Sure, those stories are interesting. But this is a how-to guide, not a history book.

Instead, you will get practical, up-to-date advice, such as

making sure that Siri and voice recognition software spell your name correctly. You'll read never-before-heard stories of naming triumphs and train wrecks. And you'll see dozens and dozens of eye-opening name examples—the good, the bad, and the so-bad-I-gave-them-an-award. I am not afraid to name names.

I break down the brainstorming process by walking you through how to come up with dozens of fantastic name ideas using the very same tools, techniques, and resources that I use every day.

My creative and fun techniques for coming up with names can be learned by anyone, even the most left-brained engineer. How is that possible? I don't use linguistics to create unfamiliar words. Instead, my approach is purely conceptual. It's based on what I've learned after spending more than twenty years as an advertising copywriter: clever ad headlines get noticed, get buzz, and get sales because they make strong emotional connections with consumers. Brand names can have that same effect.

Before we jump into brainstorming name ideas, you'll learn how to objectively evaluate names using the SMILE & SCRATCH test, a checklist based on my philosophy that a name should make you smile instead of scratch your head.

SMILE: The 5 Qualities of a Super-Sticky Name

- Suggestive** — evokes something about your brand
- Meaningful** — resonates with your audience
- Imagery** — is visually evocative to aid in memory
- Legs** — lends itself to a theme for extended mileage
- Emotional** — moves people

SCRATCH: The 7 Deadly Sins

- Spelling challenged** — looks like a typo
- Copycat** — is similar to competitors' names
- Restrictive** — limits future growth
- Annoying** — is forced or frustrates customers
- Tame** — is flat, descriptive, uninspired
- Curse of Knowledge** — makes sense only to insiders
- Hard to pronounce** — is not obvious or is unapproachable

This filter is kind of a no-brainer, right? Yet you'd be surprised how many brand names fail this test. (How does *Xobni* do?) Everything in this book is that simple.

And by the time you finish the last chapter, you will have everything you need to create awesome names on your own.

I'll admit that some of my colleagues think I'm crazy for sharing my secret sauce. They worry that I may cannibalize my business by showing "amateurs" how to do what I get paid the big bucks for. While I don't think the book will put me out of the name game, I do hope it will put me out of my misery by preventing more bad names from happening to good people.

Alexandra Watkins

P.S. If you haven't figured it out yet, *Xobni* is *in box* spelled backward. Just don't ask me how to pronounce it.

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CHAPTER 1



The 5 Qualities of a Super-Sticky Name

How do you react when you see or hear a name you like? You smile. We enjoy names that surprise us, entertain us, and make us feel smart because we *get* them.

Names that make us smile are infectious. They are the ones we talk about, tweet, and repeat because we like other people to smile, too.

I love seeing the grin on someone's face when I say that I named a Spanish language school in Colombia *Gringo Lingo*. I get the same reaction when I mention the robotic vacuum I named Neato. And most people laugh out loud when they hear about the Church of Cupcakes.

Imagine if before people were even customers of yours, they

loved your product or company simply because they loved the name. Maybe they'd even pay to buy a T-shirt with the name on it. That's the power of a name that makes people smile.

Remember the philosophy that the SMILE & SCRATCH name evaluation test is based on: A name should make you smile instead of scratch your head. SMILE is an acronym for the five qualities of a great name, which I cover here. (SCRATCH is the flipside, which we look at in the next chapter.)

SMILE:

The 5 Qualities of a Super-Sticky Name

Suggestive

Meaningful

Imagery

Legs

Emotional

Ideally your name should have all of the above attributes.

Suggestive —

Evokes Something about Your Brand

A name can't be expected to say *everything*, but it should suggest something about your brand. Not in a descriptive way, like Fast Signs, but in a creative or metaphorical way, such as Amazon.

The name Amazon suggests *enormous*. Founder Jeff Bezos chose the name because, to him, Amazon conjured up images of one of the world's largest rivers, and he envisioned his company being unfathomably large.

While Amazon.com famously started as an online bookseller in 1994, the company expanded rapidly into other areas. By 1999 the company was selling music, consumer electronics, video games, software, home-improvement items, toys and games, and much more. Of course, now it offers everything from linge-

rie to lawnmowers. And Amazon drones may one day be delivering our packages. No matter what they do or sell in the future, the name *Amazon* will always fit. Can you imagine if it had been named BookBarn.com?

Suggestive Coined Names

I have great respect for anyone who can invent a clever name that suggests something about the brand. Some of my favorite coined names are Dreamery, Groupon, Pictionary, Cinnabon, Chillow, Pinterest, Chuggernaut, and San Franpsycho. These names, also known as *portmanteaus*, work well because they cleverly marry two words together, are intuitive to spell, and easy to pronounce. Easier said than done. (More on that in the next chapter.) Other coined names that work well are those that suggest a positive brand experience. Jamba Juice, Twizzlers, and Zappos all live up to their fun, high-energy names.

A Suggestive Name Can Be Inspired by Your Brand's Personality

When you write your *creative brief* (Chapter 4), you'll jot down a few adjectives that describe the personality of your brand. You can use those words to spark name ideas. For instance, if you want to convey that your brand is adventurous and rugged, think of metaphors and phrases that fit those words. SUV names do this incredibly well. Explorer, Expedition, Range Rover, Yukon, and Denali all suggest rugged adventure.

Ad agencies are notorious for suggesting creative prowess through their wonderfully strange names. Some of the most imaginative are Victors & Spoils, Captains of Industry, The Glue Society, and Wexley School for Girls. These are certainly more interesting than traditional agency names like Foote, Cone & Belding.

How to Suggest Trust or Credibility

While your business should certainly be trustworthy and credible, trying to cram any form of those words into your name can

sound disingenuous. Luckily, there are many other ways you can convey that you have a quality company or product. Adding a strong secondary word in your name is an excellent solution. For instance, the company that makes the robotic vacuum Neato is named Neato Robotics. Other modifiers you can try are *Global*, *Industries*, or *Group*, which can instantly add heft to your name. Other ways to convey trust and credibility include customer testimonials on your website, a guarantee, professionally designed promotional materials, and an active social media presence. Actions speak louder than words.

MORE EXAMPLES OF SUGGESTIVE NAMES

Leaf (electric car)

Ninja (blender)

Kickstarter (crowdfunding)

FitBit (activity trackers)

Brawny (paper towels)

Meaningful — Resonates with Your Audience

It's important to make sure your name is meaningful to potential customers, not just to you. Most of the time when people encounter your name, you won't be there to explain it to them. And they won't have the time or interest to read about it on your website or the back of the box.

No one needs to explain the meaning of the name Norcal Waste Systems. It's unfortunately descriptive and has awful visual imagery. Not exactly something you would want to have emblazoned on a T-shirt or water bottle.

When the company was formed in 1983, the name Norcal Waste Systems was fine for the commercial businesses they served. But twenty-five years later, with hundreds of thousands of residential garbage-collection customers, the name was far from appealing. *Waste* had an especially negative meaning to the environmentally conscious communities it served in northern California, Oregon, and Washington. What these customers

cared about was recycling, composting, and reclaiming useful materials before they were buried in a landfill. Ironically, Norcal Waste Systems was an industry leader in all of these areas. But no one would ever guess that based on the name.

In April 2009, Norcal Waste Systems changed its name to Recology, fusing the words *recycle* and *ecology*. This progressive new name evokes the company's environmental shift, resonates with both residential and commercial customers, and is a source of pride (instead of embarrassment) for their 2,100 employees.

A Meaningful Long Name Is Better than a Short Meaningless Name

It's better to have a meaningful name that people can remember than a meaningless name they can type in five keystrokes. The name of the online home furnishings store Previously Owned by a Gay Man is loaded with meaning and is much more memorable than a shortened version (PreOw) or its abbreviation (POBAGM).

The longest name I know of belonged to one of the entertainment law firms that represented Michael Jackson: Ziffren, Brittenham, Branca, Fischer, Gilbert-Lurie, Stiffelman, Cook, Johnson, Lande & Wolf. I'm not sure how meaningful such a long name could be to their clients, but until recently, when they shortened it to Ziffren Brittenham LLP, the names of all ten partners composed the name of this twenty-three-person firm. I would love to have seen how they crammed that onto a business card.

Do Not Name Your Company after Yourself

While it may evoke warm thoughts to your friends and family, your personal name is meaningless to your future customers. They don't know you yet. Your name evokes absolutely nothing about your business, expertise, or brand personality. And if you're like many of us, your name is either hard to spell, hard to pronounce, or hard for people to remember. Why would you

want to have a business name with the same difficulties? (I suspect you know this, which is why you are reading this book.)

Unfortunately, most consultants and service professionals (architects, attorneys, photographers, professional speakers, etc.) use their own name by default because “That’s what everyone else does.” Most don’t know any better, lack creative inspiration, or simply let their ego get in the way. This is a huge missed opportunity. Fortunately you are reading this book and won’t make the same mistake.

Tejal Topiwala is a talented home stager and interior designer in Toronto. For most people in North America, her name is intimidating to pronounce. She had the foresight to know that it might be a barrier for people to pick up the phone and call if they were unsure how to pronounce her name. And of course her name wouldn’t distinguish her in any way from her competitors. We branded her company *Paprika*, with the tagline “Spice up your space.” This new identity recognizes her flair for color, lends itself to wordplay, has beautiful imagery, and is a fantastic conversation starter. And most of all, it lets prospective clients know that she’s creative.

If Your Personal Name Lends Itself to Wordplay, Get Clever

If your first or last name lends itself to wordplay, you may be able to create a clever brand name out of it. Dawn Gluskin is a multimillion-dollar entrepreneur and coach who shares advice through her company, Dawnsense. Steven Lord is a consultant who calls his business Lord Knows!

If you do go this route, consider what could happen if you sell your company and your name is still attached to it, as happened to Shari Fitzpatrick, the founder of the original chocolate-dipped strawberry company, Shari’s Berries. For two decades, Shari cultivated tens of thousands of loyal customers and a reputation for creating beautifully hand-dipped creations. Shari’s Berries became well known, thanks to *O Magazine*, QVC, and the SkyMall catalog, where her product was featured on the cover three times. But after making a bad business decision,

Shari was pushed out of her own company. A large corporation now owns Shari's Berries and mass-produces a product that bears little resemblance to the original. It makes Shari cringe that anyone would ever associate her good name with an inferior product. There's nothing she can do about it. She is forbidden to use her own name for her new company. (She does have a cute new name, though—Berried In Chocolate—inspired by the title of her chocolate-covered book, which is quite delicious.)

MORE EXAMPLES OF MEANINGFUL NAMES

Kryptonite (bike locks)

Breakthrough (mental health website)

Repel (insect repellent)

Mayday (tech support button)

Yelp (customer reviews)

Imagery —

Visually Evocative to Aid in Memory

Think of people you've met throughout your life who have unusual first names. For me, that would be Daisy, Forest, and Chopper. I met all of them more than ten years ago during a six-week backpacking trip through New Zealand. (Chopper was a helicopter pilot.) I met dozens of people on my trip, but those three are the ones I remember instantly because the names have such strong associations with things that I can picture in my mind. That's the power of a visually evocative name.

Wouldn't you love to have a product or company name that would be so embedded in people's memories that they could recall it ten years later? You can, if you name your product or company something that conjures up images. When people can visualize your name with a picture, it's much easier for them to remember than an unfamiliar word or acronym that doesn't give their mind anything to latch on to. Think of an energy

drink named Bloom. Now think of one named Enviga. Which name paints a picture? How's that for flower power?

One brand name loaded with visual imagery is Timberland, makers of rugged gear for the great outdoors. Whenever I hear that name, I imagine myself hiking in a mossy evergreen forest along a babbling brook, listening to lilting songbirds and crickets.

Even Dog Food Names Can Have Imagery

No matter what your product or company is, there is no excuse not to have a name with imagery. Pet food company Merrick recognizes the power of visually evocative names. Its canned dog food flavors conjure up some pretty tasty images: Thanksgiving Day Dinner, Grammy's Pot Pie, Cowboy Cookout, Smothered Comfort, Honolulu Luau. Merrick's names live up to their tagline, "It's food worthy of a fork." (For the record, I have not eaten any of these.)

Make Sure Your Name Has Imagery, Not Just Your Brand

Last week, someone wrote to me, "I've always liked the name Wells Fargo, because it connotes reliability and speed, and it has wonderful imagery of the Wild West. The stagecoach delivered the mail, come rain, snow, or ambush." Sure, after 162 years of building a successful brand and investing millions of dollars in advertising, the name Wells Fargo does evoke all of those things. But what if founders Henry Wells and William G. Fargo were starting a bank today and the name Wells Fargo popped up on your caller ID? What do those words alone conjure up without all of the years of visual branding? Certainly not pictures of the Wild West. Make sure your name has imagery from the beginning.

MORE EXAMPLES OF NAMES WITH IMAGERY

Range Rover (SUVs)

Irish Spring (soap)

Target (mass merchandiser)

Leap Frog (educational toys)

Hard Candy (nail polish)

Legs —

Lends Itself to a Theme for Extended Mileage

To get the most out of your name, give it one that has legs. Strive for a theme with mileage you can build your brand around. Names with legs provide endless wordplay and verbal branding opportunities.

A strong theme can be extended to many elements of a brand, including these:

taglines

job titles

blog names

newsletter names

network names

server names

tradeshow themes

online promo codes

conference rooms

theme songs

email signoffs

company award names

Public relations pro, Lynette Hoy, is a fiery woman who isn't afraid to pick up the phone to pitch a great story about her clients to the press. When I met her, she was using her personal name as her business name: Lynette Hoy PR. Unfortunately, it didn't evoke anything about her high-energy personality or tenacity. So we branded her with a name and tagline that said it all: Firetalker PR. *Hot on the press.*

Lynette took it from there and ran with it, creating a firestorm of branding ideas. Her official title is Fire Chief. She works in The Firehouse. And her packages are called Inferno, Controlled Burn, and Matchbox. She lightly peppers her marketing materials with her theme, keeping it fresh and fun, but not cutesy, corny, or over the top. And the ringtone on her phone is the classic R&B funk song "Fire" by the Ohio Players, which she also cranks up during her speaking engagements to fire up the audience.

Find a Theme That Can Be Stretched like Carnival Taffy

Some especially rich themes with endless wordplay include *space exploration*, *nature*, *music*, *travel*, and *art*. The theme of food is also highly extendable, as we've discovered at Eat My Words:

- ◆ Blog name: *The Kitchen Sink*
- ◆ info@email: hungry@eatmywords.com
- ◆ Service packages: Snack, the Whole Enchilada, and Just the Meat
- ◆ Client parking sign: "Eat My Words' client parking only. Violators will be eaten."
- ◆ Business card: pink retro refrigerator (a replica of the one in our office, which we use as a bookcase)
- ◆ Wireless network name: Candyland
- ◆ Meeting materials: toast coasters, pens that look like lico-rice sticks, "Food for Thought" notepads
- ◆ Corporate workshops: Spilling the Beans

The Right Name Creates a Family

When you launch a product, you can't look into your crystal ball and know what the future holds. But developing a naming theme early on will help you tremendously down the road. Apple has done this well with the iMac, iPod, iPhone, iPad, and iTouch. And even though the word *cloud* has become terribly overused, the name iCloud is instantly identifiable as being from Apple, which makes it stand out from the rest of the cloud crowd. It works for them. (But it doesn't work for you or your products. Don't even go there.)

Republic of Tea has sub-brands with very long legs:

Get a Grip

Get Happy

Get Clean

Get Lost

Get Gorgeous

Get Smart

Trader Joe's has branded their ethnic foods with clever sub-brands that play off the primary name:

Trader Jose's (Mexican)	Trader Joe-San (Japanese)
Trader Ming's (Chinese)	Trader Jacque's (French)
Trader Giotto's (Italian)	

If your name doesn't have a theme, you can still extend it through the personality of the brand, as Ben & Jerry's has done:

Cherry Garcia	Chunky Monkey
Chocolate Therapy	Karamel Sutra
Chubby Hubby	Liz Lemon

Naming Product Versions

The easiest way to name product versions is with sequential numbers. Numbers help consumers quickly differentiate newer versus older. Numbering versions is especially appropriate in software because technology changes quickly. My current web browser is Firefox 24. While it's boring, it's clear.

On the other hand, Android is having fun by naming their versions after sweet indulgences: Cupcake, Donut, Eclair, Froyo, Gingerbread, Honeycomb, Ice Cream Sandwich, and Jelly Bean. Android's maker, Google, has also licensed the name KitKat from Nestlé in a clever promotional partnership. There are endless names Android can consider for future versions. Banana Split, Butterscotch, Cherry Pie, Lemon Bar, and Macaroon all sound good to me.

Another creative way to introduce new versions is with letters of the alphabet. Ford has done this by giving their models names that start with the letter "F":

Fairlane	Festiva
Fairmont	Futura
Falcon	Focus
Fiesta	Fusion

If you're going to try this, try using an initial letter that has many words associated with it, such as S, P, C, D, M, or A. Avoid limited letters such as K, Z, and X. (As a rule, it's never a good idea to start a name with the letter X, which makes pronunciation difficult. It's also the most difficult keystroke on a Qwerty keyboard.)

Names with Legs Can Mean Money

Despite the polarizing name, restaurant chain Hooters makes an obscene amount of money selling more than 250 types of merchandise featuring its name and silly slogans, including baby bibs that say "Show Me Your Hooters." Really.

If you have a catchy name that makes people smile, you can slap it on merchandise that people will pay for because they love your name and want to show it off. Think about that for a minute. You launch a new business without celebrity endorsements, brand recognition, or the cachet of Nike, Polo, or Louis Vuitton. Yet people are clamoring to buy and wear products with your name on it. Instead of you having to pay for advertising, your customers are paying you to advertise your brand. That is the true sign of a successful name. Here is some monetized merchandise we've created for food retailers.

Company	Monetized Merchandise
Church of Cupcakes	T-shirts that read "OMG" and "Forgive me Father, for I have binged."
Spoon Me (frozen yogurt)	T-shirts with the slogans "Shut-up and Spoon Me" and "If you love me, Spoon Me." Bumper stickers that read "If you're driving this close, you might as well Spoon Me."
Smitten (ice cream stores)	Branded T-shirts, totes, and infant bodysuits. "I'm Smitten" is on the back of the bodysuits, which looks adorable when the parent is holding the child.

Emotional — Moves People

A recent *Fast Company* article revealed that 50 percent of every buying decision is driven by emotion. I'm not surprised. Think of how many times you have purchased a bottle of wine simply because the name made you smile. If you shop by the label as the majority of wine buyers do, it's hard to resist a love-at-first-sight name like Fat Bastard, 7 Deadly Zins, Layer Cake, Educated Guess, Little Black Dress, and Cat's Pee on a Gooseberry Bush. That's the power of a name that makes an emotional connection.

Use Emotion to Increase Sales

The hip Hotel Vitale on San Francisco's Embarcadero waterfront experienced a 25 percent jump in wedding business when we changed the ho-hum names of their wedding services to ones that were, pardon the pun, emotionally engaging.

Before	After
Rehearsal Dinner	Meet the Parents
Co-ed Bridal Shower	Shower Together
Post-Reception Bar Rental	Last Call for Alcohol
Post-Wedding Brunch	Bloody Married
Guest Rate	Entourage Rate

Previously, a bride and groom planning a wedding may have skimmed over a name like Post Reception Bar Rental, but nothing says party time like Last Call for Alcohol. That name makes an instant emotional connection because it's fun, meaningful, and loaded with imagery. And suddenly, a co-ed bridal shower doesn't sound so excruciating for the groom when it's named

Shower Together. All of these names bring levity to the stressful task of wedding planning, add value, and make everyone smile, even the parents footing the bill.

While I'd love to share more sales figures with you, name metrics cannot be quantified unless a name is changed. And even then, with refreshed branding and new advertising, the name cannot take all the credit. Hotel Vitale can attribute the 25 percent increase in wedding sales to the name changes because they were simply words listed in a guide. Nothing else changed. Restaurants can try this by changing the name of a dish on a menu. Something as simple as changing Chicken Soup to the more emotionally driven Grandma's Chicken Soup will increase sales.

The Power of Love

Speaking of happily ever after, we all know that falling in love is a powerful emotion. When Eat My Words was charged with naming a new online dating website, we wanted the name to tap into those feelings. The company who hired us was eHarmony. While I loved the people we worked with there, I cringed at the name eHarmony, which is dated and pretty cheesy. Most dating websites have dreadful names. Who really wants to say they met the love of their life on eHarmony, Christian Mingle, Farmers Only, Fuzd, or Veggie Dates?

The new website eHarmony had created was for people who wanted a relationship but weren't necessarily ready to get "Bloody Married." We explored the positive emotions of romance and seized on the feelings people get when they are super excited about meeting someone new who they really, really like. You probably know that rush of excitement and happiness. It's the best feeling in the world. We landed on *Jazzed*, a timeless word that people in the target audience are comfortable saying. It's not only an emotional name, it's literally an emotion. And a nice little bonus was that, like eHarmony, *Jazzed* evokes music. The client loved the name and launched the site.

Like most online dating relationships, *Jazzed.com* didn't last as long as we had hoped. (They couldn't match the success of

Match.com and eHarmony didn't want to cannibalize its own business.) I'm still heartbroken.

MORE EXAMPLES OF EMOTIONAL NAMES

Obsession (fragrance)

Pedigree (pet food)

Club Monaco (clothing)

Snuggle (fabric softener)

One Kings Lane (flash sale site)

Next let's look at the flipside of SMILE: SCRATCH.

Thank You For Reading

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