Types of Nonprofit Names

The name of your organization can say a lot about your organization's mission, values, and aspirations. While a great name won't guarantee a steady stream of funds, it can help distinguish your organization in this increasingly competitive world. Conversely, a poor name may confuse your organization with another or misrepresent your mission, losing the opportunity to appeal to donors who care about your cause. Here are some types of names to consider.

Descriptive

As it indicates, Descriptive Names merely tells what the organization does, such as the **Children's Aid Society**. While Descriptive is the most common type of nonprofit name, there is an abundance of organizations with descriptive names that are unsuccessful. Many are bland, uninspired, and too long. In choosing a Descriptive Name, consider the problem the organization solves and the main benefits it provides, as opposed to description of the actions it takes. The name needs to inspire, so consider the emotional impact, which can make a huge difference in how people feel about your organization.

Geographic

Descriptive names are often combined with the location of the organization, such as **The Boys Choir of Harlem**, **Louisville Zoo Foundation**, **and the 92nd Street Y**, or the area that the organization serves (**The Himalayan Cataract Project**). While originating as a point of distinction between other groups with similar missions, a geographic-based name can become a limitation should the organization seek to expand outside the named area.

Person's Name

From **Hale House** to the **Ellington Fund**, founders' or funders' names are often used. Since celebrities' names are their greatest asset, naming their foundations after themselves, such as **The Michael J. Fox Founda-** **tion for Parkinson's Research**, and **Lance Armstrong's Foundation** (renamed **Livestrong** after their yellow bracelets created a worldwide sensation) lends immediate visibility and credibility to the charity.

There are advantages and disadvantages to this approach. A person's name provides the opportunity for the organization to tell a compelling story of its founder and to galvanize people around a magnetic personality. The limitation is that the equity or good will is built up around an individual, and it may be difficult to shift it to the organization when the founder steps down. Name recognition can also take time to build up, while scandal can easily roil the accumulated amity. And sometimes, these types of names don't describe what the organization does.

And as corporations increasingly step up their philanthropic endeavors, watch for business names to become more commonly associated with charities such as the **Avon Walk for Breast Cancer**, which is actually the well-known event of the **Avon Foundation**, the philanthropic arm of **Avon Products, Inc.**

Conceptual

This type of name implies a meaning or metaphor that relates to the organization's mission. The name **Red Cross** is derived from inverting the colors on Switzerland's flag to symbolize the organization's neutral status, which allows it to deliver aid to ravaged countries. Their immense name recogni-

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tion is owed to its long and successful history (founded in 1881 by Clara Barton), simple name, and widely recognized icon, now indelibly linked to the concept of medical care.

Using a generic word as a name has both advantages and disadvantages. The name **Crossroads** conjures a powerful visual metaphor and is thus used by many organizations, which creates problems distinguishing between them. The organization **Breakthrough**, which uses popular culture and media to affect social change, also faces competition for its name, but is a bit more unique.

Combinations

One way to generate a unique name is to combine two words. **KICKSTART**, which builds moral character in youth through martial arts, suggests its mission in a concise, emotionally upbeat moniker that combines two generic words to create a name.

Made Up

To truly achieve a unique name, you can concoct a word. George Eastman's camera company created the word **Kodak** because it had the hard 'K' to start and finish the word, making the name sound modern. This unusual construction creates uniqueness and consequently aids memory.

In the closing quarter of last century, the technique of combining various Latin roots became common and resulted in the auto brand **Acura** suggesting accurate and **Lexus** implying excellence. The pharmaceutical industry uses this technique for naming drugs, such as the name **Prozac** helped fluoxetine hydrochloride become the best-selling anti-depression medication.

Linguistic naming techniques can be very effective, but are not commonly used in the nonprofit sector since it is expensive to generate good names this way and requires a significant investment in order to imbue the name with meaning and reinforce it for recognition.

Sounds

While not widely used, words mimicking sounds can create an effective name if there is enough of a connection between the name and the sound. Search engine **Yahoo!** successfully uses the sound of a joyous discovery; however, a nonprofit called **KABOOM!**, which rallies people around the cause of playgrounds, belies its mission of providing a safe haven for kids by employing the sound of an explosion as its name.

Foreign Words

Sometimes foreign words provide good names, particularly when they are short and sound good. **Kiva**, the micro lending site, is a Swahili word that means "unity" or "agreement," which works for them even if you don't know the meaning – perhaps because two of the four letters subtly mimic the word give.

Abbreviations

In the nonprofit sector, abbreviations are usually the result of a name that is too long to say easily in conversation. In these cases, the abbreviation is a bridge to a series of meaningless letters. Large organizations that have been around for more than half a century, such as **IBM, AT&T**, or the **UJA** (formally, the UJA – Federation of New York), may be known by their initials without the need to know what the abbreviation actually stands for (UJA was the United Jewish Appeal, which merged with the Jewish Federation three decades ago). Some organizations such as **AIPAC, AJWC**, and **HIAS** are known by their initials, at least in Jewish circles, but their full names are not lost among their audience.

Some abbreviated names are abbreviated even further (even down to one letter) as in

the case of the **YMCA** organization which recently rebranded themselves as simply the **Y** (but they still use the letters YMCA on their logo just in case). Their Jewish counterparts, the YMHA (Young Men's Hebrew Association) were renamed **Jewish Community Center** a few decades ago (although it was voluntary and some are still Ys), are referred to as the **JCC**, although members would say they were going to the J.

Acronyms

Carefully crafted acronyms, such as **K.I.D.S.** (Kids in Distressed Situations) or **M.A.D.D.** (Mothers Against Drunk Drivers), actually help to reinforce the name, in the first case by specifying the population served, and in the second, conveying the emotion felt by victims of drunk driving, a strong emotional appeal, often lacking in nonprofit names.

CARE, the leading humanitarian organization and originator of the CARE package, benefits from a fantastic acronym that describes its mission succinctly. The conglomeration of relief agencies which was founded in 1945 as "Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe," now says the acronym stands for "Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere, Inc." although the organization has become so well known that its longhand name is no longer referred to even on its own website.

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With a chance to create a new organizational name comes the opportunity for visibility, utility, and a bit of showmanship. So make it a good one.