

An analogic approach

Christening the company

by **Christine McPartland**

At conference tables from Boston to Lowell, high-tech executives are doing more than chalking up bucks. They're chalking up blackboards. A new computer language in the works? Hardly. These digital wizards are simply searching for company names. In an industry where competition leaps day by day, finding an untagged title can become a time-consuming nemesis. But few young high-tech firms seek professional advice on choosing their handles. Most resort instead to letter games more akin to Spin the Bottle than Scrabble.

What's in a name?

"They (the founders) were eating at the Harvest (Restaurant, in Cambridge) and brainstorming when it hit them," quipped an anonymous purchasing agent. Thus was born Harvest Computers of Cambridge, a computer dealer and training and repair center, of course.

The truth behind Norwood's Omicron, dealers in Toshiba and Kaypro systems, hit closer to home, as office manager Michelle Gavrilles explained the choice of the Greek word for the letter "o": owner Steven Gavrilles is Greek, and his father coined the name.

Shattering yet more Grecian fantasies was James McGill, president of Westwood's Beta Group. Not for him any inspiring wisdom from the second letter in the Greek alphabet, second brightest star in the constellation. It seems high-tech management believes customers shop the Yellow Pages, where they prefer their fingers do as little walking as possible. "We wanted something with a letter near the

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Names: Apple conception to Zilog contraction

NAMES

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beginning of the alphabet," offered McGill, "and Beta was one of the only ones left."

And Beta, of course, loves brotherhood, easily found at Atex, the Bedford computer publishing firm—thus the "tex"—prefixed with an "A," "so that we'd be out front in any listing," according to a company spokesman.

Remembering the why behind their company names was not a problem for most marketing reps—the majority had never known or questioned it in the first place. And scratch the rule that says a company's name should be its strongest selling tool. KLB of Bedford, computer dealers and engineers with a run on government contracts, has changed all that. They guard the reasoning behind their handle as "confidential, thank you." Hrumph.

As in any field, high-tech nomenclature has its trends and cycles—the proliferating data's, micro's, inter-this, and soft-that. And there are those firms who leisurely en-



*'... rides on
the wings
of sci-fi ...'*

joy the designations of such appropriately named founders as Germany's Heinz Nixdorf and Hans Ikier or Norway's Gene Amdahl.

But as Joe Selame, of Selame Design, a corporate identity firm in Newton, points out, many high-tech firms knock off their names the same way they knock off some of their products. "Someone has already trademarked the name they want, so they change a few letters, add here, delete there," said Selame.

For John Hild of Bedford's Xyquest, software publishers for IBM's personal computers, the quest for a corporate identity "was an alphabet soup kind of game."

"We wanted something a little technical," said Hild. "Ford and Exxon were already taken, and Xyquest

predecessors—Microfinance Systems and Professional Software Technology. Soon emerged the Homeric, indolent Lotus flower. "It was so human," said Germain, "this flower that literally springs up from the mud . . . Of course it's hard to pronounce with my New York accent."

Konelar Corporation president Ken Pruyn did his name-storming in his kitchen. "I had a list at home for days. People could add and comment on potential names as they headed for the refrigerator," he said.

Not that all of this name-calling is totally devoid of method. While Pruyn insists it was "more witchcraft than science," he set firm criteria for his choice of titles for his DEC software firm. "We wanted something easy to remember, pronounceable in any language and generally good sounding," he said. For Pruyn, overcoming the language barrier was key, keeping in mind, he said, the reason that sales of the Chevrolet Nova had stalled in South America (in Spanish the hook read "Chevrolet no go"). To stay on the safe side, Pruyn stuck with an initial "K." "K is pretty stable in most languages," he explains. "And you have to alternate consonants and vowels unless your jaw locks, so Konelar it was. It also has the right number of letters for a telephone ad message, you know, dial K-O-N-E-L-A-R. An engineer told me that."

P's and Q's aside, Individeo president Ed English, more into I's and V's than K's, had future slogans in mind when he tagged his Woburn video game programming business. "You know," he said, "if you're into video, go individeo." And curse the Yellow Pages for hindering his audio and misspelling the firm as Individed.

Though a bit contrived as high-tech names go (a New York City dry-cleaning business shares the nomenclature with the micro-computer manufacturer), the moniker Solvation, Inc.—total solution through automation—fit president Mike McGrath's aims nicely. His only frustration? "Resisting the temptation to say, 'Join the Solvation Army,' in our ads," he quipped.

For other founding fathers and mothers, creativity took second place to literature in dog-earring a name. A Belmont software designer, Mark of the Unicorn, for instance, rides on the wings of sci-fi author Roger Zelazny's science fiction novel, "Sign of the Unicorn." "We didn't want any technical-sounding name, like Software Something or Other," said President Jason Linhart, "so we started playing with variations on titles from books."

Similarly, other firms hit the stacks long and hard

equipment, boasts one of the more elaborate case histories. Trace the word through Middle English and French to Latin, said company spokesman Judy Goldstein, and you find cautex—a trunk of a tree or a wax-covered tablet on which the ancients wrote.

Susan K. Kubany, president of Omnet, an electronic mail company, had more human interests at heart when scratching out her Greek derivative. "We were looking for a name that seemed futuristic and forward moving,

*'... futuristic
and forward
moving ...'*

yet not hard or off-putting; electronic mail can seem so cold and frightening," she said. What she got was a marriage between the Greek Omni for "all" and an abbreviated "network," "plus the warm, flowing lines of the round letters," she mused.

Selame predicts that high tech will increasingly pick up on Kubany's and Lotus' (and of course, Apple's) cue and select names for more human-oriented reasons. "Enough of this digital talk," Selame said. "For the first time computer companies are beginning to realize that they're selling to people rather than engineers. I think it will follow that their names will get more organic. We'll be moving toward the ball and away from the square."

Albeit slowly. Many firms still prefer to package themselves concisely, if not necessarily nicely. At Burlington's Zilog, a maker of semiconductor components and supermicro computer systems, the story is "Z to stand for the word in Integrated Logic," and neighboring Inforex, manufacturer of computer components, has proudly cast itself as "information king."

But Selame warns that such hard-hitting names can be deceiving. "We've stayed away from high tech because it's in such a state of flux," he said. "You don't know if these young companies will be here tomorrow. They have big ads and powerful, strong-looking names, but there's no one there. The president is out repairing machines."