How to Name a Company in 8 Hours

by Jake Knapp, Design Partner at GV and author of *Sprint*

Not long ago, our team at GV received a request. One of our investments, a startup that makes high-tech medical devices, needed to come up with a name in a hurry—they had just a couple of weeks before a major funding event. But there was a catch. We had only a single free day in our calendar before the event. Could we name Company X in just eight hours?

By the end of the day, Company X was known as Element Science, they owned elementscience.com, and we still had almost 30 minutes to spare. This is the story of what we did in those eight hours. I hope you find something useful for your own naming project.

The game plan

How should we use our day? Before we started, I sat down with my GV partners John Zeratsky, Daniel Burka, and our ringer, Laura Melahn—who helped name the Alphabet company [Calico](#).

Daniel and Laura praised the work of their friends at a design firm called [Hello Monday](#). We looked at the agency's branding tools and cribbed a few favorites. Then we added individual work exercises and decision-making tricks from our own [sprints](#) (we've run over 100 of these with startups in the GV portfolio). We budgeted time for each activity and jotted down a rough schedule:

Morning: Brand exercises

What, how, and why	15 min
20-year roadmap	15 min
Audience ranking	15 min
Values	15 min
Break	15 min
Brand opposites	30 min
Competitive landscape	30 min

Early afternoon: Name generation

Themes	30 min
Names	120 min

Late afternoon: Decide

Weighted voting	30 min
Vetting	60 min

That's what we did. It was unscientific, inelegant, and dirty—but it actually worked!

Setting the stage

You can't name a company without the CEO in the room. If you're running a similar process and the CEO (or other decision-maker) won't get involved, just tell them you've named the company Armpit Enterprises. They'll change their tune.

For our "naming sprint" we had founder and CEO Uday Kumar and director of design Maarten Dinger. Uday brought along his friend John White—an expert in the medical

device field who had crucial outside perspective and could help us see through the eyes of the customer.

The ground rules were simple: No stepping out for a meeting; no laptops; no phones. We used a [Time Timer](#) to time-box our activities. Snacks and stretch breaks would be plentiful. We got to work.

Morning: Brand exercises

These brand exercises served two purposes. First, they helped the rest of us boot up our brains and understand what Uday and Maarten believed about their company. Second, the exercises gave us a framework and vocabulary for talking about brand. When you're not a brand expert—and again, I'm not—you need all the help you can get.

Warning: I'm about to drop some very touchy-feely stuff here. I tend to be pretty allergic to this kind of thing, but when used properly, these exercises are immensely valuable.

1. What, how, and why (15 minutes)

A nice simple place to start: we listed off what the company does, how they do it, and why—their motivation and vision.

I don't want to give away of Company X's secrets, so let's imagine a hippy toothpaste company doing this exercise. The what is "make toothpaste," the how might be "with natural ingredients", and the why might be "to promote natural living." We built on this in our next exercise.

2. 20-year roadmap (15 minutes)

Like most teams, Uday and Maarten spend a lot of time thinking about the product they're working on now—that's the what or the how.

But brands last a long time. What would Company X be doing in 2036? Were they building a single product, or a parent brand that would have many product lines over time?

Looking ahead 20 years made one thing clear: They wanted a parent brand that would allow them to build more than one product in the future. Right away, that eliminated any name that was too descriptive of their current technology.

The best place to find long-term brand names is the why. When you look at the why, you're less likely to name your toothpaste "Pepsodent," and more likely to name it "Tom's of Maine." (Full disclosure: I use Tom's deodorant, and I smell great.)
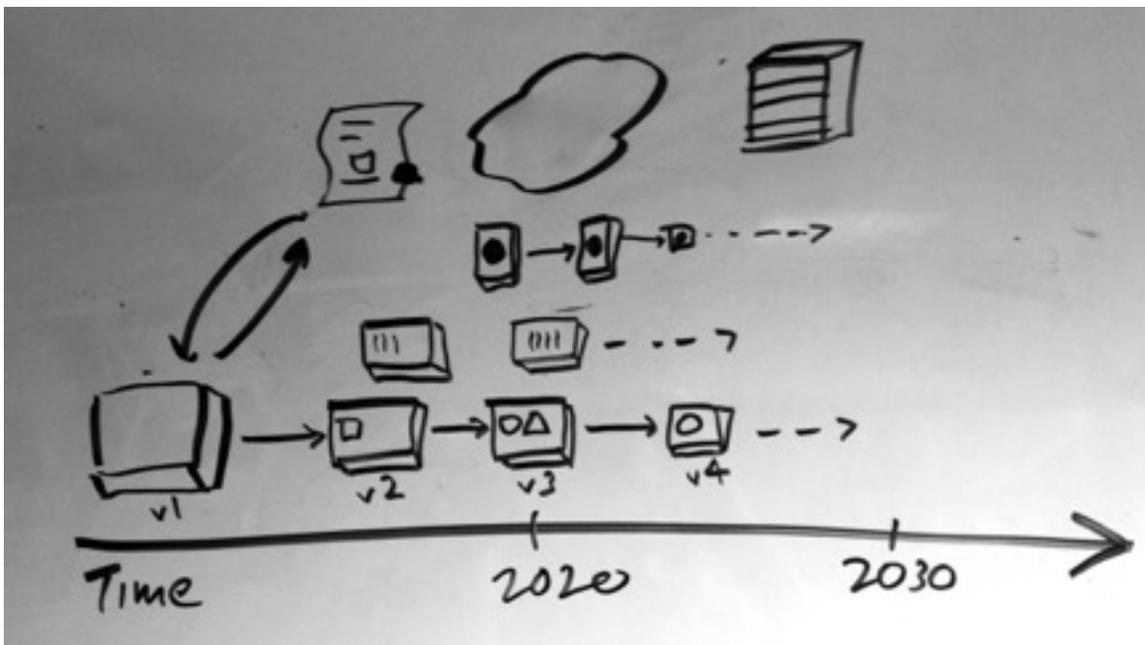
3. Audience ranking (15 minutes)

Next we asked Uday and Maarten to list their customers (pretty easy) and stack rank them (not so easy). Is the brand name most important for patients, doctors, or hospital staff? Since doctors make the device recommendation, they went on top.
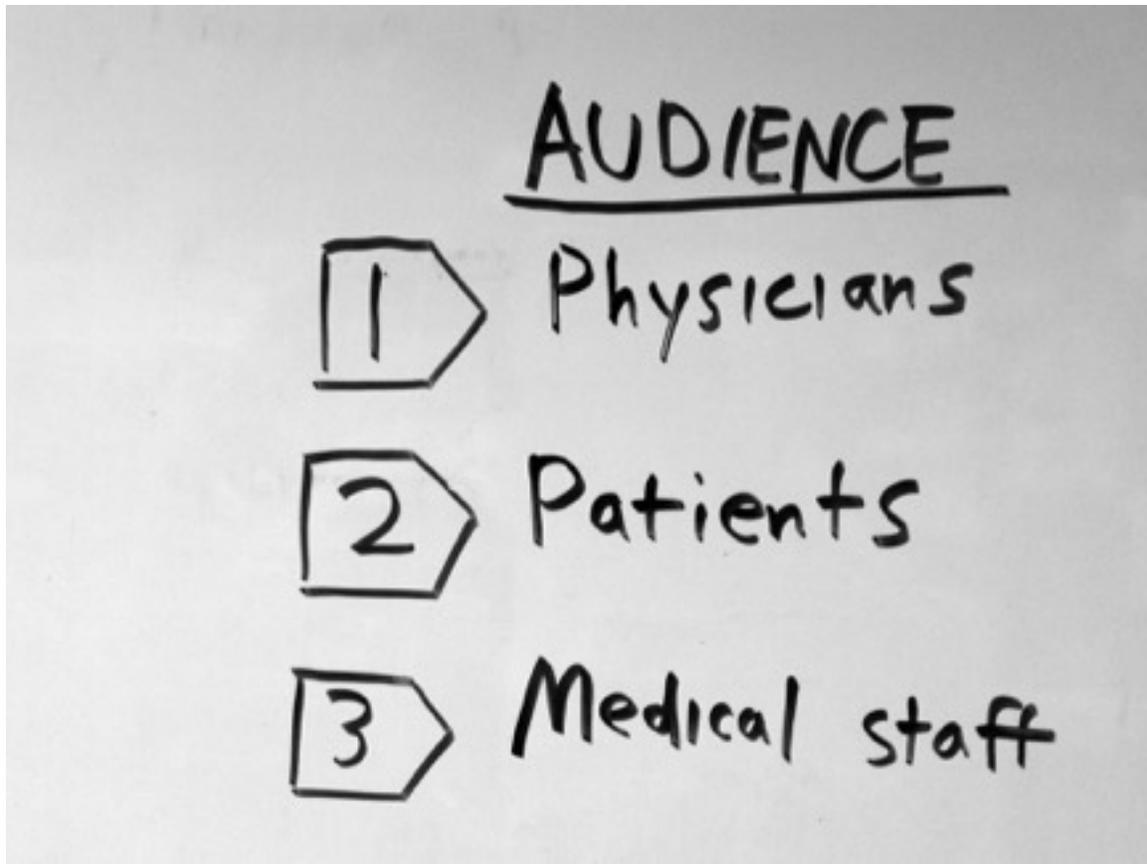
4. Values (15 minutes)

Then we did the same thing for their company values. Obviously this one is mushier than audience, but every bit as important.

Uday and Maarten easily identified three core values: vitality, simplicity, and data-driven. Each is important to Company X. Each suggests a different kind of name. When forced to choose, they went with their why: vitality—in other words, their most important company value is helping people live a long and healthy life.

5. Brand opposites (30 minutes)

Next we did a classic brand exercise: plotting the company on a continuum between pairs of extremes.

- Friend vs. authority

- Modern vs. classic

- Playful vs. serious

- Mass appeal vs. elite
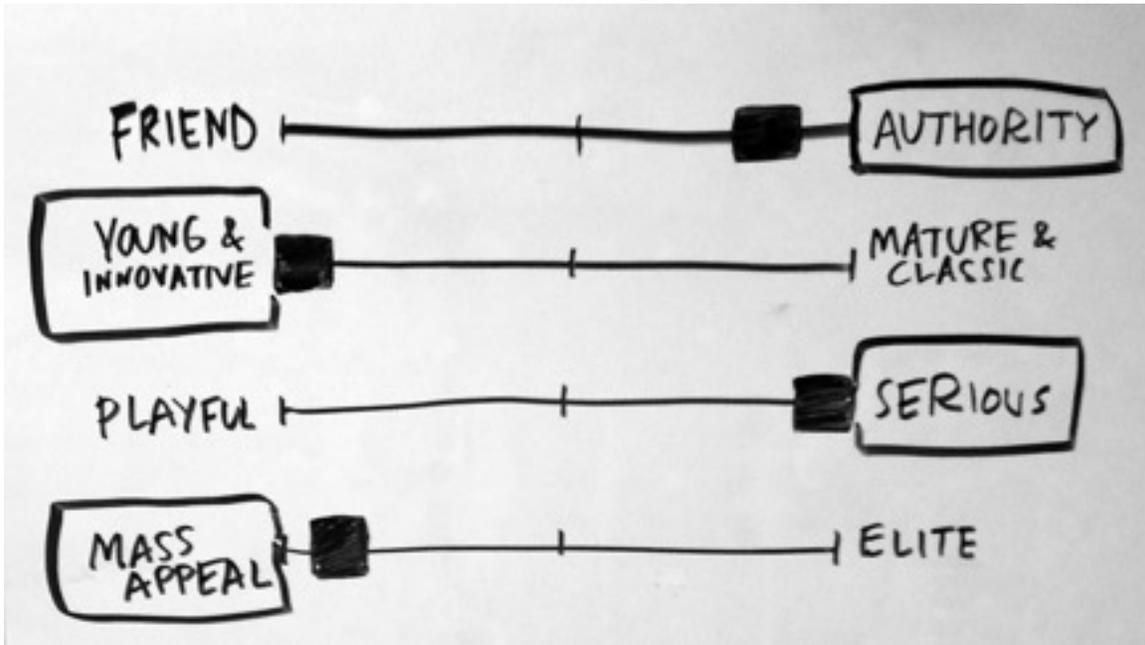
Their primary audience is doctors, so they decided that "authority" fit better than "friend," and they should be more "serious" than "playful." When we did this exercise, I have to admit it seemed corny. But by the end of the day it had proved its worth.

6. Competitive landscape (30 minutes)

This is another classic; a similar exercise to "brand opposites." We drew a simple matrix—"classic" to "modern" on the x-axis, "expressive" to "reserved" on the y-axis— and plotted Company X and all of their competitors. This was a great way to test the abstract decisions we'd just made.
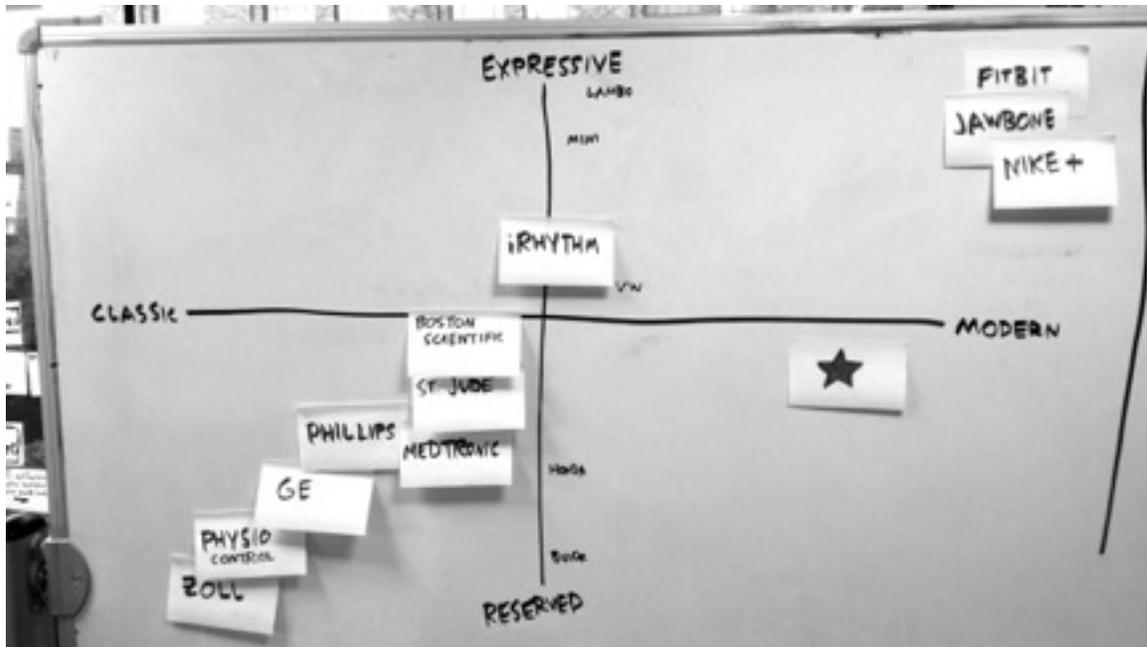
By this time, the whiteboards were half-covered. It was time to fill the rest with name ideas—after lunch, that is.

Early afternoon: Name generation

The game plan for the afternoon was simple: Come up with a bunch of names and then pick the best. We added a bit of structure to get the most out of everyone's mental effort.

7. Themes (30 minutes)

On the Calico project, we followed themes to generate long lists of names. This same strategy is used by world-class naming agency Lexicon (namers of the BlackBerry and Swiffer), so we figured we were in good company.

The first job of the afternoon was to generate themes. Laura and Daniel came up with a few starter examples (mythology, fruit, California geography, sailing, chemistry, and so on) and then I distributed paper and pens.

I'm not a fan of traditional brainstorming. It usually means everyone is shouting out ideas without any filter—in my experience it doesn't yield quality results. A better approach is to have everyone work independently and quietly on paper.

For the next 10 minutes, everybody had to come up with as many themes as they could—on their own. For 5 minutes after that, each person filtered their own list. At the end I wrote everybody's picks on the board. We had about 30 themes ranging from "natural simplicity" to "strong minerals" to "nostalgia."

8. Names (2 hours)

Before coming up with names, we walked around the room to remind ourselves of the brand framework. Then, with pen and paper, we kicked off some more super-exciting silent work time. It was as rowdy as a library in there.

We spent the next 90 minutes doing independent work, jumping from theme to theme, trying to come up with as many cool names as we could. During this exercise,

laptops were allowed, but only for Wikipedia and other exploratory searches. I also brought a thesaurus called "The Synonym Finder," but everybody was pretty freaked out because it was an actual book made of paper.

I also encouraged everyone to haul up any old ideas for names—it's common sense that the best ideas can come outside of the confines of an office, and this was a perfect time to reconsider those dusty classics.

We spent another 30 minutes in silence, self-filtering our lists again—and adding any new gems that came to mind. It's not a perfect process, but it's a very efficient way to keep the group's list from getting unmanageable. Six people can think of a lot of words in 90 minutes.

At the end I cleared a huge whiteboard and wrote down everyone's favorites. When the last word was written, we had 113 names to choose from. Holy smokes.
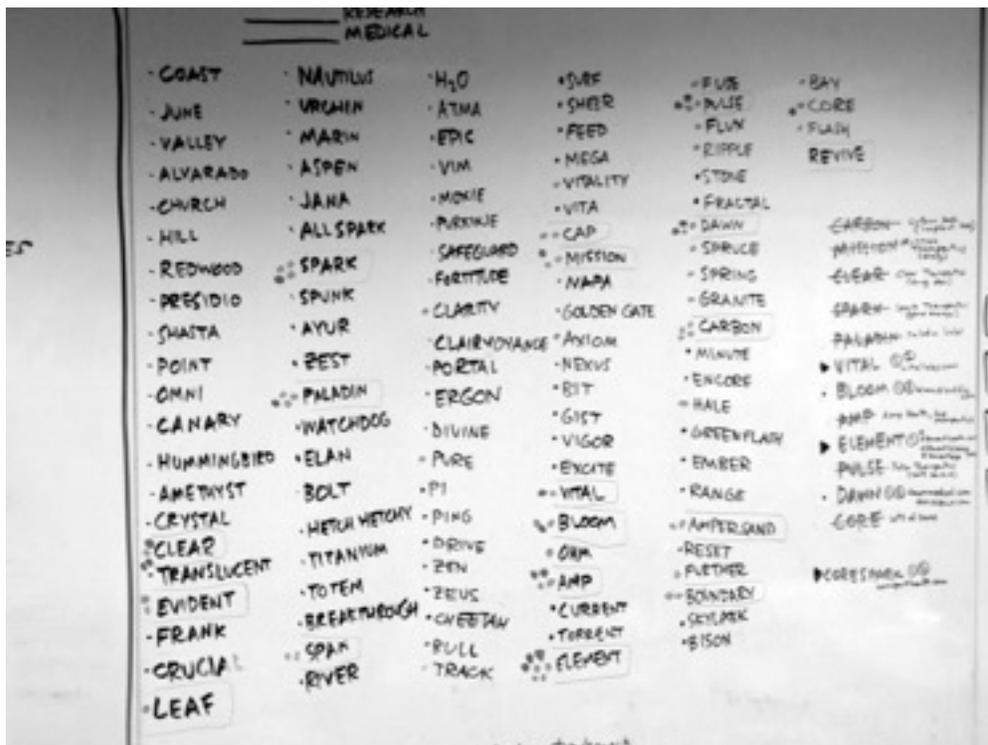
Late afternoon: Decide

Now came the hard part. To winnow down the field to a handful of candidates, we used a favorite technique from our design sprints.

9. Weighted voting (30 minutes)

Each person started with a blank piece of paper. They took ten minutes and looked over the list of 113, writing down their favorites—as many as they liked. Then they voted five times on their own list. It was OK to double or triple up votes on a single name, but you only got five. We shared our votes and I marked them down on the whiteboard with green dots.

Right away the field was differentiated. Only about 20 names received votes, and a handful received multiples—pretty interesting, considering we hadn't talked about our favorites as a group.

Then we took one more pass, giving CEO Uday a limited number of "super votes" to pick his favorites. In the end we had a field of 12 names—just about perfect for our final vetting process.

10. Vetting (60 min)

Finally, we ran the names through a series of tests to see if they'd actually work in the real world.

The "pub test"

Can you understand the word over the noise of a crowded bar? You don't want to spend the next several years correcting the same misunderstanding ("No, it's Flem with an F.")

Heck, a pronounceable name [might](#) just make your company [more successful](#). Our quick test was to say it aloud to each other; for extra credit, you could call someone on the phone and ask them to spell it back.

Brand match

Did the name match the values, positioning, and audience? By this time we had those pretty much memorized.

Quick web test

Did any companies in their field already use this name, or a variant? We ran web searches for each name and some words (like "health" and "medical") related to Company X's domain. This weeded out half of the names, leaving six.

Quick domain-name test

Was there a decent domain name available? Uday wanted a dot-com extension—no freaky dot-ly or dot-io for the doctor crowd. He also didn't want to spend a bazillion dollars buying a domain name. In addition to the names, we considered a handful of acceptable suffixes: blanklabs.com, blankmedical.com, blankscience.com, etc. Four names survived, but some of the domains were better than others.

Elementscience.com was the best. And it was available for just $2.19.

Quick trademark test

It's not hard to do a quick trademark search and see if there are any red flags in your product category. Of course, you'll need to hire a lawyer later—but the [web tool](#) is enough for this quick test. "Element" passed.

Maarten and Uday with the winning name.

Sleep on it

Remember I said this process took just one day? Well, I lied.

Choosing the name of your company is a big deal. So although Company X walked out of the room with the name "Element" and the URL elementscience.com, they still had one important step to go: They needed to sleep on it.

Uday and Maarten did a few smart things over the next couple of days. They tried the name "Element Science" out with friends and colleagues. They tried out variations to see if they could come up with something better–for a while we were all sold on "Element8" until we tried to say it aloud.

A couple of days later, they had complete confidence. Company X had become Element Science.

What about made-up names?

We got really lucky with the name Element: it's a real word, it's simple, and it's easy to say. It's also an empty vessel–most of us don't have strong associations with the word "element," so the company can fill it with their own meaning. And choosing a real word helped immensely with their serious, authoritative brand tone.

What if we couldn't come up with a real word we liked? We could have taken our favorite words and tried making compounds (think Facebook, Dropbox, YouTube) or making nonsense words (think Skype–from "sky peer-to-peer"). That probably would have involved at minimum another round of name generation.

This isn't perfect–but it works

As usual, time constraints and some structure help a lot. I'm not a naming or branding expert by any means–but if you find yourself facing a similar situation, give the 8 hour naming sprint a try.