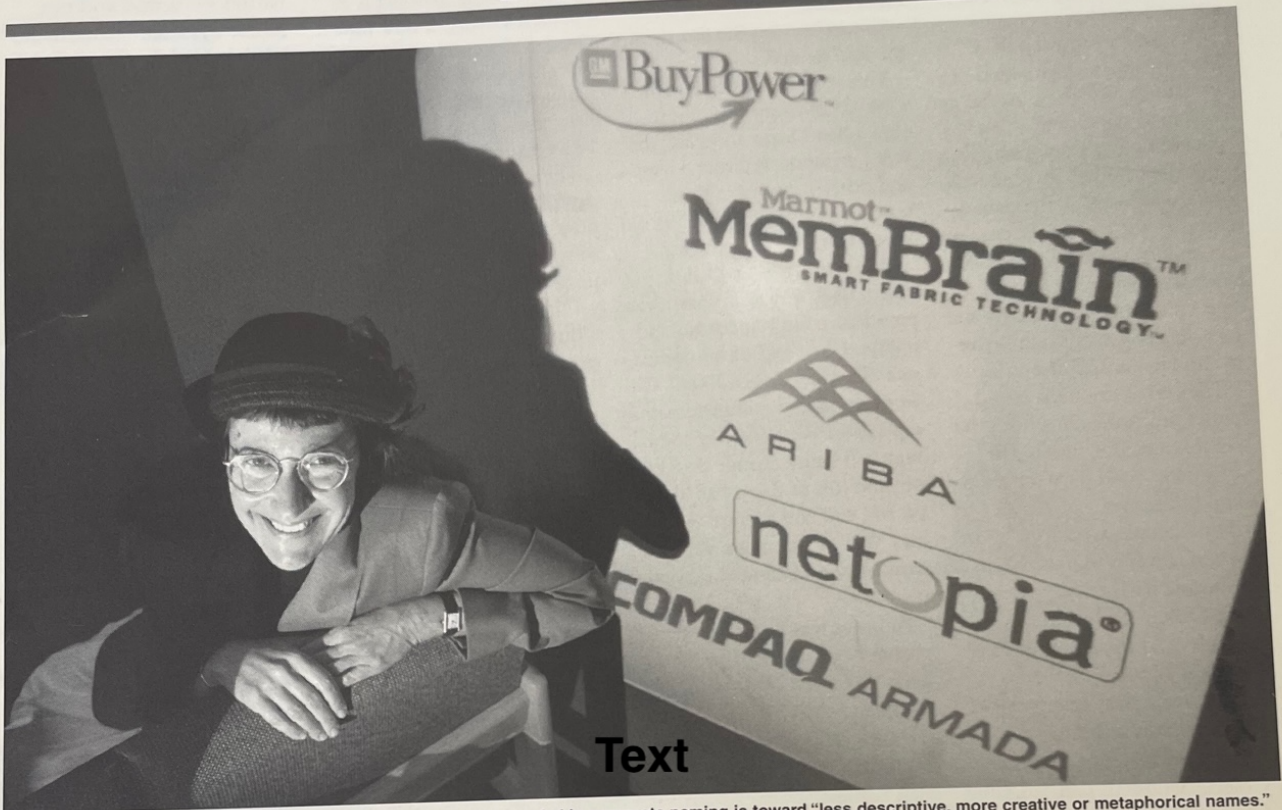


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SB Master, president of Master-McNeil Inc. in Berkeley, says the new fad in corporate naming is toward "less descriptive, more creative or metaphorical names."

'Wired' words wearing thin

Berkeley firm helps companies develop more creative names

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BERKELEY

Thinking about naming your company Net-something? Or tech, cyber, link, Web? Perhaps CyberLink Inc. or TechNet Corp. Supercalafragilistic Power-TechCyberLink Ltd. Sound chic? Sound cyber-tic? Sound familiar?

Be warned. A new study about corporate naming shows that wired words, which used to be all the rage, are quickly becoming sounds of the past.

An analysis of data from the federal trademark register indicates that corporate America is saturated with the once-popular wired words and they are falling out of fashion — fast.

Soon they'll become the linguistic equivalent of shag carpet, bell-bottom jeans and loathsome avocado-green refrigerators of days gone by.

Corporate Names, such as

netVendors, Net Basics, Net Trade, Netstreams, Tectel, Tech Pubs, Tech Aid, Web Head, Web Line, Linkages International or Cyberonic, which appear in the Oakland phone book, will likely go down in history as stereotypical of the 1990's.

"It's kind of like walking in and knowing that the last time they redecorated was 1968 or something like that," said SB Master, naming expert and president of Master-McNeil Inc. in Berkeley.

"The rush for 'wired' names in the 90's has made these

names seem trendy and faddish."

Filings using those words with the trademark office had been steadily rising at a whopping 30 percent a year since the beginning of the decade, according to a new study by Master-McNeil. But the trend took an about-face in 1997 and is likely to continue skidding downward this year.

Technology companies' cumulative requests to trademark the words "net," "tech," "power," "cyber," "link" and "web" as well as the prefix "cy"

plummeted 20 percent from 4,162 in 1996 to 3,333 in 1997.

In general, trademark requests for all 42 international classes tracked by the registry also fell — though less. The decline was 14.4 percent from 12,664 in 1996 to 10,835 in 1997. The question is, why?

"It's such a crowded field," Master explained. "It's kind of too late to pick those names and be able to stand out."

Standing out is increasingly important in the crowded technology industry as companies compete for customers, employees and investors. It's not good enough anymore to just be known by industry insiders and tech-heads as companies strive to survive on Wall Street.

The turn away from wired names probably stems from the fact that many names in the corporate world have started to sound the same.

For example, what's CyberCash in Virginia? It's an electronic payment company. And Cybergold Inc. in Berkeley? An Internet jewelry business? Nope.

"It's pretty clear once people know what it is that we do," Cybergold Inc. spokeswoman Colette Sandstedt said, laughing. Cybergold is an incentive marketing firm that pays people cash to interact with Internet advertising.

How about Techtel Corp. in Emeryville and TechniCall Communications in Santa Rosa? They both sound like high-tech telephone firms, but the first is actually a market research firm specializing in technology. TechniCall does marketing for the restaurant industry.

TechOne Inc. in Oakland? Clearly, the company does something in technology, but what?

"We want to be No. 1 in the technology consulting area, so since we thought we would name it TechOne," company president Vipul Singhal said.

But Singhal concedes that while the name speaks of firsts, it was actually his last choice. Three other names Singhal actually liked better were already taken when he went to register them with the trademark office.

"TechOne was the fourth on the list," he said.

This year, the newly renamed FirstWorld Communications Inc., a San Diego company that sells telephone, Internet, video and other communications services via cable, ditched its old wired name — SpectraNet.

"We felt that it was a little dated," Bob Cerasoli, senior vice president communications and public policy, said of his company's old name, SpectraNet. "We went through a complete name evaluation. We looked at several hundred name change possibilities and lots of them had 'net' on the end and a 'com' on the end. We felt that both 'net' and 'com' at the tail end was limiting."

Another reason for the change? SpectraNet had already been registered by another company.

It's not surprising companies are having trouble registering such names.

The U.S. trademark registry is filing up with the wired word names at a fast clip — more than 53,000 wired names have been filed since 1990 — even though state and federal laws don't even mandate the registration.

"It's not required, but it's wise to do," Master said, explaining that the laws say companies accrue rights to their name through its usage. But it's safer to protect a corporate name through trademark registration so it won't be co-opted by a competitor.

Master, whose company charges upward of \$30,000 to name companies, products or services, with some prices going into the six figures, said the new fad in names is "less descriptive,

more creative or metaphorical names."

"I think what we're starting to see is a willingness to look at names that somehow address the benefits of the technology or whatever the product is as opposed to what it is or how it does," Master said, pointing to a recent name-change her company crafted for a Sunnyvale firm that used to be called ProcureSoft.

The old name accurately described the company's purpose: developing procurement software so companies can automate their purchasing processes via the internet.

But it lacked zip. The company's new name is Ariba, a name that's "exciting. It suggests accomplishment and success and speed," Master explained. "It's fun, it's memorable, it's interesting, it's short. It's a symmetrical word."

Applied Bionomics, a Marin company that helps factories improve productivity, was tired of its lackluster name and being mistaken for a biotechnology firm, so it hired Master's company and recently renamed itself Maxager. The new name suggests maximizing work force productivity and management expertise.

Bucking the trend, however, an Alameda company once known as Farallon went wired a couple of months ago and changed its name to Netopia. The company formerly used the name Netopia for one of its products.

"It was working so well that they decided to change the whole company's name to Netopia, a name that suggests utopia on the Internet," Master explained. "The stock has doubled since the name change, obviously not just because of the name change, but who knows?"—

What's in a name?

Here's the history of some well-known company names — wired and not.

Adobe Systems — name of the creek behind the founder's house.

Apple Computer — founder Steve Jobs, upon visiting an orchard, concluded that the apple is the perfect fruit and he wanted his company to be perfect, too.

Cadillac — last name of a French explorer who founded Detroit in 1701.

Dell — founded by Michael Dell, two founders who met at Stanford University.

IBM — originally known as Computer Tabulating and Recording Company, but the name was changed in 1924 to International Business Machines (IBM).

Kodak — fictitious name created by founder George Eastman.

Land O'Lakes — Minnesota Cooperative Creameries Association. Name suggested by a farmer based on Minnesota's description as Land of 10,000 Lakes.

Levi's — family name of founder Levi-Strauss.

Master-McNeil, Inc — founder SB Master tacked McNeil on to her surname to give the name of her Berkeley naming firm more symmetry and authority.

Microsoft — started out as Micro-Soft, which stood for microcomputer software, but in 1976 founders Paul Allen and Bill Gates dropped the hyphen and uppercase "S."

Nabisco — abbreviation for National Biscuit Company.

Netscape — fictitious name that employee Greg Sands came up with during a brainstorming session in 1994.

Pixar — derived from the word pixel by founders at Lucasfilm.

Saturn — internal code name for project within GM.

3M — originally Minnesota Mining & Manufacturing, called 3M by Wall Street for years before name was officially changed.