

Change Your Name

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August 2015

If you have a US startup called X and you don't have x.com, you should probably change your name.

The reason is not just that people can't find you. For companies with mobile apps, especially, having the right domain name is not as critical as it used to be for getting users. The problem with not having the .com of your name is that it signals weakness. Unless you're so big that your reputation precedes you, a marginal domain suggests you're a marginal company. Whereas (as Stripe shows) having x.com signals strength even if it has no relation to what you do.

Even good founders can be in denial about this. Their denial derives from two very powerful forces: identity, and lack of imagination.

X is what we are, founders think. There's no other name as good. Both of which are false.

You can fix the first by stepping back from the problem. Imagine you'd called your company something else. If you had, surely you'd be just as attached to that name as you are to your current one. The idea of switching to your current name would seem repellent.

[1]

There's nothing intrinsically great about your current name. Nearly all your attachment to it comes from it being attached to you.

[2]

The way to neutralize the second source of denial, your inability to think of other potential names, is to acknowledge that you're bad at naming. Naming is a completely separate skill from those you need to be a good founder. You can be a great startup founder but hopeless at thinking of names for your company.

Once you acknowledge that, you stop believing there is nothing else you could be called. There are lots of other potential names that are as good or better; you just can't think of them.

How do you find them? One answer is the default way to solve problems you're bad at: find someone else who can think of names. But with company names there is another possible approach. It turns out almost any word or word pair that is not an obviously bad name is a sufficiently good one, and the number of such domains is so large that you can find plenty that are cheap or even untaken. So make a list and try to buy some. That's what Stripe did. (Their search also turned up parse.com, which their friends at Parse took.)

The reason I know that naming companies is a distinct skill orthogonal to the others you need in a startup is that I happen to have it. Back when I was running YC and did more office hours with startups, I would often help them find new names. 80% of the time we could find at least one good name in a 20 minute office hour slot.

Now when I do office hours I have to focus on more important questions, like what the company is doing. I tell them when they need to change their name. But I know the power of the forces that have them in their grip, so I know most won't listen.

[3]

There are of course examples of startups that have succeeded without having the .com of their name. There are startups that have succeeded despite any number of different mistakes. But this mistake is less excusable than most. It's something that can be fixed in a couple days if you have sufficient discipline to acknowledge the problem.

100% of the top 20 YC companies by valuation have the .com of their

name. 94% of the top 50 do. But only 66% of companies in the current batch have the .com of their name. Which suggests there are lessons ahead for most of the rest, one way or another.

Notes

[1]

Incidentally, this thought experiment works for nationality and religion too.

[2]

The liking you have for a name that has become part of your identity manifests itself not directly, which would be easy to discount, but as a collection of specious beliefs about its intrinsic qualities. (This too is true of nationality and religion as well.)

[3]

Sometimes founders know it's a problem that they don't have the .com of their name, but delusion strikes a step later in the belief that they'll be able to buy it despite having no evidence it's for sale. Don't believe a domain is for sale unless the owner has already told you an asking price.

Thanks to Sam Altman, Jessica Livingston, and Geoff Ralston for reading drafts of this.

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