

# This guy named Febreze, Blackberry, and Sonos. Now he wants to name your AI company

From ChatGPT to DALL-E, most AI companies have terrible names. A name branding expert has ideas for how to make them better.

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In branding and design, as in music, there are indeed one-hit

wonders.

But then there's this: Sonos; Subaru Outback; Febreze; Pentium; Swiffer; Impossible Foods; Adobe InDesign; Xbox Live; Blackberry; Microsoft Azure; OnStar; Nissan Rogue; Scion; Freeform; Dasani; Gold Peak; Truvia; Humira; Embassy Suites; Homewood Suites; *Afar* . . . and the list goes on.

All of these names came from one place: [Lexicon Branding](#), which has blended [linguistics, science, and research](#) to dole out thousands of monikers in numerous industries over the past four decades. But across all those years and clients, founder David Placek says he has never seen a category emerge quite like AI.

New AI offerings are constantly debuting that carry the potential to reshape so many aspects of our lives. And, well, they all need names. So with Placek's phone buzzing every week with AI-naming quandaries, we wondered: What makes this moment in brand naming unique—and what does the reigning guru of the craft think about the names of today's leading platforms?

## **Naming at the speed of AI**

Take machine learning out of the equation, and naming in 2024 is still a tall order unto itself.

“In this very complex digital economy that we live in now, brand names have become even more important,” Placek says. “They’ve got to do more. It’s not just ‘help tell a story.’ It’s got to be memorable. It’s got to work across cultures. It’s got to move through three or four legal classes, not just one. . . . One of the quandaries we have is every year it gets harder, because there are more trademarks that we have to clear around.”

And here’s the thing with AI: “It’s moving faster than just about any category we’ve ever worked on.”

And thus the field is rife with brand names that arguably reflect that haste—as perhaps seen in the glut of monikers with “AI” tacked onto the end of them. His advice: If you’re looking to compete with the biggest players in the arena, drop the “AI.” It’s not a differentiator. Instead, focus on something with imagination.

Placek—whose firm has worked on the collaboration platform [Velt](#), and has a handful of other AI projects in the pipeline—estimates the “AI” nomenclature trend will continue for another year or so before it begins to make products feel dated; at that point, he says “AI” will move to a descriptor rather than a name proper. He predicts companies will then begin to play on the theme of “intelligence”—and imitation will rule the day as brands all pile into the same boat. (“I’m sure there’s some Greek god of intelligence [out there](#) we’re

going to see," he adds.)

## Today's platforms, ranked

Placek has a policy of not criticizing brand names—but we delighted in him *slightly* bending the rule as we discussed his thoughts and rankings on a few of the biggest players in the field right now. To wit:

**ChatGPT:** "As a change agent across the globe, that's just a bad name," he says. When you first hear it, you wonder: *Was that ChatGBT? ChatBGT?* It lacks memorability—and ChatGPT is capable of more than simply "chatting," so it fails to do itself justice. Placek wonders if it was perhaps an internal nickname used by the team that somehow made its way out of the gate and into the public realm.

His score: D

**DALL-E 2:** "Not a great name," Placek says, diplomatically. "It's just not right." Dali? Dolly? Doll-y? Technically, the AI art generator is a portmanteau of Salvador "Dali" and "Wall-E" . . . but ultimately it just confuses in its complexity. Moreover, Placek adds, the double 'L's are problematic in global linguistic uses.

Worth noting here: AI scares the shit out of people, who alternately think their profession could be replaced by the

technology, or that it will become an apocalyptic [Skynet](#) under a different name. To that end, Placek says there could be a trend to try to be clever and funny with naming—but it's ill-advised. "If I'm concerned and fearful of AI, a name that's clever or funny or entertaining isn't going to compensate for that," he says.

Grade: D

**Midjourney:** Placek gives this image generator props for stimulating one's imagination—but says it's ultimately a name that bears no actual connection to what the product does.

Grade: C+

**Bard:** "I understand what they were trying to do," Placek says. "A Bard tells a story. It's information, things like that. [But] here, you have a name that is just not very friendly and is very flat. In other words, you hear 'Bard,' and it doesn't stimulate any ideas. . . . It's not an expansive word. It's a tight, narrow word."



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## The first step in solving our waste problem? Stop thinking of it as "waste."

Implementing innovative technologies will require greater collaboration and traceability.

**Stable Diffusion:** "It's just a very complicated name. . . . It's a very long phrase." Still, he adds later, "It is unique and sounds very credible."

Grade: B

**Copilot:** "Now we have something that people can relate to;

there's some status to it. And it is empowering, right? A copilot is going to help you."

Grade: A

**Gemini:** Citing the linguistic principle of frequency of use—essentially, that commonly used words engender relatability—Placek is a fan of "Gemini." Gemini culturally denotes everything from twins to the space program, and the name also packs a quick three-syllable burst and the dominant "G," which Placek dubs a reliable sound.

Grade: A-

## What a name cannot do

Placek says his team utilizes AI for researching data and similar tasks, but he doesn't see AI replacing his profession anytime soon in its current form. Moreover, he offers some clues to spotting AI-generated brand names in the wild: Look for compound monikers. For instance, if you asked AI to name a high-performance water filter, you might end up with something like "Filtered Pro."

"If it's a compound and it's a little awkward, it was probably some assistant brand manager [whose boss told him], 'Hey, you know, before we go to the outside, see what ChatGPT can do . . .'"

One realm where he does believe AI names could really start turning up: the pharmaceutical industry, which often mixes Latin and Greek together for nigh-unpronounceable results—something ChatGPT could excel at. When it comes to the rest of the branding world, though, at this point Placek just doesn't see a \$50 billion company lackadaisically calling up that assistant brand manager to develop a new product name using AI.

In the past, Placek and I have discussed how different sounds are associated with different industries—for instance, brands seeking to emphasize elements like energy, speed and toughness tend to imbue “action” sounds using letters such as “j,” “p,” “sh,” “k,” and “v.” (Porsche, Jaguar, Corvette). Brands like hotels, meanwhile, want to convey the exact opposite, so deploy “m,” “h,” “w,” “l,” “r,” and “n” sounds. (Marriott, Hilton, Wyndham, Hyatt).

Which prompted me to wonder: How could AI brands seek to infuse a sense of innovation into their names?

“Well, most of that—and this is what I tell clients—is behavior, and how you behave in the marketplace,” he says. “Are you innovative or not? We do know, though, from the investments we’ve made in research, that if you put a new, [invented] name on something, like a Sonos, consumers lean towards that being more innovative. And that makes sense, because it’s new, right? They’re seeing something that they



had not before."

But it only goes so far. As it turns out, there are some things a fancy moniker cannot do.

"The rest is, you're either innovative or you're not."