

The Power of Names

Creating Identity & Involvement
Through Proper Pronunciation




Introduction

Names are powerful signifiers of identity and inclusion. People respond instinctively to being seen and heard. When they read their name or hear it said aloud by others, it lights up their brain in unique ways that make them more responsive to those who used it.

And when their name is misspelled or mispronounced, the opposite happens: people feel insignificant or ignored, and are less likely to positively engage.

Indeed, getting names right is just as vital to forming a strong rapport with an employee or a customer as it is with family and friends. From the critical first impression during a phone interview or sales call, and all the way through the life of the relationship, pronouncing a person's name correctly can profoundly affect their attitude toward you and your business, as well as their behavior. As a result, correct pronunciation of names translates into better rapport with the people you depend on, and better business over time.





TODAY, RECRUITERS ARE CONDUCTING MORE VIRTUAL INTERVIEWS, MORE VIRTUAL TEAMS ARE BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS OVER VIDEO AND PHONE RATHER THAN ON SITE

The accurate use of names is even more important over the phone and online, where text and voice take on more weight in the absence of in-person cues like handshakes and body language. Today, recruiters are conducting more virtual interviews, more virtual teams are building relationships over video and phone rather than on site, and more sales and customer support happen over phone or chat. That makes saying names correctly — the first time, and every time — more vital than ever before.

This paper will illustrate the positive impact of accurately pronouncing names — as well as the potential downside of mispronouncing them — and provide actionable suggestions for how companies can remedy this common problem. By making this relatively simple change, employees and customers will feel more invited, included, involved, and invested in success.

The Importance of Names

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Remember that a person's name is to that person the sweetest and most important sound in any language.

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— Dale Carnegie

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A person's name is one of the most meaningful sounds they can hear. From as young as five months old, the brain is activated in unique ways when one hears one's own name, including creating focused attention. “Identity and self-concept are developed through a family's repeated use of a child's name,” note scholars Rita Kohli and Daniel Solorzano. “A child begins to understand who they are through their parents' accent, intonation and pronunciation of their name.”

The power of one's name is reinforced in early childhood but continues as we enter school, the workforce, and society. “Names are symbols of personhood (how others see us) and selfhood (how we see ourselves),” says anthropologist Karen Pennesi. “Fully recognizing someone as a person therefore includes treating their names in respectful ways.”

Likewise, Kohli and Solorzano note that when names are mispronounced or changed, “it can negate the thought, care and significance of the name, and thus the identity of the child.” In other words, just as using someone's name can create a sense of familiarity and instant rapport, using an incorrect name or pronouncing it erroneously can damage that bond — or prevent it from forming in the first place.



For example, former New York City Department of Education chancellor Carmen Farina was marked absent for her first six weeks of kindergarten because her last name was mispronounced so severely she didn't recognize it as her own.

And even well-known names like basketball superstar Stephen Curry aren't immune to the effects of mispronunciation. In 2013, Nike lost their valuable sponsorship deal with him after a marketing official pronounced his name «Steph-ON» instead of "Steph-EN," then used a PowerPoint slide that referred to fellow player Kevin Durant instead of Curry. By the end of the meeting, Curry and his father felt disrespected and unimportant to Nike, and soon shifted their alliance to Nike competitor UnderArmour.



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Name Pronunciation in the Lifecycle of Relationships



Whether for internal talent or external partners, it is critical in business settings to use names correctly to make people feel seen and comfortable, from the initial contact all the way through the lifecycle of the relationship.

Internal: Recruiting and Retaining Employees

Accurate name pronunciation is vital in acquiring and cultivating talent — from prospects and recruits to new employee, seasoned worker, and even for alumni who have moved on to new roles and organizations.

In the process of recruiting and interviewing, using a candidate's name can help build initial rapport and help the company stand apart from competing offers. And carrying that through into onboarding and orientation can help a new employee feel at home quickly. But just because an employee is up and running doesn't mean that name pronunciation challenges disappear or become less important — particularly for employees with less common names, those who interact with a wide range of colleagues, and those on global and virtual teams. Some might let mispronunciation go on for years without correcting anyone, effectively “code-switching” between their real identity and an Americanized or otherwise incorrect one.

ACCURATE NAME PRONUNCIATION IS VITAL IN ACQUIRING AND CULTIVATING TALENT — FROM PROSPECTS AND RECRUITS TO NEW EMPLOYEE, SEASONED WORKER, AND EVEN FOR ALUMNI



Using colleagues' names frequently and accurately can be an important component of creating a sense of belonging and inclusion, which can in turn lead to stronger motivation, deeper engagement, greater productivity, and higher retention. "The need for social belonging—for seeing oneself as socially connected—is a basic human motivation," [note psychology scholars Gregory M. Walton and Geoffrey L. Cohen](#). "Perceived availability of social support buffers mental and physical health, and feeling respected in the workplace predicts compliance with authority figures." They add that signals of belonging are particularly critical for members of minority groups who "are more uncertain of the quality of their social bonds and thus more sensitive to issues of social belonging." [Likewise, Google's research has identified psychological safety and trust as a key feature of high-performing teams](#). The brain is conditioned to fire up a fight-or-flight response to any type of provocation or dismissal in the workplace, including a mispronounced name; such a response can shut down the kind of strategic, analytical, and creative thinking necessary for success in today's workplace, [says Harvard Business Review](#).

THE WORK INSTITUTE PEGS THE COST OF EMPLOYEE
TURNOVER AT ABOUT \$15,000 PER LOST WORKER

In addition to collaboration and productivity, using names correctly to foster an inclusive work environment can also help companies hang onto their employees longer. "When someone is already marginalized or treated as less powerful, name-related problems take on more significance," [notes Pennesi, the anthropologist](#), with consequences ranging from lack of access to services or resources to more strained social relationships. And keeping good employees is far more cost-effective than replacing them due to lost work, decreased morale, and recruitment costs. [The Work Institute pegs the cost of employee turnover at about \\$15,000 per lost worker](#), while [Gallup estimates that the cost of replacing an individual employee at anywhere from one-half to two times the employee's annual salary](#).





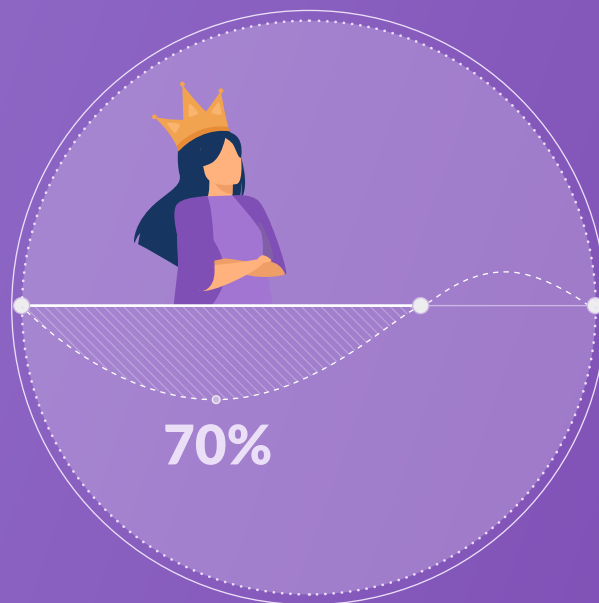
External: Finding, Securing, and Keeping Customers

Getting names right may be even more vital for customers than for employees, who are being asked to part with their own money or that of the business they work for.

In general, personalization has become a significant trend, particularly among Millennials. [In a survey by digital marketing agency AgilOne](#), more than 70 percent of consumers said they expect personalized experiences with the brands they interact with, with 52 percent of Millennials expecting brands to remember their birthdays (compared to just 20 percent of shoppers aged 65 and over). [Using customers' names on things like coffee cups can encourage people to spend more — while getting them wrong conveys disrespect and discourages consumption.](#)

The same holds true for larger purchases and for enterprise customers, where the sales process is longer and the price tag larger. That means it's vital to get your contacts' names correct right from the very first cold call, to avoid a hangup or more subtle alienation that could discourage a sale. "Not getting someone's name correct, and worse, making fun of it, is a personal sign of disrespect and laziness," [says sales expert Art Sobczak](#). "It screams out 'I am a salesperson who didn't care enough.' Don't be that person."

MORE THAN **70 PERCENT** OF CONSUMERS SAID THEY EXPECT PERSONALIZED EXPERIENCES WITH THE BRANDS THEY INTERACT WITH



What's more, if you get a potential customer's name right when it's often mispronounced, you just may create a unique impression and connection that keeps their attention longer, says Tyler Mattson, a senior business development executive at software company Conversica who has also sold skis and cars. "It takes six to ten 'touches' to get on the phone with a potential business customer, so once I get that contact on the phone, I know that pronouncing their name correctly can make it more likely that they'll lend an ear to my pitch, and will be more likely to take a meeting."



Continuing to pronounce the name correctly over time is vital to keeping that customer, particularly through challenging customer service situations in which saying a customer's name can reduce tension by helping them feel more seen and supported. Just as with employees, it is more expensive to acquire a new customer than to keep an existing customer. In addition to the sheer expense of acquiring new customers, Bain analyst Fred Reicheld calculates that customer retention also drives greater profits because happy long-term customers tend to spend more over time. And as Hubspot points out, "Customers are a source of growth you already own, and a better and more trusted way for prospects to learn about your business. The happier your customers, the more willing they are to promote your brand, the faster your flywheel spins, and the faster your business grows."

Getting it Right

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In grade school, because my last name started with an A, I was the first in roll call, and nobody ever knew how to pronounce it. So I went home and asked my mother if I could be called Zoe. I remember she was cooking, and in her Nigerian accent she said, “Why?” I said, “Nobody can pronounce it.” Without missing a beat, she said, “If they can learn to say Tchaikovsky and Michelangelo and Dostoyevsky, they can learn to say Uzoamaka.

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— actress Uzo Aduba

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Educator Jennifer Gonzalez grew up as Jennifer Yurkosky, which she says “kind of rhymes with ‘Her pots ski,’ minus the ‘t’ in pots.” [She developed a taxonomy of the people who butchered her name](#), including “fumble-bumblers” who awkwardly stumbled through it and “arrogant manglers” who aggressively mispronounced her last name even when corrected (or worse, assigned her a nickname she never asked for).

WE CAN IMPROVE
NAME ACCURACY BY
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Fortunately, most of us have the potential to fall into Gonzales’ last category, “calibrators,” who recognize that getting names right requires a little effort, and then put that effort in. We can improve name accuracy by simply focusing on the importance of this task and working to improve, with more tools and resources available today than ever before to bolster our attempts.



WHENEVER POSSIBLE, DO YOUR HOMEWORK BEFOREHAND.

Educational resources like those from the federal Institute of Education Sciences can provide some context about different languages and their pronunciation schemes. A quicker route to learning a specific name is to search for its pronunciation on Google, which will typically pull up videos and name databases that may give you quicker answers. However, like any other Web search, these are often of questionable accuracy — or worse, may conflict with one another. More robust tools like NameCoach include not only a database of recorded names but algorithms that help pinpoint the right one based on data like location, as well as the ability for users to record their own pronunciation or save and share proper pronunciations of others' names with colleagues. NameCoach was recently added to the Salesforce App Exchange after several years of use among hundreds of colleges and universities, ranging from Stanford University's use in class rosters, student services, and its residential directory to extensive student and staff use at California State University, Northridge, where international students make up about 10% of the school's enrollment.



TAKE NOTES.

Former President Barack Obama was well-known for his attention to correct pronunciation — but it didn't come naturally. His staff included phonetic spellings of names and places in his daily briefing notes, or the person briefing him would coach him on how to say them, and he would privately practice pronouncing a foreign leader's name a number of times before ever saying it publicly. "His aides know that this is an area where the president wants to be right," explains Politico. "In Obama's view, pronouncing someone's name or hometown correctly is a simple way of showing respect, they say. It's a sort of baseline diplomacy."

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BUILD THE CORRECT PRONUNCIATION OF EMPLOYEE AND CLIENT NAMES INTO YOUR COMPANY CULTURE, YOUR OPERATIONAL SYSTEMS, AND YOUR DAY-TO-DAY PRACTICES.

Consider accurate pronunciation as just as important as getting the right phone number, mailing address, or email — you wouldn't expect a message to get through without getting those details correct. Managers can and should set the example for their teams, and reinforce the importance of this practice through team meetings and trainings.

The acceptance of diverse names can start with ensuring that online forms, databases and documents allow various name structures and accents. However, companies can also consider more creative ways of spotlighting the importance of getting names right. For example, the Santa Clara County Office of Education has done with its "[My Name. My Identity](#)" campaign, including videos of students talking about their names and [ideas to help students reflect on naming and names](#).



FINALLY, REMEMBER THAT DEVOTING TIME TO GETTING NAMES RIGHT ISN'T A FAULT — IT'S AN ASSET.

In fact, research shows that difficulty learning something gives that thing being learned a sense of importance, and lead to better retention. And paying attention to the identity and background of the people you are working with bodes well for your ability to include and involve them over time.



Conclusion

As famed pronunciation stickler [President Barack Obama noted in his memoir, *Dreams of My Father*](#), “With the right words, everything could change.” Names are the gateway to our identities, and can also be the entry point to a positive and productive business relationship. Ensuring that every name is pronounced correctly is a simple, inexpensive tactic that can make a world of difference in ensuring that employees and customers feel invited, included, and involved — and helping companies thrive and grow

