

I'll Never Forget What's-Her-Name! *Winning the Name Game*

By Craig Harrison



My name is Craig. But I'll answer to Greg. Most Gregs I know answer to Craig. Of course we are not alone: there's Eva and Ava, Bill and Bob, Jeff and John, and many more. I can't complain. I often confuse and occasionally mangle others' names. Names are not my strong suit.

My purpose is not to engage in anthroponymy, the study of personal names. It's simply to remind you that learning, remembering and properly pronouncing other peoples' names is more than just good manners, it's good business, smart sales and service. What's in a name? Everything!

Every customer wants to be seen as an individual, to feel special and feel respected. When you refer to a customer by their preferred name you are honoring them with respect. You're also seeing them as the individual that he or she truly is. It's a good beginning.

Over the years I've struggled to learn and remember names. The older I get the harder it becomes, in part because I continue to meet new people, sometimes an audience at a time!

Given our global marketplace you will likely be meeting customers from China, Israel, Nigeria, Germany, Argentina and Arkansas. Names and pronunciations vary by country and region. Eugenia — pronounced "U-Gene-E-Ah" in the US — sounds entirely different in the Southern hemisphere: "O-heee-Nee-Yah." Win points by pronouncing it her way! My secret: I spell it out phonetically whether on paper or in my mind. Seeing it this way helps me pronounce it properly.

It took me a while to correctly pronounce Osafran Okundai and Orunamamu (O-Roon-a-Mamu). I've

heard it mangled seven different ways. Ditto John Eweglaben. It would have been so easy to pull an Ed McMahon, and simply introduce him by saying "Here's Johnny!" Instead I had John spell his name out for me phonetically, and then practiced saying it repeatedly. Incidentally, it is pronounced "A-wig-LAY-Bin."

I accidentally insulted my colleague from Louisiana, Mademoiselle Carolyn Millet (pronounced Meee-Aye), by presuming her last name was pronounced like the grain. That's not Southern hospitality!

Employ the following tips to track names and the vital details that accompany them.

- When you hear someone's name repeat it out loud as soon as possible in conversation.
- Append it to the beginning or ending of your greeting to that person: "It's a pleasure to meet you, Amber" or "Tyrone, how nice to meet you."
- Try to associate a stranger's name with what they tell you about themselves. Repeat it out loud if need be: Ken the southeast QC manager; Ariana, the internal service starlet. Hearing yourself say their names makes it more real and memorable.
- European names employing W may sound like V's: Tony Bacezwski pronounces his name Tony Ba-SHEV-ski.
- Chinese names may take the form of last name (surname), first name (given name). For example: Courtroom interpreter and longtime Oakland City Center Toastmaster Joe Parkman tells new friends: "I'm no ordinary Joe, I'm Parkman Joe!" Indeed he is
- Employ mnemonic devices or alliteration to help you remember customers' names: Ling from Laos, Helen who's Gellin', Sandy...like my sister-in-law (of the same name).
- If you know your name will be hard to remember or pronounce for others, help them out: realtor Lisa Wierenga of Michigan encourages people to think of the phrase "Wearing A"; A realtor whose last name is Wojokowski helps people by saying "it's like 'where's your house keys!' " Oakland poet Lavignia asks people to call her "Vinny the Poet" for short.
- Make written notes to yourself, at the time or later. Don't tax your memory. Notate on the back of their business card or in your PDA. (Beware of writing on the front of someone's business card. In some cultures it's perceived as defacing their person! Remember, we mean no disrespect.)

- Ask for help with complicated names or ones in a foreign tongue. Take pride in learning the trills and other accents of foreign languages. Customers will appreciate your efforts and warm to you correctly pronouncing their name.
- If you ask someone how to pronounce their name, never respond "Oh, I could never pronounce that!" Not only is it disrespectful, it's lazy on your part, to not even attempt the correct pronunciation. Try your best to pronounce it correctly in their presence; ask for help if you aren't letter perfect the first time. Remember, it's not about you and your comfort level, it's about them and making the effort to respect their identity.
- Learn the story behind the person's name. Orunamamu's name, in the Nigerian language of Yoruban, means "Oh you royal one, miss morning star." Sometimes she'll simply tell people "The 'O' is for respect!" That's memorable!

According to the mingling maven herself, author Susan RoAne, "if you have trouble remembering names, understand that others have forgotten yours. NEVER, EVER ask, "Do you remember me?" "

The author of bestsellers *How to Work A Room* and *How To Create Your Own Luck: The "You Never Know" Approach*, RoAne recommends that we simply, "put out our hand, smile and re-introduce yourself. Ninety percent of the people will respond in kind and no one is playing the memory game. For the ten percent who don't ask, tell the truth: "It's been one of those days . . . I can't even remember my name." "

And when the shoe is on the other foot, and your name is lost in translation, turn the other cheek. Don't get angry or feel victimized. Past Toastmasters International president Dilip Abayasekara, Ph.D., DTM, has experienced the ups and downs of having a distinctive name. Dilip, a Sri Lankan whose last name means "leader without fear," knows his name is difficult for a first-timer to pronounce. He offers a pronunciation guide, relating his name's pronunciation to words people already know: Dilip sounds like Philip; the first three consonants of Abayasekara mimic the first three letters in Spanish or French: Ah – Bay – Say, to which one can add Kuh – Ruh. It works!

Of course, if the person in question offers you a nickname you are welcome to use it. Many people have trouble pronouncing (and spelling) the name of the longtime Duke men's basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski (give yourself two points if you pronounced it "Shuh-SHEV-ski"). Many players and fans alike eschew the Polish pronunciation and simply call him by the alliterative "Coach K."

Are you talking to ME?

One challenge occurs in environments when more than one person has the same name. In such cases nicknames may be the answer. One person may prefer Michael, another Mike and a third might even prefer Mikey. What is needed is mutual assent. Assigning a nickname without a person's permission can be insulting. Get a person's buy-in. Remember, their identity is at stake. Accede to their wishes whenever possible. What's humorous to you may be insulting to the person in question.

One Upmanship Has Its Place

Recently Distinguished Toastmaster Keith Ostergard, their Vice-Chair of Training in the People's Republic of China, told me in one of his companies they had so many employees with the same name it became problematic. According to Keith: "In China it is very common to meet or work with people that have the same name – both surname and given name. Wang is one of the most common Chinese names and in a job I worked here we had six people in a department of 100 that had the name Wang Chen. In order to keep them straight they all agreed to let me number them: Wang Chen 1, Wang Chen 2, etc.)." That worked well until one left the company. According to Ostergard: "They all wanted to change their numbers!"

What's in a name? Gold. Learning, using, and properly pronouncing customers' names is a great first step to building solid relationships built on trust, respect and admiration. Win the name game!

About the author:

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