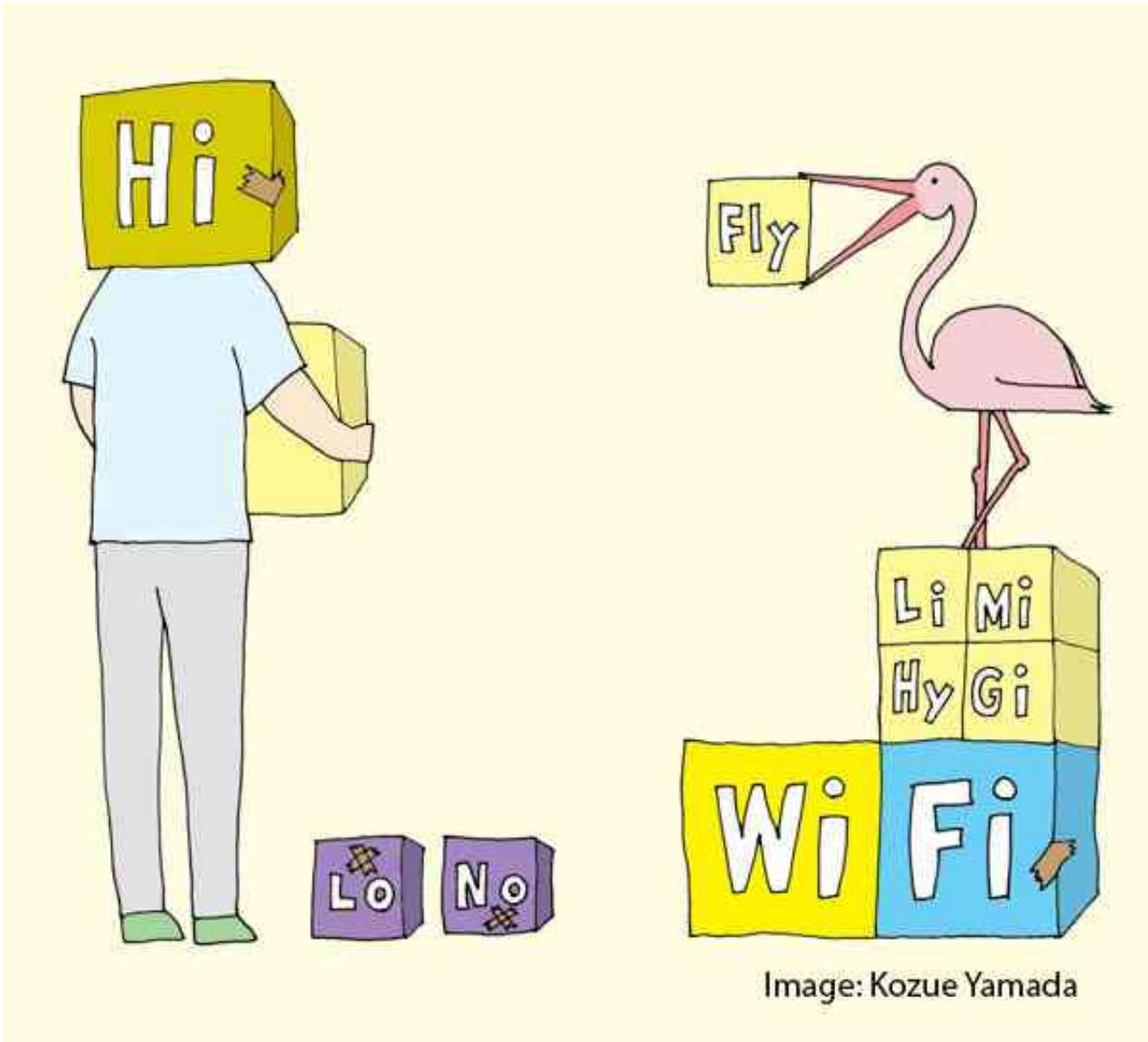


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# The Future: Where Sci Fi Meets Hi-Fi, Wi-Fi (and Beyond)

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***The following article by Caitlin Barrett and Fell Gray has inspired a SXSW Interactive 2016 panel — vote for it here through Sept. 4!***

Replicants. FTL Drives. Skynet. Maglev cars. Naming the future has long been a specialty of science fiction—and for years, resulted in company and product names that sounded like they’d been pulled from the pages of Isaac Asimov’s famous (and famously fake) research paper “The Endochronic Properties of Resublimated Thiotimoline.”

While these names may still be great if you’re writing *Battlestar Galactica* fan fiction, in the real world they feel expected, bordering on schlocky. It’s easy to sound dated when you’re naming the future.

Naming something that doesn’t exist today has specific challenges. A fresh idea could warrant a name with very little connection to the present—or to anything at all. Or, because the idea is so novel, the name might need a reference point; something well understood and easy to connect to the new idea.

Take the case of Wi-Fi, the now ubiquitous name for wireless internet connectivity.

In 1999, a handful of industry leaders formed a global non-profit organization with the goal of “driving the adoption of a single worldwide-accepted standard for high-speed wireless local area networking.” They called themselves the Wireless Ethernet Compatibility Alliance (WECA) and the standard was known as the engineer-friendly IEEE 802.11. They needed a name that wasn’t just user-friendly—it needed to become standard language for everyone.

Wi-Fi has proven to be such a successful name because it anchored us in something familiar, something that communicated an equally invisible, everyday

value: sound. High-fidelity, or hi-fi, made its way into our lexicon in the 1950s as a marketing term to describe records and equipment that provided faithful sound reproduction. It lent Wi-Fi a reference point that let the world know this was a technology meant for everyone: reliable and ubiquitous.

Wi-Fi has since inspired countless “-fi” names that have expanded the terminology, from products and services like the MiFi router and JetBlue’s Fly-Fi, to other technologies and standards like Gi-Fi (or gigabit wireless) and Qualcomm HyFi. And this works because the name was meant to set the standard. Variants of Wi-Fi now send a signal that these new things are all related, in some way, to wireless connectivity.

This is different from getting sucked into a naming trend—following a certain style of name popular within the industry. Spotify spawned Workify, Xtify, Stackify, Praxify... and on and on. Then there’s the e-dropping Flickr, Tumblr, dopplr, Flagr—you get the idea.

All industries are susceptible to naming trends. But the pace of product development with apps and startups mean that they are often first to chase their own tails, resulting in an echo chamber of me-too names.

There is no one type of name that is successful. So how do you find the right balance of meaning and style when trying to future-proof your startup’s name?

## **Start with best practices**

Ultra-creative names for things we already know don’t always go over well. That’s because, mostly, we expect brands to use known language for known things. Insisting your restaurant is a “dining concept” (when it looks, feels, and tastes like a restaurant) is going to earn you more eyerolls than reservations. Thanks to best practices, some naming decisions are, or at least should be, no-brainers.

But what about when your category is too new to truly have best practices? Often, a good starting point is looking at what you are asking people to do and thinking about how far it is from what they do today. Looking at a category without a standardized vocabulary or behavior, like augmented reality headsets, reveals your options.

## **Look to your experts**

The augmented reality category actually has no shortage of language, but not a lot of firm agreement about what we'll use going forward. There's the mixed reality/augmented reality/hybrid reality debate. There's uncertainty about how we'll consume this new tech-enabled layer of reality: Glasses? Viewers? Headsets?

This is a great problem to have. While consumers aren't settled on the words they'll use, there's plenty of expert perspective on the category itself. Start with the prevailing language of the experts, and you're likely to land where your audience will, too. Microsoft's new HoloLens is a perfect example of this kind of naming. With "holo-," they're expecting holograms and holographic experiences to be the way we describe AR interactions. And this could happen given that the terms are well-understood thanks to science fiction (hat tip to actual science on this one, too). It's a name that has room to grow with the technology, but also can fit in to the bigger world of Microsoft.

## **Uncover emerging patterns**

There's an opportunity to look beyond more immediate references and make an educated guess for what new technology will mean to everyday life, based on new trends and potential changes to behavior. With research and analysis, the pattern is yours to uncover, but it's important to link the emerging need with a familiar starting point.

In augmented reality, there are some known references from which to draw: physics,

fiction, pop culture. But if it's adopted as widely as some predict, it will change us in ways that we don't yet understand.

Meta is a name that takes this approach. It grants permission to do more and be more than what is known today—a lot like Uber. The name Meta suggests a big, powerful reshaping of what we know as reality, a time when we will be familiar with new layers of the world around us. The brand's early foray into augmented reality headsets was called SpaceGlasses (a product name they likely thought would become a best practice, but sounded almost instantly dated), but now they invite developers to write this vision for augmented reality alongside them, as “Meta Pioneers.”

### **Know when to jump ship**

In some cases, it's time to leave the references behind—you're creating something completely new and you'd rather have a name with maximum runway, even if you'll leave some people behind. If you prize expectation over understanding, then it's up to you to decide what language will define your new thing.

You could coin a new name that reflects that energy or message of what you hope people will understand about your product, or use an existing real word that you want people to associate with you. Consider Facebook's Oculus Rift virtual reality business. We'll only know in hindsight how well the name works, but we know that this kind of unfamiliar-in-the-market today language sends a strong signal that Oculus (already starting to shed the Rift) aims to introduce a completely new behavior.

### **The ever-moving goal posts**

Sometimes, words just aren't enough. When Prince famously dropped his name and performed under a symbol, he did so primarily to skirt (and protest) a trademark issue because his record label owned his name as a performer. Today, brands that

have seen their names become a played-out trend might find Prince's plight familiar. Apple recently abandoned its immensely popular "i" naming construct when naming its new wearable. It's called "Apple Watch" but visually represented as the Apple logo and the word watch. For the first time, we see them using their company logo as part of a name.

It's timely. And it may have more value than trademark protection.

Emoji usage is on the rise, and for good reason. We spend more and more time in front of screens, so what's better than a simple, highly telegraphic form of communication? The adoption of emojis in brand messaging is already commonplace, primarily in social media, but it's foreseeable that we'll start to see them in traditional media and UI soon. Names might not be far behind.

Whether in alphanumeric characters or other symbols, names today are under more pressure than ever to be telegraphic (while still convincing us of their value). And with every innovation, what new hurdles will names have to clear? Take the rise of virtual personal assistants—will we say, "Siri, Amazon Prime a new pair of Frye boots" as effortlessly as we might say "Cortana, grab me an Uber to the airport"? Brands need to continually reexamine their role in our experiences to secure their role in our future conversations.

*Caitlin Barrett is a verbal mad scientist who creates monstrously good names. Follow her on Twitter at [@badnewsbarrett](https://twitter.com/badnewsbarrett).*

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