



INSIDER EXCLUSIVES

Remember (and Use) Other People's Names, and You'll Succeed

By Brent Sverdlhoff

Does this scenario sound familiar? You're at a business function like ABA's Annual Meeting & Marketplace and strike up a conversation with a travel leader in your field. You go deeper and find out where she grew up, lives, works, and vacations. But you have completely blanked on her name. Neither of you is wearing a name tag, and you're too embarrassed to ask again. Why is it we can recall so many details about a person, but names vanish into thin air?

While there are science-based reasons why names are tough to retain, keep this fact in mind: you can't remember what you didn't know in the first place.

Names are the most important thing about a person's identity, and yet they are often the least remembered thing about them. Often, we don't hear a name clearly at the moment of introduction. Maybe the other person didn't speak up enough. Maybe you weren't paying attention. Regardless, the moment has passed, and we can feel sheepish about asking again. So we barrel ahead and keep talking.

Make sure you understand a name clearly from the outset. It is advisable to repeat the other person's name—it underscores the fact that you heard it, and the act of speaking it aloud contributes to muscle memory. You say it, you feel it, you hear it.

Every name has a story, so ask others questions about their names. "You said, 'It's Glen?' Is that with one *n* or two? Three? Really! I bet there's a story there." "'Oscar,' you said? Nice to meet you. Were your parents big fans of the Academy Awards? No? Oh, Oskar with a *k*. And you were named after your grandfather Oskar who was a Nobel Laureate? Fascinating, tell me more!"

Taking the time to ask people about their names, when done sincerely, is flattering. The examples above may seem a little over the top, but you get the picture. Without belaboring the issue, in well under a minute you can make truly astonishing (and memorable) discoveries—that some prefer to go by their middle names, won't answer to nicknames they hate, or often have their names confused with something entirely different.

Make the discussion about the name as vivid as other aspects of the conversation. This will help cement it into your memory. You are hearing it, repeating it, and, to a certain extent, playing with it, albeit respectfully.

Be kind to others, and give them an association with your name. "Hi, my name is Ray, like Ray Charles." "My given name is Frances, but people call me Frankie. Please, use Frankie." If they want to pursue a line of questioning, they will. But in the meantime, you've given them a gift.

Of course, there are scientific reasons why names elude us. Joshua Foer, in his engrossing book *Moonwalking with Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything*, references a phenomenon known as the "baker/Baker paradox." It goes like this: if a person tells you that he works as a baker, your mind conjures up all sorts of imagery. You may think back to your childhood and recall a friendly baker clad in a flour-dusted apron offering you a freshly baked cookie. But if a person tells you his name is Baker, it's just a series of sounds.

This means we have to work harder to associate names with a concrete image, story, or some other memorable construct. The great writer Ralph Waldo Emerson said that all words are "frozen metaphors." The origin of a name may be obvious and correspond to an occupation (think Cooper, Hunter, or Archer) or to things found in nature (like Violet, Robin, or Willow). In other cases, it may be revealed through linguistic sleuthing: the name Leonard, for example, derives from old Germanic words for "lion" and "brave" (hardy). Look for a backstory or create a new one through your questions.

We are all in the business of building relationships, and that starts with remembering someone's name. Getting a name right inspires confidence from the get-go and helps others remember you—a powerful advantage in any professional or social situation. So make sure you hear a name clearly at first, make it part of the conversation, and see how much further it takes you in your interactions. Glenn, Oskar, Ray, and Frankie will be grateful that you did!

Marketplace seminar leader Brent Sverdlhoff is the author of How Could I Forget You! A Creative Way to Remember Names and Faces. A practitioner of trained-memory methods for more than 35 years, Sverdlhoff has led memorization workshops for businesses and individuals across the nation. His work has earned him interviews with Forbes, Refinery29, and television, radio, and print outlets. Learn more at www.flexyourmemory.com.