



How to Pronounce Difficult Names

By Dr. Kathleen Begley, Published Author and Professional Speaker

Note to Readers: *Looking for information and inspiration in coping with these challenging times? Write Company Plus hopes this weekly blogletter is giving you a lift. Because we know you're a busy person inundated with printed material, we try to make our email as brief as possible. If you're really swamped at the moment, simply skip to the seven news-you-can-use bulleted tips at the end of this piece.*

Names have always fascinated me. As a child growing up in an ethnically mixed neighborhood in Pennsylvania, I learned early that last names ending in “a” “i” and “o” often were Italian; in “ski,” Polish; in “ous,” Greek. To identify people sharing my Irish heritage, I looked at the beginning letters, specifically “Mc” and “O’.” “Mac” prefixes usually were Scottish.

As a child, I was even more intrigued by first names. Why, for example, did some people give their son a formal name such as “Daniel” or “Stephen” and then, inexplicably, call the kid “Butch?” How come, in defiance of all logic, was “Bill” the nickname for “William”; “Jack,” for “John”; and “Bob,” for “Robert?” And what was up with the fact that some parents named offspring in honor of other family members while others avoided repetition at all cost? Considering my lifelong interest in names, you can imagine my delight at recently noticing a barrage of news articles involving this exact topic.

U.S. President Barack O’Bama – the Irish spelling – frequently notes, for example, that his name is highly unusual for the leader of the free world. That’s really saying something taking into account his predecessors included Dwight Eisenhower, Millard Fillmore, and Rutherford B. Hayes. Texas State Senator Betty Brown last week suggested to a representative of the Organization of Chinese Americans that its members adopt Anglocized names that “we could more readily deal with here.” Texan Xiaos, pronounced like the first four letters in “shower,” were understandably offended. The esteemed ladies of the ABC television gabfest “The View” talked recently about their struggles pronouncing the name of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Whoopi Goldberg, no slouch in the unusual name department, said she is busy concocting a phonetic memory device.

As a corporate communications trainer working for the past decade primarily with immigrants from India, China, and Russia, I’ve witnessed the impact that hard-to-pronounce names can have on newcomers to the United States. Because Americans often simply avoid conversing with individuals with unfamiliar names, many immigrants end up feeling excluded and isolated.

To be sure, some of you may think the Texas senator’s idea is the answer. What’s wrong, after all, with calling “Animikh” from India “Alan?” In my view, everything. Imagine moving as Vic or Susan from New York to Leningrad and having Russian colleagues start calling you “Vladimir” or “Svetlanda?” In this era of continual global communication, I think it behooves everyone to assume the burden of correctly pronouncing other people’s names. So what if a Chinese colleague’s first name begins with a weird “Y?” Or if an Indian friend’s last name has 10 syllables? Or if both parts of a Russian’s name have weird-sounding “r’s?” Here are some ideas on successfully playing today’s name game:

Begin with respect. During the 20th century, many American managers arbitrarily changed names such as “Sharmilla” to “Sharon.” The arrogance was breathtaking. To me, that now despised practice smacked of Confederate plantation owners stripping slaves of their African



Dr. Kathleen A. Begley
The Write Woman
KBegley@writecompanyplus.com
610-429-1562

identities by giving them English surnames. A person's name is precious, and it deserves your respect.

Accept change. To be truthful, I suspect that the Texas senator's recommendation that Chinese men and women alter their names for American consumption goes deeper than pronunciation issues. I'm thinking fears about possible loss of power, wealth, and electability in the increasingly diverse state bordering Mexico.

Show curiosity. When you run across a person with a last name like "Wocjiewicz" or "Svarotsky," ask directly how to pronounce it. Contrary to looking like a linguistic dunce, you'll be perceived as a person with true interest in treating others respectfully.

Practice, practice, practice. When I meet a man or woman with an unfamiliar name, I immediately repeat it several times. I then ask for feedback on my performance, and make necessary improvements. The whole time, I stress that saying the other person's name right is really important to me. I also make fun of my own limited language ability, not of the individual's strange -- to me -- name.

Tap into the Internet. The Wall Street Journal recently ran a story about a Washington, D.C., area resident who just launched a website called www.howtosaythatname.com. It includes both phonetic spellings and spot-on audio. My hat is off to the developer for following a key principle of business success: filling a previous unmet need.

Join Facebook. If you want to check out the impact of difficult names on their owners, look at this popular social networking site. Facebook has a sub-group called "Nobody Can Pronounce My Last Name." I think the website should actively solicit former Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich.

Simplify your name. Over the years, I've learned that the letters "th," which appear in my first name, are extraordinarily difficult for non-native English speakers. To learn how to get the combination right, you need to put your tongue between your teeth and almost dribble out the sides of your mouth. As you might imagine, the technique strikes many newcomers as utterly disgusting. Because most other languages lack this sound, multinationals struggle mightily with "Kathleen," "Samantha," "Theodore," "Thaddesus" and similar words, which are technically known as consonant digraphs. Observing this difficulty years ago, I decided to take corrective action. To hundreds of global friends and acquaintances, I am known -- and, I hope, fondly thought of -- by the one-easy-syllable "Kay."

Dr. Kathleen Begley owns *Write Company Plus*, a corporate communications training firm outside Philadelphia. One of Dr. Begley's specialties is teaching American business culture to non-native English speakers. She has written seven books and spoken on five continents. You can call her to chat at 610-429-1562 or read about her seminars and books at www.writecompanyplus.com.