

## POLICY BRIEF #94

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# Rightsizing Brand Names: The Effects of Brand Name Length on Brand Name Attitude and Recognition

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For decades, branding experts, business advisors, and marketing textbooks have promoted a simple naming principle: keep brand names short, ideally limited to two syllables. This rule is widely used because short names are assumed to be easier to remember, easier to process, and more appealing to consumers.

This policy brief revisits that assumption. The findings show that the widely used two-syllable rule oversimplifies how consumers process brand names. Whether shorter names perform better depends on the outcome being considered.

### Highlights

**Longer names, stronger recognition:** Contrary to conventional branding advice, recognition improves as non-word brand names become longer.

**From two syllables to 3–4 phonemes:** The widely used two-syllable rule oversimplifies brand name length. For brand attitudes, approximately 3–4 phonemes provide a more informative benchmark than syllable count alone.

**Phonemes outperform syllables:** Brand names with the same number of syllables can differ substantially in their number of phonemes. For brand attitudes, phonemic length provides a more precise measure of brand name length than syllable count.

**The optimal length depends on the objective:** Longer non-word brand names improve recognition, making them particularly valuable when memorability is a priority. For market contexts in which evaluative judgements are most important, shorter names of 3–4 phonemes are associated with the most favourable attitudes.

## 1. The persistence of short names and the two-syllable rule

*Conventional branding advice strongly favours short names. Business publications, brand name consultants, and marketing textbooks frequently argue that shorter brand names are easier to remember and therefore more effective. In many cases, this recommendation is translated into a simple rule of thumb: aim for two syllables.*

*The popularity of this advice is understandable. Brand names must compete for attention in increasingly crowded markets, and shorter names appear easier to process. As a result, the assumption that “shorter is better” has become deeply embedded in branding practice.*

*Despite its popularity, however, the empirical basis for the two-syllable rule remains surprisingly limited. More importantly, it assumes that syllables provide the most meaningful way to evaluate brand name length.*

*Our recent study challenges both assumptions.*

## 2. Recognition: longer names perform better

*The first assumption in branding we challenge is that shorter names are easier to remember.*

*Instead, our findings show that when consumers are asked to recognise previously encountered non-word brand names, recognition improves as brand name length increases. Longer names were recognised more accurately than shorter names.*

*This finding challenges the beforementioned conventional belief that shortening a brand name automatically improves memorability. Longer names provide more information, making them easier to distinguish from competing names during recognition.*

*For organisations developing new brands, the implication is straightforward: reducing a name to its shortest possible form does not necessarily improve recognition and may even sacrifice distinctiveness. When a firm's goal is to launch a highly distinguishable brand, as is often the case in brands advertised through billboards, radio or awareness campaigns, it is probably better to prefer a longer brand name over shorter alternatives.*

## 3. Moving beyond syllables: why phonemes matter

The second assumption we challenge is that syllables provide the most meaningful way to evaluate brand name length. The widely used two-syllable rule not only recommends short brand names but also assumes that syllable count is the most appropriate measure of length.

Our findings suggest otherwise. Brand name length can also be measured through phonemes, the smallest units of sound in a language. Because phonemes capture sound structure more precisely, they provide a more detailed measure of brand name length than syllables.

Consider the brand names *Lee* and *Dell*. Both are one-syllable names. *Lee* consists of two phonemes (/l/ and /i:/), whereas *Dell* consists of three phonemes (/d/, /ɛ/, and /l/). From a syllable perspective, the two names appear equally short. From a phonemic perspective, however, *Dell* is 50% longer than *Lee*. This illustrates why syllable counts can overlook meaningful variation in brand name structure.

This distinction becomes important when examining brand attitudes. While conventional branding advice recommends two-syllable names, our findings suggest that attitudes are better predicted by phonemic length. Brand names containing approximately 3–4 phonemes are associated with the most favourable attitudes, regardless of whether they contain one, two, or three syllables.

Table 1 illustrates these ideas using existing non-word brand names. Names with the same number of syllables can differ substantially in their phonemic length and expected evaluative outcomes. Conversely, names associated with favourable attitudes cluster around 3–4 phonemes, even when they differ in syllabic length.

This distinction has practical consequences. If brand managers relied solely on the traditional two-syllable rule, they might favour names such as *Honda* or *Revlon* over names such as *Dell* or *Skype*. Our findings suggest that this would be a misleading conclusion, as phonemic

length provides a more informative guide to expected brand attitudes than syllable count alone.

**Table 1**

*Phonemic and syllabic length of existing NWBNs and their hypothesized evaluative outcomes*

Brand Name	Phonemic Transcription (IPA)	Syllabic Length	Phonemic Length	Evaluation Outcome
Lee	/l//i:/	1	2	-
Dell	/d//ɛ//l/	1	3	+
Skype	/s//k//aɪ//p/	1	4	+
Stant	/s//t//æ//n//t/	1	5	-
Mua	/m//u://ə/	2	3	+
Sony	/s//oʊ//n//i:/	2	4	+
Honda	/h//ɑ://n//d//ə/	2	5	-
Revlon	/r//ɛ//v//l//v//n/	2	6	-

Note. At the time of launch none of these NWBNs were existing English dictionary words

#### 4. Key recommendations and lessons learned

##### Measure brand name length using phonemes rather than syllables.

Convert candidate brand names into their phonemic transcription and count the number of phonemes. Existing pronunciation dictionaries and phonetic databases can be used for this purpose. Phonemes provide a more precise measure of brand name length than syllables.

##### Choose longer names when recognition is the priority.

Longer non-word brand names are recognised more accurately than shorter alternatives. When the objective is memorability and recognition, longer names should be preferred.

##### Aim for 3–4 phonemes when attitudes matter most.

When the objective is to maximise positive brand attitudes, names containing approximately 3–4 phonemes provide the most favourable outcomes, regardless of whether they contain one, two, or three syllables.

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