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What's in remembering a name? Imagine if Diether had become Peter

By Diether Haenicke
October 14, 2009

'I remember your name perfectly, but I just can't think of your face,' is one of many famous spoonerisms.

I envy those lucky people who unfailingly remember names, even of persons to whom they were introduced only briefly and a long time ago. Politicians often have this uncanny memory, a powerful tool in public relations.

After I became president of Western Michigan University, I had been introduced to the governor and I chatted with him for about 10 minutes. Months later, sitting in a hotel in Washington, D.C., Jim Blanchard strolled in, crossed the vast lobby and greeted me with the correct first and last name — in my case a double challenge. I was flattered and enormously impressed.

I, on the other hand, struggle to remember names, particularly when I meet a familiar person in an unfamiliar context. When I began my work at Ohio State, I was quickly introduced to several hundred faculty members and staff.

I did my best to remember names and match them with faces. One night, I was out for dinner with my wife when a gentleman greeted us from his table across the restaurant. I recognized the face instantly; in fact, I knew that I had talked to the man just recently. Obviously a member of the faculty. But who? A physics professor? A historian? A dean? Finally, I went over to his table to exchange a few collegial words about the university. However, the moment I shook his hand, I remembered how I knew him. He was the service man who had repaired our furnace a few weeks earlier.

We expect people to recall our names, and when they do, we take this as a sign of personal respect. Every Bob who is addressed as Richard resents it. Even if we have difficult foreign

names, we cringe when we see our names misspelled. Every time I write to my friend Carol Waszkiewicz, I go back to my address book to check. Just in case. In this country where foreign names are legion, one meets frequent challenges. Are Ananthan Venkatachalam and Ter Chong Wang male or female? If I correspond with them, I go to great lengths to find out. I myself don't respond to the frequent solicitations addressed to Ms. Diether Haenicke. Fundraisers, take note!

We can't do much about family names. That's why first names are usually chosen with great care. Expecting parents often spend months to select just the right name for their progeny. Family tradition used to be a respected guideline.

As our family is about to have a second grandchild baptized, I am mindful that Caroline Dorothea bears the names of her grandmother Carol, her great-grandfather's name Carl in its female form, and that of her German great-aunt Dorothea. My son and I carry on the names of Kurt and Waldemar respectively in memory of two relatives who died as soldiers in World War I. But that tradition seems to fade.

Young couples nowadays often choose names that just sound beautiful, lining up vowels and the right number of syllables to match the family name. I particularly like the sound sequence Sedona Dobson and also the cute little girl who goes by that name. However, some parents seem careless when assigning names. I am thinking of a friend whose exceptional spirit and energy are not reflected in his name. His parents named him Robert Bobb, but everyone calls him Bob Bobb. My former assistant, Irene Stink, was in the habit of signing documents with her last name preceded by her first initial, which caused both consternation and smiles.

I am very comfortable with my name, difficult though it might be. But once, for about 20 seconds, I was in danger of losing it. When I became an American citizen 30 years ago, the presiding judge pointed out that my German name was not mainstream American and might not blend in properly.

This was the moment to pick something more pronounceable, he helpfully advised. I asked for a suggestion. He made me sound out my name and then suggested "Peter Hennessy." I looked at my wife. She violently shook her head. And so I kept my identity. Peter Hennessy? Naah!

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