

Ten Steps to a More Colorful Future

by Jon Vara

Have you eaten your fill of drywall dust? Do your knees hurt? Are you tired of getting blood blisters on your calluses, and splinters in your blood blisters?

If so, maybe it's time to consider training for an exciting new career in naming paint colors. According to the experts at several leading paint companies — the folks who bring us color chips with names like Salmonella and Roasted Seed, to name two actual examples — mastery of the steps below could be your ticket to a brighter, lighter, cheerier, more pastel-tinted future:

1. Keep your eyes open. The pros spend a lot of time studying maps, textbooks, and other references in search of pleasant-sounding words that might serve as seed for a new name. "I'm always looking," says Barbara Richardson, who names colors for Glidden. "Every time I drive by a store or a billboard or a housing development, I check to see if there's a word there I can use."

2. Add adjectives and stir. Once you've picked a suitable base word — say, "cork" or "gutta-percha" — liven it up with one or more "descriptors," as they're known to the trade. "Descriptors are things like 'dark,' or 'glazed,' or 'flowering,' or 'northern,'" says the Benjamin Moore Company's Leslie Harrington. "You just try them and see what works."

3. Consider your audience. Although the same name can never be applied to more than one color, a given color can have several different names if it appears in different product lines from the same manufacturer. "You might use a name like Lumen White for an industrial paint," Richardson says,

"but the same exact color might appear in a designer series as something like Stratosphere Kitten White."

4. Dare to be great. An inspired color name can be a beautiful thing. Linda Trent, a color expert with Sherwin-Williams, points to a pair of personal favorites: a tricky off-white called Simply Neutral and a lively green she dubbed Key Lime. But show some restraint. Wise-guy names like Gang Green or Cut the Mustard don't wear well.

5. Be flexible. Remember that turquoise is in the eye of the beholder. A color like Petal Pink can actually be an off-



white, and beige, tan, taupe, and cream are pretty much interchangeable.

6. Rotate your stock. Like paint itself, paint color names have a shelf life. Barbara Richardson recalls two popular names from the 70s — Peppy Purple and Top Banana — that would never work today. The word “avocado” is also pretty much played out. The recent trend, Richardson says, is toward spiritual and environmental colors. Outdated names are weeded out and replaced with new ones as necessary.

7. Offer to do the greens. Speaking of the environment, it is generally agreed that green is one of the easier colors to name, because there are so many examples in the natural world. Opinion is divided as to which color is most challenging. Richardson, for example, struggles with purple. “If it’s a borderline color, I’ll usually try to call it a blue,” she says (see Step 5).

8. When the going gets tough, get help. When you’re producing a thousand or more names each year, you’re bound to get stuck now and then. When you do, don’t be too proud to ask for help. Leslie Harrington once asked the entire corporate population of Benjamin Moore to submit three names, some of which turned out to be keepers. And when you’re

really desperate, there’s always your family: Barbara Richardson once paid tribute to a newborn relative by naming a color Katelin Rose.

9. Look for spin-offs. Another trick is to comb through lists of existing names for those that can be modified and reused. Pebble Beach, for example, might become Nouveau Pebble. It also pays to keep an eye out for reversible names — like Ocean Blue and Blue Ocean — that can painlessly double your output. (Check with your employer first, though: Reversibility isn’t allowed at Benjamin Moore.)

10. Expect a 40% failure rate. There’s also a dark side to color naming, which Terry Kalcevic, manager of color marketing for the PPG corporation, calls “the toughest, most unglamorous job in the paint industry.” Once a name has been used and withdrawn from circulation, it can’t be reused for 20 to 50 years (the actual period varies from one company to the next). That makes things less confusing for consumers, but it also means that the pool of available names gets a little shallower every year. Each potentially new name must be carefully checked against vast card files of previously used ones and disqualified if necessary. “If you get six usable names out of every ten you come up with,” says Leslie Harrington, “you’re doing very well.” 