



The Five Best Tricks to Remember Names

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If you meet someone named Ryan, associating him with a famous actor like Ryan Gosling can help you remember his name. It's one of my personal frustrations that I am naturally terrible at remembering names. I place great value on truly connecting with other people, and I know one of the simplest ways you can make someone feel recognized is to remember and speak their name. Plus, let's face it, blanking on someone's name whom you've met before — or worse, just been introduced to — is borderline rude, and fully embarrassing.

How many of us have been there, awkwardly trying to get someone to repeat their name so we can make a proper introduction, or using all sorts of nonspecific phrases, "hey there!" to work around the issue. According to an article on Psychology Today, this issue just worsens with age, as nearly 85% of middle-aged and older adults forget names. (Not sure what my excuse was at age 25, but I do admit retrieval is getting harder.)

It's understandable. When we meet someone, we have a lot to take in — from their appearance, to the conversation, to other distractions happening around us. With our increasing reliance on the Internet as a substitute for flexing our memory, research indicates memorization of any kind is becoming a lost art.

Remembering names is important on so many levels. It makes people feel good to hear their name, and they pay greater attention. Studies show that hearing our name activates our brain, even when it's spoken in a noisy room. You may notice that influential leaders take care to use people's names, and even mention personal aspects that they share in common.

This isn't by accident — they know it matters and use it. We feel better when people remember us (and worse when they don't). If you're like me though, and want to get better at name recognition, take heart. There are ways to dramatically increase your ability to catch names, and keep them top of mind. Here are some tricks I've learned that work.



Try them for yourself:

1. Meet and repeat - When you get someone's name, don't just nod and continue the conversation, try to plug the name into what you're saying. For example, if the man in front of you says his name is Mark, say, "Hi, Mark, nice to meet you." Or ask a question with his name at the end, "How long have you been working in IT, Mark?"

Use the name throughout the conversation, but sparingly, and not in an overly salesy or repetitive way. When you're saying goodbye, make sure to use the name one last time while looking them in the face, and make an effort to commit it to memory.

2. Spell it out - Psychiatrist and memory expert Dr. Gary Small suggests asking someone to spell his or her name, especially if it's an unusual one. This technique can be helpful if you have a visual memory, as it creates a mental picture of the person's name.

It may also be helpful to ask for a business card, and to glance at the person's name while you're talking to them. This creates greater alignment between the person and the visual name. Finally, after meeting someone, the first moment that you get, put them into your contacts with a few pieces of information that will help you remember them. This may include their appearance, children's names, or interests

3. Associate - Many experts suggest that you conjure a verbal game or image when you first hear a name. This could be an alliterative pattern involving something you know about the person, i.e. Forbes.com contributor Helen Coster gives the catchy example of "Joann from Jersey." Or consider something about the person's interests or job, i.e. Sarah's in sales, so Sarah Sells. Vivian Giang cites this advice she learned from the Dale Carnegie training course, "Picture images that sound like a person's name — and combine it with other things you know about them. If you meet someone named Laura from Brazil, imagine her with a laurel wreath on her head swimming in the Amazon River."

4. Make connections - Another way association can be helpful is to make a connection between the person you're talking to, and someone else you know with the same name, i.e. Carrie, like my sister. I received a life-changing tip that was a spin on this from a speaker who spoke to my Vistage group years ago.

After meeting the 15 people in our group very briefly, he proceeded to go around the room and repeat each of our names perfectly. His trick? As you meet someone, consider a famous person (or famous to you) who shares their first name and looks somewhat like them, i.e. Ryan looks like Ryan Gosling (if you could be so lucky.) I've found that it can be harder to make the association, but once you do, it's locked in.

5. Choose to care - Most psychologists and memory experts point out that one of the main reasons we forget someone's name is that we're not really focused on learning it in the first place. There's too much else going on, and it's vying for our attention.

Author Keith Ferrazzi's first piece of advice for remembering names is to decide to care. "If you make a conscious decision that you are going to remember names," he explains, "because you care about the people you meet, you will immediately become much better at doing it!"

