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Hello, This is Stark Industries. No, We Do Not Make Iron Man Suits

Companies that share names with fictional firms from cult movies and shows can get into some stupefying situations. 'Yeah, great latex salesman.'



A scene from 'Office Space.' PHOTO: TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX/EVERETT COLLECTION

By *Spencer Jakob*
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3 COMMENTS

Rich DiBernardo thought it would be fun to name his company iniTech after the awful corporation in Mike Judge's cult classic "Office Space." Then came the TPS reports.

A prankster has faxed thousands of them, bearing the iniTech logo, all over the world over the years, with a note that they hadn't been filled in correctly. Most went to people who probably had never heard of TPS reports, a much-maligned piece of paperwork featured in the 1999 movie. Hundreds of the recipients have googled the real-life iniTech and contacted Mr. DiBernardo's nine-person engineering firm based in Clifton, N.J., asking for the faxes to stop.



iniTech stapler

Would he change the name of his 11-year-old company? No. "It was clearly the right name to use," he says. "It's been a source of laughs."

Employees bought Mr. DiBernardo a pair of suspenders like those of the movie's nightmare boss, Bill Lumbergh, and iniTech hands out red staplers to workers like the one used by the pyromaniacal character Milton. The

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company's website even used to have a fake IT contact, Michael Bolton, named after the bitter computer programmer from the film. Emails to the Bolton address went straight to Mr. DiBernardo.

Sometimes reality imitates fiction. Ben Hardt named his technology consulting firm Vandelay Industries—a famous reference to a fictitious latex products distributor from “Seinfeld.” On the show, George Costanza made up the company's name and listed it as a potential employer in order to extend his jobless benefits. (George gave Jerry's home number as the company's switchboard and hilarity ensued.)



Ben Hardt of Vandelay Industries, which is named after a company in 'Seinfeld.' PHOTOS: VANDELAY INDUSTRIES; CASTLE ROCK ENTERTAINMENT/EVERETT COLLECTION






Many real-life job applicants appear to have copied George's fraudulent move by listing Vandelay as a former employer. Mr. Hardt says he has received dozens of serious calls from employers trying to verify that some job applicant he's never heard of had once worked for the company.

“Sometimes I'll say: ‘Yeah, great latex salesman.’”






And then there are human-resources managers who have heard of the fictional Vandelay. They call about references for actual former employees and have to be convinced that Mr. Hardt's Citrus Heights, Calif., company truly exists.

Unlike iniTech and Vandelay, some companies are oddly similar to their fictional counterparts. Stark Industries of Terre Haute, Ind., makes products for the aviation, space and defense sectors, just like the fictional company of Tony Stark in “Iron Man.”



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Robert Downey Jr. in 'Iron Man 2' as Tony Stark, head of Stark Industries and Jeff Stark, CEO of real-life Stark Industries in Terre Haute, IN. PHOTOS: PARAMOUNT/EVERETT COLLECTION

The real company doesn't secretly build rocket-powered armor with neurokinetic user-controlled morphologic nanoparticle bundles on the side, but founder Jeff Stark, who started the company in 1993, says he does get emails from strangers volunteering to be suit testers.

Truth is Stranger Than (Corporate) Fiction

Can you answer questions about these fake companies and their real versions?

1. Stark Industries, the fictional company run by Iron Man's Tony Stark, makes high tech equipment for the defense sector. The real Stark Industries in Terre Haute, Indiana, makes:

Equipment for the defense sector

Flying, armored suits

Lawn furniture

All of the above

In Japan, Tsukuba-based Cyberdyne incorporated 20 years after that name was made famous as the designer of Skynet in "The Terminator." The Japanese company is now working on a cyborg-type robot called HAL to assist people unable to use their limbs.

Founder Yoshiyuki Sankai says that any resemblances between the company's name and the producer of the time-traveling cyborg played by Arnold Schwarzenegger in "Terminator" or the homicidal computer HAL from "2001: A Space Odyssey" are purely coincidental.

Patrick Bluth, who owns southern California home-building firm Bluth Construction, didn't think the name of the dysfunctional Southern California home builder from "Arrested Development" was a coincidence. He says his company was well-known locally, since it was founded 25 years before the fictional one in the TV show. He isn't sure which character he might be.

"I've only seen the show once, but I think I'd be the normal one."

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Above, a scene from the HBO show 'Silicon Valley' and Fran O'Hagan, founder of Pied Piper, in Pacific Grove, Calif. PHOTOS: FRAN O'HAGAN

Mr. Bluth, who gets reminded of the names' similarity "almost every day," says he once got a customer because he assumed Mr. Bluth was associated with the show. He has since decided there is no such thing as bad publicity.

Pied Piper, a Pacific Grove, Calif., firm that rates the effectiveness of car dealer networks, was founded 10 years earlier and located 90 miles to the south of the fictional technology startup of the same name in the HBO show "Silicon Valley." Founder Fran O'Hagan said he was recently "presenting to a room of purchasing managers and one of them asked if we do compression algorithms," like the company on the show.

The real company had the temerity to rate [Tesla Motors](#) dead last in a 2016 survey of dealership networks. The electric auto maker's chief executive, Elon Musk, tweeted a link to an article mentioning the company to his 10 million [Twitter](#) followers saying: "Tesla finishes last in being salesy. Good. Also, I can't believe there is a real Pied Piper."





"The Dark Knight" starred Christian Bale. Denise Howard, CEO of Wayne Enterprises in Houston. PHOTOS: WARNER BROS/EVERETT COLLECTION; WAYNE ENTERPRISES

Founders of real companies that share the names of fake ones seem to agree that it is at the very least a conversation-starter. A shared name can also be an effective recruiting tool. Denise Howard, who runs Wayne Enterprises, a manufacturer of safety equipment in Houston, says she gets swarmed by curious applicants at job fairs.

"We have an intern this summer who took the job so he could tell his friends he works at Wayne Enterprises."

Aside from the random phone calls asking about the weather in Gotham City or if the company is real, Ms. Howard says only one thing about the name bothers her—the nagging fear that lawyers for the owners of the Batman franchise will call her one day and ask her to change it. But the name stems from the purchase of a neighbor's existing company by her father decades ago. The neighbor's name was Wayne Davis. Batman is secretly industrialist Bruce Wayne.

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What keeps Ms. Howard up at night is all part of the fun for others. Zachary Smith named his Indiana auto wholesaler Virtucon as a direct homage to the industrial empire of Dr. Evil from the Austin Powers movie franchise.

"I called it that because Cyberdyne Systems was already taken."

Mr. Smith is happy with the name, although irked by people who fail to recognize the cinematic reference in his company's title despite his hints.

"I tell people we have a factory that makes miniature models of other factories, but they don't get it."

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