

For women called Alexa, it's funny, frustrating to share name with Amazon device

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Since Amazon introduced the Alexa-enabled Echo device in 2014, the jokes have become so omnipresent that Alexa Philbeck, 29, briefly considered changing, or at least obscuring, her name.

"I work in the service industry, so my name is printed on receipts that people see all the time" says Philbeck, a Seattle bartender. "I get comments constantly and people trying to make jokes or order me around."

"Alexa, take our photo," she says, imitating a group of tourists who recently visited the establishment where she works.

It's become a chore for Philbeck to acknowledge the near-constant barrage of remarks.

"When you hear it so often, it's hard to respond in a way that is actually nice," she says.

But, over time, Philbeck, who proudly describes herself as "stubborn," got over it. "It's a part of my life. I've accepted it," says Philbeck. "I'm not going to change my name because of Amazon.com."

Being named "Alexa" in a landscape dotted with an estimated 11 million plus Echo devices can be funny, and just as often, frustrating. As Alexa's reach expands, the name seems to be on everyone's lips. This year it's forecast that 35.6 million Americans will use a stand-alone, voice-activated assistant device at least once a month, up 130 percent from 2016 - and Amazon's Echo dominates that market.

According to Business Insider, when choosing a name for their virtual assistant, Amazon engineers liked the soft vowels and distinct "x" of "Alexa." Something about that particular combination of letters sounded "unique."

Alexa, however, is far from an uncommon name. Since 1998, Alexa has consistently ranked among the top 100 female baby names in the United States, according to the Social Security Administration.

This means, for a sizable population, Amazon's choice for the name of the voice behind their gadgets, which sold big during Amazon's recent Prime Day sales event, has not gone unnoticed.

"One of the kids I've been baby-sitting forever - they love talking to the Echo. 'Alexa, Alexa, Alexa, Alexa,' and I'm like 'What?' They're like, 'Not you,'" Alexa Sorensen says.

As a nanny working in a home with an Echo system, Sorensen says confusion like this is commonplace. So commonplace, in fact, that the 21-year-old from Seattle sometimes doesn't hear her charges when they refer to her as "Alexa," leading the kids to use her surname instead.

"If they can't get my attention, Sorensen works better," she says.

She doesn't let it get to her, though. "Yes, it's sometimes annoying, but I've found other ways to deal with it."

She's even ordered an Echo device to use in her own home. That may seem paradoxical, but Sorensen says, "I just use a lot of the Amazon products, and it just seemed easier."

Often, reports Seattle's Alexa Nguyen, sharing a name with Amazon's "Alexa" is simply a source of humor and bizarre anecdotes.

Back when Nguyen, 20, was on Tinder, she recalls a match using the gadget's specific syntax to flirt with her. "He would just say, like, 'Alexa, turn on the lights. Alexa, turn on the speakers. Alexa, will you go on a date with me?' And I was like 'No,'" she says.

Nguyen also says her boyfriend owns an Echo and decided to change its name to avoid an awkward outcome. "Alexa" is just one of the device's four programmable "wake words" (the others are "Echo," "Amazon,"

and "Computer"). So, if a user wants to turn on her lights, she can just shout, "Alexa, turn on the lights."

"His reasoning (for the name change) was, like, what if we break up and I have to keep calling it Alexa," Nguyen says. Her sister, on the other hand, left the Echo's settings untouched. "She's like, 'I like to shout commands at it like I'm talking to you or yelling at you,'" she says.

Nguyen laughs all of this off. "It's just the name of a piece of tech. I just think it's funny that it is my name," she says.

In terms of surreal encounters, Alexa Wakefield, of Seattle, has Nguyen beat.

In the early days of the Echo, Wakefield, 36, stumbled across a video posted by a woman she follows on Instagram. "She wanted to program her Echo to turn on her personal pleasure device ... I was like 'Whoa,'" she says.

The video made her think more about the Echo's naming. "It was getting a little bit stranger that people were using my name to sort of give commands to this small, electronic device," Wakefield says.

Even though she's never been on the receiving end of any commands or jokes, Wakefield remembers her first reaction to Alexa being, "How are they (Amazon) sort of allowed to use somebody's name, like a more common name, as something like a robotic command," she says, "It seems like a little bit of a violation."

Later, she adds, "It's placing your name in a subservient manner."

These days, Wakefield says she's learned to "look on the bright side." "It's sort of a feeling of pride," she says, "Like a person named Alexa is

very helpful!"

Amazon has also helped popularize a name people once struggled to get right. "If I introduced myself, people assumed my name was Melissa or Alyssa," she says, "Now when I introduce myself ... I'll say, 'My name's Alexa,' and then sometimes I'll say, 'Like the Amazon Echo.'"

But Wakefield still can't help but wonder, "Why couldn't they have just called it Echo?"

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