



Izben or I-S-B-N

Forget those extra three digits. What I want to know is: “izben,” or “I-S-B-N”?

Two decades ago, when I worked at an independent bookshop on Boylston Street, right in the heart of Boston’s Back Bay, everyone referred to the 10-digit International Standard Book Number as an “iz-ben”—one word, two syllables. (That shop was the most alliterative place I’ve ever worked because our accountant’s name was Bob. Bob balanced the books at Buddenbrooks Books on Boylston Street in Boston’s Back Bay.)

The owner called that number an izben, the buyer called it an izben; even the sales reps gleefully recited their izbens as they urged the buyer to double the order despite the owner’s scowl. The first of four cats who called the bookshop home was named ISBN, of course pronounced “iz-ben” and eventually shortened to Izzy. (Izzy was kidnapped by someone whose note, taped to the magazine section, said that a bookstore was not an appropriate place for a cat to live. The remaining three cats disagreed.) For most of my adult life, an ISBN has been an “iz-ben.”

When I came to work for YBP, however, I discovered that everyone here referred to it by the four letters of its acronym, as in “eye-ess-be-enn.”

“What’s the eye-ess-be-enn of the paperback?”

“The publisher misprinted the eye-ess-be-enn.”

“Is it just a coincidence that Gavin Menzies’s new book on early Chinese voyages includes the numbers 1492 in the eye-ess-be-enn?”

At first I thought that this was simply due to the corporate culture at YBP. The company was founded in 1971, just a year before the ISBN was formally adopted by the book industry, and it always takes a while for shortened versions of words to take hold. How long after the invention of television was it first referred to as “TV”? I just assumed the two-syllable version had never taken root at YBP. But in conversations with the customer service departments at various publishers and with sales reps over the past year, I have consistently heard “eye-ess-be-enn.” It makes no sense.

I hereby request that everyone in the world begin pronouncing ISBN as “iz-ben.” Two syllables, not four! There is something wonderfully Cartesian about the shorter pronunciation:

**I think, therefore I is, or have been.
Is/Be(e)n. It echoes Kierkegaard’s Either/Or.**

Every time you place an order with a publisher or chat with a customer and cite that number, you can ponder the dichotomy of being instead of having been; you can celebrate life instead of wallowing in morbid thoughts.

But I’m not so deluded as to think that a philosophical justification will change anyone’s mind, so for all you managers out there here’s the ultimate persuasion: it takes two seconds to say “eye-ess-be-enn,” but only one second to say

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“iz-ben.” I know, I timed it. If you utter that word twenty-five times a day, the shorter pronunciation saves you twenty-five seconds per day, 125 seconds per work week, 6,250 seconds per year (assuming two weeks vacation). If YBP has 250 employees, that’s over 1.5 million second per year, or about 4,166 hours per year.

In other words, by saying “iz-ben” instead of “eye-ess-be-enn” we can add another hundred person-weeks per year of productivity (or vacation, depending on preference) to our businesses. And achieving it doesn’t require any Six Sigma implementations or revisions to the organizational chart.

So please: from now on, say “izben.” Two syllables, not four. Somewhere out there a kidnapped cat will thank you, and we’ll all have more time to check our e-mail.

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