



Domain Names

Taking Your Company Online

The Internet is here to stay, and having an online presence is an important part of any business plan. For most companies, the first step is securing a domain name. Unfortunately, that's often more difficult than you might anticipate. Metaphor offers this overview of the history, importance, and future of domain names to assist in that process.

What's a Domain Name?

A domain name is your address on the Internet. It's also called a Uniform Resource Locator, or URL, and it serves a function similar to the mailing address used by the postal service to deliver your printed mail: it identifies the location where you can receive information or where others can access information that you make available. We don't all need the same things from our websites – they can range from a simple presentation of your offline contact information to a virtual storefront with all the bells, whistles, and security features available to online shoppers – but we all need a simple and memorable way for our customers and clients, present and potential, to find us online.

A Bit of History

"Internet" refers to the global information system that...is logically linked together by a globally unique address space based on the Internet Protocol (IP) or its subsequent extensions/follow-ons....

-from the Federal Networking Council resolution of October 24, 1995
(emphasis added)

The Internet, or World Wide Web, evolved from technological innovations linking computer networks on campuses and at (mostly governmental) research institutions. Theoretical work underlying this breakthrough was done in the early 1960s and in 1969 the first network-to-network link was established. (Visit <http://www.isoc.org/internet-history/brief.html> for an excellent historical overview of the development of the Internet, written by those who participated.)

Identifying the location of a given user on the Internet has always been a question of finding the address within this "globally unique address space." A system of numbered locations was established early on, followed shortly by a language-based "domain" system which relied on a centralized server to translate each domain name into its numeric (IP) address. By 1984 this no longer sufficed to meet the increasing volume of users, and the Domain Name System (DNS) was introduced. (See www.dns.net for details on the architecture and logic underlying the DNS.) The familiar three-letter "generic" .com and .net suffixes date from this time, as well as the 243 two-letter "country codes," such as .uk for the United Kingdom, .fr for France, and .jp for Japan. These dot-something suffixes are known as "top-level domains" or TLDs.



What Choices Do I Have About My Domain Name?

Choice #1: Top-Level Domains: .com and Beyond

Registration of a domain name requires that you first select a top-level domain. The most popular, and most crowded, TLD is .com. “Dot-com” has become synonymous with “Internet” to the extent that “dot-com” companies and even the new “dot-conomy” have become part of our everyday language. However, there are other top-level domains. As it is increasingly difficult to secure a name you want in the crowded field of .com registrations, it is well worth considering other suffixes for your online identifier.

The seven original “generic” three-letter TLDs were .com, .org, .net, .edu, .mil, .gov, and .int. Of these, only the first three are available to the public at large, with the remaining four limited to specific types of entities (four-year educational institutions in North America, the U.S. government, the U.S. military, and organizations established by international treaty, respectively). Network Solutions (NSI) had the exclusive contract to register and maintain the database of the publicly accessible three-letter TLDs, while administration of the two-letter country code TLDs was controlled by the Internet Assigned Numbers Authority (IANA) (<http://www.iana.org>).

All that changed in October 1998, with the establishment of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) (<http://www.icann.org>). According to their website, “ICANN coordinates the assignment of the following identifiers that must be globally unique for the Internet to function:

- Internet domain names
- IP address numbers
- protocol parameter and port numbers

In addition, ICANN coordinates the stable operation of the Internet's root server system.”

In very simple terms, ICANN oversees the things that go on in the background so that when you click on a banner ad or type in a URL, your browser takes you to the right location on the Internet and you see the content you anticipated seeing.

Two major developments have arisen from the shift in control to ICANN:

- 1) Registration of a domain name in any of the publicly accessible three-letter TLDs is now available through any of the ICANN-accredited registrars (<http://www.icann.org/registrars/accredited-list.html>). (Registration in the two-letter TLDs is still coordinated through the database (<http://www.iana.org/cctld/cctld-whois.htm>) maintained by IANA, which gives the contact information for registering in each country code.)
- 2) New TLDs are being introduced. The first two of these, .biz (limited to business and commercial uses) and .info (open to the public), begin registration in the summer of 2001, with five others (.aero, .coop, .museum, .name, .pro) to follow. (For the most up-to-date information on the status of the new TLDs, check for bulletins on the ICANN (<http://www.icann.org>) website.)



What's the upshot? While it seems evident that the .com domain will continue to predominate for the near future, the default status that it currently enjoys will likely be lost. For new business websites, .biz is intended to open up some of the crowded space. Certain country codes, notably .cc and .tv, have been made commercially available for uses beyond their geographic description, partly as new alternatives to .com. It remains to be seen how well this will work. As you begin the process of creating an Internet presence, do a little research and find out what TLDs are open to you, prioritize the TLDs in which you want to be found, and use those answers to help you arrive at your new domain name.

Choice #2: MyCompanyName.com or a Variant?

Regardless of the TLD in which you elect to register your domain name, assume there will be competition for the name you want. "Uniqueness" means that there can only be one owner of any given name within a top-level domain: the existence of XYZ.com may force you to consider XYZ.net or XYZ.biz if you want to use the name XYZ. (Whether you can use the name XYZ at all if someone is already using it is a trademark issue: see our primer for more on that question.)

An alternate solution is to register a variant of your company name in your chosen TLD, as in "XYZCorporation," "XYZSoftware," or "XYZonline." Again, these considerations should be discussed before beginning a naming program: what variants will you be able to get behind and promote in your on- and offline advertising and other verbal branding? Be honest. If you really want to be XYZ.com and won't be happy with any variant, then you'll have to live with the choices that imposes on the names available to you. If you will consider other TLDs and other variants of your corporate name, you broaden the parameters and increase your chances of finding a registerable domain name.

What Legal Standing Does a Domain Name Have?

Domain names in themselves do not hold a lot of weight as a way to establish a trademark, especially outside the United States. However, the existence of a similar trademark can block your use of a domain name. Our Trademark Primer (<http://www.metaphorname.com/trademark.html>) gives further information on how domain names interact with trademark law in the United States and internationally.

Global Considerations

As more and more people around the world turn to the Internet for communication, shopping, and research, there will likely be two trends: the first will be a strengthening of the global aspects of the "information highway," while the second will be the rapid growth of localized content.

In order to respond to the first trend, you'll want a name that has a maximum of consistent meanings, pronunciations, and spellings, so that no matter who in the world is trying to find you, your name is memorable and easy to locate, whether in .com, .biz, or some other TLD.

The second trend is the one which is harder to predict. Localization of Internet content covers everything from the language in which your browser opens to your default search engine and its default TLD for searching. Thus far, generic TLDs have all been English-based (.com, .net, .org, .biz, .info, .name, etc.). Non-English alphabet characters in domain names are a recent introduction. The Internet of tomorrow will demonstrate a compromise between a global English standard (which has been the unofficial case due simply to the predominance of English-speaking Internet users) and an interconnected quilt of sites using a variety of local languages which will be more or less available in translation to your local language.



How Important Is It To Register My Domain Name in International Markets?

Metaphor's advice is to judge the importance of each market for your business, both in your current operations and in your plans for expansion in the future. If sales in South America are key for you, then your online marketing department is going to need to learn which are the most popular search engines in your key markets and whether they search global TLDs with the same priority as the local country code TLDs (for example, Argentina is .ar, Brazil is .br, Paraguay is .py). Another consideration is the status of local registration of a domain name in establishing trademark registerability.

Beyond registering your domain name, there are, of course, other things to consider in establishing an international online presence. For more on verbally taking your brand international, please see Metaphor's Global Perspective white paper.

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