A Domain by any other Name: Picking the Right URL

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What's in a Name?

I don't know about you, but lately I've been getting at least one call a week from a "customer service" representative from Network Solutions. After taking the first call, I found it was just a sales pitch trying to convince me to add the .net and .org variations to the .com domains I owned. Ahh, I sighed, relieved. For a minute there, I thought Network Solutions had actually decided to offer customer service, a concept that has been totally foreign to them up until this point. But, it did get me thinking. Am I missing the boat by not securing these domain variations?

Net vs Org vs Com

How important is securing all the variations of your domain name? If you listen to the sudden crop of domain registrars that have emerged, it's vital. If you ask me, there are many other far more important marketing concerns you can spend your time and resources worrying about. It all depends on what you're protecting and your reasons.

First, let's accept the fact that .com is the de facto standard of the web. It always has been and it always will be. Of the 36 million plus registered domains, 22 million of them are dot coms. After that, .net is the next most popular, with a mere 4 2 million, .co.uk for the United Kingdom is third with 2.7 million, and .org is fourth with 2.6 million. What about the hundreds of other extensions, including all the regional variations and the new universal extensions, including .biz? Collectively, these hundreds of variations make up less than 13% of the remaining registered domains. If someone is looking for a site by intuitively typing in the business name, .com is the extension they're going to type in after. So, if you're trying to attract the traffic going for the most obvious option and you've secured the .com extension, you're covered.

Perhaps you want to protect your branding. In this case, you've got the .com extension and you want to make sure that somebody doesn't set up shop under the same name with .net or .biz tacked on the end. This should only be a concern if you've built up significant brand equity with your domain name, and even then, it's probably not as important as the domain registrars would have you believe. Let's take a brand that has tremendous equity built up, Coke. Coke does have Coke.com, Coke.net and Coke.org tied up. They use the .com for their main site, .net for their business oriented site, and the .org variation sits without a site. Has Coke registered every single variation of their domain? No..there are literally hundreds available and they've covered the main bases. If Coke, with billions of marketing dollars invested in brand equity, is okay with three domains, why would you need more?

Beware of Pirates

Now, a word of caution. If you do have a .com extension with your business name or a term that people will intuitively type in to look for, congratulations. Whatever you do, don't lose control of that domain. There are people out there that scour the net every day for expired domains that they can snap up and

then hold for ransom. For one horror story, read Domain Pirates, High Tech Lunacy on the CyberSeas.

Registering a Domain

In the good old days (well, good from Network Solution's perspective, anyway) you didn't have a choice when it came to registering a domain. You went to Net Sol, plunked down your $70 for two years, and went away secure in the knowledge that you got the best deal, because it was the only game in town. Then, competition was opened up and you could register a domain name almost anywhere. Today, domains can run less than $10 per year. Here's some domain registrars to check out: www.bulkregister.com ($12 per year), www.godaddy.com ($8.95 a year) and www.namecow.net ($12 per year). We've used Bulk Register for over 2 years now and haven't had any problems, which is more than I can say for Network Solutions.

One tip when registering a domain name. Make sure the domain owner is either the administrative or technical contact, as well as the billing contact. It's the administrative and technical contacts that have the authority to change contact information and change domain name servers, necessary when switching to a new hosting company. If a third party is registering the domain for you, insist that you're one of these two contacts. Also, make sure you use a current e-mail address which is not an alias and which you're reasonably sure you'll stick with in the future. Network Solutions uses this e-mail address as a way of verifying that you're really who you say you are.

How to pick a domain name

What do you look for in a domain name? Ideally, it should be as intuitive as possible..something customers would type in to look for. Now, with 22 million .com's already registered, the chance of finding a really good name is minimal, but I'm always surprised at the quality of names that are still available when you do a little research and apply a little creativity. In the past year, we've registered domains like specialkidsonline.com, spiderspotter.com and nettrafficjam.com.

Consider carefully before you try cashing in on the popularity of a well known domain by changing a letter, or adding a dash or a number to the front. What are the chances that someone will try looking for Yahoo by going to "Yahhoo.com", or Amazon by going to "1ama-zon.com"? Unless your choice is a common misspelling or a logical alternative, you probably would be better off looking for an original name.

If you're trying to find a domain that contains your company name and your first choice is gone, make sure you keep your customer in mind when looking for an alternative. What are they most likely to type in? What will be the easiest for them to remember? Domains that contain words in logical combinations are much easier to remember than corporate acronyms. Obscurity is the last thing you want in a domain name.

Finally, if different logical variations of your domain are available for the dot com extension, reserve them all. For example, we had a recent incident where a potential customer who ran a chain of motor inns came to us for a web design quote. For the purpose of my example, let's call them the Radiant Inn Group. They had reserved the domain radiantinn.com (domain names are fictitious) but hadn't bothered

to reserve radiantinns.com or radiantinngroup.com, even though both were available. For the sake of $24 we reserved them for them so they could avoid potential headaches down the road, either through confusion with another hotel group elsewhere, or a domain pirate.

Longer vs. Shorter Domain Names

In the beginning, domain names were restricted to 20 characters, plus the extension. In late 1999, longer domains were made available, with up to 63 characters for you to stake your online claim. So, what's more effective?
For ease of remembering and input, the shorter the domain, the better. It also gives your company a more professional appearance. Long rambling domains are usually the mark of an amateur. That said, it makes sense to use longer domains to tie up possible variations of your name. And there is one more factor at play here. For search engine optimization purposes, long domain names that include your keywords can give you a slight boost on the engines. As search engines have become more sophisticated, keyword stuffed domain names have become less important for positioning, but they still can help.

When it comes to the long vs. short debate, my theory is to hedge your bets by trying both. Find a shorter, snappy domain for your main corporate site, and consider using the long, keyword rich domain for a marketing site to draw more traffic to your main site. Ideally, try to promote unique content on both.

Stay Tuned Next Time for Round Two of the Domain Game

This week, we focused on reserving a domain from scratch. In the next NetProfit, I'll be giving you some tips if you're planning on shopping for an existing domain name.

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