



What's your domain?

A domain name is your space on the web where you get to tell everyone about you and your company. But with unscrupulous sorts waiting to pounce on the unsuspecting, it needs protecting every bit as carefully as your good name, warns Simon Easterman

A website offers you unprecedented possibilities for communication and commercial interaction at a comparatively low price. For as little as a few pounds you can register a domain name – a unique internet address that will bring people to your site when they type it into their browser or click a link to it.

But the relatively low price belies the worth of your domain name, especially once a number of correspondents and customers have started to use it to reach you. And on the internet, as in any other under-policed land of opportunity, there are plenty of corrupt people ready to take advantage of you if you don't know how to look after yourself.

Fortunately, as long as you are prepared to take responsibility for your domain name, you should be able to ensure that when your fellow web users want you, they get you.

Cover yourself

Obviously you need to find a name no one else is using. To do this, use a Whois search, which you'll find on any registry's or ISP's site, (see *Registries*, right) though some may not cover all the TLDs (top-level domains).

Because of the number of different TLDs it may well be necessary to register more than one domain name to avoid awkward clashes. You don't want to find that while you are happily displaying your wares on Yourname.co.uk, someone else is disseminating quite different information on Yourname.com. It may be porn, it may be a competitor, but either way you don't want it confronting half your potential customers when they try to log on to your site.

Registries

- .uk **Nominet**
- .com **VeriSign**
- .net **VeriSign**
- .biz **NeuLevel**
- .org **Registry**
- .info **Afilias**

At least register the .com and .co.uk versions, as these are the ones most users will try out when looking for your site.

A far more weighty choice is who to register with. You register with the registries (in the case of country-based TLDs such as .uk, .fr), with accredited registrars or ISPs. While the first two are established, trustworthy bodies,

they may not provide the extent of services you require.

If you prefer to have the paperwork handled for you and need a package that includes hosting and upkeep, an ISP will probably suit you better.

However, ISPs come and go and their activities are largely unregulated so, once you find an ISP that offers a package that suits you, you should check its dependability. You are going to trust it to arrange the internet face of your business, so you need to be sure it isn't a two-bit outfit operating out of somebody's back bedroom.

Ken Corrie from Internetters, a successful domain name registrar, advises a thorough investigation of your prospective ISP. Find out from Companies House whether it is a limited company or plc, how long the firm has been in business and test the authenticity of its address and phone number. The latter will be vital if anything goes wrong.

Domain name nightmares

- **Your ISP has registered the domain name in its name instead of yours.**
- **You have let your email account lapse or your ISP has registered it incorrectly.**
- **You or your ISP forget to re-register your domain name and it is registered by someone else and used to distribute porn or pay-per-click services to your customers.**
- **Your ISP goes into liquidation and your site is lost.**
- **Your ISP hits you with hidden charges for upkeep or transferring to another host.**
- **Your ISP demands a long grace period for transfer arrangements.**

Courtesy of Internetters.co.uk



You should also be wary of any accreditation the company lays claim to, bearing in mind that since Which? ended its Web Trader scheme, Icann's accreditation is alone in carrying any real value.

Read the small print

Since no one else will check up on your ISP for you, it's important to get hold of its terms and conditions – assuming you can find some. If it hasn't got any, you are right to wonder why not.

Look out for hidden charges for site upkeep or transferring to another ISP. Beware, too, of extra-long grace periods designed to delay a transfer. The discussion forums on the Icann website have innumerable threads that begin with a plea like, "Help! Has anyone, anywhere, ever managed to transfer their domain name from [unscrupulousISP].com?" You don't want to get caught.

Even once you're happy with your chosen ISP, you should keep an eye on things to ensure it processes your registration correctly. If the ISP sends mistaken information to the registry you could find yourself having problems later on.

Do a Whois search on your site and check the details that come up. Some ISPs will put themselves down as the registrant, primarily to protect their

Useful websites

- www.icann.com
- www.nominet.net
- www.internic.net
- www.internetters.co.uk

interests. This is an understandable precaution, but you shouldn't let them get away with it. It's your domain name and you are entering into a contract with the registry in question; the ISP is just an agent.

You should also ensure that the administrative email address is correct. There have been several domain name hijackings that involved using false documentation (most notably the theft of Sex.com in 1995, a domain name that's still being fought over in the US courts today). Because of this, registries will now only accept communications from you if they come through the registered email address.

Don't get replaced

Similarly, when your registration period is coming to an end, you'll be warned via this email address. Re-registration is one of the most important things to be aware of in taking care of your domain name, so keep up your email address, monitor its inbox and inform the registry, registrar and ISP (all the links in the chain to your domain name) if you change it.

The perils of neglecting to re-register your domain name are serious and well documented. Nominet research shows 50 percent of UK businesses are not even aware that domain names are registered for finite periods. Its director, Lesley

Glossary

- **Hosting** An ISP maintains your website on its own server.
- **Registrar** An accredited agent acting directly for the registry.
- **Registry** An organisation that maintains a TLD registry.
- **TLD** Top level domain, such as .com, .uk and .net.
- **Whois search** Brings up the name, address and details of a domain name's registrant.

Cowley, says this is reflected in the number of high-profile companies losing access to their sites due to non-renewal.

Depending on the TLD you have chosen, the consequences of letting your domain name lapse can be disastrous. If you have registered a .uk name with Nominet it will be 'detagged', meaning taken temporarily off the net, but held for you on the assumption that you'll renew it.

But global TLDs are not as caring. The moment your registration period ends, anyone can grab it and start showing all manner of material to your visitors.

Memory lapse

Internetters' Ken Corrie tells of a large accountancy company that let its registration run out over Christmas (a common lapse time).

Its domain name was snapped up and began to lead its customers and clients at first to a hardcore porn site and later to a list of pay-per-click links for financial services.

There is no shortage of people looking to exploit the web presence that you have built up. Don't give them the chance. ■

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