

# Harness the power of your domain

**Elisa Cooper** advises brand owners to maximise the potential of a domain name portfolio in an economic downturn

**W**e have entered a new economic era, where titans of industry plead for bailout funds from the government, news of corporate downsizing is commonplace and the internet is becoming an increasingly dangerous place to navigate with the proliferation of fraud and malware.

Corporations should take this opportunity to re-evaluate their approach to domain name management. Specifically, corporations should focus on ways to secure and protect valuable domains. At the same time, companies should also be looking for ways to maximise portfolio value by selling unused generic registrations and improving website traffic by pointing defensive registrations to live sites. Finally, companies should work to implement policies and procedures to ensure that new registrations support defined corporate objectives, including the need for cost containment.

## Secure and protect valuable domains

Undoubtedly, some domains are more valuable than others. Clearly, domains that point to corporate websites, highly trafficked promotional sites, and ecommerce storefronts are more valuable than those registered in an effort to protect against cybersquatting or typo squatting.

For highly valued domains, it is recommended that special care be taken. Specifically, these domains should be registered for maximum allowable terms. For generic top level domains (gTLDs) like .com, and .net this is 10 years. These domains should also be locked at the registry level to protect against unauthorised domain transfers (hijacking). Of course, domains that are highly valued should be set to automatically renew each year, and most domain registration portals provide this functionality.

While phishing attacks targeted at retail registrars are nothing new, are malware attacks geared towards the managers of corporate domain portfolios the next likely target? After all, wouldn't the fastest, most effective way to redirect website traffic be to update name servers, and/or domain name system (DNS) settings for a popular site?

One likely scenario might be an instance where malware is downloaded from a seemingly harmless site (a site with domain rules and requirements for instance), and a keystroke logger is used to track logins and passwords for corporate domain name management portals. With this credential information, fraudsters could unlock and hijack domains, update name servers, or even change DNS settings – all of which could potentially result in the downtime of a site, or even the proliferation of more malware to unsuspecting website visitors.

One approach for thwarting these types of attacks is to restrict domain portal access by IP address. By doing so, only portal requests originating from a specified network would be allowed to login, update and modify domains.

Making domains uneditable from within the portal, and requiring special high-security protocols for any change, is another method for ensuring that valuable domains cannot be updated or modified by fraudsters.

Using a company-controlled email alias such as "admin@yourcompany.com" for the administrative contact on Whois records is critical. This ensures that someone is always available to review and respond to important registrar communication. Also, ensuring accuracy of Whois data is critical, as ICANN mandates that the provision

## One-minute read



In a distressed economic climate, companies must explore all options for protecting and building upon key sources of revenue, including domain names.

By taking steps to ensure that active domains are sufficiently protected, that unused domains are identified and sold as a means of generating revenue and that defensive registrations are utilised to direct web traffic to live sites, corporations can maximise the value of their domain portfolios. Most importantly, companies should develop and implement clear domain policies and choose online brand strategies that make the most sense for their particular business models. As ICANN considers opening TLD registration to the general public, having strong brand protection policies in place is particularly crucial.

## Maximising portfolio values

Many corporate portfolios contain unused generic domains that were purchased years ago with the intent of use. In many instances, corporations are not even aware of the value associated with these premium domains. Any unused domain containing one or two generic words should be appraised and potentially sold if there is no plan for future use.

In 2008, the top 10 highest priced domains accounted for more than \$18.5 million dollars in sales on the secondary market.

1.	Fund.com	\$9,999,950	3/11/08
2.	DataRecovery.com	\$1,659,000	3/4/08
3.	Kredit.de	\$1,169,175	11/25/08
4.	Cruises.co.uk	\$1,099,798	2/5/08
5.	Invest.com	\$1,015,000	9/30/08
6.	SkiResorts.com	\$850,000	4/8/08
7.	Printer.com	\$800,000	8/26/08
8.	iReport.com	\$750,000	1/29/08
9.	Casino.de	\$625,060	3/18/08
10.	Jobs.ca	\$600,000	5/6/08

Source: Domain Name Journal

With the anticipated release of new TLDs in 2010, the value of these domains may potentially decrease over time - so now may be the time to sell.

of false or incorrect Whois information can be grounds for cancellation of the registration.

Because the sophistication of malware, as well as social engineering attacks, continues to grow, domain portfolio managers should work with corporate-only domain registrars to ensure that the tightest security measures are in place to protect online presences.

### Improve web traffic

The bulk of corporate domain portfolios largely consist of defensive registrations which often include common misspellings, product names and abbreviations. Due to the continued rise in direct navigation to locate web content, directing traffic from these existing registrations to live sites is an easy way to increase the number of website visitors.

Why let these valuable assets go unused?

Determine where you want domain names to point. For example, if an internet user types in one of your domain names, where do you want that user to go? Should it resolve to a main corporate site, an eCommerce site or an HR site? Consider matching foreign-language domain names (IDNs) to language-specific websites, or product domain names to specific URLs.

Pointings can be updated through the use of DNS or a web forwarding solution.

### Implement defined domain policies

The world of domains continues to change at an alarming pace. In the last several years, there has been a proliferation of new country code TLD internationalised domain names (ccTLD IDNs), many new second-level, and third-level ccTLD offerings, nine new sponsored TLDs, not to mention ICANN's new initiative to open the floodgates for a potentially unlimited number of new TLDs.

Although domain names are often managed in a manner similar to trade marks, the complexities associated with domain names is far more intricate. Unlike trade marks, domain name restrictions and requirements change rapidly, often making it difficult to stay abreast.

Understanding your company's corporate online objectives is the first step in creating a comprehensive domain portfolio. Direction for how to build, maintain and protect a domain portfolio may come from marketing, sales, or even the board of directors, depending on the type of business and the company's requirements for online exposure or protection.

For example, online retailers often feel compelled to register their key brands worldwide, regardless of where they conduct business, because their domain names are so integral to their ongoing operations. Conversely, a brick and mortar retailer may decide that it is only important to register their brands as domains in countries where they currently conduct business. In essence, there are two different domain registration strategies: brand protection and brand promotion.

For companies concerned about brand abuse and trade mark dilution, the brand protection strategy most likely makes the most sense. For companies concerned with worldwide brand promotion, portraying a sense of cultural understanding, and increasing internet-generated revenue, the brand promotion strategy may be best. Companies often employ a combination of these two strategies.

### Strategise

When devising a strategy, also take into consideration new names that your company may want to use in the future, different geographical regions in which you are doing business, or geographical regions where you may consider doing business in the future. Remember of course that many countries have restrictions such as local presence requirements, which must be satisfied in order to register in those regions.

As changes to ccTLDs can happen quickly and often without warning, it is especially important to create enterprise-wide policies and procedures regarding who can register domains, and how they will be registered. In particular, it is important to determine a preferred administrative contact. This administrative contact, which appears on the domain ownership record (also known as the Whois record), is generally the recipient of renewal and expiration notices. Consequently, problems can arise if an individual's information is used when that employee leaves the company and their email accounts are deactivated. Also, unauthorised transfers can occur if emails are not monitored. Using a company-controlled email alias such as "admin@yourcompany.com", can alleviate these problems by ensuring that someone is always available to review and respond to important registrar communication.

In addition to setting up role-based administrative contacts, it is necessary to set standards for how the registrant, technical and billing data should appear in Whois records. It is critical that this information is accurate per ICANN, the policy coordinating body for all gTLD registrations.

It is also important to determine which individuals in the company should be permitted to approve orders for new domain names, renewals and modifications. If more than one

person is granted the ability to make changes, it is still advised that a central point of contact review and approve all orders. This central point of contact can either be in-house or outside intellectual property counsel.

Keeping a list of brands to be registered regardless of geographic location can also decrease the likelihood that a name will be lost to a cybersquatter. This is especially true given that many new ccTLD offerings are announced and made available with very little notice.

Ensuring that defined policies related to what should be registered, which extensions should be covered, and who should have the final approval will help to reduce the number of superfluous registrations. Without defined policies in place, portfolio managers will err on the side of caution, registering any newly liberated ccTLD, even if it does not support online goals or objectives. Implementing a workflow approval process will also ensure that management is aware of domain expenditures, which will be important as budgets are tightened.

Simply put, without a defined set of guidelines, a clear corporate domain strategy cannot exist.

### Meet the challenge

Clearly more emphasis is being placed on the management of domains as they are now viewed as important intellectual property.

As the industry continues to grow with the anticipated launch of new TLDs in 2010, the management of large portfolios will become even more complex. Protecting domains from cybersquatters and phishers will continue to be a concern for corporations.

For companies with a global presence, managing an international domain name portfolio has become an increasingly complex challenge. With 249 ever-changing ccTLDs, domain administrators are forced to make important daily decisions about where, when and how to register domain names.

Whatever the future may bring for domains, of one thing we can be certain – global markets are not likely to rebound anytime soon. In the coming years, domain management will probably become a delicate balancing act between cost containment and risk mitigation. Protecting core domains, maximising portfolio value where possible and implementing domain management process and procedure will be a must in this new era.



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