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Choosing a Domain Name

Abstract: In the online world the first contact the potential customer has with the organisation is through its domain name. Be it as an address for email or web site, the domain name provides the user with a first impression of the organisation. Given that we all know what our parents told us about first impressions, why do businesses give so little thought to the registration of their domain name? This paper offers advice to businesses on the selection and use of the right domain name.

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Let me set the tone of this paper right at the start. This paper is written by a marketer, not a technician. The perspective is, therefore, that of a marketer. And that is as it should be. Choosing the organisation's domain name is not an aspect of the IT department's job description. A domain name is used in the promotion of the organisation. It can be a significant determinant in how potential customers perceive the organisation. Selection of the domain name is, therefore, a function of the marketing department. Some definitions for the rest of this paper then. When I refer to the IT or ITC department, technicians, programmers or developers I mean anyone who has anything to do with an organisation's web presence who is not a marketer. When I refer to marketers I mean, well, marketers.

So what does the marketer need to consider when selecting the right domain name? There are a number of the aspects to be addressed:

- What is a domain name and how is it constructed?
- Top Level Domains
- Choosing an effective name (or names)
- Domain names as email addresses

Before taking a look at each in turn, another rationale. This paper focuses on the choosing of a domain name for the Internet presence of an existing, offline, business. Choosing a name for a purely online business requires a whole host of other, disparate considerations, not least that the domain name will actually be the name of the business – lastminute.com, for example.

What is a domain name and how is it constructed?

Your domain name is your address on the Internet. Technically; each domain (web site) is allocated an Internet Protocol (IP) address that is identified by a series of numbers. In turn each set of numbers is assigned to a domain name. As no two sets of numbers are the same, no two domain names can be the same. I said this paper has a marketing inclination, so that is all you need to know about the technical aspects of domain names.

When a name is registered it takes the suffix of the registered naming authority (more of this later). There are a number to choose from – and I'll discuss them shortly – but to help me illustrate how domain names are constructed I am ►



going to use the best known suffix - .com (that is full stop, or 'dot' com). In a somewhat narcissistic manner I'm going to use my name, Alan, as the name in my example.^[1]

Combining the name with the suffix creates the primary domain name:

i.e. alan.com

When indicating their use as the URL (Uniform Resource Locator) of a world wide web site, it has become accepted protocol to use the prefix 'www' on the primary domain name:

i.e. www.alan.com

As the .com suffix now has two distinct 'words' before it, technically, this is now a second level domain name. Note that each 'word' is separated by a full stop; counting the dots before the suffix will determine the level of domain.

Any subsequent 'words' placed in front of the primary name, but divided by a full stop, make the URL a third/fourth^[2] level domain name.

i.e. www.sunderland.alan.com

The use of third level domains is not unusual, but nor is it common practice. Its current use is normally instigated by the IT department, using the third level as an extension to the domain to provide extra space for web site content. Think of it as an extra directory in which to keep files on a PC. When used in this way it is common practice to omit the 'www'. This means that when the web page is live in a browser window the address will read [something like] <http://sunderland.alan.com>. From a marketing perspective this is not good practice. It creates a confusing state of affairs for

web surfers who have become accustomed to seeing a 'www' and not having to type in the <http://>.^[3] To be fair to the IT people, third level sites are usually accessed only as links from the primary domain site, therefore the surfer will not be required to actually type the URL into the browser. When third level domains are generated at the behest of the marketing department the www will be retained. Marketers want web sites to be revisited. For that to happen the web site address should be as clear as possible (a good general rule for domain names, more of which later).

NB. Only the registered owner of the primary name can add second and any subsequent level names. Registrants of names based on such domains as .uk.com and .eu.com, take note.

Rather than extending the domain name with prefixes, the usual practice for naming pages beyond the domain's index page^[4] is to extend the name with directory and file names. A perfect example of this, not least because it is a system that all PC users will be aware of, is Microsoft's web site. Microsoft.com not only uses directories and files to extend the site, but names them with aforethought, so helping surfers to navigate the site and identify pages. For example, the Microsoft web site pages with information about their Windows system can be found on:

www.microsoft.com/windows

Part of the Windows package is Excel, so the page with details of that tool can be found on:

www.microsoft.com/windows/excel

Clear, simple and logical, but sadly, somewhat rare. It is another subject, but why do programmers give web page files names that resemble



passwords? (the use of a 'squiggle' [or tilde to give it its correct name] in a URL should be outlawed). But I digress, lets get back to choosing the domain name before we discuss its use on a web site.

Top Level Domains

So what other Top Level Domains, with their associate suffixes (or extensions as the Americans call them), are available for the business to use online? This paper is for a UK publication, so I will cover the options for a UK business.

Realistically, the choice will depend on where the company plies its trade, and how it wants to be identified in that market. A UK company trading solely, or primarily, in the UK will want a .co.uk suffix. A UK company trading elsewhere in the world, but wanting to be identified as a UK company will want a .co.uk suffix. A UK company trading around the world and wanting to be perceived as a global player should get a .com suffix. Of course if the UK company has a home market and a global market there is nothing to stop it registering both a .co.uk and a .com and using them accordingly. This may mean having two web sites, one under the .co.uk domain and one under the .com. Essentially these two web sites are the same, but each is tailored for its audience. The content of the .co.uk is for a UK audience, the other putting a more global perspective on the organisation^[5]. In a similar manner, when working with international clients, staff should pack their business cards with the email address @ the .com domain. On domestic trips the business cards should feature an email address with the .co.uk suffix.^[6]

As experienced web surfers will be aware, other suffixes are available from around the globe. There are over 250 countries with a country spe-

cific domain (for example .de for Germany .jp for Japan .fr for France and .gr for Greece). Many of these place restrictions on who can register their domains. Most require an organisation to have a presence in the country. Others do not allow generic words or place names to be registered, only company names.

More than 80 countries are "unrestricted" meaning anyone anywhere can register any names Some of these have been heavily promoted, for example .tv (Tuvalu) and .cc (the Cocos Islands). Although these are still considered as 'novelties' in the majority of business fields there are exceptions. TV broadcaster Channel Five, for example, when it re-branded itself as simply 'five' adopted the domain name five.tv – which makes sense.

New top-level domain extensions from the US 'Internic' include .info and .biz. Both are unrestricted, but offer little for the UK business. The .biz suffix is an alternative (read 'poor substitute') for .com. Dot info does have its uses – a web site that is more information biased than sales based for example.^[7]

Many other third level names are being discussed by different countries, but perhaps none so novel as New Zealand's proposed .geek.nz.

One more task before the actual name is considered; what can the name actually be made up of? This is relatively simple. Any of the 26 letters of the Latin alphabet. Any of the numbers 0 to 9. And a dash (-).^[8] The domain name has a minimum of three characters and can be up to 65 long. Although two letter domains do exist, they are only allocated to organisations who can prove that they are universally recognised by a two character name. Communications giant O2 for example, use O2.co.uk. Realistically, for a small business, forget two character domains. ➤



Choosing an effective name (or names)

Now we can get down to the important bit, the actual name.

For those new to domain names it should be added here that all [useful] generic words have long since been registered, so a toy company wanting to register www.toys.co.uk or www.toys.com is too late.^[9] Unless of course they want to buy the registration from its existing owner. Even if they were willing to sell the name, it would probably be beyond the budget of all but the largest company.

So let us assume that a suitable generic word is not an option, how does the organisation choose a suitable domain name.

I have always been a proponent of naming a business with a combination of its location or owner and what it does. If this is the case, then the best domain name option is to simply take the company name, and add the suitable suffix. So if our business makes toys in York and is called York Toys Ltd, we simply combine the two words and add a suffix - yorktoys.co.uk. Similarly, Alan's Toys Ltd would use alanstoys.co.uk.

Another slight diversion to the itinerary is necessary here. Domain names are not only used in internet browser windows, they appear offline as well. They appear on stationery, on business cards, on trucks and vans and on adverts - in all media. For these we must consider the aesthetics of the name, how it will look on all of the aforementioned. So here is something that if you take only one thing from this paper, this is it.

When used to type a URL into a web browser, domain names are NOT case sensitive. Both offline and online, they can be presented in lower, upper or sentence case.

When used offline, therefore, yorktoys.co.uk is presented as YorkToys.co.uk. In this particular

case this is not a major issue, but with other names it can have great significance. Let me use an example from my own experience. A company that specialised in organising and hosting exhibitions of child related products was known as Children's Exhibitions Ltd.^[10] So they registered their business name as a domain name. Stationery bearing the name was already ordered when I pointed out how their name would look 'in print'.

www.childrensexhibitions.co.uk

Because of the way we identify prevailing words within a series of letters, at first glance the phrase "children sex" is prominent, or even "children's sex exhibitions". Not what the business was hoping to promote.

The solution was relatively simple. In print the name was presented as:

www.ChildrensExhibitions.co.uk

An alternative would be to use a dash between the two words:

www.Childrens-Exhibitions.co.uk

Even without the capitalisation of the words this would still read, www.childrens-exhibitions.co.uk.

On the subject of using a dash between distinct words. In the US dashes are rarely used, 'all one word' being the norm. In the UK we are more accepting of the dash. Which is best? As a rule, I favour the 'all one word' approach, but the example above proves that there must always be room for exceptions to that rule.

There are occasions when the full name and trade of the business are simply too long to be



acceptable as a domain name (although they can, technically, be up to 65 characters, realistically anything over twenty characters is questionable). A fabrication welding company from Sunderland, for example, should think seriously before registering:

www.sunderlandfabricationwelding.co.uk

So what to do? One option would be to register a name that the company is 'known by'. Companies with long names are frequently given shorter, more convenient, names. Such names can be official or colloquial. Throughout the West Midlands Jaguar was known as 'the Jag'. Growing up in Grimsby I was in my teens before I discovered that BUT actually stood for British United Trawlers. As I have invented Sunderland Fabrication Welding Ltd, and so cannot really give them a local alias, I will suggest the obvious route – in this case SFW.co.uk. Sadly for the business that is new the Internet, few, if any, three or four character domain names are still available (SFW.co.uk has been registered by SF Williams Ltd). What other possibilities exist for my made up company? There isn't much scope though possibilities might include;

SunderlandFW.co.uk or Sunderland-FW.co.uk

Any of the following are possibilities, but should be well down the 'suitable candidates' list:

SunderlandFabWeld.co.uk
Sunderland-Fab-Weld.co.uk
SundFabWeld.co.uk
Sund-Fab-Weld.co.uk
SundFabricationWelding.co.uk

Sund-Fabrication-Welding.co.uk
SunFabricationWelding.co.uk
Sun-Fabrication-Welding.co.uk

These just do not look right. I wish I could be more objective here and offer a number of 'check-points' to follow, but it's a subjective call. They are just not right. Like marketing, choosing a domain name is part art, part science – this is the art aspect.

The best option for my scenario? Try for a generic phrase, for example:

FabricationWelding.co.uk
Fabrication-Welding.co.uk
Sunderland-Welding.co.uk

Only the latter of these is still available. Generally speaking, all generic words and useful combinations thereof have already been registered, but there are some combinations still out there, particularly in the more traditional trades that have been [relatively] late in joining the information superhighway.

Given that both combinations of 'Fabrication Welding' have gone, I might have to resort to the www.sunderlandfabricationwelding.co.uk that I dismissed so lightly earlier in this piece!

Domain Names as part of email addresses

Before I suggest what you can do, I'll start with something you must not do. Never, ever, use as a business email address:

- The address given to you by your Internet Service Provider (ISP)
- An address of one of the many free services available.





Both sunderland.welding@serviceproviders.emailservice.com and sunderland_welding@yahoo.co.uk do not present the organisation in a professional light (remember my earlier comment about first impressions?).^[11]

For Sunderland Fabrication Welding Ltd their web presence is unlikely to be a decisive element in attracting new contracts (the subject of a different paper I'm afraid) therefore:

www.SunderlandFabricationWelding.co.uk

is probably quite acceptable for the web site URL. Domain names are, however, also used as part of an email address, and twenty-nine character domains do not make snappy email addresses. This would be even more pertinent if I worked at the company. I would need an extra long business card to fit on it all 16 characters of my full name before the @ of @sunderlandfabricationwelding.co.uk. Although the name is [relatively] easy to remember, the more characters there are to type, the more the chance of a mistake being made. There is a solution. The answer lies in registering one domain name for your web site, and another for your email address.

If sunderlandfabricationwelding.co.uk is too long for an email address, then the obvious route to follow is to use an acronym, or a shortened version of the company name. In the case of my fictitious welding company in Sunderland, sales@SFW.co.uk is easy to remember. Alas, as we have already discovered this is not an option as the name has already been registered. So what else can be done?

The organisation should consider its products, the market in which it trades and the culture of

how the company does business and make a decision on how its email address might be disseminated. If the address is always given in a printed format (business card, brochure) then it is likely that the user will simply 'copy-type' it onto their computer (until they become familiar with it). This being the case, then the use of a different suffix could be considered, for example, SFW.info or SFW.biz. Again our fictional welders are out of luck – these have both been registered!

So, as with the web site URL, Sunderland Fabrication Welding Ltd might have to resort back to:

@sunderlandfabricationwelding.co.uk

as their email address and use only first names (alan@), generic titles (sales@) or employ only people with short names!

If you do decide to go for using more than one domain name make sure that your ISP sets up both names so that when each name is typed into a browser the surfer arrives at your web site, and that emails addressed to both names reach the same PC.^[12]

And finally. Like domain names, email addresses are not case sensitive. People's names, being proper nouns, should always be spelt with capital letters. And yet I have not used any capitals in the [fictitious] email addresses above. The reason is simple; I know email addresses are not case sensitive. The majority of people, however, do not. To introduce capital letters in the address may confuse the less well informed. Having read this article, you are now one of the better informed.

Postscript

One of my motivations behind writing this article is that I have never read a similar piece, either in



a journal, web site or book. Indeed, I have a book entitled "e-marketing" (I'll not embarrass the authors by naming them) which offers the following advice with regard to domain name registration: "Picking the right domain name can make a huge difference when trying to entice users to the site and builds consistency in the firm's marketing communications". Sadly, it then moves on to another subject without actually telling the reader how to pick the "right domain name".

Even this is an improvement on other books. I have two with the titles; "*e-Marketing Excellence*" and "*World Wide Web Marketing*", which do not even feature 'domain names' in their indexes!

I have also looked at numerous web sites that offer advice on choosing a web site and submit these conclusions:

- Many sites offer their author's opinions on selection – which is OK, that is what I have done. Sadly, not all the authors of those sites have my experience on the subject.
- On technical issues, some sites are just wrong.
- US sites offer advice for US companies. They do mention anything other than US extensions, and they include local bias; for example they say to never use a dash (-) in a domain name, 'over here' it is acceptable.
- Beware of the information presented by commercial sites looking to register your domain name for you – the advice they offer is often biased towards the products that they offer (and away from those they do not offer).

That said, I am not the sole source of advice on the subject. Here are a couple of web sites that do offer further information that you might find useful.

www.igoldrush.com – The definitive domain name web site. More information than you can shake a stick at, but be prepared to be there for a few hours if you want to read all the material included on this extensive site.

www.internic.net – The InterNIC is a registered service mark of the U.S. Department of Commerce and provides all you need to know about the US extensions. There is also a 'whois' section where you can check the details of who owns what for US extensions. NB. No similar facility is available for UK names as the information is covered by the Data Protection Act.

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References

[1] Alan.com was actually registered back in 1995 by a radio DJ in New York.

[2] Technically, you can have as many 'words' prior to the domain. In practice three or four is really the limit.

[3] In the early days of the world wide web surfers actually had to type in the http://, modern browsers default to this when only www is typed in before the domain name.

[4] The first page of a web site is the index page, so called because the actual URL of the first page is www.whatevername.com/index.htm. It also known as the front or homepage.

[5] Writing content for the web requires skills few possess. It is rare for a business to employ a skilled web writer. It shows. It is the subject of another paper I must get round to writing. ➤



[6] Do I need to add — Don't get them mixed up.

[7] As my mum thinks I should one day be famous, I have registered Charlesworth.info.

[8] Trials using the characters of other languages including Chinese, Japanese and Korean are ongoing.

[9] Owned by Toys"R"Us and KB Toys respectively.

[10] They have since ceased trading.

[11] The use of the underscore is, technically, valid in an email address. In fact, the receiving

server can be set up to accept almost anything prior to the @ sign. I mention this only in passing – stick to A to Z and full stops to avoid confusion.

[12] This is not difficult to do and should not cost much money (if any). If your current ISP doesn't know what you are asking for, find a new ISP.

Biography

Alan Charlesworth is a Senior Lecturer in Marketing and e-Commerce at the University of Sunderland. His main field of research and consulting activity is the practical marketing applications of e-technology. He has been advising businesses of all sizes on domain name registration since 1997.



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