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TECH TIP:
Choosing the Perfect Domain Name

In planning your online presence, the domain name choice is one of the most important decisions you will make, particularly if you will rely on non-internet promotion to drive traffic to your site. If you expect all of your visitors to come to your site by simply clicking a hyperlink from a search engine or from other web sites, your domain name can be about anything; but, if you expect any portion of your audience to manually type the domain name into their browser's address bar, you'd better choose that domain name carefully.

In essence, your domain name becomes the "brand name" of your web site. Millions of dollars and millions of hours have been devoted to research on effective branding. Most of the results of that research are directly applicable to the choice of internet domain names. Some of the results are even more important for domain names than for consumer product brand names.

A "good" or effective domain name will meet most or all of the following criteria:

A Good Domain Name is Easy to Spell and Pronounce

Avoid the use of words that are either inherently difficult to spell, or that may be spelled in more than one way. You should choose your domain name so that you can speak the name to someone who can then easily type the name into your browser, without your having to spell it out for them.

Some "good" examples: yahoo.com; cnn.com; infoseek.com; excite.com. Even the more unusual of the above examples would be easily typed and typed correctly from the spoken word.

Some "bad" examples: eidos.com; submit-me.net; hisel.com; tanztreff.com; schweizr.com. I don't know how to pronounce most of these, and I certainly wouldn't know how to spell them if I heard them pronounced. Hyphenated domain names can be a problem, too. The natural tendency would be to pronounce the name as if it were not hyphenated, so I'd be likely to type submit-me.net as submitme.net unless you made the hyphen explicit. Even if you made it a point to say "submit hyphen me dot net," you could probably expect at least one person to type it in as "submithyphenme.net."

I have to pick on myself in this category, too. We own several domain names -- some good and some bad. The name of our company is Tintagel Net Solutions Group, Inc., and we've always used the domain, tintagel.net. Not only do we have to spell it every single time we give it to someone, but we usually end up spelling it two or three times. We also own perlarchive.com, which for those folks familiar with the Perl programming language isn't a problem. The problem is that "perl" sounds like "pearl" for those less familiar with the language. We solved (or at least eased) those potential problems by registering tnsgroup.com and pearlarchive.com, too.

A Good Domain Name is Easy to Remember

You want people to visit your web site more than once, don't you. You've got to come up with a distinctive name that's easy to recall. Many of the other suggestions in this article contribute to making a memorable domain name. Using hyphens and irrelevant number combinations in your domain name don't help.

A Good Domain Name Invokes Positive Associations

"Cover Girl" makeup, "Irish Spring" soap, "Bounty" paper towels. What these and other brand names have in common is that they invoke in the consumer's mind positive associations, even when those associations have no direct connection with the product to which they're attached. Research has shown that individuals process information more completely, remember the information better, and form more positive attitudes when the information is associated with positive, happy images.

Good examples of positive domain names: yahoo.com, islandofgifts.com, alohaprints.com, webolicious.com.

A Good Domain Name Reinforces the Site Concept

Hopefully, the visitor will be able to draw some connection between the name of your site and the content that appears on that site. Consistency between content and name can aid in memory and encourage repeat visits. A domain name that is completely contrary to content can cause dissonance in the visitor's cognitive processes, and is likely to result in more negative attitudes being formed, unless that contrariness is humorous or ironic in some way.

Good examples: yourdomainhost.com; 3dfxgames.com, perlarchive.com, etoys.com, blackfilm.com, downloads.com, shareware.com.

The Shorter the Better

Everything else being equal, I believe that shorter domain names are better than longer domain names, if for no other reason than the fact that they're usually easier to spell, and certainly easier to type. The problem is that most of the "good" short names are already taken. It's my guess that you'd be hard-pressed to find a two-, three-, or four-letter combination that's not already registered.

Three-letter names seem to be very appealing to a lot of folks, maybe because so many individuals and companies have names that can be initialized into three-letter combinations. We've seen some folks try to compensate for the shortage of these domain names by hyphenating between each letter (e.g., a-b-c.com). I think that's a bad idea for the same reasons described above, and also because I have learned that is physically impossible for me not to type a hyphen after the last letter -- I invariably end up typing a-b-c-.com. I think it's the Gestalt closure principle in action, and I assume others will have the same problem.

Thankfully, the domain name registration system limits our ability to go crazy with long names. Domain names cannot exceed 26 characters in length (including the ".com"). Without that limitation, I have no doubt that the net would be cluttered with domain names like ihaveabeautifulwebsitewontyoucomevisititplease.com.

Good Domain Names are Unique

This one's getting tougher -- it often seems that all the really unique names have been taken. The last thing you want, however, is a domain name that so closely resembles other domain names that your visitors become confused and type in your competition's URL instead of yours. Distinctiveness also, of course, aids memory.

The distinctiveness issue is the reason that so many consumer products companies "create" brand new words for their brand names -- words like Exxon, Xerox, Citgo. Note also that these distinctive made-up words remain easy to pronounce. A domain name like xycjxyk.com is certainly unique, but it is not going to be effective in generating recall or traffic.

Say Something About the Visitor

Coinciding with positive associations reinforcement of the site concept, good domain names often say something positive or unique about the visitor, making the experience and the domain name more personally relevant to the visitor. You might achieve this result by directing the name specifically toward the visitor by incorporating the words "you" or "your" or some variation into the name. Whatuseek.com, for example, tells me that this site exists for me. Other examples: doityourself.com, lovingyou.com, myownemail.com.

Avoid Linguistic Traps

One of the reasons that many companies make up new words for their brands is to avoid the possibility of choosing a word that has potentially negative connotations for in different languages or cultures. One of the more popular urban marketing legends involves Chevrolet's attempt to sell the Nova automobile in Spanish-speaking countries. One possible interpretation of Nova in Spanish is "it won't go," which, of course, would be kind of a bad name for an automobile.

The point is to "step back" from the domain names you're considering and look at them from as many possible viewpoints as possible. When you're combining multiple words into one name, play a game to see how many other, unintended words might be picked up from name you're considering. Consider whether any possible unwanted double entendres might be lurking in the combination. Always consider your target audience and that audience's likely interpretation of your domain name -- some of us still interpret "bad" as the opposite of "good."

Conclusion

Selecting the right domain name has never been easy, and it's getting more difficult as the number of registered domains increase. However, it remains one of the most critical decisions you can make.

A good process would be to select a number of possible names and then ask for comments from disinterested third parties. Play the word association game to discover what associations the name invokes and to uncover any unintended meanings or difficulties. Give them a spelling test to see if it meets the easy-to-spell criteria. Ask them what they'd expect to find on the web site.

The choice you make now is a choice you'll have to live with for a long time to come. Think about it carefully. Spend some time with it. Do some research. A little upfront work will pay big dividends in THE future.

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