

EDITORIAL AND OPINION

'Dot-net' could well be 'dot-not' for your e-business

As if the challenge of online marketing weren't enough, some well-intentioned "netrepreneurs" are unwittingly hindering their own best efforts. In dissecting this misstep, let's review the purpose and logic behind the suffixes used in the growing on-

COMMENTARY

by S.A. "Sam" Jernigan

slaught of domain names, also known as URLs.

The suffix ".com," which has quickly and thoroughly made its way into the lexicon of American language, was designed to indicate a commercial Web site. Other suffixes also in current use include .edu for schools and universities, .gov for governmental sites, .lib for libraries, and .org for organizations. Knowing these extensions helps you quickly attempt to connect to a site whose online address you have not otherwise looked up (via a search engine like Yahoo or Excite). For example, you could guess that the Small Business Administration can be found online at www.sba.gov – and you'd be correct! Same thing with www.sierraclub.org – you get the idea.

In the meantime, as the .com ranks have swollen, many businesses seeking to market their wares online have found the URL they want to acquire is not available. When the companies authorized to sell domain names inform them of this in their search results, they often suggest that whatyouwanted.net is still available – which brings us to yet another existing suffix that is increasingly and unwisely being misapplied.

The trouble with .net

The .net extension is supposed to indicate a network provider, otherwise known as an ISP (Internet service provider) – the folks you contract with to provide you with dial-up access to the Internet, e-mail accounts, and Web hosting services. When you opt for whatyouwanted.net, you make a couple of significant mistakes.

First, unless you are a network provider, you're immediately misrepresenting the nature of your business and confusing Net-savvy potential customers.

Second, and with more dire financial consequences for your business, you are now voluntarily competing with whoever has the .com counterpart to your URL, and you are further confusing customers who will only hear the first part of your URL and then incorrectly assume the extension to be .com. Promotional efforts of yours to introduce and increase traffic to your site at whatyouwanted.net may result in sending folks to whatyouwanted.com's Web site instead. Tsk, tsk, tsk. Lucky them...and poor you (literally)!

Solutions and alternatives

Here's some e-food for thought if you're already Web-ensnared in this regard.

First, visit the site of the folks who beat you to the punch – the .com'ers with "your" name. Is their product/service the same as yours – including the geographic region they serve? If so, you lose more points yet as they are, indeed, a legitimate competitor of yours. If not, however, use the e-mail link or other contact data on the site and offer to exchange links with them so that at the top (preferably) of each of your sites a sentence would read: "Looking for whatyouwanted.net? If so, click here."

If, on the other hand, their site looks dated, undeveloped, or otherwise languish-

ing, contact them to see if they'd be willing to sell their domain name to you. In this instance you can arrange to mirror host your site at both locations (.com and .net). In this scenario, you will most likely want to phase out the .net when it expires.

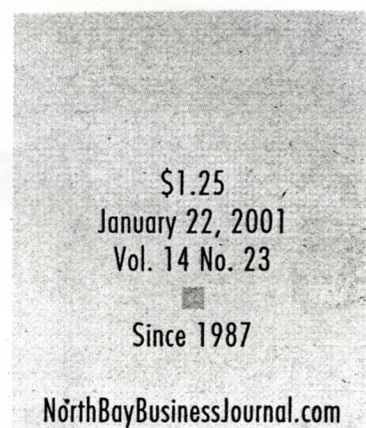
Lastly, consider abandoning your URL with the lamentable .net extension altogether and instead acquire a creative, easily spelled and pronounced domain name with a .com extension. If you've researched extensively and *still* can't arrive at a suitable substitute selection, stay tuned. The next wave of extensions were approved as of November 2000 and will be available for registration toward the end of the first quarter 2001.

These are .aero, .coop, .info, .museum, .name, .pro, and possibly the best new opportunity for your Net enterprise: .biz. (Be forewarned against "early registration services" for these new extensions – they're a total scam.)

The saturated, changing-every-five-minutes world of Net-based commerce requires common sense and a multipronged marketing effort to rise above the e-fray. Make certain your domain name works with you instead of against you!

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