



"Brand" New Opportunities in 2000?

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Does anyone remember the state of the Internet as of, say, five years ago? Strange how that seems like ancient Net history today. The great gold rush of registering domain names hadn't really taken off yet, and it's great to recall how *Wired* journalist Joshua Quittner remarked, "It's true: there is no mcdonalds.com on the Internet" (see Quittner, J. "Billions Registered," *Wired*, October 1994, http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/2.10/mcdonalds_pr.html).

Fast forward just five years, and here is an example of some related .coms that are no longer available:

- Mcdonalds.com
- Bigmac.com
- Quarterpounder.com
- Frenchfries.com
- Chocolateshake.com

And even, would you believe...

- Mcdlt.com
- Eggmcmuffin.com
- Quarterpounderwcheese.com
- Royalewithcheese.com

All of these sites are actually registered, and many probably belong to McDonald's Corporation. If you run a "whois" query on "eggmcmuffin.com," for instance, you get: "McDonald's Corporation, 1 McDonald's Plaza, Oak Brook, IL 60523 ... Administrative Contact ... Technical Contact ... Billing Contact: McDonald's Legal Department...."

For a company that knew nothing about the Internet five years ago, they've come a long way. I edited that quote down a bit; however, as you can see, they own eggmcmuffin.com and the billing contact is their *legal department!* (In mathematical terms, it breaks down like this: domain name + lawyers = serious brand protection.)

DOMAIN-MANIA

As a general rule, all common words, brand names, and even phrases, are currently unavailable as .com addresses. To test this, browse to www.networksolutions.com and try out some .com names. I tried common words for nearly 45 minutes without any success. Here's an example string of tries to find a .com related to "blue": blue, bluish, lightblue, darkblue, bluegreen, bluejeans, bluebell, bluegrass, bluegrey, bluenote, eblue, iblue, netblue, bluenet, blueweb, blueglue, blueshoe, and even bluesuedeshoes. All taken!

Based on that list of taken domain names, you may be asking yourself, "How am I ever going to register a name I need or like?" Well, you're not alone. As early as 1997, official Internet governance groups began examining the need for expansion. There was (and still is) a call for more than just the .com, .org, and .net domains. The history of this development is long-winded and

so full of acronyms that it's difficult to keep track of who did what, but the current state of this expansion effort has led to the "Generic Top-Level Domain Memorandum of Understanding" (affectionately known as the gTLD-MoU).

For detailed gTLD-MoU information, just visit www.gtld-mou.org. (One can't help but look twice at that ridiculous acronym, which in a Gödel-like glory holds the recursive quality of demonstrating how far one must go these days to register a unique domain name.) The acronym in question, according to the Web site, is "the international governance framework in which policies for the administration and enhancement of the Internet's global Domain Name System (DNS) are developed and deployed. This includes, inter alia, the addition of new generic Top-Level Domains (gTLDs) to the root of the DNS, selection of new domain name registrars, and development of equitable dispute resolution mechanisms over conflicts between parties concerning rights to domain names."

The part we're concerned with here is the addition of new gTLDs. If all goes well, the Internet will experience a significant change in the next six months to one year. Instead of being limited to .com, .net, and .org, businesses will have

the option to choose from up to seven additional domains. The proposed extensions are

- **.firm**, to be used by businesses or firms;
- **.shop**, for businesses offering goods or services for sale;
- **.web**, for sites emphasizing Web-related activities;
- **.arts**, for those emphasizing cultural activities;
- **.rec**, for recreational and entertainment activities;
- **.info**, for information-oriented Web sites; and
- **.nom**, for individual or personal sites (derived from "nomenclature").

Without a doubt, another cyber gold rush is on the horizon. What would the market value be, for instance, for the name "www.computer.shop"? What could you do with, say, "spider.web"? Or, how about "law.firm"? There will be literally thousands of fantastic names available, but right now, no one knows which, if any, of these names will gain approval. And certainly no one knows *when* they could become available. (Without going into it too deeply, governmental/political maneuvering has brought some uncertainty to the gTLD *whens* and *whiches*.) But we do know *how* the process will work.

According to the gTLD-MoU, members of the Council of Registrars (or CORE) will be allowed to register the new domains into a shared registry system. There will be many registrars (a few dozen, probably) approved to handle the registrations. In and of itself, there is nothing remarkable about multiple registrars. However, this scenario presents some interesting situations during our current state of awaiting the approval of any or all of the new domains.

The most interesting such situation is that several of these registrars are maintaining pre-registration queues. If you browse to a site like www.domainbank.net, you're able to query their current queue of pre-registrants. Actually, this site is worth a few minutes of your time. (Visit www.domainbank.net, and click on "Proposed New Domains" on the left.) It's one of the best, if not *the* best, example of a user-friendly pre-registration Web site. Users can query names for all seven proposed domains at once.

My first query, naturally, was "awma" for .web, .info, and .shop. Unfortunately, they were all pre-registered (which wasn't completely surprising, as there are certainly others who share our acronym, such as the Asian World of Martial Arts, at www.awma.com). Although "awma" may seem unique, and its being pre-registered would seem to indicate that we would again run into the blue, bluish, blueglue problem described above, that wasn't the case. In fact, I came up with many great domain names that hadn't yet made it into that particular database, for instance: dark.web, microbrew.shop, airquality.info, ozone.info, waste.info. As of this writing, these and countless more await a pre-registrant hoping to build a new brand.

"Hoping" is the key word here. Recall my statement that several registrars exist, and many are maintaining such queues. Under the current setup, there is no guarantee that a pre-registered domain name will become registered. It is expected that many names, especially the no-brainers like "computer.shop," will be pre-registered in numerous places by numerous people. To address this, the official names will be entered into the official registry in an ordered fashion.

On the big day, a round-robin event will transpire, during which each of the few dozen registrars will take turns entering names into the official database. For most people, it will come down to luck of the draw. If two people have pre-registered "ozone.info" at different registrars, that name will go to the first one submitted.

A few registrars have found ways to capitalize on the event by selling preferential placement within their submittal queue. For \$1000, for instance, at www.enom.com, you can request a first slot (for which I assume you would be within their first group of names submitted once the system goes live). At least one other site I visited was conducting an auction for top placement. Still others are concerned that the registering companies themselves may sneak in a few of the most obviously desirable names, with the intention of selling them off at a later date.

Besides purchasing preferential slots within a queue, it's also possible to up one's chances of successfully getting an official name by pre-registering the same domain name request at multiple places. If you'd like

to explore this option, visit CORE at www.corenic.org and click on "Find a Registrar." Because these registrars exist all over the world, it might be difficult to cover all the bases. (If you don't speak Japanese, for instance, then it would be difficult to identify pre-registering entities in Japan.)

CONCLUSION

Although this pre-registration time period offers no guarantees of actually getting the name you want once the system goes live, it's still an exciting opportunity to pre-register a name a little more close to home than otherwise possible with the .com, .net, .org system. With the exception of simply "blue," all of the other blue-related names I mentioned above were available in one or more of the pre-registration databases.

As of this writing, even EM.web, which would be a fine URL for this magazine, is available (at least in domainbank's queue). But unlike McDonalds, not every company is a multibillion-dollar corporation with the resources to protect every single brand it maintains. Between you and me, though, www.eggmcmuffin.web is still available. Somebody, quick! Call McDonald's lawyers! ☺

