

Dom@in Dilemmas

While they could plead ignorance last century, hospitality enterprises cannot ignore the Internet this century; effective Internet use is a competitive advantage. One of the keys to effective Internet use is choosing the right domain name. In addition to branding opportunities and protection from fraudulent websites, customers often guess the website address. Current and potential guests seeking Hyatt hotels' Swiss and global operations would type *hyatt.ch* or *hyatt.com*, respectively. For as little as ten Swiss Franks annually, hotels can invest in a domain name that protects their brand, strengthens their brand and increases website visits.

Choosing the right name necessitates answering two key questions – what name and how many names. The first question is easy to address but answering the second takes on a life of its own. Before addressing these key questions, a brief overview of the importance of domain names follows.

THE EVOLUTION OF DOMAINS AND DOMAIN NAMES

In the pioneering Internet days, the small community of users knew the Internet Protocol or IP address of each other's computers. But as the number of users grew, remembering four to 12 digit IP addresses proved cumbersome and led to the 1985 development of the domain name system or DNS; domain names replaced IP addresses. Thus to reach Hyatt's global website, it is simpler and easier for users to remember and type *hyatt.com* rather than a number such as 207.155.183.72.

Technically, *hyatt* is the domain name and *.com* is the domain. The global body for domains and domain names, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), oversees three processes relevant to this article: adding new domains, authorizing companies to

rent domain names, and settling domain name disputes.

Until this century, domains were either three-letter generic domains or two-letter country domains. Anyone in any country can register any name – first come first served – in the generic *.com*, *.net* and *.org* domains, for as little as CHF 10 annually. Rules for registering names in country domains vary depending on the country. Switzerland (*.ch*), as well as South Pacific countries Tuvalu (*.tv*), Tonga (*.to*) and Niue (*.nu*) let anyone register any name. Other countries, such as Australia (*.au*), Italy (*.it*) and Malaysia (*.my*) restrict registrations based on country of residence or a corresponding business name. Country domains cost from about 10 to hundreds of Swiss Franks annually.

This century has seen the blossoming of domains and non-English languages. New generic domains are either unrestricted (*.biz*, *.info*, *.name* and *.pro*) or restricted (*.aero*, *.museum* and *.coop*). Generally, the former are available to anyone but the latter have restrictions such as being in the aerospace or museum industry. A generic domain solely for the travel industry, *.travel* went live in late 2005. Two new country domains for businesses and individuals in Europe and Catalonia, respectively *.eu* and *.cat*, go live in mid 2006. ICANN is considering *.asia* for Asian businesses, *.tel* for telecommunications and *.xxx* for sex-related websites. Finally, early this century ICANN began implementing domain names with non English characters, such as Arabic, Chinese, Thai and Croatian characters.

DOMAIN NAMES AND ONLINE BRANDING

Common sense suggests that organisations choose domain names that match their brand name. Users often guess the domain and domain name rather

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than search for the website address. All things equal, the Hyatt Hotel chain would use *hyatt.ch* and *hyatt.com* for its Swiss and global online presence. Similarly, Hyatt would direct customers to email info@hyatt.ch or info@hyatt.com for queries to its Swiss or global operations. Most of the world's top brands own their brand name in the global *.com* domain (96%) as well as the Australian *.au* (77%) and French *.fr* (80%) country domains (Murphy, Raffa, & Mizerski, 2003). In addition to mimicking the top brands, this intuitive online branding suggests effective Internet use.

A popular theory of effective technology use is the diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 1995). Since the end of World War II,

studies have shown that organisations adopt technologies over a continuum, from having the technology to using the technology well. A 2005 hospitality study found that hotels advance from having email, to having a website to having the same domain name in the website and email address, such as *hyatt.ch* and *info@hyatt.ch* (Hashim & Murphy, 2005).

The above argument relates branded domain names to advanced Internet use, but fails to relate branded domain names to effective Internet use. Two other studies show that compared to those without branded email addresses, Swiss hotels and Singaporean travel agencies with branded email addresses provided better email responses to guest inquires and had more advanced websites (Murphy, Olaru, Schegg, & Frey, 2003; Murphy & Tan, 2003). Thus for both online branding and better Internet use, hotels should buy and use domain names that match the hotel's brand name.

OWNING AND KEEPING THE RIGHT DOMAIN NAME(S)

For hotels seeking branded domain names, two general rules guide choosing the correct domain(s) and domain name(s). The target customers dictate the choice and the more valuable the brand, the more domains and domain names rented.

Businesses and the trade literature usually speak of buying a domain name, but the correct analogy is renting a domain name. ICANN lists over two hundred businesses authorised to register generic and country domain names, but the registration is for a limited number of years. If a hotel registers a domain name for one year and lets the registration lapse, another person or hotel can grab that domain name. Lapsed domain names highlight the sleazy side of renting domain names.

Unsavoury entrepreneurs known as cybersquatters profit from staking legitimate businesses' domain names. For example, cybersquatters buy lapsed domain names and host a pornographic website at that name, ransoming a hotel's online reputation. Similarly, cybersquatters could buy a hotel's name as a domain name in one of the half-dozen generic domains or over two hundred country domains. As the rules governing domain name registration are often first come first

served, the hotel must pay the cybersquatter an exorbitant fee or take the cybersquatter to arbitration. While the hotel should win the arbitration, the lengthy process costs and usually offers little recourse for damages.

To protect its online brand, Hyatt Hotels should reflect upon intuitive names and typographical variations their customers might use, such as *hyatt*, *hyat*, *hyatthotels* and *hyattcorporation*. Hyatt should register domain name variations across generic and country domains, starting with *.com* and country domains where Hyatt has a strong presence such as *.fr*, *.ch*, and *.de*. Hyatt could eventually register hundreds of domain names, but the expense is minimal compared to Hyatt's brand value and arbitration hassles. Hyatt can then point several domain names to the same website. For example, visitors keying in *hyatthotels.com* arrive at the *hyatt.com* website.

For smaller properties, one domain name should suffice. The main decision is a global versus country image. For the former, the hotel would use *hotelbrand.com* and for the latter, a Swiss hotel would register *hotelbrand.ch*. Yet given the minimal expense of around CHF 10, a small Swiss hotel should register their brand name in both *.com* and *.ch*, and then redirect *hotelbrand.com* visitors to *hotelbrand.ch*.

A final step in online branding is promoting the branded domain name, offline and online. Offline promotion includes adding the hotel website address, *www.hotelbrand.ch*, and branded email addresses to all advertisements and collateral materials. Online promotion includes using a branded email address for both the hotel departments and employees, such as *sales@hotelbrand.ch*, *info@hotelbrand.ch* and *m.steiger@hotelbrand.ch*. All outgoing hotel emails would use a branded email address as well as include the hotel website address, *www.hotelbrand.ch*.

BRIEF TIPS

A few tips for choosing and renting domain names follow:

- Choose domain names that resemble the hotel's brand name.
- Keep the domain name simple, short and easy to remember.

- Use an accredited ICANN registrar.
- Watch out for the expiration date and consider renting the domain name for several years.
- When renting a domain name, use contact details that will last. Expiration messages sent to an ex-employee can prove troublesome.

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RELATED WEBSITES

Approved registrars

www.icann.org/registrars/accredited-list.html

Domain arbitration

www.icann.org/udrp/udrp.htm

.cat domain names

www.domini.cat/

.ch domain names

www.switch.ch/

.eu domain names

www.eurid.eu/

ICANN

www.icann.org/

.travel domain names

www.tralliance.info/

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