

Internet Domain Name 'Gotchas'

Domain Name Registration

It is most likely that you or your company has an Internet domain name, used for your web site and for email messaging. Hopefully you will have obtained both '.com' and '.co.uk' variants of your preferred name, along with other types according to your company needs and target markets.

Domain names are usually registered through a hosting service or an ISP (Internet Service Provider), although other companies frequently offer this service. It is usually unimportant which route you use to register your domain name, although your hosting ISP is often the best person to use. **What is important is that you ensure the domain name registration is recorded against your own company name** (or your own name) and not that of the company performing the registration. Most companies are very good in this respect, but it is a point to watch out for with some operators.

The actual charges for domain name registration are, or should be, quite low, generally below ten pounds per year. The registration period is usually defined for a minimum of one or two years, although you can pay for longer if you wish. Web site hosting has its own charges, depending on the service that you wish to pay for.

Domain Name Expiration

You, or your company, should ensure that the expiration date of any domain name registration is noted and that renewal is performed before that date expires. Most hosting services and ISPs will send you a reminder in time for payment to be processed at the required time – but do not depend on them doing this.

If not renewed in time, the domain name will become unregistered. This will lead to your web site being unavailable and company emails being returned to the sender. That is bad enough in itself, but it is also possible that someone else may snap up your domain name and grab it from you.

Believe it or not, Microsoft even fell foul of domain name renewal for hotmail.com some years ago. Some benevolent hacker-type actually paid the renewal fee to keep the domain active, just for the entertainment value in pointing out this mistake made by Microsoft, which certainly pleased many of that company's detractors!

Renewal Scams

As indicated above, the actual cost for domain registration is quite low. This is paid to a central registry organisation, according to the domain name type (.com, .co.uk) by the company performing the registration or renewal. The minimal effort involved in this work means that there is a lot of competition in getting your custom for performing this service, particularly because a domain name holder is likely to pay for other related services such as web hosting and email mailboxes.

So do not be surprised to receive renewal notices from companies other than the one you use for domain name registrations. This is a predatory type of business practice that depends on misleading wording and a bit of scare-mongering to make you believe that you will lose your domain name if you do not renew it with that company.

Domain name renewal is straightforward and should be cheap. It is usually best to use your existing service provider for this process, unless you are looking to change provider for any other reason. That being the case, you should generally ignore any renewal offers from companies that you do not know, even though their choice of name is probably intended to make you believe that they are the central registry used for domain names.

An example of this is the '*Domain Registry of America*', which have been sending out renewal notices to holders of .com domain names, asking for transfer and renewal some

four months before expiry is due. They also ask for a very prompt reply to take up their offer. Needless to say, they are not the cheapest service around. They also do not point out the possible complications of changing domain name registration when you have an existing email address or web site in operation with an ISP.

If you get such a renewal notice, just use it to verify when your domain is really due for renewal and treat it as a reminder to perform renewal at the correct time.

As this gives you plenty of warning, you may want to take a further look at the costs of your existing service provider and consider better deals. If the fees are reasonable, it is often best to stay with your existing provider than it is to move for a small saving. That is under the assumption that you are happy with their level of service, of course.

Search Engines and Directories

When you have an existing domain name and/or web site, you will undoubtedly receive many spam-type email messages offering either further registration services or, which is very common, offers to pay for an entry in some kind of search engine or directory. In almost all cases, you should simply ignore these messages and delete them, along with the offers to 'improve your manhood' or 'view my webcam'.

The main Internet search engines do not require payment to be added to their databases – these are the web sites that nearly all users go to when they wish to find company or product information on particular topics. The most well known include **google.com**, **yahoo.com**, **altavista.com** and **ask.co.uk**. Hopefully you use sites such as these for your own Internet research.

There are business directory sites on the web, and some of these do charge for an entry. It is up to you whether or not you think that they are worth using (you can guess my view on their value), but if you are considering a paid-for service of this sort, just bear in mind the number of times that you go to those sites for information. If you use the site frequently, and you hope your potential customers also use it, then this could be a good site to be registered with. But if you don't use it, why pay for a service that your target markets probably will never see?

The free services offered by the main search engines are well worth investing in, but not by paying those companies directly (although sponsored advertising is a different topic). There are techniques for web page and web site design that will definitely improve your 'ranking' within these search engines. Any competent web designer should be very familiar with these techniques and suggest that your web site is set up in such a way to benefit from the relevant measures.

There are also some techniques that have been developed to try and boost your ranking using means that are essentially banned by the search engines. Examples of this include adding phrases and keywords to a web page in white text, on a white background. The idea of this is that the users will not see the text, but that the search engine will. You should not try these sort of misleading tactics, as the search engines will pick this out and your site will be blocked from their listings – achieving exactly the opposite effect to what you had hoped for! If your web designer suggests these tactics, I would recommend that you try asking another designer for their input.

Consultancy Services

Finally, a small plug for the services offered by *Multiplan Consultants*. If you require unbiased advice on these topics, or wish for a review of your Internet usage and hosting services, then please contact Multiplan (see **www.multiplan.co.uk** for details). We would be pleased to work with your company to help you avoid being caught out or misled on these issues. You will find that our costs are structured to meet the budgets of smaller businesses, who often have a greater need for technical assistance at a sensible price.