

Internet braces for '.Vegas' and other not-coms

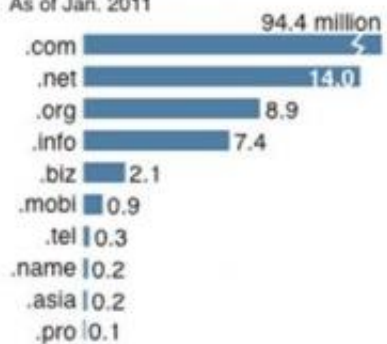
June 17 2011, By JOELLE TESSLER , AP Technology Writer

Domain names

Next week, a non-profit which oversees the Internet addressing system will vote to possibly expand on the current 22 generic domain names.

Registered domains

As of Jan. 2011



SOURCE: Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers AP

Graphic shows the total number of Internet addressing domains such as .com, .info and .museum through Jan.

(AP) -- Coming soon to the Internet: website addresses that end in ".bank," ".Vegas" and ".Canon."

The organization that oversees the Internet address system is preparing to open the floodgates to a nearly limitless selection of new website

suffixes, including ones in Arabic, Chinese and other scripts. That could usher in the most sweeping transformation of the [Domain Name System](#) since its creation in the 1980s.

More than 300 suffixes are available today, the bulk of them country-code domains, such as ".uk" for the United Kingdom and ".de" for Germany.

Hundreds or even thousands more suffixes could be created, categorized by everything from industry to geography to ethnicity.

The [Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers](#) will meet Monday in Singapore (Sunday evening in the U.S.) to vote on its expansion plan for [domain names](#). If ICANN approves the plan as expected, new domains could start appearing late next year.

The new system could bring innovative branding opportunities and allow all sorts of niche communities to thrive online.

But businesses worry that they'll have to grab their brand names before others do. New suffixes could also create confusion as consumers navigate a Web with unfamiliar labels.

It's also possible that the new names won't make much difference because many people these days rely on search engines and [mobile applications](#) to find what they are looking for online. Consumers don't type Web addresses into browsers nearly as much as they did 15 years ago when talk of a domain name expansion began.

"Most people don't pay a lot of attention to website addresses anyway these days," said Danny Sullivan, editor of Search Engine Land, a website that covers the search industry.

From a technical standpoint, domain names tell computers on the Internet where to find a website or send an email message. Without them, people would have to remember clunky numerals such as "165.1.59.220" for "ap.org."

The monikers have grown to mean much more, however. Amazon.com Inc. has built its brand on its website address, while bloggers take pride in running sites with their own domain names.

ICANN has already allowed two major expansions of the addressing system. In 2000, it approved seven new domains, including ".info" and ".biz." It began accepting new bids again in 2004. It has approved and added seven from that round, including ".xxx" for pornography sites this past March.

Under the expansion plan now before ICANN, future applications would be streamlined and open to all companies, organizations and individuals.

That has set off a virtual land rush.

A group of entrepreneurs in Las Vegas is vying to operate a ".Vegas" suffix. They have the city's endorsement and consider ".Vegas" a way to unify local merchants, entertainment venues, residents and even businesses beyond Sin City.

Former professional hockey player Ron Andruff is working with international sports federations to bid for ".sport." He expects sports leagues, teams, athletes, equipment makers and fans to want websites with a suffix that defines them better.

Two groups - one backed by the Sierra Club and the other by the World Wildlife Federation - are separately seeking the right to operate a ".eco" suffix.

Big business will stake claims, too. Printer and camera maker Canon Inc. plans to apply for ".Canon". Trade groups for bankers and financial-services companies are working together to explore bids for ".bank", ".insure" and ".invest" for their member companies.

New domains offer fresh branding possibilities for companies to identify themselves online in "a more relevant or a more localized" way, said Pat Kane, a senior vice president at VeriSign Inc., which operates ".com" and ".net."

Although suffixes added over the past decade haven't been as popular as ".com," there has been demand for an expansion because nearly all of the most desirable ".com" addresses have been taken. There are more than 94 million registered under ".com."

The thinking is that new businesses setting up shop online might prefer a simple name that ends in ".bank" rather than "TheBankDownTheStreetFromTheSupermarket.com."

The expansion plan before ICANN had been delayed, however, largely because of concerns that new suffixes could infringe on trademarks and copyrights. There's also worry that new suffixes could deceive consumers, create new platforms for hate groups or lead to website addresses ending in obscenities. ICANN spent years crafting guidelines and creating procedures for objecting to applications.

ICANN already has approved rules for some countries to claim suffixes that spell their names in languages other than English. The new plan opens that up to Chinese and Arabic versions of ".bank" and ".sport" as well.

It won't be cheap to operate a domain name suffix. The application fee is \$185,000, and winners will have to pay \$25,000 annually after that.

Disputes are likely as different groups go after the same domain. ICANN may auction off domains if multiple parties have legitimate claims. Legal fees could also pile up as trademark owners and governments file objections to certain applications.

Trademark holders, in particular, fear they would have to register a lot of addresses they don't need or want simply to keep others from using them. Microsoft Corp., for instance, would not want websites addresses such as "Microsoft.software" and "Microsoft.computer" used to commit fraud or sell pirated goods.

Copyright owners, too, worry they would have to devote more resources to fighting online piracy with a proliferation of websites ending in ".movies" and ".music" that distribute copyrighted content illegally.

ICANN has crafted rules meant to give trademark owners a first shot at claiming their brands. It would also have a process to quickly take down addresses that are clear violations.

But Steven Metalitz, a lawyer for a coalition of movie studios, recording labels and other copyright holders, fears ICANN won't be aggressive enough in enforcing the rules.

Still, supporters of the expansion believe it will create opportunities.

Juan Diego Calle, whose company operates the existing ".co" suffix, said that with more alternatives available, more businesses and groups will see that they can set up shop online with a catchy, easy-to-remember website that doesn't end in ".com."

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