

Internet address expansion set despite ".worries." (Update)

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Rod Beckstrom, CEO of ICANN, speaks during an interview, Monday, Jan. 9, 2012 in New York. The oversight agency for Internet addresses, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, spent years crafting guidelines meant to curtail nefarious activities. Still, critics say ICANN is rushing to expand the system without putting enough safeguards in place. (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan)

Bidding will begin this week for words and brand names such as ".sport," ".NYC" and ".bank" to join ".com" as online monikers.

Up to 1,000 [domain name suffixes](#) - the ".com" in an Internet address -

could be added each year in the most sweeping change to the [domain name system](#) since its creation in the 1980s.

To some, the system will lead to ".cash." To others, it will mean ".confusion."

The idea is to let Las Vegas hotels, casinos and other attractions congregate around ".Vegas," or a company such as Canon Inc. to draw customers to "cameras.Canon" or "printers.Canon." The new system will also make Chinese, Japanese and Swahili versions of ".com" possible.

Some companies and entrepreneurs have already expressed interest in applying for a suffix and possibly earning millions of dollars a year from people and groups wanting a website that ends in that name.

Others are skeptical, though. They worry that an expansion will mean more addresses available to scams that use similar-sounding names such as "Amazom" rather than "Amazon" to trick people into giving passwords and credit card information. Others worry that new suffixes could create additional platforms for hate groups or lead to addresses ending in obscenities.

The oversight agency for Internet addresses, the [Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers](#), spent years crafting guidelines meant to curtail nefarious activities. Still, critics say ICANN is rushing to expand the naming system without putting enough safeguards in place.

"You don't want a ship to have holes... and ask everybody to come on board," said Dan Jaffe, the chief lobbyist at the Association of National Advertisers, which represents 400 companies and 10,000 brand names. "You should close the holes, then run a [pilot project](#) to see if the systems you put in place are actually effective."

There's also a question of how useful the new names will be, at least among English speakers. Alternatives to ".com" introduced over the past decade have had mixed success. These days, Internet users are more likely to type "new Muppet movie" into their browser's search box than to know the official site is at "Disney.go.com/muppets."

ICANN will start taking bids for new suffixes on Thursday at 12:01 a.m. Greenwich Mean Time (Wednesday at 7:01 p.m. EST).

That doesn't mean people will be able to type in "Caribbean.vacation" or "iPad.Apple" right away. Initial bidding will stay open until April. After that, ICANN will accept challenges for trademark conflicts and other reasons. Auctions would be held should multiple bidders seek the same suffix. It could take months more for winning bidders to set up.

The new names won't appear in general use until at least spring of 2013. Applicants facing challenges may have to wait until 2014.

Names will be restricted to the richest companies and groups, as it will cost \$185,000 to apply and at least \$25,000 a year to maintain one. A 10-year commitment is required. The fees do not include operational costs, such as computers and staff. By comparison, a personal address with a common suffix such as ".com" usually costs less than \$10 a year.

Despite the startup costs, suffixes could be lucrative to the winning bidders. A company called ICM Registry receives some \$60 a year for every ".xxx" registered, for instance. It's not just pornography sites interested. Colleges and universities have been buying names such as "KUgirls.xxx" to make sure others can't.

Although companies such as Apple Inc. and Canon aren't likely to make any suffixes they get available to the general public, other entrepreneurs have been eyeing ".web" and others. They won't be the only ones cashing

in. Companies have formed specifically to sell names on behalf of those entrepreneurs, and ICANN gets a cut.

In recent weeks, members of Congress, the Federal Trade Commission and the Commerce Department have raised concerns.

"A rapid, exponential expansion ... has the potential to magnify both the abuse of the domain name system and the corresponding challenges we encounter in tracking down Internet fraudsters," FTC commissioners said in a letter to ICANN.

ICANN plans to proceed with its schedule. ICANN CEO Rod Beckstrom said many adjustments have been made to address objections raised over the years. Although Jaffe said several other concerns were ignored, Beckstrom said he has heard nothing new in the recent critiques.

"There are parties that would like to see other protections, or want to see this or that," Beckstrom said. "These discussions are going to go on for a long time."

Beckstrom said many businesses and groups outside the U.S. have been clamoring for more choices, and ICANN didn't want them to wait longer.

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," which is the underlying Internet Protocol address 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.

Theo Hnarakis, CEO of the domain name registration company Melbourne IT, said his organization already has prepared more than 100 suffix applications for financial services, airlines, gambling sites and others. He declined to name any clients.

Although suffixes added over the past decade haven't been as popular as ".com," nearly all of the most desirable ".com" addresses have been taken. New businesses are often stuck with difficult-to-remember names such as "TheFloristInsideThePeanutShop.com." The expansion would allow "Peanut.florist."

Customers might be able to find that florist through Google or Bing, but Hnarakis said merchants often have to buy ads to lure them. And an Internet search might lead customers to a rival - such as the Cheaper Florist Outside The Peanut Shop.

The demand for new suffixes appears greater outside the U.S. That's because many of the ".com" names had been grabbed by Americans who got on the Internet first. In addition, suffixes had been largely limited to the 26 letters of the English alphabet until now.

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 added seven from that round, including ".xxx" last year. It also cleared others on an ad hoc basis, including ".eu" for the European Union and ".ps" for the Palestinian territories.

Under the new system, the application process will be streamlined.

Expanding the pool of suffixes was one of ICANN's chief tasks when

the U.S. government ceded oversight of domain names to the organization in 1998. But progress was slow because of objections and concerns from government groups, businesses interests and others. ICANN is finally ready to implement the system, despite calls for further delays.

"This is a change, and whenever there's a change, there is anxiety," Beckstrom said. "We're doing our best to administer a fair and equitable system that the global community has designed."

Q&A on plans to expand the Internet address system

Here are some questions and answers regarding plans to expand the Internet address system:

Q. What are domain names?

A. Think of them as shortcuts for navigating the Internet. Just as it's easier to find the Empire State Building at 350 Fifth Avenue in Manhattan rather than through its GPS coordinates, it's easier to type in "ap.org" rather than remember "165.1.59.220." Google and other search engines have reduced the need for domain names. But these search engines are essentially catalogs of the Internet, and they depend on the domain name to take you to what you're looking for. Also, domain names aren't used only for websites. The part after the "at" symbol in email addresses is the domain name.

Q. How many domain names are out there?

A. There are millions of domain names including "bbc.co.uk" and "Microsoft.com." If you're just thinking of the suffix, formally known as the top-level domain name, there are currently 312. The most popular is ".com," with about 100 million names registered. Anybody willing to pay

\$10 or less a year can get one. Others are restricted to certain groups, including ".aero" for the aviation industry and ".edu" for U.S. colleges and universities. The bulk of the suffixes are two-letter designations for countries and territories, such as ".fr" for France and ".aq" for Antarctica. Some countries also have suffixes in their native languages, so websites in China can use the Chinese equivalent of China rather than ".cn."

Q. Is the list static?

A. Suffixes come and go. The European Union gained ".eu," while Midway Islands and other U.S. minor outlying islands lost ".um." Following East Timor's independence, ".tp" became ".tl." A handful of others got added over the years, including ".biz" for businesses and ".xxx" for porn sites. On Thursday, bidding will begin for up to 1,000 more suffixes each year.

Q. Who decides these things?

A. An organization called the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers is in charge of domain name policies. The U.S. government, which funded much of the Internet's early development, delegated the task to that group in 1998. ICANN is a nonprofit organization with headquarters in California and has board members from around the world, though the Commerce Department retains limited oversight of the group.

Q. How do I get my own suffix?

A. Begin by submitting an application - and paying a fee of \$185,000. You'll need to make a 10-year commitment, during which you're liable for annual fees of at least \$25,000. The money will pay for ICANN's costs setting up the system, reviewing applications and making sure

parties do what they have promised once the suffix is operational. Some of the money will be set aside for potential lawsuits from unsuccessful applicants and others.

Q. I love Apple. When can I get my own website address ending in Apple?

A. Like many companies, Apple Inc. hasn't said whether it will seek ".Apple." It's also possible that an apple-growers group or the Beatles' management company, Apple Corps, will make a bid. It will be up to the company or organization winning the bid to decide whether a suffix is open to general use. It's doubtful Apple Inc. would let the public claim ".Apple" names if it gets the suffix, but entrepreneurs will likely propose other suffixes, such as ".web" and ".nyc," specifically for broader use.

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