

.ORG and the Non-commercial Domainer

By Michael Ward, Public Interest Registry

In early 2006, staff members at a rape crisis center in Syracuse, New York, made a disturbing discovery: A Web site they maintained for the purpose of providing services for rape victims was now displaying links to subscription-based pornographic pages and sales pitches for sex toys. After some scrambling, the center learned that the domain name associated with the Web site had expired and, without their knowledge, was now registered to another party, and that party had determined that the domain name had profit-making potential.

How could this happen? It's easy. Every day, approximately 2,000 .ORG domain names become available because domain name holders allowed them to expire or were unaware that the domain names were up for renewal. And every day, the organizations or individuals with a legitimate association to those names become vulnerable to those who would exploit those names for economic gain.

While snapping up expired domain names has become big business for some, it presents a unique set of problems for .ORG domain name holders, many of whom have little or no understanding of how domain names operate or how attractive the .ORG designation has become.

A NEW TWIST ON THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

In a market-driven economy, the nonprofit organization (NPO) or non-commercial enterprise operates as an anomaly. While nonprofits must sustain themselves financially—which they do through membership dues, fund-raising initiatives, the procurement of grants, the generosity of philanthropists, the staging of events, and even through merchandizing—there is no bottom line. Nonprofits exist to serve the public interest or to support the needs of an industry or constituency. Although the nonprofit world is composed of diverse interests, individually they have one thing in common: they are not in business to make money; they exist to serve. And within this distinction exists a striking, albeit closing, digital divide.

While nonprofits have as much appreciation as commercial enterprises do for the benefits that communications technologies offer, they traditionally have not been as quick or as eager to embrace those technologies. Nonprofits and charitable organizations are less likely than for-profit organizations to have the financial resources or the technical expertise necessary to adequately leverage the Internet either through a Web presence or through the Internet's most pervasive—and possibly most important—application: e-mail. Even when nonprofits find the resources and make the decision to use technology to transform their organizations, they typically have a different rationale for doing so than their for-profit counterparts do.

Although more NPOs than ever are taking seriously the economic and organizational advantages of information technologies, they still lag behind commercial enterprises not just in their ability but also in their willingness to leverage the Internet. A handful of NPOs boast highly sophisticated Web sites—due in equal parts to a growing body of evidence that the Internet is an effective tool for fund-raising, membership management, and donor relations and a new generation of nonprofit leaders, many of whom grew up with the Net. In fact, many NPOs rely on Web sites that are every bit as sophisticated as those found in the business world. The International Fund for Animal Welfare, for example, had 1.25 million unique visitors in fiscal year 2005 and raised \$1.1 million in 2005. Yet even as more and more nonprofits are discovering the benefits of the Web and e-mail for their missions and for organizational stability, most have taken

their time getting there—either as a result of funding or as a consequence of limited vision.

It's important to keep in mind also that today more than 1 million nonprofits employ approximately 11 million people (not counting volunteers) in the United States alone, meaning that NPOs play a formidable role in the economy. In fact, from 1987 to 1998, the number of nonprofits increased at an annual rate of 5.1 percent—more than double the rate for the business sector. NPOs also make a considerable contribution to economic growth. From 1977 to 1997, the revenues of nonprofits increased by 144 percent. This amounts to nearly twice the 81 percent growth rate of the nation as a whole.

However quantifiable the loss to nonprofits for not fully embracing the benefits of Internet technologies, the real danger is in what they don't know about the technologies that they do use.

THE INCREASINGLY ATTRACTIVE .ORG DOMAIN NAME

The .ORG domain was one of the original top-level domains (TLDs), established in January 1984 along with .COM, .EDU, .GOV, .NET, .INT and .MIL. While .ORG is a generic TLD (gTLD)—meaning that it is available to anyone without restriction regardless of the type of organization—it quickly became adopted, at least in the United States, as the preferred TLD for organizations that were non-commercial in nature. Today the public perception of a .ORG domain name is that it is associated with a nonprofit or non-commercial enterprise. More important—though it may be difficult if not impossible to determine how many .ORGs are actually registered by nonprofits—the average Internaut is more likely than not to trust or value the information that is made available on a .ORG Web site.

Not only does this perception enhance the value of the .ORG domain name; it also makes the .ORG domain more vulnerable. It was the growing awareness of this vulnerability, combined with an increasing number of complaints of abuse by .ORG domain name owners, that caught the attention of the Public Interest Registry (PIR), which, in January 2003, assumed responsibility for operating .ORG and now maintains the authoritative database of all .ORG domain names. In a March 2006 letter to the Security and Stability Advisory Committee Liaison at the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN)—the organization responsible for global coordination of the Internet's domain name system—then PIR president and CEO Edward G. Viltz voiced concern over the growing practice of selecting, testing, and keeping or rejecting expired domain names based on the names' monetary value and the subsequent use of those names in a manner that would be contradictory to the original registrant's or organization's mission. Viltz cited the situation with the rape crisis center as an example of the dangers that this practice presents to non-commercial entities and the sometimes delicate relationships they have with their constituents.

As the value of .ORG domain names increased, so did concerns regarding the registration of expired .ORG domain names for uses that conflicted with the previous registrants' intent. PIR responded with two initiatives. In November 2006, the organization launched an international campaign aimed at raising awareness of the consequences associated with allowing .ORG domain names to expire. Named Protectyour.ORG: Protecting and Preserving the Value of Your .ORG Domain, the campaign was created to educate registrants about the value of .ORG domains—even those that are not currently being used as Web sites—and it outlines steps for

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locating, managing, consolidating, and securing domain names in order to reduce the potential for problems that may occur when domain names lapse either intentionally or because the registrant was unaware that a name had expired.

That same month, ICANN's Board of Directors unanimously approved a resolution proposed by PIR to implement an excess delete fee on certain .ORG domain names deleted during the five-day add-grace period. In particular, the service approved by ICANN provides that PIR may charge a registrar an excess delete fee of five cents on every domain name deleted during the five-day add-grace period when the number of deletions is in excess of 90 percent of the total number of initial registrations made by a registrar in a month. (For more information about the excess deletion fee, see <http://www.icann.org/announcements/announcement-22feb07.htm>).

Support for the resolution came from a number of businesses and organizations. One in particular came from the Internet Commerce Association (ICA). In a two-page letter submitted to the ICANN board, the ICA defended the resolution, stating that "repetitive mass registration of domain names (DN) for the purpose of determining their pay per click advertising viability (known as domain tasting) can lead to abuse of the five day grace period." The letter further states that the PIR proposal is a "reasonable policy designed to address such abuse and clearly demonstrates that individual registries can readily take action to address the legitimate concerns that have been raised by the practice of excessive DN 'tasting.'"

WHAT .ORGS HAVE TO LOSE

There are any number of unintended consequences of allowing domain names to expire, not the least of which are the potential impacts on an organization's public image and the potential for damage to relationships the organization has established with its members or the individuals it serves. The impact—of what is known as domain tasting—on the .ORG community can be even direr because of the level of trust that exists between nonprofit, non-commercial, and charitable organizations and their members and constituents.

Those who work in non-commercial, nonprofit, and charitable ventures value their domain names less for their monetary value and more for their ability to facilitate the formation and maintenance of trusted relationships with donors, members, and constituents. That's why it can be especially problematic when .ORG becomes vulnerable to domain tasters. Even Web sites that are launched for a onetime event or that are no longer relevant can be attractive targets. In many cases, organizations allow domain names to expire if the name is no longer in use, such as a Web site for last year's conference. Sometimes domain names are allowed to expire if the organization becomes dissolved. In all cases, PIR cautions registrants to think twice about letting .ORG domain names expire. For a small fee, it pays to hold on to even the seemingly most insignificant domains.

While the case of the rape crisis center is an extreme

example, the consequences of allowing .ORG domain names to expire cannot be overstated. The message of the campaign—and the advice offered—are aimed at organizational executives, marketing staff, and technology officers, all of whom have a vested interest in the public image of their organizations and the protection of their members and constituents. To expand the reach of the Protectyour.org campaign, PIR published a booklet—5 Simple Steps to Protecting Your .ORG Domain Names—in seven languages. It also launched a Web site called protectyour.org, and it has secured a handful of partner organizations to help spread the message of the campaign—mainly through other nonprofits.

Current campaign partners are Alfa-Redi (www.alfa-redi.org), a Latin America-based scientific community that focuses on information society policies and regulatory frameworks as well as Latin American civil society; U.S.-based Grassroots.org, which disseminates information through its network of socially focused Web sites and provides nonprofit organizations with free resources to increase efficiency and improve productivity; the Internet Society (www.isoc.org), an international professional membership society that provides leadership in addressing issues that confront the future of the Internet and that serves as organization home for several key groups responsible for Internet infrastructure standards; and the North American Consumer Project on Electronic Commerce (NACPEC), a Mexico-based nonprofit organization that provides online information about public policy issues that affect consumers on the Internet.

CONCLUSION

In 1992, in his book *School's Out*, Lewis Perelman described the inevitable impact of information technology on our culture by comparing the Internet to the automobile. He said anyone could have predicted the invention of the car, but who could have predicted fuzzy dice and drive-in movies? Fifteen years and millions of hosts later, that cultural shift is happening at breakneck speed. After all, who could have ever predicted that in the so-called knowledge age, someone would market a subscription-based porn site with a domain name formerly registered to a rape crisis center?

Ultimately, we as a community decide what has value and what has a price. We can choose to participate in that which turns a profit but erodes what we trust and value. Or we can choose to maintain those values, which ultimately leads to a truly level playing field. The PIR Protectyour.ORG campaign and the excess deletion fee are first steps in what is likely to become a growing area of interest for the organization as well as for other organizations that monitor the use—and, sometimes, misuse—of domain names.

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References

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