

When in Doubt, Hold onto that .ORG Domain Name

Nonprofits and NGOs can avoid a public relations nightmare by making sure their .ORG domain names are not allowed to expire.

Back in the 16th Century, one of William Shakespeare's famously tragic protagonists asked, "What's in a name?" In the nearly 500 years that have passed, that same rhetorical question has been asked countless times, in references ranging from baby names to corporate identities. In its latest incarnation—What's in a *domain* name?—the answer is, More than you might realize. In fact, if you don't keep track of the .ORG domain names that you use to provide services, advice, or resources to your members and constituents, they could end up serving as revenue generators for individuals and groups interested in exploiting them for economic gain.

How could that happen? Simply put, if a web site has enough traffic, or even a relatively small but loyal following, the domain name becomes a potential commodity. Employing sophisticated algorithms that can select, test, and keep or reject names based on traffic and other factors, third parties can track expiring domain names and, once they expire, register them and use them to generate revenue, without regard for their original meaning or use.

Those of us who work in noncommercial, nonprofit, and charitable ventures value our domain names less for their monetary value, and more for their ability to facilitate the formation and maintenance of trusted relationships with customers, members, and constituents. That's why it can be especially problematic when domain names ending in .ORG—the preferred designation for noncommercial enterprises—become vulnerable to this practice. In one dramatic example, an expired .ORG domain name, which served as the name of a Web site owned and operated by a rape crisis center, was purchased by another party when the name expired and the Web site was subsequently relaunched. The new site, which was practically identical to the original site in its presentation, featured links to subscription-based pornographic pages and sales pitches for sex toys.

While the case of the rape crisis center is extreme, the consequences of allowing .ORG domain names to expire can not be understated. In response to the increasingly popular practice of grabbing expired domain names that are selected, tested, and kept or rejected based on their monetary value, the Public Interest Registry (PIR) has launched a campaign to educate .ORG domain name holders, which are composed primarily of individuals and organizations that work in the public interest, about the potential dangers of allowing .ORG domain names to expire. The message of the campaign, and the advice offered, is 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.

Think about the ways in which your organization communicates with its audience through the Internet. You may have many domain names, each serving a specific purpose or targeting a specific segment of your audience. Even Web sites that are launched for a

one-time event or that are no longer relevant can be an attractive target. Each day, approximately 2,000 previously owned .ORG domain names become available to register. In many cases, organizations allow domain names to expire if the name is no longer in use, for example the web site for last year's conference. Sometimes domain names are allowed to expire if the organization is dissolved. In all cases, PIR cautions owners to think twice about letting names go. For a small fee, it pays to hold onto even the most seemingly insignificant names.

What can you do to protect your .ORG domain name? PIR offers a simple checklist.

1. Verify registration of your .ORG domain names

Whether you registered your .ORG yourself, or someone in your organization was responsible for registering it, it's essential that you verify that you or an authorized representative of your organization is named as the registrant..

A simple visit to the WHOIS database at <http://www.pir.org/> is a good first step. There you can view who the registrant, administrative, and technical contacts of your .ORG domain are. You can also learn the name of the registrar through which your .ORG domain was registered

2. Verify and update .ORG administrative contact information regularly

Consider making it organizational policy that .ORG domain name information be verified and updated on a regular basis. If it's your responsibility to keep the information updated, put it on your calendar to verify the information twice a year. If it's the responsibility of a staff member, instruct the staff member to put it on their calendar for twice a year.

PIR recommends that a senior level individual within your organization be named registrant contact.

Any information pertaining to your .ORG domain that needs to be updated can be done so through contacting and working with your registrar.

3. Check that e-mail contact information is valid

The most common way that registrars, (the organizations that provide registration services to the public), notify .ORG registrants of domain name renewal is by e-mail. If you can't be reached by e-mail, it's possible your domain name will expire without your knowledge. Therefore, it's essential that e-mail addresses are regularly updated and validated. Consider using a paid e-mail account rather than a free account. Free accounts can be suspended and are difficult to track, which increases the possibility of your not receiving notification of a renewal.

You may validate your email through reviewing your .ORG domain name whois information at <http://www.pir.org/>. You may update your email contact information through contacting and working with your registrar.

4. Consolidate .ORG domain names

Many individual, organizations and companies have more than one .ORG domain name. It's possible that your organization's .ORG domain names are registered with different registrars. Today, it's easier than ever to transfer domain names to another registrar in order to enable you to consolidate and track them. Many registrars offer domain name consolidation services, such as domain portfolio management systems, which enables you to use a master account to view all of your domain names, regardless of their expiration dates.

5. Register your .ORG for maximum period of time

The maximum registration period of .ORG domain names (as well as all the other generic top level domains such as .com and .net) is 10 years. Consider registering yours for the maximum period at initial registration or even at renewal.

By taking a few simple steps, a potential public relations disaster can be averted and relationships with organization members and constituents can be preserved. You can find more information about preserving the value of your .ORG domain at www.protectyour.org.

For more information, see www.protectyour.org or contact Wendy Rickard at rickard@rickardgroup.com or by phone at 609-466-4343.