SEO and Domain Name Best Practices

White Paper

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EVALUATING A DOMAIN NAME

There are several ways to evaluate or put a value on a domain name. Depending on who you ask, a domain name investor, a marketer, an SEO expert, or even a small business owner, you will get a different answer on that domain name’s value. When it comes to the value of a domain name:

- The domain name investor will look at past sales figures or comparable domain names.
- The marketer will value the domain name based on its “brandability”.
- The small business owner will value it at $10 because they want a “deal” on the domain name.
- The SEO expert value the domain name’s based on its past history and ability to “rank” in the search engines.

Does an SEO expert have a different reason for evaluating the domain name the way they do? Does a domain investor or domain name industry insider look at a domain name’s value differently? The SEO expert will typically look at raw data, such as the history of links pointing to the domain name, the former topic of the domain name, how long it’s been registered, and other values that typically translate into search engine ranking factors. For example, the length of a domain name in characters is related to value, and the length of the registration period can show the commitment the site owner has to that domain name.

As we evaluate domain names and their values, from an SEO or search engine optimization perspective, there is value in the number of links that are pointing to the domain name. If those links are quality links from quality websites, and not spam, then there is value in the links—it takes time and a lot of effort to get good quality links to a website. SEOs look for quality links from a lot of unique domain names, not just 1,000 links from one or two domain names. Rather, 100 links from 100 unique domain names would be preferred over 1,000 links from 10 domain names. If you were to put a value on each link to the domain name, such as $25 per link, multiplying the number of links times $25 per link would give you a value that you could add to the value of the domain name.

In this document, we’ll focus on the search engine optimization factors and data that adds value to a domain name. We’ll also focus on SEO factors and data that can devalue a domain name. Even though a domain name is a premium domain name, if that domain name was previously used for sending spam or contained spam content on it, the domain name could be a liability rather than an asset.

New gTLD domain names have been available starting around the beginning of 2014, and more and more website owners are beginning to move their websites to a new gTLD domain name. We’ll examine the process for properly moving your website from one domain name to another, and then look at the best practices for promoting your website on a new gTLD domain name.
HOW TO MOVE TO A NEW DOMAIN NAME

There are several different scenarios that cause you to have to move or want to move to another domain name. These scenarios can include:

- You sell your domain name where your current website is located.
- You buy a premium domain name and want to move your website to the new domain.
- You buy a "better" domain name than your current domain name and want to move.
- You rebrand your company with a new name and want to move to a new domain.
- Your company merges with another company and rebrands, forcing a move.
- A New gTLD becomes available and you want to move to that domain.

Each of these scenarios requires a customized solution to properly move to a new domain name. In some scenarios, the domain name you’re moving to doesn’t have any history—so it’s essentially a clean domain name. Moving your existing website to that domain name shouldn’t reveal any issues. But if the domain name has some sort of history, or you’re not sure about its past, then you’ll want to do your due diligence to make sure that the history does not come back to harm a smooth transition.

The Process for Moving

When you move to a new domain name, even if the domain name is a new domain name (newly registered), you’ll want to perform due diligence on the domain name (I address this later on in this document). Then, unless the domain name move must happen quickly (within a few days or right away), put some content on the new domain name and “feel it out” so to speak: see what type of traffic the domain name has, and if there are any referring websites sending traffic. You’ll want to verify the website with Google to make sure that the site isn’t on Google’s banned list of domain names. Once you’re convinced that there are not problems with the domain name, you can begin the process of moving.

Steps for Moving to another Domain Name

1. Make a backup of your website.
2. Crawl your own website using a website crawler such as the Screaming Frog SEO Spider (http://www.screamingfrog.co.uk/seo-spider/). This will allow you to record all of the current URLs on your website, and save them into a Microsoft Excel document. You’ll be able to use this later when setting up redirects from the old URLs to the new URLs.
3. Choose your new domain name. Make sure the new domain name is “clean”. (Do your due diligence on the new domain name to make sure that there aren’t any problems with the domain name. See our section on “Domain Name Due Diligence“ for more information.)
4. Put some sort of content on your new domain name, even if it’s a blank page with a “coming soon” type of message. You’ll want at least “some” unique content on that new domain name.
5. Verify the old website and new website(domain) in Google Webmaster Tools and Bing Webmaster Tools.
6. Use the built-in notification tool in Webmaster Tools to notify the search engines of the new location change.
7. Set up a 301 Permanent Redirect from the old domain name to the new domain name.
8. Notify your web host and move the content to the new domain name.
9. Review your content to make sure you’re not referencing the old domain name anywhere on your website.
10. Check the links to the old domain name, identify the “best” links from other websites, and notify those websites of your new location. This will help with the transition to the new domain name. You will lose some search engine rankings if you sell your domain name and cannot redirect from the old name to the new name, but at least this will help start the search engine ranking recovery process.

11. Work on getting new links and listings to your website’s new domain name and new location.

12. Change or update your email address, email signature, business cards, any online personal profiles, such as LinkedIn, and social media accounts so that they reference your new domain name.

The move is most difficult if it is caused by the loss or selling of your old domain name to another party. It is the most difficult scenario because you will be unable to set up redirects from your old domain name to the new domain name. If you cannot redirect from the old to the new location, you are going to lose search engine rankings and traffic from organic search. In this case, you may want to consider advertising on Google AdWords for a period of time to make up for the traffic loss and sales while your website recovers to previous traffic levels.

If you’re going to retain ownership of the old domain name, the old location, you’ll want to keep the redirects in place indefinitely, so that all visitors, including search engines, are redirected to the new location. I’ve seen some websites keep redirects for 10 years or more, because even after 10 years some websites won’t have updated their links and will still link to your old website.
PERFORMING DUE DILIGENCE ON A DOMAIN

Domain names are valuable e-real estate properties, just like physical real estate—homes, condos, commercial properties, and land. Before you purchase a home, it's important to have someone check out the home for potential problems, and hire a title company. Just like in real estate, if you purchase a domain name, it is important to do your "due diligence," and know the complete history and potential future problems. But how do you perform "due diligence" on a domain name? What do you check, what do you look for, and what are the potential future problems that can occur? What is the reputation of the domain name?

Determining the reputation of a domain name before it is used in commerce is important. A domain's bad reputation can make the domain a liability rather than an asset.

Proper due diligence on a domain name includes compiling various data from internet websites that provide historical views of data related to that domain name. We recommend reviewing the following data:

- Whois Data (especially Whois history)
- Search Engine Factors, such as the backlinks to the domain name
- Social Media Factors, such as any social accounts connected to the domain name
- Topic, such as former topic of the website on the domain name
- Current Status of the domain name (e.g., is it a live site or parking page?)
- Review UDRP history of the domain name
- Check for possible trademark issues
- Other Reputation Factors, such as email blacklists, domain block lists

Before moving a website to another domain name, or using a domain name that is new to you, it’s extremely important that due diligence be performed on that domain name. I have seen companies fail to perform due diligence on a domain name. In fact, one popular IT news website bought the non-hyphenated version of their website, redirected to the new domain name, and got their site banned in the Google search engine. The domain name they bought formerly hosted spam content, and they moved to a banned domain name. I’ve detailed the full story here: https://www.billhartzer.com/pages/zdnet-buys-domain-name-immediately-gets-2-year-old-trusted-site-banned-in-google/
The following is a list of resources that can be used to perform due diligence on a domain name:

- Majestic.com
- Ahrefs.com
- Moz.com (OpenSiteExplorer.com)
- Screaming Frog SEO Spider (http://www.screamingfrog.co.uk/seo-spider/)
- DomainTools.com
- Archive.org
- Index of WIPO UDRP decisions (http://www.wipo.int/amc/en/domains/search/legalindex.jsp)
MARKETING ON NEW GTLD DOMAIN NAMES

New gTLD domain names offer a unique opportunity to include the keywords in the domain name, not only in the first part of the domain name, but also keywords appear in the ending, or in the TLD of the domain name. As previously mentioned, it’s a wonderful opportunity to include Keyword1.Keyword2 as the domain name, especially if your marketing efforts include search engine marketing efforts. Having the keywords in the domain name has been a search engine ranking factor for several years now, even though the value of that ranking factor has changed over the years. Having the keyword in the domain name is also very helpful in Pay Per Click (PPC) marketing, such as using Google AdWords.

PPC and New gTLD Domain Names

A previous search engine marketing study that I performed (https://globerunner.com/com-vs-new-gtld-domain-names-8-months-later/) was very positive in regards to New gTLD domain names.:

- A .COM outperformed a .Diamonds domain name in certain key areas. However, in other key areas, the .Diamonds domain name performed much better.
- It cost less per click for a .Diamonds domain than to run the same keywords on a .COM domain name, and the total campaign cost was lower.
- Google AdWords appeared to favor use of the .Diamonds domain name, giving it more impressions and even better positioning. The average position for the .Diamonds domain name was better then the .COM domain name.
- Based on the Effective CPM, it cost nearly twice as much to advertise a .COM domain name than it did a .DIAMONDS domain name.

When it comes to marketing a new gTLD domain name on Google AdWords, I recommend using a keyword rich domain name, and making sure that the content on the landing page is well optimized. As with any search engine marketing campaign, setting up the Google AdWords campaigns correctly, bidding on the right keywords, and writing the ad copy is key to success—and a keyword rich domain name is helpful, as well.

SEO and New gTLD Domain Names

When it comes to SEO, search engine rankings, and new gTLD domain names, it’s important to note that the domain name itself is new. There typically is not going to be any history, links, or even social media mentions of the domain name. While having no history is a plus, it not something that is going to help search engine rankings. The search engine rankings must be earned. As with ANY newly registered domain name, it will take time for the search engines (mainly Google) before it is trusted. This is the same for any newly registered domain name, with any TLD. A domain name that has no history has to compete with domain names that have had contained websites for quite some time. They have had the time to build up trust, and build links and social media mentions.
Just like moving to a new domain name, there is a specific process that I recommend going through in order to take full advantage of the new gTLD domain name (and the keywords that it contains). You want to give it the best chance to compete with other domain names, other websites. Even other keyword rich domain names on other TLDs.

First, once the domain name is registered, I recommend immediately setting up web hosting for the domain name, and putting up at least one unique web page of content on it. The domain name should not be a parked domain name, displaying ads. It should contain unique content, even if it is only a few sentences of text on a white page. This will “start the clock ticking” so to speak, and the search engines (again, mainly Google), will start indexing it within a few days. Even if you plan on beginning work on a new website, you should put up at least one web page immediately.

Parked domains typically don’t get indexed in Google, and are removed from the search engine index. Adding content on a newly registered domain name will avoid this “waiting period”, and tell the search engine to keep the domain name in the index.

Example of a landing page, using Unbounce.com.

One option to accelerate ranking is to use a landing page service such as Unbounce.com to create a landing page for the new gTLD domain name. This will allow you to set up Google AdWords campaigns and start driving traffic to the domain name immediately. An example of an Unbounce.com landing page is shown above. Google AdWords campaigns were set up and run, sending traffic to the new gTLD domain name, allowing the public to start seeing the domain name in use. The search engines began indexing the content, as well.

When a new website is ready for the newly registered new gTLD, the content should be made “live” as soon as possible. SEO best practices should be used when promoting the domain name and new website. This includes:

- Creating great content on the website
- Adding a blog or other shareable content
- Promoting the website content on social media sites
• Using public relations techniques to promote the website and the content.
• Get the website listed on authoritative websites related to the site’s industry.

Websites generally have to contain unique content on them in order to perform well in the search results. Google has a very sophisticated duplicate content filter, and will only index the first version of content that they crawl. Other content that’s copied from other sources won’t be indexed, and overall copied content will “bring down” the overall quality of your website, even if there are only a few web pages on your site that contains duplicate content.

In order to check or duplicate content, you can use copyscape.com to check your website. You can also use siteliner.com to check for copies of content on your website that appears elsewhere on your own website.

Adding a blog on your website, that is updated regularly (once a day or once a week) is helpful to keep the visits from social media websites current, and gives you something to share. No one wants to go to a website that hasn’t been updated in a year, so adding content on your blog is important to keep it fresh. The search engines notice if your website content is fresh, and rewards you for it by giving you better search engine rankings and more visibility. Websites should generally grow in size over time, and adding a blog is one way to do this.

A disclaimer, terms of service, and privacy policy page is needed on all websites. The search engines (mainly Google) actually looks for these pages, as they’re a way to cover your company legally on the web. If you collect any data on your website (or have any forms that people can fill out), it’s important to have a privacy policy.

Links to websites are important. But the quality of the links is extremely important, as well. Links should be on-topic, if possible. Any link from another website to your website should be relevant and helpful. Links that appear to be “unnatural” can hurt your site’s search engine rankings, and it’s important, especially in the beginning when there are not a lot of links present, to have quality links. For example, a press release announcing the website is appropriate—as long as it’s distributed on PRNewsWire.com or PRWeb.com, legitimate press release websites. However, a press release on other “press release distribution websites” is not natural, and can get a website in trouble with Google, violating their guidelines. Generally speaking, don’t do anything that are on Google’s list of link schemes (https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/66356?hl=en).

Reviewing Google’s Webmaster Guidelines is important, and the information contained in their guidelines is helpful. The Google Webmaster Guidelines can be found here:

Google Webmaster Guidelines
https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/35769?hl=en
Little Or No Content
https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/66361?hl=en

The section on little or no content in Google’s Webmaster Guidelines is very helpful, especially when it comes to domain names. This section does not address domain parking pages specifically, but a parked page that only contains ads qualifies in the Webmaster Guidelines as “auto generated content” and content that are “cookie-cutter pages that don't add substantial value to users”. Therefore, parking pages violate their guidelines.
SEO FACTORS AND DOMAIN NAMES

The words or keywords that appear in a domain name have an effect on the value of a domain name. If a keyword appears in a domain name, and the content on that domain name is related to that keyword, then there is a better chance that the website will show up in the search results of Google and Bing.com. While Google has, in recent years, somewhat devalued the benefits of having a keyword in the domain name, it’s still considered to be a search engine ranking factor. From which other search engine ranking factors can domain names benefit?

There have been multiple studies, tests, surveys, and polls about search engine ranking factors. A detailed, comprehensive survey is done every year by Moz.com, to which I contribute. The recent survey (https://moz.com/search-ranking-factors/survey) pointed to several different categories of factors related to the domain name itself:

- Domain-Level Link Authority Features
- Domain-Level Brand Metrics
- Domain-Level Keyword Usage
- Domain-Level Keyword-Agnostic Features

Most of these factors (also referred to as features) are gained after a live website appears on the domain name. Link authority (whether the website linked from that domain name is authoritative) and keyword usage factors can only really appear once the domain name is actually developed and not a parked domain. Websites won’t link to your domain name unless they are linking to content on that domain name. Parked domain names generally don’t naturally gain new links over time.

What is important to understand, though, is that many search engine ranking factors, especially those that are gained, typically do not go away over time. Once a website links to another website, that link typically does not go away for a period of time. Website owners don’t regularly remove links from their websites. I know of links that have been in place for over 10 years, although the domain name changed its content and subject matter 8 years ago. A domain name’s overall brand, as it is built up over time because of online usage, sticks with the domain name.

The search engines are actively tracking and watching a domain name’s history. The history of links, the history of content on the domain name, and even the Whois history (who owned or owns the domain name).

Keywords that are part of a domain name also do not go away. That’s how many people refer to the website, both online and offline. The Moz search engine ranking survey results pointed to several different domain name factors.
The biggest factor, with the most importance, is the “exact match” root domain name according to this recent survey. The survey referred to the example of keyword.com. However, with the new gTLD domain names, that is changing. It is highly likely that Keyword1.Keyword2 will help a website show up at the top of the search results for a “keyword1 keyword2” search query.

The domain name itself plays a major role. If the domain name is Keyword1Keyword2.com or Keyword1.Keyword2, there is a higher chance that other websites will refer to that domain name as “keyword 1 keyword 2”, using the keywords in the domain name. This has a big effect on how the search engines, as well as end users, view the domain name and the website that’s linked to that domain name. Just like a company’s branded domain name, such as companyname.com, everyone tends to refer to that company and points to their website. The website is associated with the company name, and that’s why it tends to always show up at the top of the search results when someone searches for “company name”.

Spam Can Devalue A Domain Name

While factors that are gained, such as links, brand mentions, and a positive history can add value to a domain name, spam can very quickly devalue a domain name. If a domain name at one time contained spam, the domain name could be banned in the search engines, or could have undesirable links linking to it. Those links could be sending bad traffic or “bots” to the domain name, which can be difficult to eliminate.

The Story of ZDNet

ZDNet bought a new domain name (https://globerunner.com/before-buying-a-domain-name-perform-due-diligence-or-risk-it-all/) from the domain name aftermarket (a domain name auction), and almost immediately got their trusted,
authoritative, 2-year-old website banned in Google. ZDNet wrote a scathing article on their site (http://www.zdnet.com/article/when-google-errs-a-cautionary-tale-of-great-power/), blaming Google for the error, claiming that Google got it all wrong. But, that’s not the case. Google absolutely got it right, and was correct in banning the site in Google. Here’s how ZDNet bought a domain name, redirected their trusted, authoritative site to this new domain name, and then got their website banned in Google.

It all went down like this. Here’s a quick timeline of the events, and how buying a domain name got their site banned:

- ZDNet runs their CXO-Talk.com website for two years. Adds great content on the site.
- ZDNet decides to purchase CXOTalk.com at a domain name auction.
- ZDNet bought the domain, failing to do their due diligence on the domain.
- ZDNet redirects CXO-Talk.com to CXOTalk.com, their new domain.
- Google immediately bans the site, and gives site owner a “pure spam?” message in Google Webmaster Tools.

The plan was, ultimately, a good one. Getting rid of the hyphenated domain name and moving it to the non-hyphenated version of the domain. I have always preferred using a non-hyphenated version of a domain name, a domain name without a hyphen, because, mainly, it will end up in sending traffic to the non-hyphenated version of the domain name. Ideally, you should own both versions, and redirect the hyphenated version to the non-hyphenated version.

According to NameBio.com, ZDNet paid $207 for the domain at a GoDaddy auction on April 9, 2015.

So, ZDNet did have a good plan, which was to buy the non-hyphenated version of their current site, and then start using it. But in this case, their plan backfired on them. And oh how did it backfire! Google banned the domain name and banned their site, although they thought that it contained great, authoritative, trusted content. So what wrong?

Before redirecting the CXO-Talk.com domain name to the CXOTalk.com domain name, they didn’t do their due diligence on the CXOTalk.com domain name. It turns out that the domain name was a “throw away” domain name, used by blackhat spammers to generate gibberish content on the site. The content on the CXOTalk.com domain was so bad that it got banned in Google. So, once they were done using it (and spamming the heck out of it), the owners of CXOTalk.com sold the domain name to an unsuspecting buyer.

That buyer was ZDNet.
What ZDNet failed to do was properly check out the domain name. They didn’t look at the history of the domain name. They didn’t look at the Internet Archive of the domain. They didn’t check out the backlinks of the domain name. It was the backlinks of the domain that gave it all away: it was linked from all sorts of other spammy websites, hosted in other countries. If you look up the backlinks for CXOTalk.com on Majestic.com, you’ll see what I mean.

When ZDNet redirected their CXO-Talk.com domain name to the banned website with all the former spam, they essentially “combined resources” into one domain name. All of the history of both domain names, along with all of the backlinks and other search engine data and ranking factors that Google takes into account, are combined. Justifiably, Google banned both domain names, which was now one domain: CXOTalk.com.

Whenever you buy a domain name, it’s is EXTREMELY IMPORTANT to do all of your “due diligence” on that domain name, and literally check everything possible. The last thing you want to have happen is something like what happened to ZDNet. Their trusted, authoritative site was banned in Google. All because they rebranded on a transferred domain name without performing due diligence.

Other Factors that Devalue Domain Names
Besides the history of the domain name, the links pointing to the domain name can make a domain name a liability versus an asset for a company. If the domain name was, in fact, a former spam site, there are most likely a lot of low quality links pointing to it from other websites. This could be in the form of comment spam links that have been placed on an abandoned blog. But it could also be forum profile links, as well. Spammers will register at a message board (forum) and fill out their “profile”. They will add a link to a website. Within days, a spammer can create thousands of links to a website (or domain name), making it nearly impossible to “clean up”.

When it comes to links, the search engines provide a way for website owners to “disavow” links to their website, telling the search engines to ignore certain links. But even identifying all of these links is quite a task. I have been involved in numerous “link cleanup” efforts, ultimately costing clients tens of thousands of dollars just to clean up the links and get them removed. Some of these link cleanup projects were very costly because the domain name had so many bad links pointing to them that the search engine manually penalized these websites.

In the case of ZDNet, they unknowingly bought a domain name that was already banned in Google because of the former content on the domain name and because of the links pointing to the website from other spam websites. While ZDNet eventually got their domain name un-banned and the manual penalty “revoked” by the search engine, it cost them a lot of lost traffic. They will eventually need to hire someone to clean up the links to their new domain name, and have the bad, low quality spam links removed.

There are other factors, besides links, that devalue a domain name, including:

- Being on an email blacklist(s)
- Having been used for Social Media spam
- Having been parked for a period of time.

If the domain name is currently or was previously used to send email spam, most likely it has been flagged for sending spam. It could still be on an email blacklist, making it difficult to be used to send email in the future. Email sent from the domain name might not be delivered.
If the domain name was referenced on social media sites (creating spam links on social media sites) in a spammy or malicious way to capture traffic, there can be problems using it in the future in social media campaigns. In some cases where I have seen this to be the case, the search engines were very aware of the social media mentions. While the social media mentions will eventually go away on sites like Twitter, they are still present on Google Plus and even on Facebook. The domain’s brand reputation could have been tainted, as well.

If a domain name has been parked for a period of time, from a search engine optimization perspective, it can take a considerable amount of effort to get content on that domain name to perform well in the search results. Typically, if a domain name is parked, and a new website is put on that domain name, you can expect a 6-month delay when it comes to search engine rankings. There are rare circumstances when it can be quicker than 6 months, such as putting a lot of online and offline marketing efforts into promoting the domain name. The quality of the links pointing to the domain name, as well as having media attention (being mentioned in the news) can also have an effect on how long it takes for the domain name to start receiving traffic from the organic search results.

**Should You Ever Just Give Up on a Domain?**

I have been asked previously about just “giving up” on a domain name and starting fresh with another domain name. For example, a client had a website that had such a bad link problem (thousands of low quality, unnatural links to the site) that they thought about just giving up on their current domain name and starting fresh with a new domain name. Typically, I do not recommend just “giving up” and starting fresh with a new domain name. There are several reasons why you would not want to do this:

- The domain name has history.
- You’ve built a brand on that domain name.
- Your current customers know that the domain name is your website.
- There are still at least some quality links pointing to the domain name.
- The domain name is a good, quality domain name. Maybe even a premium domain name.

The search engines, mainly Google, give us ways to “clean up” our past, including cleaning up and removing low quality link spam. And there are opportunities to remove spam content on a current domain name, as well. The biggest value of a website and domain name is the history that it has—it’s very tough to replace that. The branding and current customer base is equally tough to replace, as well.

The only situation where I would think about going with a new domain name (not moving the site, but completely starting fresh with a new domain name) is when the website is “fairly new”, less than two years old. There is no history, and the website generally has always been a magnet for spam would be another reason. And finally, if the website was on a very poor quality domain name, I might recommend starting fresh on a premium domain name.

**Additional Information**

For additional information, or if you have any questions regarding anything mentioned in this white paper, feel free to contact Bill Hartzer, at Globe Runner, at www.GlobeRunner.com.