

Adding .app to the Internet

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Bored with dot-com? Soon there may be dot-app for that.

In the biggest expansion of Internet addresses, the organization that oversees the naming system said Wednesday that it had received 1,930 applications for new "top level domains," the letters that follow the "dot." The most sought-after extension is .app, with 13 applicants, ranging from Amazon to the .app Registry — though not Apple, the company that popularized the mobile application.

The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, known as Icann, is expected to approve hundreds of these extensions for use, the first of which should be in use by next year.

"The Internet is about to change forever," said Rod Beckstrom, chief executive of Icann. "Through its history, the Internet has renewed itself through new ideas. We're on the cusp of new ideas and innovation which will give rise to new jobs and ways to link communities and share information."

At a news conference in London, Icann disclosed that applications had been filed for suffixes featuring brand names like .heinz and .walmart, cities (.nyc and .paris) or categories of products and services like .bank and .home.

The geographical origin of the applications demonstrates the increasingly international nature of the Internet. While nearly half of the bids are from North America, more than 600 have come from Europe, with about 300 from the Asia-Pacific region.

More than 100 of the applications are for extensions in non-Western alphabets. While so-called internationalized domain names have been phased in since 2010, the current round of expansion could accelerate the globalization of the Internet, Mr. Beckstrom said.

"That is going to mean a lot to the people in countries who maybe feel they haven't benefited fully from the Internet," he said.

While there are already several hundred dot-suffixes, many of these, including country codes like .co.uk, come with restrictions. There are only a handful of so-called generic top-level domains, including .info, .net, .org and the popular .com — which, according to supporters of the expansion plan, is running out of capacity for accommodating the digital world's ever-growing addressing needs.

The publication of the applications Wednesday is only one step in a process that has been under way for more than four years. But the event Wednesday provided a first detailed look at how some of the new addresses might be used, and at the vast scope of the project.

The expansion creates an opportunity for marketers, who will be able to develop Web sites with addresses ending in their own companies' brand names, or an entire category of products or services, like .music or .insurance.

"This is an opportunity for brands, cities and countries to step out of what was this very limited — in my view — environment in which they could promote their brands," said Alex Berry, senior vice president for enterprise services at Neustar, an Internet registry service that is working with clients like New York City, which is seeking the .nyc name. "This is a positive, a once-in-a-generation opportunity that we'll look back on 10 years from now and say, Wow." Among the most active bidders among individual companies were Google and Amazon, each seeking dozens of new extensions.

Not everyone is equally pleased.

As the expansion of the address system was in the works, Ican was dogged by complaints that it was bowing to the demands of the Internet registry business, which stands to benefit hugely from a surge in new addresses by collecting fees. More recently, in April, the process was delayed by a technical problem that allowed some applicants to see each others' data.

Some brand owners, meanwhile, have complained that the expansion could cause trademark violations and other headaches and expenses.

Luxury goods companies, which have long complained of trademark abuse in the digital realm, appear to have been active bidders for the new address extensions, with high-end carmakers like Bugatti, Maserati, Ferrari and Lamborghini all seeking to acquire new top-level domains in their names.

While some of these might be so-called defensive registrations, to protect their brands, Mr. Beckstrom said he thought the companies would make active use of the new addressing possibilities.

"I'm speculating here, but I would be surprised to not see companies start using these as their primary Web sites," rather than continuing to feature .com sites in this role, he said.

There is also a lingering question about whether the new suffixes are needed at all. Some new top-level domains that Ican has created in previous, smaller expansion rounds have attracted little interest. Many consumers find Web sites via search engines, rather than typing in an exact Web address. Others are increasingly using mobile applications, rather than the open Internet.

In any case, what could turn out to be the most challenging part of the process is about to begin — deciding who gets to use which of the new extensions. Ican set the price of applications high, at \$185,000, to try to discourage frivolous bids; still, more than 200 terms are being sought by more than one bidder. In addition to .app, extensions like .inc and .art were particularly popular, attracting 10 applications each.

Ican has detailed criteria for the selection process, specifying that trademark owners would have first dibs on their own names. The organization will also conduct criminal background checks on corporate officers at the applicants, in an effort to prevent fraud and other abuses. Objections can be filed with Ican for two months.

But some disputes could be difficult to sort out, analysts say. There are several applications for the extension .merck, a name used by two drug makers, Merck KGaA of Germany and Merck & Co. of the United States. There are also two bidders for the .guardian name — The Guardian newspaper of Britain and Guardian Life Insurance of America.

Some applicants have also been grumbling about the way that Ican will conduct the selection process. Rather than processing all applications at once, it will do this in several batches, meaning some of the new extensions will be available long before others.

Trademark lawyers are gearing up for a busy season. The law firm of Crowell & Moring has created a 17-member team to work on disputes arising from the process, said Flip Petillion, an intellectual property expert at the firm in Brussels.

"This is absolutely good business for us," said Mr. Petillion, whose firm has already been involved in previous legislation involving top-level domains, including the .xxx extension, which is used for pornography. "There are going to be many ways to question these decisions."

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