

The perils and potential of dot-bank

Here's a question that is kicking around just now: Would it help marketing and customer retention if a bank's internet address domain was much more specific? Namely, instead of ending in dot com (.com), it ended in dot-bank (.bank)? How about taking it further by having the address end in dot-yourbank (.yourbank)?

The prospect of getting such a moniker, called a "top-level domain," is attracting companies in many industries including several banks. Such an opportunity is available for only a limited time, however. Over the past three years, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) established a set of new rules and guidelines for those wishing to apply to serve as registrar for any new domain. The application process began Jan. 12 and will remain open until April 12.

As ABA's Doug Johnson, vice-president, risk management policy, says the internet entered a new age when ICANN began accepting applications for new top-level domain names. This change—which ABA has been monitoring and commenting on since the beginning—means that there could be an explosion of website suffixes beyond the familiar ".com," ".org," and ".gov." Think instead of dot-apple (.apple), or dot-newyork (.newyork), or dot-yourbank (.yourbank).

There are two types of top-level domain applications—open and community. Open means a company could use its brand name. Community means that an industry, for example, could apply for a generic top-level domain name—hence, dot-bank (.bank) or dot-eco (.eco).

A third of all applicants participating in ICANN's new top-level domain program likely will come from the IT and financial services industries, according to figures released by ARI Registry Services. It predicts more than 1,000 total applications will be submitted before the April 12 deadline. Adrian Kinderis, CEO of ARI Registry Services, says: "Analysis of more than 400 clients we've engaged with globally over the past year shows technology and finance companies in Asia Pacific and the United States lead the pack."

Kinderis says such domains can help companies differentiate themselves while taking advantage of new online channels. "The rapid growth of ecommerce and online retail also complements the move to a .brand domain name. For example, in the near future we may see short, relevant, and memorable domain names such as iphone.apple, creditcards.hsbc, and shoes.nike," he says.

Even so, that leaves a lot of banks not interested or otherwise out of the running. So what's the big deal?

"Whether you desire a dot-bank domain name for your institution or not, a survey conducted by ABA indicated that a majority of bankers do not want someone else operating a "yourbank.bank" domain that could create brand confusion," Johnson says. "The trust of bank customers and the integrity of our payments systems could be undone by a company or an individual whose only interest in becoming the keeper of the dot-bank domain is financial gain."

Unfortunately, this is not merely an academic exercise. One company, Domain Security LLC, has been particularly active in persuading banks and companies to "pre-register" for dot-bank (.bank) and dot-secure (.secure) sites. The ABA has received questions from bankers about this. The thing is, pre-registration would help DSL demonstrate "community," a necessary element to obtain dot-bank, and ties into a scheme to help them show ICANN that they represent potential users of whatever domain they seek to control, Johnson says.

The company also filed an application to register ".bank" as a trademark. So far DSL has not been successful. That application is currently pending a second review by the examiner based upon a letter of protest submitted by ABA and BITS, a division of The Financial Services Roundtable. Still, a quick internet search just last week turned up at least three sites seeking pre-registrations for dot-bank. The sites had different names but all were obviously connected straight to Domain Security.

ABA and BITS have been working on behalf of the financial community to keep the job of registering dot-bank sites out of the hands of opportunistic startups. Their efforts resulted in ICANN acknowledging that financial domains should have higher levels of security than others. Additionally, ICANN agreed to add limited intellectual property protection. Further, government agencies, including federal banking regulators, have an avenue to express concerns about financial domain applications, if they want to.

So what should any bank do? At the least—and first and foremost—become aware of and resist those who try to get the bank to pre-register for any kind of top-level domain name until ICANN has determined what entity has the authority to do so.

ABA says it welcomes your input on this issue. Stay tuned for future developments. By all means, contact ABA with any questions or to support its efforts in this arena. You can email Doug Johnson at djohnson@aba.com

Sources used for this article include:

Technology and finance industries to dominate new domain applications

Is there a 'Dot Bank' in your bank's future?

ABA and BITS choose Verisign as registry operator for potential new generation of financial services domains

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