

New domain name keeps things simple

WEBSITES

Rob Minto considers the appetite for the .tel domain name, launched today

From today, businesses will be able to register a new top level internet domain name - ".tel" - but will there be a mad rush or a collective shrug?

"Dot tel" is pitched at businesses and individuals, as a simple way of getting listed on the web without having to create a website. It's an entirely different proposition to previous domain names, and gives all registrants a listing in the global directory - telpages.

With other domain names you buy the name (example.com), and then point it at a server where you put up your website. That website contains whatever you want, in whatever format. But it leaves no standard way for customers to find the information they want.

Dot tel differs in that businesses or individuals are buying a domain name that gives them a template on which they can enter a range of contact details. These details can be links to existing websites, telephone details and keywords, as well as information about the owner's location. It is also optimised for search engines.

The launch of a new top level domain (TLD) name - the last bit of a web address, such as ".com" - was once seen as a big event. Debates raged over whether the next domain to launch should be ".xxx" for porn sites, and whether some cities needed their own names such as ".nyc".

But that debate was made redundant by the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, the body that regulates top level domains, when it announced earlier this year that it will open up the system and allow any name people want so long as they pay.

Organisations will be able to create their own top level domain - in effect creating ".anything" - adding a layer of confusion for customers and a headache for marketing departments.

Add in a global slowdown, and the launch of dot tel comes at a difficult time. But given how it works, it may become the one name that small businesses need.

Justin Hayward, communications director for Telnic, the company setting up the domain, says: "It's online for offline people. There's no ongoing hosting cost, no need to worry about building a website for customers to find your business."

Mr Hayward agrees that dot tel may challenge the directory listings business, given the low cost - around £15 (\$23) per year - and ability to update and control the information.

Although dot tel is a very different domain name proposition, it may take time to catch on.

Recent launches of some generic top level domains have not raised much interest, and have appeared more about protecting existing brands than creating anything useful for businesses.

The reason is the dominance of the ".com" name.

The dotcom extension has more than 78m active domains.

The newer ".biz", created in 2001, still has only 2m registrations, and is also behind the country specific domains such as ".de" for Germany and ".cn" for China, each with more than 12m registrations.

Jonathan Robinson, chief operating officer at domain name company NetNames says: "There is a risk of TLD fatigue. Dot tel could be successful if people understand it, but will the message get out?"

He also noted that the Ican ruling may not help: "If there is chaos, that may entrench '.com' and make it more valuable. There could be a flight to quality."