Domain Names and Search Engine Optimization

Issue paper by Olivier Duffez for Afnic

Six years after the first analysis made by Olivier Andrieu in our issue paper #2, in this new issue we obtain the views of Olivier Duffez, SEO consultant and creator of the site WebRankInfo, on the relationship between domain names and SEO in the light of the imminent arrival of new TLDs.

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2 The impact of a domain name on SEO.

3 Should you have one or more domain names?

4 In that case, should you only buy one domain name?
No!

5 What domain name TLDs should you use?

To a certain extent, a domain name is the primary identity of a website. But what impact does it have on the SEO of the site concerned? Should the owner have one or more domain names? With or without key words? With which TLDs? Have these strategies changed or they will change in the near future? These are the main issues that we address in this paper.

1

The need for a domain name

The algorithms used by Google, Bing or other search engines are based on a large number of criteria. Some are specific to each page (on-page), others to the aspects of the page such as the links that point to it (off-page) and the last concern the entire site (on-site).

Among all these criteria, the «reputation» of the site in the broad sense of the term is probably the most important - even if there is no official way of measuring it. That reputation is associated with the site as a whole: it starts at zero when the site is created and progresses as and when it manages to make itself known on the web. To identify a site, the search engines start with its address. If it changes, the owner runs the risk of having its reputation drop back to zero.

It is not mandatory to have your own domain name to edit a website: for example you can be hosted on a blogging platform. But what happens if it changes domain name? You just have to hope that the migration is technically well done... And what will happen if you need to change your address because the platform disappears or its terms not longer satisfy you (such as the use of advertising for your competitors)? In cases such as these you may lose the most important part of the reputation of your site.

From an SEO perspective, therefore, it is highly recommended to have your own domain name. No serious website project should be launched without a domain name (and web hosting to operate it).

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The impact of a domain name on SEO

Is it better to have a domain name consisting of keywords (to be better positioned on the corresponding queries) or which is the same as your brand (or a mixture of both)? Although things have changed a little, it is advisable to focus on branding.

Certainly, having a keyword-based domain name can help for SEO purposes, but:

- It only helps for the few queries related to these words, but most certainly not for any of the other queries. When you know the range of ideas Internet users employ to express themselves when they use search engines (the long tail principle), you quickly understand that keywords are not that interesting.

- If the domain name of the site is a keyword, it is therefore not your brand. How are you going to promote it? If you have to use another site, it is not very effective for your communication campaigns...

- If the domain name is a keyword, it is very limiting. What will you do if you want to expand to other themes or geographical locations? The issue of the number of domain names is discussed below.

- Google has officially introduced an algorithm to penalize poor EMD (EMD = Exact Match Domain, a domain name consisting solely of keywords). The purpose for Google is to penalize sites with no quality content, and giving priority to advertisements.

Incidentally, the impact of keywords in the domain name is essentially indirect: most of the links to the site using the celebrated keywords as anchor (i.e. clickable) text. Since anchor text is a major element of SEO ranking, having keywords is indirectly beneficial. In this case, it is better to separate the words (with a hyphen): it is more efficient because the search engine locate the words better than when they are stuck together.

3

Should you have one or more domain names?

Having keywords in your domain name (and quality content) can help to position these keywords. So why not create multiple sites?

This is not recommended because the notion of reputation mentioned above is the most important, mainly in the Google algorithm. When your site's reputation is good, everything becomes easier, and this trend is increasing over the years (particularly since February 2009). To develop the reputation of a site, it must accumulate a large number of citations (usually through links to the site) from reputable sites if possible. This is incompatible with the creation of many (small) sites, each with its own domain name.

Consider two examples: the first is that of a seller of garden tables. He may be tempted to use a name such as gardentables.fr. What will happen if he also wants to sell chairs and sunshades? A new domain name each time? And if he then wants to sell indoor tables? For each new site (domain name), he will have to rebuild its reputation.

Another example: imagine a wedding planner based in Bordeaux that starts with wedding-organizer-bordeaux.fr or something similar. What will he do if he wants to expand throughout the Aquitaine region or elsewhere in France?

Operating a series of websites with a different domain name each time means:

• Starting from scratch for each of them in terms of reputation;

• Multiplying the enormous task of creating brand awareness by as many sites;

• Taking the risk that the search engines equate the network of sites to spam;

• Reducing the marketing impact: internet users will not recognize the brand

In addition, a change of domain name can penalize the ranking if the migration is done poorly.

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In that case, should you only buy one domain name? No!

You should buy:

- Everything that protects your brand: the name of the domain name with variations and misspellings, with and without dashes, with and without accents for the main TLDs affected by the extent of your presence in the world;

- A certain number of domain names consisting of the major keywords for your business. Warning: the objective here is to prevent your competitors from registering the domain names and creating a large number of websites with them.

How should you use your domain names?

- In the case of your brand, some of them can point to your site, so that users who make an input error immediately arrive on your site.

- In the case of domain names with keywords, it does not make sense to point them to your site:

   - As far as users are concerned, they do not waste time typing a keyword followed by a domain name extension to see where it points to, they search using keywords in the engines.

   - As far as SEO is concerned: these domain names have no existence and therefore no reputation. Whether they refer to your site (by DNS pointing or redirection or links) or not will not change anything. You may even risk an SEO penalty because of creating spam...

Whatever the case, care must be taken not to index the site several times with several domain names to avoid problems of duplicate content.

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What domain name TLDs should you use?

The types of TLDs

To simplify things, in terms of impact on SEO, a distinction can be made between two types of domain name TLDs:

- The ccTLDs (country code top-level domain) which correspond to national top-level domains, such as the *.fr* TLD.

- The gTLDs (generic Top-Level Domain) which correspond to generic domains such as the *.com* TLD.

Search engines use a wide range of criteria to determine which site or part of site should be returned as appropriate. Major criteria include the language of the query, the browser language, the geolocation of the user, the international version of the engine used, the TLD of the domain name of the site, the language(s) of the site's pages, the geolocation parameters of the site in the webmaster tools and possibly the geolocation of the server hosting the site).

Note: Some ccTLDs have special (unofficial) meanings, such *.tv* (for «television») or *.me* («me» in English). Google has decided to treat certain ccTLDs as gTLDs.

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The new TLDs

In 2012, ICANN approved the creation of hundreds of new gTLDs associated with brands (e.g. Danone), geographic areas (for example *.paris*) or other items (e.g. *.clothing* for the clothing sector).

These TLDs are still very recent and not yet exploited, so their impact on SEO is not precisely known. It seems logical that these TLDs should be treated just like the other gTLDs, i.e. they are neutral[1]. They will neither represent an advantage or a disadvantage in itself for SEO, if you put aside these two aspects:

• They are not associated with a country (even the *.paris* for example, unless Google manages exceptions as it does for some ccTLDs);

• They can include a keyword, whose impact is probably the same as a keyword located in the wording of the domain name. For example, the domain name spectacles.paris includes the keyword «Paris» in the gTLD: one could imagine that the impact will be similar to the domain name spectacles-paris.com.

thalasso.bzh
high.school **spectacles.paris**
magasins.bio
destination.voyage **nrj.music**
location.box *animation.film* **pop.art**
street.dance **tatoo.ink** **jouets.kids**
asia.food
photo.gallery
sf.book **tonyparker.basketball** **vente.maison**
emploi.salon **free.photos**

To conclude, domain names play a crucial role in site management and SEO. Rather than seek minor benefits related to the presence of keywords, it is better to use the domain name as a tool for protecting and developing the associated brand. The new TLDs offer opportunities for SEO, a constantly-changing discipline.

About Olivier Duffez

Olivier Duffez is the creator of the site **WebRankInfo** (2002), community information portal on SEO and web marketing in general. **As an SEO consultant**, he has been providing optimization tips to his customers since 2003. He has also created **Ranking Metrics** (2005), training company (SEO, AdWords, Analytics and social networks) and a publisher of optimization tools on the same themes.

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About Afnic

Afnic is a non-profit corporation in charge of the administrative and technical management of the *.fr* and *.re* Top-Level Domain names for France and Reunion Island.

Afnic comprises public and private stakeholders, including government officials, users, and Internet Service Providers (Registrars).

http://www.afnic.fr/