

Slamming

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1 Definition and varieties

Slamming can be defined as an illicit practice aiming to deceive clients in order to sell them unsolicited services. Slamming as used here refers to the domain name sector, even though this type of practice naturally exists in other sectors, in particular telecommunications. In most cases, the companies involved in slamming use the Whois databases of registries to contact their victims.

To date, we have identified three major slamming groups. However, this list cannot be considered as exhaustive since it depends on the imagination of its perpetrators.

► The false renewal invoice

This variety of slamming consists in sending the domain name owner a notice warning that the domain is about to expire. The notice is presented as a renewal invoice.

Clients who are not very familiar with the procedures for managing domains may be deceived by the wording of the notice into thinking that they have to pay this “invoice” to renew their domain name. In actual fact, they will be signing a request to transfer their name to the issuer of the “Expiry notice”, who is a service provider that they do not know.

The feedback that we have received from victims of this practice indicates that the new service provider generally refuses to answer subsequent requests sent to it.

The many legal proceedings instituted against the perpetrators of this illegal practice have not as yet forced them to end these activities.

► Psychological pressure

In this variant of slamming, a service provider contacts a company and informs it that «one of its clients» has asked it to register one or more domain names that are identical or close to the name of the contacted company or its brands.

The service provider then proposes to the company to register these names on its behalf to protect them from the obviously illicit intentions of its “client”.

The procedure is usually presented as motivated by an ethical concern to protect the targeted company from the malpractices of third parties. Although this approach is well-founded in principle, it can be considered as illicit because of the systematic nature of the telephone solicitation made by these slammers, the exceptionally high prices charged as well as the creation of strong psychological pressure reinforced by the need to make a decision in just a few minutes.

It is hard to believe that would-be cybersquatters will concentrate their registration attempts with service providers who are generally unknown to the general public. The very existence of these so-called “clients” who want to register domain names corresponding to these brands cannot be established with certainty.

Here again, we do not know of any legal proceedings that have succeeded in forcing these companies to put an end to their activities. Their victims are vulnerable because when taken singly, each case may be considered to be relatively legal. It is the systematic and “industrial” nature of the practice that can show that the intention is of a fraudulent nature.

► The false “register”

A third variant that has been identified is when the slammer contacts French companies or agencies present on the Internet and gives them the impression that they have to register in the slammer’s directory.

The wording of the message implies that this “referencing” is compulsory. However, victims who sign the proposal receive a real directory accompanied by a bill amounting to several hundreds of euros, which is excessive considering the limited circulation of the directory.

The deception here lies in the use of visual and textual references associated with legitimate players of the directory and/or Internet market in France. This can mislead people who do not know much about these players or believe in any official-looking documents.

This practice already exists in the trademark sector, where foreign companies offer to “finalise” the international registration of recent registrants. Large organisations and professionals may be well armed against these practices, but smaller companies easily fall prey to them.

2 Common characteristics

A study of these different variants highlights several common characteristics:

- ▶ the service offered is never solicited beforehand by the victim. It originates from an unknown third party,
- ▶ the mechanism of the slamming operation is often based on a mix-up or an element of deception, intended to take advantage of the victim's credulousness or insufficient knowledge of the rules,
- ▶ in most cases, there is an element of psychological pressure through a latent menace to the victim who does not give a positive response to the proposal made to it: loss of a domain name, cybersquatting, etc.
- ▶ the rates proposed are usually much higher than normal, to enable the slammer to make as much money as possible by maximising its profit on the limited percentage of "prospects" who can be "persuaded".

3 Recommendations

The above analysis of the common **characteristics** of slamming leads to the following basic recommendations:

- ▶ for all operations on a domain name and in particular renewals, **you must only go through the registrar to whom you have entrusted the management of this domain name**. Any other entity can be potentially suspicious if you have not given it the prior authority to carry out the planned operation;
- ▶ **designate one person from your company who is clearly authorised to take decisions concerning your domain name**, and inform all your employees and registrar that all requests concerning domain names must be validated at least by this person;
- ▶ **make sure that your registrar does not respond to any solicitation from a third party** without first validating it with the authorised person and ensure that it notifies you of any suspicious solicitation;
- ▶ **do not take any decision at very short notice**; if you have any doubts, ask your service provider to explain all the tiny details about the decision to be taken;
- ▶ **monitor the domain name sector regularly to find out about any new developments**; such practices have been identified and their articles can keep you informed.