

Forgetting to renew domain name can be disastrous

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Created *01/06/2005 - 3:03am*

Submitted by srlinuxx on Wednesday 1st of June 2005 03:03:14 AM Filed under [Web](#) [1]

If the Web is your small or home business' front door, losing control of your Internet domain name can be catastrophic.

A domain name is the name of a Web site or the part of an e-mail address that comes after the (AT) sign. It's the part of the Web address (or URL) that comes after the <http://www>. part.

"It's amazing how many businesses don't equate the domain name with the Web site name or their business name," says Aaron Larkins, president of Profitability.net in Cincinnati, which helps companies set up Web sites along with domains and domain names. "It's as much of a brand as anything else. And some people just let it slip away, not knowing how important it is."

No statistics are available, but Larkins and other experts in the field say they see a fairly constant stream of businesses letting their domain name registries lapse. That omission, in turn, can lead to breakdowns of their Web sites or their e-mail systems.

Just look at some of the names that have had this happen in the past couple of years:

- The Washington Post's e-mail system went down for at least several hours last February when that company did not renew its (AT)washpost.com domain name, although the Web site continued operating normally.
- Online auction site eBay briefly lost control of its German site www.eBay.de last September when hackers apparently got control of its domain name.
- In January, New York-based Internet service provider Panix, host to scores of business Web sites and e-mail systems, lost control of its own domain, with all the Web traffic being directed to a company in Australia and e-mail going to another firm in England. It took more than 24 hours to straighten out the situation.

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