

How to choose a domain name for your website

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One of the questions I get asked most when someone is starting their website is "How do I choose a domain name?" (For an easy explanation of what a domain name is, read [The basic building blocks of any website](#) .)

Your first step is to decide just how important it is to use your actual business name as your domain name.

Let's look at a real business to put this into perspective...

Michael, a German precision engineer now working in South Africa, runs a wire erosion and milling firm called ETM Mettler. Should his domain name include ETM Mettler or should it be something else entirely?

To answer this question, Michael needs to consider how people searching for his business will look for him.

- Is the business well known in his industry, in which case people will be looking specifically for ETM Mettler?
- Or will people be looking for the kind of work he does and so be searching under terms like wire erosion, wire cutting and milling?

Also important to consider here is what is easier to remember: www.etmmettler.co.za or www.wirecutting.co.za ?

In Michael's case, wire cutting is the easier domain to associate with the work he does. People tend to remember the words related to a website - "I heard about this website called Wire Cutting" but not necessarily the exact details of how the domain name is written.

People remember words far easier than just a few letters. This means that domain names consisting of just the first letters of a business name are generally not a smart idea.

The natural tendency will be to type in the words as they are remembered i.e wirecutting. If that doesn't work, most people just go to Google, type in the words they remember and wait for Google to give it to them. (So it's pretty important that your site appears in the search engines!)

The length and spelling of this particular domain name is also good as both the words are commonly used, short and easy to spell. Long domain names and those made up of words with tricky spelling can be a problem as your visitor will battle to remember you. A simple typing mistake will also mean she can't find you.

A few other aspects now need to be considered:

- * The search engines like hyphens between the words in your domain name.
- * Keywords in the domain name is also a good thing.
- * Humans read hyphen-separated domain names more easily.

So www.wire-cutting.co.za seems to be a good choice.

But search engines never have to hear and then type in domain names - people do. And here's where hyphens start becoming a real pain!

If you have to tell someone your domain name and spell it out for them the conversation will usually go something like this:

"That's www dot wire hyphen

"What?"

"Hyphen..... um... dash.... you know, the minus sign...."

"Oh, ok"

"So it's www dot wire w i r e dash hyphen cutting c u t t i n g."

Then the person has to type in the hyphen, which is not a natural way of typing either - lots of mistakes.

And it get's worse when explaining the hyphen is "koppelteken" in Afrikaans.

And it's NOT because people are stupid but because the way we hear things and then interpret them and then write them down is an interesting process. What you write doesn't always look like what you heard. Then you think there's a problem so you ask and it generally turns into quite an explanation.

Basically people are used to writing down what they hear with spaces between the words. Many people are comfortable with the idea that, for the internet, you usually leave out the spaces between the words. What most people are not comfortable with is putting hyphens between words - especially lots of them.

Having to ask you about the hyphens between the words in your domain name can also make people feel uncomfortable (they're feeling like you might think they are stupid) and that's not an association you want to form with your name.

(Our own primary domain name elite-ideas.net has caused all these problems more often than I care to remember. If you can avoid them, I would really suggest you do.)
So must a domain name have a hyphen or not?

Your best bet is to take advantage of the best of both hyphenated and non-hyphenated domain names. Michael should try to register as many of the following to suit as many different types of people, search methods and ways of relating to words and the internet as possible (The .co.za ones for trading in South Africa are a must. A .com is the most desirable extension for your domain name if your focus is international):

www.wirecutting.co.za (and .com / .net if possible)
www.wire-cutting.co.za (.com / .net)

And to allow for those who do search for ETM Mettler by it's full name, Michael may want to register
www.etmmettler.co.za /net /com as well.

Lots of people frown when I've suggested registering more than one domain name. No, you don't need to put a separate website on each of them! :-)

What we can do is put your website on one domain name, e.g. wirecutting.co.za and have the other domains "point" to that one. So if anyone types in any of the other domains, it will go to the main one, wirecutting.co.za automatically.

I know registering multiple domain names is extra money and that the domains need to be renewed annually. On the other hand, domain names aren't expensive and the more ways you allow people to naturally connect to your website the better.

Also, it does happen that a firm chooses one domain name and invests a lot of effort in building up its website. Then a competitor comes along and registers a very similar domain name (the one with the hyphen for example) and profits by visitors who mistakenly come to it, looking for the original business. It's a situation that can easily be avoided by just registering all the applicable domains in the beginning.

One final point to bear in mind: anyone can register just about any domain they like. In the "real" world, if you register a business name, no-one else can trade with it. This is not the case in cyberspace.

Your registered business may be called Great Interiors but that doesn't stop someone else registering the domain greatinteriors.co.za / com / net. So when you want to start your website with that domain name, it may already belong to someone else and you'll have to choose another name for the website. It may not be fair, especially to the business that's taken the time and trouble to build itself up, but that's the way it is.

You could try contacting the relevant person and ask to buy the domain name from them as they are now the legal owners of it (and will continue to be as long as they pay the annual domain name renewal fee.) I must, however, warn you that it is unlikely that they will sell the domain at all and certainly not at the price of registering a new one from scratch. (One of the websites we did was for wedding photos and we tried to get a certain domain name that had already been bought by someone else - who wasn't even using it. He wanted \$10 000 for it! Needless to say we used something else!)

A short checklist for you to refer to when considering a new domain name:

- Does it say something about the info offered on the website it goes to? Keywords relating to the content are a good choice.
- Is it short and easy to remember?
- Is it easy to spell and are the words used often/easily recognizable?
- Is it a good choice for the search engines?
- Is it a good choice for human visitors?
- Can you get the hyphenated and un-hyphenated versions?
- Can you get the .com / .net and .co.za versions?

Remember, your domain name is not only the address people are going to use to get to your website, it is also going to form part of your e-mail address (e.g. info@yourdomain.com), so it's worth it to take a little bit of time choosing the right one for you in the beginning.

PS: New domains get registered in the thousands every day so there's no guarantee that what is available today will be available tomorrow. Part of our SnapSites website solution includes the registration of a suitable domain name for your business. Don't let getting your website up and running become just another broken New Year's resolution – go to SnapSites today and get your domain name and website sorted out today!