

Coming soon to the Internet: The .whatever address

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In this March 16, 2010 file photo, former President Bill Clinton gives the keynote address at the "25 Years of Dot Com Policy Impact Forum" in Washington. Internet minders voted Monday, June 20, 2011 to allow virtually unlimited new domain names based on themes as varied as company brands, entertainment and political causes, in the system's biggest shake-up since it started 26 years ago. Groups able to pay the \$185,000 application can petition next year for new updates to ".com" and ".net" with suffixes using nearly any word in any language, including in Arabic, Chinese and other scripts, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers decided at a meeting in Singapore. (AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin, File)

A quarter-century after the creation of ".com," the agency that assigns Internet addresses is loosening its rules and allowing suffixes named after brands, hobbies, political causes and just about anything else.

Under guidelines approved Monday, Apple could register addresses

ending in ".ipad," Citi and Chase could share ".bank" and environmental groups could go after ".eco." Japan could have ".com" in Japanese.

It's the biggest change to the system of Internet addresses since it was created in 1984.

More than 300 suffixes are available today, but only a handful, such as the familiar ".net" and ".com," are open for general use worldwide. Hundreds of new suffixes could be established by late next year, thousands in years to come.

"This is the start of a whole new phase for the Internet," said Peter Dengate Thrush, chairman of the [Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers](#), the California nonprofit organization in charge of Internet addresses.

The novelty addresses will be costly - \$185,000 to apply and \$25,000 a year to maintain one. A personal address with a common suffix such as ".com" usually costs less than \$10 a year.

[ICANN](#) says it costs tens of millions of dollars to write the guidelines for suffixes, review applications and resolve any disputes. Even with the hefty fees, the organization says it plans only to break even. It's also setting aside up to \$2 million to subsidize applications from [developing countries](#).

The expansion plan, which runs about 350 pages, took six years to develop.

Before 1998, the United States, which paid for most of the early Internet, was in charge of handing out Internet suffixes. ICANN, which has [board members](#) from every inhabited continent, was a way to take the administrative burden off the U.S. government.

ICANN was always supposed to expand the number of available Web suffixes. But the progress was slow because of concerns that new ones could infringe on trademarks, be obscene or give a platform to hate groups. Competing interests wrestled with ICANN over guidelines.

ICANN has come up with procedures for any party to object to applications for trademark, or other reasons.

[Internet addresses](#), technically known as domain names, tell computers where to find a website or send an email message. Without them, people would have to remember clunky strings of numbers such as "165.1.59.220" instead of "ap.org."

But the addresses have grown to mean much more. Amazon.com has built its brand on one, and bloggers take pride in running sites with their own domain names, uncluttered by the names of hosting services.

The address expansion could create new opportunities for companies to promote their brands and allow all sorts of niche communities to thrive online. But they could create confusion, too.

And they might not make much difference. More and more people online find what they're looking for by typing a term into a search engine, not tapping out a full address. Or they use an app and don't type anything.

ICANN will start taking applications for new suffixes Jan. 12. Approval of individual applications is expected to be quick if there are no challenges for trademark, morality or other reasons. Proposals that are challenged would have to undergo more thorough reviews, including possible arbitration to decide on the merits of claims.

High-profile entertainment, consumer-goods and financial-services

companies will likely be among the first to apply for the new suffixes to protect their brands.

Canon Inc., the camera and printer company, already plans to apply for ".canon." And Apple could go after not just ".apple," but also ".ipad" and ".iphone." Apple had no comment Monday.

Groups have already formed to back ".sport" for sporting sites, and two conservationist groups separately are seeking the right to operate an ".eco" suffix. Trade groups for bankers and financial-services companies are jointly exploring applications for ".bank," ".insure" and ".invest" for their member companies.

Smaller companies stand to benefit, too. A florist called Apple can't use "Apple.com" because the computer company has it. Previously, the shop might have registered a longer, clunky address. Now it can just be "Apple.flowers."

Of course, a small florist might not be able to afford an expensive suffix. But an entrepreneur or a trade group might, and it could sell individual addresses ending in ".flowers" for \$10 or \$100 a pop. A successful suffix owner could make millions, much more than what it pays in application and annual fees.

When two or more groups have a legitimate claim to an address, ICANN expects them to work it out on their own. If they can't, the nonprofit will auction the suffixes.

"Things are going to have to be decided, like 'Who's a better guardian for .golf?' The PGA or some global group?" said Jeremiah Johnston, chief operating officer at Sedo.com, which helps companies resell domain names.

Sedo brokered the sale of Sex.com late last year for \$13 million, a record for a domain name. Despite the availability of new suffixes, Johnston doesn't expect the value of existing ".com" names to diminish. That's based on the limited number of additions to the system since 2000.

"Even though the new extensions come around, the ones that are most rooted and most popular in the minds of consumers, their value has only gone up," Johnston said.

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