

Master of your own Domain, or Slave?

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If you think you own and control your firm's website address, you'd better check again.

Your website address, or what's called a "domain" in today's rapidly changing Internet world, is almost as important as your firm's address in your local community. It will continue to become more and more important as more and more people turn to the Internet looking for information about funerals.

But, just as you go to register your firm's Internet address, you quickly realize it's gone! It has been taken by another firm with the same name, a disgruntled former employee, or your competitor down the street.

For others who thought they had done everything right when purchasing their firm's domain, they quickly discover that the domain is registered to the owner of the website developer they hired or the legal name of their website hosting firm.

Sadly, this has become common practice with some of the large website providers as well as a number of the smaller ones. These firms register the client's domain name in their own name in order to create a 'hostage' situation if the funeral home ever considers moving to another website provider. At a time when most website companies are here today and gone tomorrow, the practice becomes a ticking time bomb for funeral homes.

Another tactic employed by website companies is to try and block anyone they view as a competitive threat to them from reaching you. They do this without your knowledge or approval but the result is the same; they strip you of the right to control your own domain.

So how do you know if your firm's website address has been hijacked?

The first thing you need to do is to check the registration.

A great site to check this out is located at <http://whois-search.com>. Enter your domain name in the search box and you will be provided with all of the registration information related to the domain. This will produce a record showing the legal registrant, when it was first registered, and when it is set to renew.

If you are not listed as the registered owner, it's best to take immediate action. However, it is not recommend that you engage the registrant yourself. Contract a reputable third party firm that specializes in Internet matters and allow them to act on your behalf to attempt to change the records.

The Internet provides funeral homes an opportunity to better serve their families and communities by allowing them to offer a convenient, informative portal about funerals, options and costs. Surveys indicate that the public is having a greater sense of trustworthiness with firms that provide this information online. With the advent of new Integrated Web Systems (IWS) that offer complete self administration at very affordable prices, the barrier of entry to the World Wide Web for any size firm has been removed. But, even the best website solution can fail without the right domain name strategy.

Here are a series of helpful tips.

Make every effort to purchase the domain that matches your firm's name, brand, or "the way you answer your phone". Intuitively, this is what people will expect your domain name to be. Any other name can lead to an expensive uphill battle to educate the public differently.

Always try to acquire the ".com" extension because of its universality. Extended families and friends from around the world will be the ones looking to offer words of sympathy and support to the family at a time they need it most. The .com extension after your domain name is also perceived as professional; most will believe that you were forward thinking enough to acquire it years ago.

Domains can be purchased online from one of the many domain registry companies. The pricing can range from \$10-\$75 for the first year but be aware that your domain must be renewed on the anniversary each year. Many companies now offer multiple year registrations of up to 15 years while others offer automatic domain renewal services so you never need to worry about your renewal slipping through the cracks. Be careful not to fall into the trap of choosing the cheapest company; there are usually strings attached. If you have done your homework and selected the best, professional solution for your website, speak to them about registering your domain as well since some will include that service as part of your website purchase.

Make sure you check the registration record of your domain name regularly to ensure that you (or your firm) are the legally registered owner of the domain.

Regrettably, if another firm with the same name already owns the .com extension, you are probably out of luck. You can try an alternative extension such as .org /.net /.us, however you always run the risk of visitors and potential families trying the .com extension first. A number of registrars offer a "backorder" service which allows you first rights to purchase the domain in the event that the current owner does not renew or lets the renewal slip through the cracks.

Sadly, there is very little you can do under current domain regulations if a disgruntled employee, a less than scrupulous competitor, or website developer has purchased your domain and registered it in their own name. Unless the name of your firm has a registered Trademark, it probably will be difficult to get it back. If this happens, you will more than likely be held hostage for money to buy it back or run the risk of them publishing a less than flattering website under your firm's domain name.

Keep in mind that you can have multiple domains all pointing to the same website. If the name of your firm is lengthy, you might also want to consider purchasing a shorter version for use with e-mail and with death notice insertions. As long as you have the main one for search engines, the second one can almost be anything.

Your domain name is also a critical component to higher search engine rankings. For example, if someone types in the actual name of your funeral home, your search engine rankings will be very high, if not number one, because of the matched keywords. By the same token, if someone searches for "funeral homes in Smithville" and you acquired the domain www.SmithvilleFuneralHomes.com and pointed that domain to your firm's website, you would be the top match. Having multiple domains pointing at the same site can be a powerful strategy.

If you build it, it doesn't necessarily mean they will come. Once you own your firm's domain and have a professional, functional website ready to go live, make sure that your domain name is advertised on every piece of newly printed stationary and ads you run. You must help educate your public about your firm's website address and provide them with real information, services and conveniences when they get there. Once you establish that connection, there is an endless number of new services you can launch on the web to help increase potential business.

Make sure your firm's domain is listed at the bottom of every death notice. This will provide you with powerful promotional tools that highlight the incredible service you offer your grieving families through an efficient Online Condolence feature.

Bottom line – if you haven't already purchased your firm's domain name, it is wise to do so immediately. You do not have to have a website in place in order to purchase the domain but it's a wise investment to secure the future of your firm on the Internet. Thanks to relatively low costs, it is no longer a luxury to have a professional and interactive online service and it has become an integral component of funeral "service" expected by the public and the families we serve. "Controlling your own domain" has never had such a significant meaning.

For more information, please feel free to contact us at 1-866-748-3625 or online at www.FrontrunnerProfessional.com.