

Getting started

Have you ever wondered how Google or Bing decide which sites to show? At the most basic level, they look at the text on billions of pages and match that up with your query. But for almost any query, that results in millions of possible pages to show. So how do they decide which ones to show first?

Put simply, the search engine assigns a score to each possible page, then orders the results using that score. The score is calculated using hundreds of different factors. Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is the practice of trying to modify how a site is scored in order to make it show up higher (earlier) in the results. Both the specific factors and the relative importance of each of those factors are closely guarded secrets (and change constantly), but by observing the results for different queries we can get an idea of the most important ones.

Breaking it down

The scoring factors can be divided into two types: onsite and offsite.

Onsite factors are those that come from the website itself. They include (among hundreds of others), the following examples:

- The keywords in the URL (both the domain name and the “path”, or additional text that identifies the specific content on the site)
- Text on the page that users see
- Text stored in special hidden fields on the page (hidden to site visitors, but viewable by the search engine)
- Whether the site displays content to mobile users in a readable way (usually called “responsive design”)

Off-site factors are those that aren’t directly affected by the site itself. They include details such as:

- The number (and “quality”) of links from other sites to the page
- The number of Facebook likes and shares
- The number of Twitter followers and mentions in tweets
- Google+ circle inclusions, reviews, etc
- Reviews on Yelp, Google+, etc

With this background, we can start to think about how a website built on a new Top Level Domain will be ranked by a search engine. Most of the factors are not affected by the fact that a TLD is new. The text on the site, external links, social media mentions, etc all work the same way whether your site extension is *.NINJA* or *.COM*. In addition, representatives from some of the search engines have stated that there are no factors that explicitly favor or discriminate against new TLDs. However, there are a few areas where new TLDs can be helpful, and a few where they may be at a slight disadvantage.

The cons

Let’s start with the possible disadvantages. First, one of the suspected factors is domain age. All else being equal, an older domain name will rank above a newer domain name. Since at this point all domains on new TLDs are (by definition) relatively new, this factor may affect a new site’s ranking. Note that this is just as true of a domain on any TLD, though: a brand new *.COM* domain will be treated identically to a brand new *.ROCKS* domain. It’s not really a disadvantage of new TLDs themselves, but since you can’t buy an old *.DENTIST* or *.LAWYER* domain, there isn’t any way to address this.

The second, and more important disadvantage, is a lack of inbound links. The number and quality of inbound links to a site is an important ranking factor (this concept is the essential element of Google's original advantage over the other engines: the PageRank algorithm and accompanying patent). A new domain will not have any inbound links, and is therefore less likely to rank highly. As with the previous factor, note that this is not intrinsic to new TLDs; any new domain will be in the same position.

Both of these potential disadvantages will become less relevant over time, as domains using the new extensions age (and potentially become available on the aftermarket).

The pros

So, how might a new TLD compete against other sites? There are a couple of possible scoring factors that could lend new TLDs a significant advantage. First, the keywords present in the domain name have a big influence on ranking. This is due to multiple factors, though the most direct is a straight analysis of the words in the domain and how they compare to the query. In the simplest case (usually called "exact match"), the domain "*www.jacksonville.lawyer*" is clearly a great match for the query "Jacksonville lawyer." (In a follow-up post I'll show many examples of "exact match" results on various engines.)

Another, less direct but still very important impact of the keywords comes from another major ranking factor used by the search engines. To understand the importance of this factor, think about the ultimate goal of a search engine: to show sites that the user finds useful. The best way to tell if the sites shown were useful is to track whether the user visited them, and the best way to tell which of the sites shown were most useful is to track which one from the page of options was selected. Therefore, a measure of the likelihood that a visitor selects a site shown in the results (usually called Click Through Rate, or CTR) is an extremely strong scoring factor.

So what does this have to do with new TLDs? The user receives little information about each of the 10 or so results on each page. They see the domain name and path (aka URL), the title of the page, and a short snippet describing what is on the page. Since there are so many similar sites for most queries, often the title and description are very similar across many different pages, so the domain name becomes an important factor in deciding which result to visit. A domain name that is obviously about the right topic is more likely to be chosen before one that is ambiguous, and domains using new TLDs (especially vertically-specific TLDs, like *.BAND*, *.DENTIST*, *.LAWYER*, etc) will clearly stand out.

This is especially important for domain-specific brands. Bands are a good example of this. Let's say you are interested in the band "Underbelly". Searching just for their name will return results for the TV series, a number of entertainment companies, a pile of documentaries, etc, on many different domains. Seeing "*www.underbelly.band*" will immediately tell the user they've found the right site. So when the user picks this site, the search engine records that fact, and the next time it calculates the rankings for the different possible results, it will be more likely to show "*www.underbelly.band*."