

David Fearon argues that **umbrella domain names** aren't even worth the registration fee.

Money for nothing



I'll avoid making some kind of pun along the lines of 'what's in a name?' because they've all been done to death in recent months. But writing this a couple of weeks after the sale of the Internet domain

business.com for £4.7m, I just

have to add my own opinions to the fray.

Business.com, bought by a company called Ebusiness, is to be used as a portal for a range of business services, and the justification for the huge cash outlay is that the usual cost of establishing a brand name is bypassed. But branding consultant Allen Adamson is quoted in the *New York Times* as saying that there's little future in this type of generic, catch-all domain name, and I agree. Paying that kind of money for a single domain makes you wonder if any of the investors putting up the money for Internet-related ventures actually use the web on a day-to-day basis.

If you're looking for information on a particular topic, the quickest way to find what you want is often

www.altavista.digital.com. Compaq, having acquired DEC, subsequently shelled out a reported £2.1m for altavista.com in August 1998. I'd call that a sensible move – Compaq was protecting a valuable, specific brand. Ebusiness has paid twice that figure for a word that doesn't mean anything very much.

It only costs about £45 to register a domain name for two years – you can do it online via any number of ISPs. If you're going for a .com, once you've applied for the name through your chosen third party you'll get an invoice via email from Network Solutions in the US. From there you can hop across to the secure server and pay for it online. It's as easy as ordering a book from Amazon, which is why every generic .com domain you can possibly think of has been snapped up either by individuals, ISPs or domain-trading companies.

Try it yourself: think of the most obscure commercial activity you can, head over to www.internic.net and do a whois query on thatsubject.com. In the hope of making easy money, crazypaving.com, doubleglazing.com and every other daft generic domain has already been registered. The frustrating part is that only a tiny

percentage of these are actually attached to real sites; most just contain placeholders advertising the fact that the domain is for sale. Even when you do hit a live one, it's likely to be a company you've never heard of, operating from the most inconvenient physical location possible.

Information can travel at the speed of light from a server in America, but a chap from plumbing.com might take a little while longer to make the trip from Middletown, New York to fix your leaky tap. All this means that anyone with any experience in web use tends to avoid domain surfing with generic .com domains. You're far less likely to hit a red herring if you enter a well-known brand name URL: large companies swiftly bring their trademark lawyers to bear on domain speculators who try to acquire brand name domains. It's those couple of saved surfing seconds that will lead to generic domains languishing under the shadow of established brands.

Aside from those domains in the news, very few of them actually change hands for significant amounts of money. The upshot of most domain speculation is simply to clog up the web and make those very domains practically worthless in the long term.

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not a search engine, but domain surfing. Enter a sensible-sounding URL for the chosen subject into your browser's address field and you'll likely find what you're looking for after one or two attempts. I do it all the time: looking at my browser's history list now I can see opengl.org, vrml.org and usb.org, all excellent resources. But in the list there are precious few entries of that sort for commercial .com sites – intel.com and microsoft.com are there, but processors.com and software.com aren't. If you've ever dabbled with something like book-buying online, did you type www.books.com or did you head straight to the brand names you know, in other words amazon.com or, after the recent TV ad push, bol.com?

Specific branding is a resource worth defending. A couple of years back, www.altavista.com sent you to a site that, I seem to recall, produced email greetings card software – the 'real' Altavista search engine was at