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Dot what? Dot-pro (dot yawn)

Lawyers' domain name likely won't rival ".com."

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In a few weeks, lawyers will have a new Internet domain dedicated to them. How dedicated lawyers will be to it is another matter.

The new ".pro" domain is for licensed professionals—currently doctors, accountants and attorneys.

Each group, moreover, will get its own "secondary level" domain. Doctors can register at ".med.pro," accountants at ".cpa.pro" and lawyers at ".law.pro." So the XYZ Law Firm could hang out its cybershingle at "xyz.law.pro."

But there are signs that things have changed since the 1990s, when people eagerly grabbed up domain names. It now appears that many lawyers and their firms have mixed emotions about using the dot-pro domain.

Lukewarm reaction

"From my perspective, dot-pro has generated very little interest in the legal community," said Mark Willard, a partner at Pittsburgh's Eckert Seamans Cherin & Mellott.

Special security features of the domain to allow encrypted e-mail may not be a big draw. Many law firms already have Internet security.

"If we want to encrypt our e-mail, we certainly do that when necessary," said Willard. "We also have digital certificates."

Moreover, dot-pro's security seems unlikely to satisfy all clients' needs. Clients who want encrypted e-mail often prefer to use their own technology or one which is an industry standard, said Mark Heaphy, a senior associate at New Haven, Conn.'s Wiggin & Dana. "Best practices vary across industries," he said.

The target market for dot-pro is the small- to medium-sized professional practice group, said Sloan Gaon, chief operating officer and vice president of policy and legal affairs for Atlanta-based RegistryPro Inc., the registry for the dot-pro domain.

However, one marketing consultant for small law firms is advising his clients to save their money and stick with dot-com.

Doron Levin, an attorney and the president of Houston's Levin & Associates, provides client-acquisition services for small firms that specialize in mass tort and personal injury litigation. He said, "Consumers have a mindset to enter dot-com on their keyboards. I don't advise my clients to swim against the current. Most of my clients are not going to be registering."

It may be larger firms that will wind up registering, to protect themselves from cybersquatters.

"We will register, if we haven't done so already," said Alan Sutin, a partner in the New York office of Greenberg Traurig. That way, he explained, "we won't have to deal with any potential issues of third parties taking our name."

Paul, Hastings, Janofsky & Walker will register, according to spokesman Patrick Dorton, as "part of protecting the Paul Hastings brand."

Eckert Seamans won't get an active registration. It is unnecessary, said Willard, because "dot-com is the domain for business." But he added that the firm may get a defensive registration.

Hartford, Conn.-based Day, Berry & Howard is undecided. "We are still analyzing this," said partner Richard Harris. "The test is whether there will be confusion among our clients if another legal organization takes our name in dot-pro. And my marketing people can't answer that for me right now, because no one knows how popular the dot-pro domain space will become."

In all, eight out of 11 firms contacted discussed their plans with regard to dot-pro.

Selling points

The dot-pro domain has some attractive features. Unlike a dot-com registration, it will provide more than just an Internet address. Registrants will receive tools to facilitate confidential communications over the Internet—specifically, digital certificates and software to encrypt e-mail.

"A digital certificate is like an online passport," said Gaon. It tells the recipient of an e-mail "that you're a lawyer, that you work for XYZ firm and that this credential has been cross-verified by a third party. It indicates where the e-mail came from, that it hasn't been tampered with and that it has been sent and received."

Dot-pro is different from dot-com in one other way: It's much more expensive. Registering a name for one year will cost around \$300, about 10 times the cost of registering a dot-com.

An owner of a nationally registered trademark can file a purely defensive registration, which is somewhat less expensive. Such a registration doesn't create an active Internet address. It merely prevents anyone else from grabbing it. The market price for a defensive registration covering just one secondary -level domain, such as .law.pro, is about \$1,000 for four years, according to Gaon. The price for a defensive registration covering all the secondary domains in dot-pro is about \$3,000 for four years, he said. A defensive registration covers only the exact terms of the trademark.

The new domain is accepting only defensive registrations until the "sunrise period" ends on June 30.

The domain is expected to go live sometime in mid to late July, Gaon said, at which point it will accept registrations for active addresses on a first-come, first-served basis.

Despite high prices, "we are getting strong demand" from legal practices, Gaon asserted.

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