

Domain Name Registration and Privacy

Contributed by Richard G. Keir

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The internet is a wonderful thing, except for a few small details. When you register your first domain name, you soon get your introduction to one of them. There's a lot of information they want. Your name, your email address, your physical address, your phone number. For each of 4 separate categories, and the Registrant, Admin and Technical categories are publicly available (for almost all TLDs - Top Level Domains, with the possible exception of .ws - Western Samoa).

Email

addresses, which must be valid, phone numbers and physical addresses which also must be valid. I personally think it's both absurd and dangerous to make this information so easily available. Once again the right to privacy of law-abiding individuals is being abridged supposedly to help catch lawbreakers. Since this information would be provided under a court order, making it publicly available just invites abuse.

Spammers, scammers, stalkers and the idle whacko can easily get this information. And it's a nice start on identity theft, too. However, for most people, the most likely result is an increase in the amount of spam you get. But, much worse can and has happened.

So

what solutions are there? Basically there are two ways to protect your privacy if you are a private individual without access to a legal entity such as a company to own the domain name (note that if it is a company, you must provide accurate information. This only moves the problem to a slightly less personal level).

First you could

lie. No, that's not one of the ways. Unwise and illegal too, and you are a law-abiding type, right? So, first, a proxy registration is one alternative.

Essentially you make a binding legal agreement

with a company which will register the domain name as if they owned it and then provide their own information to meet the requirements. For each domain, they will set-up a special email which they will monitor and forward to you, usually after spam filtering, if you want them to.

They, of course, retain your data and will also monitor physical mail. You will be notified of first class mail which appears to or could be legal documents or if registered or couriered mail arrives. They will, for a fee, ship such to you, if you agree and pay. Generally such items would be sent by courier. Phone callers will be directed to use the email or physical address shown in the WhoIs record.

Of course, under subpoena or other specified conditions they will provide your details. You will have full rights as owner - as long as you behave and don't violate the agreement.

The other alternative, usually called "private registration", is a little different. Here your name would still appear as registrant. You would provide the names of the admin and technical contacts. But the address, email and phone number would be provided and monitored by the organization handling the private registration in essentially the same manner as a proxy registration. Thus with this alternative you remain in full legal control of your domain name since it is registered in your name rather than the name of a proxy.

On the face of it this second alternative sounds better, but your name is hanging out there on view and you may have valid reasons for not wanting that (perhaps the company you work for takes a dim view of moonlighting, or you have had a stalking problem or are doing something perfectly legitimate but don't want your name linked to it). In that case, a proxy registration is the only real alternative.

In case you're thinking you can hide out and do whatever sort of bad stuff behind a proxy or private registration, don't even dream about it. These outfits take it very personally if you misbehave and the legal agreements spell it out.

If you decide to pursue a proxy or private registration, make very sure that you are working with a legitimate company with a track record. A domain name can be a very valuable possession. Both your registrar and, if it's a separate organization, the entity that does the proxy or private registration must be quality, legitimate outfits. Registrars offering

extremely low prices which are way out of line with the going rates - unless it's a special - just might be after your credit card and identity. Also, this time, actually read the agreement and TOS so you do know what you're doing and what could happen under what circumstances.

Wondering why I'm writing about this? Well, it's because I'm getting more and more spam and I started doing some research on possible solutions. And I figured, I wasn't the only one looking to do something about the problem. And then, I discovered that some registrars will provide free proxy or private registration with your domain name purchase. So think about it and do some checking before you buy a domain name. Your privacy is a precious possession.

About the Author Richard G. Keir, www.building-ecommerce-websites.com. A PhD psychologist infected by the computer bug, Richard first worked online in the early 80's (yes, pre-WWW). Currently writing on eCommerce, RSS and internet marketing in general, he has never been cured of that early fascination.

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