

## **Could a search engine friendly domain name help your target market find you?**

I am often asked whether choosing a particular domain name will improve a web site's ranking in search engine results. This question is open to much debate, particularly because search engines keep their methods for ranking pages very close to their chests. However, there is speculation that if a web address contains words that match users' search terms then it will gain a slight advantage in the search results. These are sometimes called 'keyword rich' domain names.

### ***Will a keyword rich domain name affect your search engine ranking?***

It seems likely to me that the search engines will put little or no emphasis on keywords that they find in a domain name. Common sense suggests that it would make it too easy for web site owners to abuse them by using keyword rich domain names as a substitute for real content.

On the other hand, there may yet be some benefit in using this style of domain name because of the way that other sites create links to yours:

- When another web page shows a link to your site it will feature the domain name in its behind-the-scenes code. The search engines see this and probably take note of any words that match the user's search terms.
- Some links to your pages will also show your web address on the page. The search engine will pick up on this visible text as well as the behind-the-scenes code so your key words actually appear twice to them.

If you want to find out more about the importance of these incoming links, then please read my article on link popularity.

Many people have tried to test out this search engine friendly domain name theory, but so many factors affect search engine results that it is impossible to be sure one way or the other. It seems most likely that having a 'keyword-rich' domain name may have a very slight affect on your search engine ranking, but not enough to make it worth the hassle of changing your current domain name, if you already have one.

However, if you are setting up a new web site and having problems finding a unique domain name for it then including keywords may be an option that could benefit you.

### ***Regional variations***

If you are targeting a local market then it is more important that you have the regional suffix than a .com. For example, your visitors may search for 'UK web designers' so having .co.uk in the domain name will help you more than .com will. If you want to avoid any confusion caused by someone else registering the .com version then register both and have the .com permanently redirected to the .co.uk version.

Note that if you have several domain names never be tempted to host a duplicate of your web site on each one - the search engines will recognise them and will only list one version of a site.

## ***Branding, ranking or both?***

Are you are trying to build a recognisable brand name for your business? If this is the case then I recommend that you register your company name as your domain name. If brand recognition is not important then consider using search terms. These are less memorable but may give your pages a slight advantage over others competing for the same visitors. Of course, you may be able to combine your brand name with relevant search terms (see the tips below).

### ***The problems with search engine friendly domain names:***

- Most of the obvious short names have already been registered so you could end up with quite a long, clumsy looking name - how about [www.cheshire-and-north-wales-holiday-cottages.co.uk](http://www.cheshire-and-north-wales-holiday-cottages.co.uk)?
- Be wary of choosing a very specific name that is inflexible and won't benefit you if you want to expand your web site to cover other topics in the future.
- People are likely to mistype addresses that contain hyphens, which means that they may not find your web site and your incoming e-mail may go astray. I have had first hand experience of receiving other people's e-mail simply because they have registered a domain similar to mine, but with hyphens.

### ***Tips for choosing search engine friendly domain names:***

- Do some research to identify the actual words and phrases that potential visitors are using to find sites like yours. (Find out how in my article on keywords).
- Choose a short phrase of 2 or 3 words for your domain name that features popular and relevant keywords and, importantly, makes sense.
- Use hyphens between each keyword so that the search engines will recognise the individual words.
- Try adding keywords to your company name, for example [designspring-books.co.uk](http://designspring-books.co.uk).
- Choose the regional suffix if you are targeting a regional market, for example, [.co.uk](http://.co.uk) instead of [.com](http://.com).

### ***Remember:***

The benefit of keyword rich domain names to your search engine ranking is probably very slight so if you can't find a suitable name don't lose any sleep over it. Also, building recognition of your company name may be more important in the long