Domain Name Brand-Sharing Starts With Embracing Web 2.0

Alex Tajirian
January 26, 2009

Irrespective of which solution to the current domain name brand-sharing impasse ends up being adopted by brand owners (option 1, option 2, or a combination), the owners must first understand and embrace current trends in online communications, information gathering, and entertainment. Thus, for a solution to succeed the corporate mindset toward new technologies needs to change; after that brand owners can work cooperatively with the domain name industry (owners and institutions) to increase the aggregate pie.

A brand-sharing Web site is a mashup of content related to a given brand, with the domain name as a LEGO mashup of the brand. Embracing such mashups is in contrast to the traditional, command-and-control approach, which companies have clung to for too long. They must be convinced that the benefits of embracing Web 2.0 outweigh the drawbacks, but that realization is not in itself enough to convert them. They must also realize that these technologies, which include blogs, are not a fad.

Two phrases sum up the sources of corporate resistance to new technology. First, "it wasn't invented here," an attitude that still grips many companies even now that the Internet age makes possible the superior distributed approach to problem solving and product development. Second, there's the perennial favorite "if it ain't broke, don't fix it"—if change isn't urgent, it must be avoided. And it's true, change does create risk. But reducing risk is not management's key job. The real goal is to manage risk so as to maximize shareholder value. Blindly following risk reduction as an objective leads to zero risk, i.e., being out of business.

What managers must realize:

1. They will not be ceding control of the brand, just sharing it to create shareholder value.

2. A large number of registrants of brand-sharing domains are fans and will spread the brand's goodwill. Enthusiasts offer real authentic mashups, views, and personality. They should be nurtured and appreciated as a powerful branding instrument. But without brand sharing, brand owners will not be able to capitalize on the creativity of enthusiasts.

3. Brand-sharing mashups are no different than, say, flickr, whose service is free. Yahoo, the owners of flickr, benefits from tapping global creativity to enhance its site's visibility and usage of its products.

4. Blogs increase awareness that management is listening, and thus, increase customer trust. No wonder that Apple, Cisco, and Google are great listeners.

5. Site visitors can easily change the look and feel of the corporate site even though the brand owner has spent and continues to spend millions of dollars to control every pixel. A simple tool like greasemonkey, an add-on to Firefox, is enough to break through the safeguards.

6. They can make it more expensive for the public to get corporate information, but they cannot keep the information from getting out. So why not take the opposite route and win customers' trust? Wiki sites like WikiTravel, ShopWiki, and WikiBooks show how the public can create content for aggregate product lines. Of course, no matter what, there will always be determined detractors, so companies can and should manage public information.

Benefits of change:
1. A domain brand-sharing solution that's acceptable to company and public can help the company through positive buzz.

2. Embracing Web 2.0 is in itself branding because it shows that the company listens to customers and embraces change.

3. Besides mashups, blogs can be used to listen to customers (which provides new insight) and to influence them.

4. Company blogs can also break down departmental silos.

What companies need to do to change from within:

1. Embrace new trends through changing the archaic mental images of mashups. Allowing user-generated content (UGC) on a Web site does not imply that the company has embraced Web 2.0.

2. Create a central repository for reports of domain and content mashup abuses and the associated corporate action. The result is an instrument to implement an effective carrot-and-stick strategy.

3. Where necessary, have middle management assure bloggers inside the company that they won't face retribution. Such steps are required when top-down acceptance of mashups is not readily attainable.

4. Avoid "Astroturf"—blogs have to be authentic. Sony, McDonald's, and Wal-Mart, among others, paid people to blog favorably. Such McBlogs can easily backfire.

In conclusion,

1. Domain name owners and the Internet Commerce Association (ICA) should start working on a cooperative branding regime with companies that have already embraced Web 2.0. Cooperative successes make it easier to convince late adopters of the benefits of mashups and brand-sharing domain names.

2. Domain owners should devote more time to:

   a. Market blogs and mashups at their own companies. They can act as change catalysts within their own organizations.

   b. Showing brand owners that there are multiple approaches to creating mutual benefits from brand-sharing domain names.

3. Opening up brand sharing will unleash the creativity of domain name owners that is currently constrained by passive sterile parking pages. ■