A New Online Address for Utah Government: `utah.gov`

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Domain names are one of the many places that technical requirements and policy intersect with business needs. Domain names are a way of mapping human readable text to arcane computer network addresses. At the same time, domain names represent more than just a technical mapping, they've come to serve as a key piece of branding and identity for anyone doing business online.

Just like the physical world, the online world is filled with upscale addresses as well as less desirable locations. The recent rise of online businesses saw a rush of new and unusual company names as businesses tried to find a company name that was also a memorable and, more importantly, available Internet address or URL (Uniform Resource Locator). The reason for this land rush is that people see domain names and the URLs that result from them as much more than just a convenient way to find a computer. A good domain name is easy to remember, easy to type, and conveys a message about the owner. For example, the name `amazon.com` has nothing to do with books, but the name is memorable and easy to type. Furthermore, at the time Amazon.com coined their name, having a `.com` in your name indicated that you were a new economy company, ready to change the way people did business.

Top Level Domains

Top-level domains, or TLDs, are the final set of letters after the last period in a domain name. Here in the US, we are all familiar with TLDs such as `.com`, `.org`, and `.net`.   These were originally created to indicate that the entity holding the domain was a commercial enterprise, a non-profit organization, or a network respectively. Since that time commercial pressure has made these distinctions less clear and a number of commercial enterprises operate under `.org` or `.net` domain names.

Other TLDs are better controlled and less known: `.edu`, `.mil`, and `.gov` were created for educational institutions, military organizations, and government organizations respectively.   In each of these cases, the membership in these TLDs was tightly controlled by an organization without commercial interests and, consequently, they've remained relatively pure to their original intent.

A Geography Based TLD System

There's another TLD system based on geography. Most people associate it with going to a foreign site on the Internet. This is because the geography based TLD system is based on ISO standard two letter country codes such as `.us` for the United States, `.uk` for the United Kingdom, and `.jp` for Japan. Inside the US, the TLD is divided into subdomains based on the two letter postal abbreviation for each state (e.g. Utah is `.ut.us`). Entities within each geographic subdomain can further divide it along organizational and geographic boundaries.

The association of the geography based TLD system with foreign Internet sites is somewhat misleading since, in fact, there are no rules that prohibit entities outside the US from obtaining and using domain names inside the `.com`, `.org`, and `.net` TLDs. Domain name assignments inside these three TLDs (as well as other recent additions such as `.ws`) are essentially a free for all, with very few rules on how or to who names are assigned.

The geography based TLD system was created by technical folks at a time long before anyone dreamed of either the commercial success of the Internet or how marketing and public perception would shape the land rush that resulted as companies and other organizations competed for lucrative space on the Internet. The system, while open to anyone within a geographic boundary, is not widely used outside state and local governments and public schools.

States and Domain Names

Because state and local governments have a specific geographic component, the geography based TLD system seemed like a match made in heaven and most states set up shop using the appropriate subdomain in the .us TLD. For example, Utah state government uses `state.ut.us`. Most other states also recognize this naming convention.

For a time, any government entity in the US could register a domain name in the `.gov` TLD. For example, Washington and California registered `wa.gov` and `ca.gov` respectively. Utah registered and holds the `utah.gov` domain. Last year, the General Services Administration, which controls the `.gov` TLD, tightened the rules so that `.gov` was reserved for federal agencies. They did, however, grandfather any existing domain names that had been registered.

A New URL for Utah Government

Not long ago, a number of states started setting up eGovernment portals for their citizens. Some of them used the domain name they owned and controlled in the `.us` TLD. Others, realizing that citizens don't generally understand and typically can't remember URLs based on the `.us` TLD, set up shop under a `.org` or even a `.com` based domain name. Those with `.gov` based domain names often set up shop there.

Utah did all of these. We used the `state.ut.us` domain for all our email and some department web sites. We used `eutah.org` for our web portal. A number of department web services, such as `renewalexpress.com`, used a domain name in the `.com` TLD. At the same time, going to www.utah.gov opened a web page that directed you to www.eutah.org.

The time has come for Utah to have a unified strategy for our domains. Businesses have long recognized that a domain name and the way it is used are critical to allowing their customers and partners to communicate with them effectively. Take a look at the business cards on your desk that you've collected from contacts in the private sector. My guess is that the great majority show no company subdivision in the email address or web URL. The reason is simple: removing barriers to communication.

To that end, we plan to unite around a single domain, `utah.gov`, and use it for all our communication, be that on the web, via email, or wherever. My reasons for this proposal are as follows:

1. The `utah.gov` domain name is much easier to remember than the current `state.ut.us` based domain name.

2. The `.gov` TLD conveys a sense of trust. Only a US government entity can have a `.gov` based domain name, anyone can be a `.org` or a `.com`.

3. Our customers and partners will understand and remember `utah.gov` more easily and this will facilitate communication.

4. We cannot continue to squander our brand identity on twenty different domain names or on URLs that are hard to remember.

Along with this proposal is an implementation strategy:

1. We won't delete any existing domain names or cause them to not work. There will be an orderly transition plan.

2. We will continue to support the `state.ut.us` domain because it is a standard that many people are familiar with. We will not, however, promote it. The domain will simply serve as an alias for `utah.gov`.

3. We will promote the `utah.gov` domain as the official domain of the state of Utah. We will specifically disclaim responsibility for anything listed under any URLs other than `utah.gov` and `state.ut.us`. This will serve as a visual clue to people linking elsewhere from our web site that they are not on an official Utah government web site anymore.

4. We will set up a system for registering email addresses under the utah.gov domain that forwards to an existing mailbox. Using this system, any Utah state government employee will have the opportunity to register an email address such as windley@utah.gov and forward it to the mailbox they use now.

5. I have asked the state Electronic Commerce Coordinator, Al Sherwood, to serve as the registrar for state domain names. The registrar will be responsible for developing plans and policies regarding state owned domain names, including subdomains of utah.gov and state.ut.us. There will be further communication on this in the near future.

A number of people have asked about the expense of new letterhead or business cards. There won't be any need for everyone to rush out and change everything because the old domains and email addresses will still work. Having said that, I strongly encourage everyone to quickly adopt the new system to facilitate our electronic communications. No business in the world would decide a basic communication strategy such as this one on the basis of the fact that their letterhead was already printed. We shouldn't either.

Conclusion

The motivation for this move is simple: customer focus. I want people in Utah to intuitively know how to find our services and easily get in touch with us. Our customers don't understand our geography based domain names and they're confused by the proliferation of URLs and domain names that are offering government services. We can change that and we will. Further, our customers and partners don't care which agency we work for and shouldn't have to remember that to send us email. We can fix that too and we will.

In all our efforts, not just in eGovernment, but wherever we deploy IT, we shouldn't just be putting a high tech patina on our old way of doing things. Our decisions regarding the use of IT resources in the state should be customer focused. This is one small move in that direction.