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## MINUTES WITH...

### PAUL LEVINS

EXECUTIVE OFFICER AND  
VICE PRESIDENT OF CORPORATE  
AFFAIRS AT THE INTERNET  
CORPORATION FOR ASSIGNED  
NAMES AND NUMBERS

BY ELISABETH A. SULLIVAN//STAFF WRITER

**THE INTERNET CORPORATION** for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), a Marina del Rey, Calif.-based not-for-profit organization, was set up a decade ago by the Internet community and the U.S. government to coordinate the Internet addressing system—to ensure security and stability, and to promote competition and innovation in the domain name registration process. Lately, ICANN has been in the news because it's working in earnest on the last part of that mission: innovation.

Come spring, ICANN plans to open the floodgates for interested parties to apply for new generic top-level domains (gTLDs), or the Web address' suffix. At present, there are only 21 gTLDs, including '.com,' '.org,' '.edu' and the like, and ICANN plans to allow countries, cities, companies, brands and other organizations to apply for their own domains. (ICANN made another headline-grabbing move in September when its oversight agreement with the U.S.

Department of Commerce expired and the two parties agreed to extend oversight duties internationally by establishing advisory panels consisting of government and private-sector representatives around the world.)

*Marketing News* recently caught up with Paul Levins, ICANN's executive officer and vice president of corporate affairs, to learn more about ICANN's plans for gTLD expansion. Here, Levins explains why marketers might want to consider applying for unique domain names to strengthen their brands' online presences. He also talks about how new gTLDs could help marketers find more creative or localized ways of situating their Web sites on the Internet.

**Q:** Why is ICANN looking to expand from the 21 gTLDs that exist now?

**A:** This is not an overnight sensation. We've been talking about the expansion of generic top-level domains for almost 10 years—in detail, around the last three to five [years]. The reason it's been getting a lot of publicity in recent times is because we're now at a point where we believe it can be implemented. We can expand this.

Now, what does that mean, expanding it? Well, it means that if you are a business enterprise or you have an interest in seeing a form of expression or top-level domain that you think would be a useful thing for consumers or as a business model, then you can propose it. It won't be up to a California not-for-profit to say there should only be 21 names. No more. Why should that be a decision when essentially it is a largely unlimited resource? Now, we need to be careful about that. We need to be attentive to security concerns, and we are. We've had a number of research papers done by the Internet technical community and we're doing more in order to determine whether or not there is any insecurity or instability. So far, so good.

**Q:** Before we delve further into security issues, how are you going to determine who gets '.apple,' say? What if an apple grower in Wisconsin wants to own that domain, but Apple Inc. also is interested? Is it first come, first served? I read that there's an auction process.

**A:** Firstly, both applications would have to be equal to force an auction process. What I mean by that is you have to demonstrate that the apple growers of the world have as much intellectual property tied up in the name 'apple' as the Apple corporation.

Secondly, we're not talking about a \$6 exercise here. It's not like I could go and apply for '.apple' because I thought it was a good idea or because I was an apple grower. I could do that, but the cost to me is going to be significant. It's going to be \$185,000 in application fees alone and then a \$25,000 ongoing annual registration fee—that's the current proposal. So when you look at it

that way, you realize that ... you're running a piece of the Internet's infrastructure and I don't think that's something that individuals on the street will be necessarily quick to do or interested [in doing].

**Q:** What are the benefits for marketers?

**A:** We're not a marketing company and we're not doing this for a purpose other than creating the most open, innovative platform for people to use. We think that there may be some possibilities for marketers in this. ... We've had some modest interest from brand owners. ...

For example, there's a very strong demand for people wanting geographic names. There's a proposal for a '.nyc,' a proposal for a '.London,' a '.Paris,' a '.Berlin,' a '.Hamburg,' potentially a '.Sydney.' It goes on and on and on and on. The rationale there is around localization. If I'm TonysPizza, it's a lot easier for people to find me and where I'm at if I'm TonysPizza.nyc as opposed to '.com,' which could be anywhere. So it's a more intuitive search. It's more localized. And there's interest around communities. For example, there's a '.sport' being proposed, and there's a '.eco' and a '.green' for green issues being promoted.

**Q:** Would the cities get first dibs on those domain names?

**A:** The process is that the applicant has to get approval for use of that geographic name from the relevant government authority.

**Q:** How will you determine who gets first dibs for '.sport' or '.green'?

**A:** Whoever puts in the first application, and if that application is successful. ... [If the application makes it through ICANN's analysis] and all the boxes are ticked, their security's in good standing and they have the technical capacity to run a registry, all of those things and many more, and they were the only application for '.green,' then they would receive the name.

We're trying to make this a platform for innovation and not limiting the scope of the domain name system. There may well be branding opportunities. What we're anxious for brand managers to do is to be aware of this and to make up their own minds whether or not they want to keep their existing presence, whether they want to look at whether or not a brand presence at the top level is a good idea.

Let's say I'm a big soap manufacturer. Does my brand reside in soap.com or does it reside in dot-soap? In other words ... the way we market ourselves in the online world is, at the moment, at the second level. Why doesn't it make sense for it to be at the top level? ... That's a question that brand managers should ask themselves. How is our brand represented? Does it make sense for our brand to be represented at the top level?

All we're advocating is an open platform. But what we are anxious to do is for businesses to be aware of it so that they don't wake up when the expansion occurs and say, 'Oh, I wonder what the impact on my brand will be,' and 'I should get my head around the protections that are afforded my brand.'

**Q:** This could be an interesting opportunity for big corporations that could set up addresses like Maps.Google, rather than Maps.Google.com, for example, and that might make search within that one company's holdings more intuitive. At the same time, it seems that there will be a steep learning curve for consumers. Now that we're all in this comfortable routine of looking for the '.com,' the '.org' and the '.edu,' won't companies struggle—at least initially—to let consumers know where to find them?

**A:** That's a very good point. I mean, I don't know about you; maybe I'm just a bit of a Luddite on these things, but ... I go

searching for an educational institution in New York, for example. I don't [assume that it's] '.edu' for New York University.

I think where a locality top-level domain or a city-based one will be useful is if you want pizza in New York, you can type in pizza in New York now and you may well still get just general discussions about pizza in New York or [listings] connecting the two terms. But [with the new gTLD system,] if you're searching for pizza in New York, you'll know that the place to find it has a '.nyc' address. That will be the most clear to you, so I think it could, in fact, enhance clarity rather than add confusion.

**Q:** So this expansion is predicated on the fact that the Internet is pretty much governed by search at this point.

**A:** Yeah, certainly many people use browsers for search.

I don't think it need be confusing. People will vote with their fingers. If they want to stay with their '.com' choices, that's perfectly fine. If there's not a thousand new

names, that doesn't worry us. If there are a thousand new names, good. We just want to make sure it's the most open, fair process that protects rights while still encouraging innovation.

People often say to us: 'Where's the demand for this? Why do this if there's no demand?' Firstly, ... there already is existing demand. Secondly, there's never a demand for innovation. There was never a demand for Facebook. There was never a demand for Skype. I'm old enough, unfortunately, to remember FM radio and there was active anger in the introduction of that because people were like: 'Well, I've already got a radio. Why would I want to buy one that's got two bands?' What we do know is that innovation occurs when competition is introduced, when platforms are accessible and you have a blank canvas on which you can paint and introduce a bit of artistry.

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