a new domain name for museums

Museums currently have an opportunity to register web and email addresses using a format exclusively available to the museum sector. The new .museum top-level domain for museum websites was introduced in 2000. Take up has been slow, but the opportunity to acquire a museum address for your museum may not be available forever. Museums need to act soon, or risk missing out.
All web addresses end in a generic suffix known as a top-level domain: .uk, .com, .edu, .org, and so on. These currently indicate either what country an organisation is based in, or broadly what kind of organisation it is. As the internet grows in size, more of these top-level domains are needed in order to provide more scope for organisations across the world to have simple and meaningful web addresses. The proposal is that new top-level domains should indicate more precisely what kind of organisation a website belongs to.

How does it work?

Who’s in .museum

ICANN is the one-time entity which secured a top-level domain for museums. It established an organisation called MuseDoma to run, .museum. To date, .MuseDoma has been funded by ICANN and the .Paul Getty Trust. .MuseDoma is currently running an awareness-raising project called MuseNic, funded by the European Commission. The campaign began last year and from autumn 2003 it will focus principally on the UK, France, Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands. A website, http://about.museum, gives more details.

Who is eligible for .museum?

Museums that comply with the ICANN definition of a museum are eligible to use .museum addresses. .MuseDoma will work with the relevant museum organisation in each country to determine eligibility; in the UK, all Registered museums will be eligible.

.museum is open to museums. Individuals working in the museum sector can have a personal museum email address which will travel with their employment. Companies organisations will find their web address. It could, however, use companyname.museum as its address, .MuseDoma would not be able to use town.

What are the benefits?

Museums owe it to themselves and their visitors to have a simple and unique web address – something that might be particularly valuable for museums with complicated web addresses, or whose websites are currently buried within a larger site. Museums have nothing to lose by having a .museum address. If a museum becomes unsure about taking the new name, or if they have a well-established web address already which they are reluctant to lose, they can establish a .museum address which simply redirects users to their main site. Commercial companies very often do this: for example, if your marksandspencer.co.uk visits your browser, you will be automatically redirected to marksandspencer.com.

The structure of .museum names

Web addresses using the .museum top-level domain have to have at least three levels. These fictitious examples illustrate how the naming works:

- vam.london.museum
- victoriaandalbert.london.museum
- ironbridge.gorge.museum
- freemasonry.scotland.museum
- isleofman.history.museum
- aberdeen.artalleries.museum
- tank.museum
- birmingham.tank.museum
- thenational.scot.museum
- abbey.northumberland.museum
- nationalhistorymuseum.london.museum
- nationalmuseumofphotography.uk
- albertville.museum
- victoriaandalbert.london.museum
- vam.london.museum

Examples of .museum names

The following names are all in use by museums in the UK.

- Natural History Museum: science.museum
- British Museum: britishmuseum.museum
- National Gallery: nationalgalleries.museum
- Tate: tate.museum
- British Museum: britart.museum
- National Portrait Gallery: npg.museum
- Victoria and Albert Museum: vam.museum

What does it cost?

Costs are relatively low. There is currently a one-off application fee of £110 to MuseDoma, plus a fee of about £80-$100 per year for the second to the registrar for each name.

How to apply

Museums interested in taking up .museum web addresses have to apply to MuseDoma. There is a one-off application fee of £110 to MuseDoma, plus a fee of about $80-$100 per year for the second to the registrar for each name.

Why should I register now?

There are already about 2,000 museum names registered internationally. Once .museum achieves a certain critical mass, it will be imperative for every museum to have a .museum name; but, of course, critical mass will not be achieved unless more museums are prepared to take the step of registering now.

.museum is not going to go away. Now that the top-level domain has been established, it will be a permanent feature of the internet. However, there is a risk that museums’ control over .museum could be lost. To register .museum on behalf of the museum community. MuseDoma has to pay a substantial fee to the organisation which controls naming conventions for the internet. To date, it has received significant financial support from ICANN and from the .Paul Getty Trust but it needs to sustain a good level of registrations in order to be financially viable in the long term.

If control over the name is lost, museums may lose out. Museums that have not registered their names may find their identities usurped by all kinds of unwelcome intruders. Commercial dealers and amateurs setting up family history sites may find make use of .museum if this were to happen; it is vital it does not. Although it is not clear how long the present mode of financing .museum will prove viable, museums safely have about one further year to make sufficient registrations to demonstrate that the professional museum community can make museum viable. If this is not achieved, the professional risks losing control of the name.

Applying, cost and registering

For information on how to register or for more details about museum, visit http://about.museum

National Museums and Galleries of Wales: a case study

The National Museums and Galleries of Wales (NMGW) has registered several .museum names, including national.wales.museum and a Welsh equivalent, cenedlaethol.cymru.museum. NMGW has been using these names in parallel with its existing web addresses for some time. It does not currently promote its .museum addresses to the public, but plans to switch to using them for its main online identity in the future, once .museum is more widely used and recognised.

Iwan Standley, web officer at NMGW, says that the main attraction of .museum was that it could give the national museums more meaningful and straightforward addresses. The current addresses - www.nmgw.ac.uk and www.acc.ac.uk mean little to most visitors. One disadvantage for NMGW is that .museum does not work well in Welsh: a Welsh speaker might be surprised to find the English word ‘museum’ at the end of a Welsh address. ‘Museum’ was chosen as an internationally recognised term but some complications are necessary when .museum is used in languages which have a different word for museum.

Although it is not clear how long the present mode of financing .museum will prove viable, museums safely have about one further year to make sufficient registrations to demonstrate that the professional museum community can make museum viable. If this is not achieved, the professional risks losing control of the name.