WHITE PAPER

SEO spotlight

Best practices for migrating to a branded TLD

Google's proven process to maintain ranking

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*By Ashley Roberts, Senior Manager, Com Laude*

The world's leading search engine, Google, applied for 101 gTLDs in the first round of new gTLD applications, eventually obtaining more than 40, including eight dot brands. Google's investment in dot brands is good news for all dot brand owners. It will boost wider consumer awareness of dot brand TLDs, and is already providing valuable migration best practice, including in search engine optimisation (SEO).

As a leading innovator of the world wide web, it's no surprise that Google has eagerly embraced dot brands. Its dot brand registrations include its principal brand names, such as .GOOGLE, .GMAIL and .YOUTUBE, as well as associated system and product names, such as .ANDROID and .CHROME. They also have two Internationalized Domain Name (IDN) dot brand TLDs: .谷歌 ("Google" in Chinese) and .グーグル ("Google" in Japanese).

The company shared valuable insight into its approach to dot brand registration and migration at last year's Brands & Domains conference in Montreal; in particular, detailing its strategy for ABOUT.GOOGLE and its approach to SEO migration, a hot topic in the dot brand field. This white paper summarizes some of the key points and best practice relating to dot brands and SEO, as well as top tips from Google's presentation at the conference.

Why SEO planning is important for dot brand migrations

SEO is critical for companies to build their brand or grow their business online. Understandably, there has been concern that migrating established sites to the new dot brand domain will impact hard-won search engine rankings. However, as Google has shown, migration to a new dot brand TLD can be achieved without negatively impacting a site's search engine ranking. Overall, Google views the dot brand migration of ABOUT.GOOGLE as successful in that site traffic has continued to increase when compared to the previous about.google.com site. The key to success is in the planning and execution, so where should a dot brand owner begin?
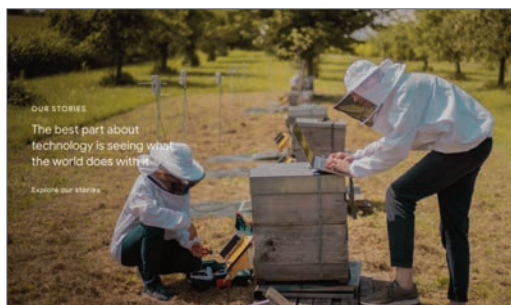
ABOUT.GOOGLE
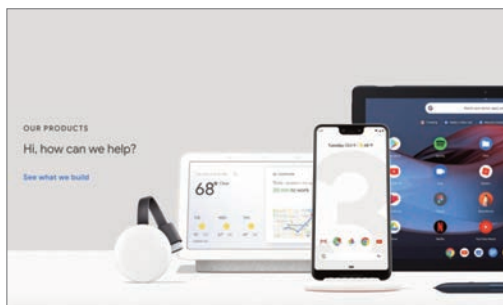
At the Brands & Domains conference, Christina Chiou Yeh, Product Strategy and Marketing Lead at Google Registry, emphasised the importance of:

> " *(Getting) that early adopter, like we did with ABOUT.GOOGLE. You need the strong use case that inspires others in the company to follow. ABOUT.GOOGLE was a huge migration, full of backlinks. The fact that it went so well was and remains an inspiration. And, you also need an evangelist in your organisation.* "

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You can follow Google's lead by using the four-step process it employed for migrating to ABOUT.GOOGLE as a guide for your own migration:

Step 1: Identify and appoint an internal champion
Obtaining a new dot brand is exciting, but before you rush to launch, first take the time to look internally. Appointing an internal champion as the go-to person for any TLD cost or process questions will be crucial for building employee awareness prior to launch. That internal champion will also play a key role in advocating for the use of the new TLD for sales and marketing, for existing corporate sites, or for new brand or product releases.

What should your internal champion do?

Internal advocates play a key role in the adoption of a new dot brand, from identifying opportunities and raising awareness, to overseeing how it is used by different business units.

In particular, they should:

- Be the go-to-resource for all things related to the dot brand TLD;
- Raise awareness and advocate for the use of the branded TLD;
- Identify opportunities for use with brand or product launches;
- Review your existing domain portfolio to identify areas for improvement, from branding oversights to inconsistencies in the naming structure;
- Develop guidelines and processes for migration; and
- Maintain a record of all dot brand sites, and how they map back to the previous gTLD and ccTLD sites.


Step 2: Audit your assets to inform your strategy
Next, companies should undertake an audit of their existing domain name portfolio to highlight any gaps or vulnerabilities. For example, areas of the business that would benefit from a more focused domain name or a shorter naming structure. Fixing such issues can be a long process, especially for larger portfolios. Here, domain name consultants can play a helpful role in assessing, prioritizing and implementing dot brand migration strategies.

Auditing your domain name portfolio will provide a clear picture of all the domains you have in place. This will be important to help inform naming guidelines and the selection of the second level names to register. As the dot brand extension itself will carry the main brand or corporate name, the focus here should be on choosing names that are easy for the general public to identify and remember. Typically, this means opting for short and descriptive terms; although it's important not to lose sight of the company's overall goals and objectives, including its IP protection strategies. Setting naming guidelines will also help to ensure consistency, especially where a company has multiple dot brand TLDs.

DESIGN.GOOGLE
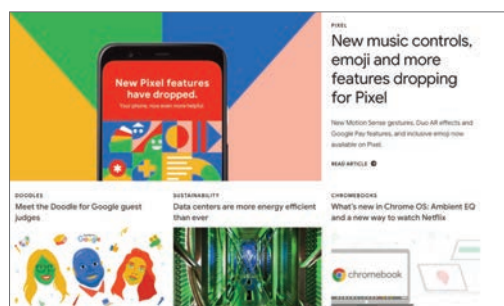
BLOG.GOOGLE

" The migration was very successful and then we made sure to do many updates. Traffic increased. There were no major issues. We estimated it would take 2-3 months, but it took a lot longer. It was worth it. "

Christine Chiou Yeah, Product Strategy and Marketing Lead at Google Registry

For example, after consideration of its naming guidelines, Google selected ABOUT.GOOGLE as a shorter and simpler alternative to replace about.google.com. Other examples of its naming strategy in practice include AI.GOOGLE, BLOG.GOOGLE, DESIGN.GOOGLE and GROW.GOOGLE (its free training site) - all short, memorable and descriptive domain name registrations.

Setting the optimisation strategy

As with any type of business asset, gaining clarity of what you currently own is the crucial first step to developing an effective optimisation strategy.

Take the time to step back and plan, by:

- Auditing your portfolio to establish what you own and how it could be improved;

- Developing naming conventions aligned with your brand strategy;

- Prioritising continuity of service and a good user experience;

- Rectifying any errors and bad habits identified in the previous portfolio;

- Optimising SEO on the existing site/s prior to migration; and

- Developing an approach that minimises negative SEO impact by developing a robust migration plan (see Step 3 below).

Step 3: Develop a migration plan

The next step is to build a migration strategy that keeps any disruption to SEO ranking or customer experience to a minimum.

Google found the following helped to ensure the process runs as smoothly as possible:

- Review the website before migration and ensure that basic SEO is implemented, including generating and replicating the site map (usually as an xml file), including associated metadata and links that need to be in place in the new website:

  - List the content you currently have, and on which domains it is hosted;

  - Identify any bad habits in the old website, and ensure they are fixed and not carried across to the new domain; and

  - Make a list of the existing links pointing to the current site.

- Implement proactive link management for external links, at first using 302 redirects and then eventually moving over to full 301 redirects. It is important to keep these in place after the migration has been completed, so as not to lose any traffic from sites that have stored the old links.

- Retain and redirect existing URLs during and after the migration. For example, Google has retained its about.google.com registration, redirecting any traffic to its new site ABOUT.GOOGLE. This ensures it does not lose any visitors who look for the old site.

- Monitor 404 errors on the old domain to establish any links that were not identified and redirected as part of the migration. The Google team found it was able to catch a number of straggling links in this way.

  - It's worth noting here that this may not be a major issue for all dot brand migrations (e.g. if a company is swapping a complete and independent domain); however, the ABOUT.GOOGLE migration was not a straight transfer from about.google.com, as some content was also on google.com/about.

  - Update the canonicals, hreflang tags (if relevant), XML sitemaps and robots.txt file.

  - Allow a bedding-in period of up to three months (or longer, if required) in order to fully manage the transition and capture an accurate picture of success.

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SEO benefits of dot brand TLDs in brief

Search engine algorithms are continuously evolving to match the ways in which we use the internet. As dot brands become more recognised by the general public, it is only a matter of time before they will yield higher search rankings.

Keyword-rich domains are the main tool in SEO strategies, as search engines use link data (keywords used in links) to rank results. This applies to dot brand TLDs as well as existing TLDs. As Google explains on its own site, search engines such as Google do not treat a .brand domain "any differently to any other TLD".

Confirm site authenticity
The ability of a dot brand to confirm the authenticity of a website may, in the future, help improve its organic search engine rankings. Not only will consumers recognise the dot brand website as authentic and secure, so too will the search engine algorithms. In general consumer awareness of dot brand TLDs is growing, but education and marketing of a new dot brand TLD will be key. OUI.SNCF is a good example of how SNCF, the national French rail network operator, established a new consumer-facing site. OUI.SCNF is the largest transactional dot brand site in Europe. For more detail read the .SNCF case study on observatory.domains.

Freedom to create any/keyword-rich URLs
As dot brand awareness becomes increasingly wide-spread, dot brand owners will be able to unlock additional benefits. Ownership of the TLD gives brands complete flexibility over second level registrations enabling them to create any short, memorable, keyword-rich URLs they wish. For example, the ability to drive traffic to dedicated mini sites for specific products, tools and campaigns. Search engine algorithms work to help consumers find information, so the more specific a domain name is, the more likely it will be seen as relevant in search results. This can work for short URLs, such as ABOUT.GOOGLE, or longer strings that reflect common search terms, as with Audi's E-TRON.CHARGING-SERVICE.AUDI.

Many dot brand owners are using a combination of full migration, mini sites, web forwarding and other strategies to introduce the new TLD to consumers, while also building up an authentic digital presence for SEO purposes.

For more information on these strategies, read our dot brand use cases at observatory.domains.

Step 4: Implement, monitor and optimise
Naturally, businesses are concerned about impacting their hard-won search engine rankings. Tracking results from each migration will help to build a feedback loop to inform future migration plans. Even Google reported sharing this fear at the Brands & Domains conference. However, Google reports the migration to be a success, revealing an increase in traffic to ABOUT.GOOGLE, in comparison to the previous domain.

> " It took us three years [to move to ABOUT.GOOGLE] because about.google.com had 20 years of search equity. The migration was very successful, and then we made sure to do many updates. Traffic increased. There were no major issues. We estimated it would take two-three months, but it took a lot longer. It was worth it. "

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The success of the launch had the added benefit of raising internal awareness of the various extensions owned by Google. Chiou Yeh added that more business units were now showing an interest in using one of the Google dot brands for new launches or marketing campaigns:

> " *Now we are out the door. There is SERVICE.GOOGLE and PRODUCT.GOOGLE;*
>   *if a brand or business within Google wants it, they can have it.* "

In addition, the lessons learned provide a successful template for future migration activities on its other dot brand TLDs. By sharing its experiences migrating to ABOUT.GOOGLE, Google has also provided a blueprint for the industry as a whole.

For advice or insight on obtaining your own dot brand, please get in touch with us at:
experts@comlaude.com

The Dot Brand Observatory is operated by Com Laude.
www.observatory.domains