

# The Role of Website TLD Properties in SEM

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## Abstract

The article examines several factors associated with domain names of websites to reveal the true role of TLD properties in search engine marketing. Live working websites are used to identify the impact of websites' domain names on SEM results. Firstly, the article examines the role of keywords presence within domain names in search result generation process. Thereafter, TLD zone's impact on image search results is analyzed through comparing websites with similar content hosted at different TLD zones. The role of domain age in the website ranking and sorting process is researched next. Finally, the article presents a brief summary of the findings and research implications.

**Keywords:** domain names, keyword optimization, search engine marketing, SEM, SEO, TLD  
**JEL:** M31

## Introduction

Although in recent years search engine websites' various officials constantly announce that the domain names and various TLD properties have no significant impact on website's SERP (Search Engine Results Page) performance due to algorithm perfection efforts, the evidence for the opposite is often observed (McGee, 2009). Many companies are willing to purchase domain names that are most relevant to their businesses not only for keyword optimization, but also for general marketing purposes. For instance, mirror domains are frequently used by organizations to have more than one domain pointing to the website. These domains are like "synonyms" and redirect users to the same location (Charlesworth, 2013).

According to Dover and Dafforn (2011), domain names are really important in SEM. First of all, it is not suggested to choose domains containing hyphens, which can detract credibility and act as a spam indicator (Enge, Spencer, Stricchiola, & Fishkin, 2012). Secondly, it is a bad practice to use a domain with more than 15 characters long (Enge et al., 2012). Thirdly, organizations should be aware of possible permutations within a domain name that can have a negative impact on how users perceive the website. For instance, the owners of ExpertsExchange.com built a sizable brand before they realized that the chosen domain name can be misconstrued as ExpertSexChange.com (Dover & Dafforn, 2011).

Along with domain names, various TLD properties like domain age and zone can also have an impact on search marketing process (Dean, 2014). For instance, it is commonly known fact that search engines implement separate algorithms for sorting image and web search results (Vaughan, 2012). Besides sorting, search engines also use

different spider programs for image and text content indexation processes.

## Research Goals and Methods

In order to understand the true role of TLD related factors in SEM, several live working websites were examined. Various scientific experiments were run to reveal:

- The role of keywords inserted into the domain name.
- The role of TLD zone in SEM for image search traffic.
- The impact of domain age on search results.

For the first purpose, two competing websites - www.funnybuildings.com and www.building.am, were selected to test whether search query keyword existence in website's domain name gives any advantage to one of the websites in organic search listings. The same two domains were also used in the experiment which should reveal how TLD zone can alter image search results. Finally, a study was conducted among hundreds of small corporate websites of various construction companies to find out how the age of domain affects search results.

The research was undertaken mainly through search simulation process. The data obtained through hundreds of search queries were collected and analyzed to make credible inferences about the role of different TLD-related factors.

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## Conducted Research

**1. Keywords Existence Test:** www.funnyBuildings.com and www.building.am were launched simultaneously in 2011. The first website is developed on the basis of the second one. It contains absolutely the same content as the special section of www.building.am (<http://www.building.am/funnyb.php>) dedicated to funny buildings from all over the world. Both websites contain duplicate content, but due to simultaneous updates, search engines are “confused” and cannot clearly identify which one is copying from another. So web pages from both websites are kept in the databases of major search engines. Because of absolute identity of the contents, factors that can influence SERP positions of the domains are very much limited. Besides domain name and domain zone differences, the websites differ from each other mainly by Page Rank and total volume of the content. For both characteristics, www.building.am has an advantage over its competitor: it has bigger back link mass (PR=4 vs PR=2) and larger volume of the content (www.building.am contains articles not only about funny buildings, but also about historical, green, high-rise and scary buildings).

To test domain name’s impact, 50 funny buildings were randomly selected from the database. For each building, three different search queries were created and executed in Google:

- Name + “funny”,
- Name + “building”,
- Name + “funny building”.

Both domains’ SERP positions in different search engines were collected and analyzed for domain name impact existence. In the first query, “funny” keyword is added the name of the building to increase domain name’s matching percentage for www.funnybuildings.com. Similarly, the second query is optimized for www.building.am. Finally, the last search query represents a mix of the first two queries (domain name matching percentage is greater than zero for both domains).

The obtained data from Google’s search results for the first group of 50 queries that contain only the “funny” keyword revealed that www.funnybuildings.com generally outperformed www.building.am in spite of several advantages of the latter. Furthermore, the average SERP positions comparison shows that www.building.am lags behind by 27 places in average. Therefore, it becomes obvious that domain name really plays an important role for Google’s sorting mechanism even in the cases when competing domains have different Page Rank values.

The queries from the second group containing “building” keyword added to the name of the building produced expected results. The average SERP position of the web pages of www.building.am was 10.34; whereas average position of www.funnybuildings.com was substantially lower (65.22). Moreover, for all search queries that were adjusted under www.building.am domain name, the latter was displayed far ahead from its competitor. So the combined analysis of SERP positions for the first two query groups implies that content-relevant keywords existence in the domain name greatly improves website’s search positions for those keywords. Hence, as the experiment showed, the replacement of the word “funny” with the word “building” in the search query inverts search results upside down for competing domains in Google Search.

Finally, execution of the last group of queries placed both domains very close to each other in most of the cases. Similar to the previous group, www.building.am was usually positioned above its competitor (only 9 queries out of 50 produced reverse results). The average SERP positions for both domains were improved compared to the previous two experiments (4.04 and 8.76 for www.building.am and www.funnybuildings.com respectively).

Based on the obtained results, it can be concluded that the domain matching percentage has significant importance for all three search engines. Thus, domain name optimization techniques can substantially facilitate website’s promotion efforts through search engines. Besides, mirror domains selected under targeted keywords can provide organizations with an additional competitive advantage, which eventually will have a positive impact on search marketing results.

**2. TLD Zone:** To confirm or reject widely-spread rumors about .com zone advantage over other country-specific domain zones in image search results, 100 search queries containing building names from www.funnybuildings.com database were designed to run at most popular image search websites - Google, Yahoo! and Bing. The selected queries do not contain any keywords which can provide an advantage to one domain over another. In order to identify TLD zone impact on search results, image SERP positions for both domain names were compared by taking into account several ranking advantages of www.building.am over www.funnybuildings.com.

The experiment results obtained for Google Image Search are quite impressive. Despite the strong advantages of www.building.am, it had lost the “contest” to its competitor. Only 19% of search queries pushed the domain hosted at .am zone above the .com zone website. As opposed to logical expectations, the website with weaker search engine ranking and small volume of content outperformed the stronger one. Similar results were obtained for Yahoo! Image Search and Bing Images (38% and 33% respectively). So, the entire three search engines preferred to display images from www.funnybuildings.com, despite the plenty of drawbacks of the .com zone website.

In order to understand the true cause of such “discrimination”, it is vital to analyze not only search engine rankings, but also the mechanism of crawling and indexing images by search engine robots. For example, the image file illustrating unusual hotel on the trees located in Oregon, USA is displayed through www.funnybuildings.com in the first place of Google’s image SERP for corresponding search query. Ranking analysis for that specific page containing the hotel’s image revealed that the web page at the .com zone has weaker SEO characteristics as compared with www.building.am web page. So the only reason left that can explain this situation is that Google’s spiders indexed the image file from www.funnybuildings.com earlier and treated the domain as a primary source for the image file.

The obtained results suggest that global search engine image crawlers generally screen websites at .com TLD zone more frequently than web pages hosted at country-specific domain zones. So, obviously, TLD zone can have an indirect impact on search engines’ “decision” regarding primary sources of image files. Thus, country-specific domain zones can hinder companies’ promotional efforts for obtaining image search traffic from search engines operating globally, whereas .com zone can provide an additional competitive advantage and improve image search traffic volume.

**3. Domain Age:** The research results imply that primary sources of information are usually preferred by search engines over newly emerged pages containing content with similar subject. Moreover, older and larger domains are considered by search engines as more trustworthy and relevant, than small websites with short history. In order to successfully compete for organic search traffic with big web resources, organizations owning small corporate websites can be forced to implement costly SEM methods. Therefore, just like in traditional business world, the famous marketing law about being the first in the market is actual also for on-line businesses.

## Conclusion

Discussion: The conducted research proved that domain names containing relevant keywords have an essential contribution in promoting websites through search engines, despite the fact that search engine officials constantly deny that fact. Surely, companies can achieve magnificent results practically with any domain name. For instance, the success of [www.hostgator.com](http://www.hostgator.com), [www.godaddy.com](http://www.godaddy.com) or [www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com) has nothing to do with their domains, but these brands conquered the Web not by the means of SEM. So in the context of search marketing, domain names can facilitate or hinder the progress of SEM campaign. Although domain names should be chosen before putting websites online, organizations have a chance to park additional mirror domain names later in order to exploit new keyword segments, which were missed during web development stage.

As opposed to web search traffic competition, TLD zone can play an important role in image search traffic competition. The results revealed that all major global search engines crawl images hosted at .com zone more frequently than at country-specific TLD zones. This can result in wrong decisions made by image spiders regarding primary sources of images. Hence, companies competing for image search traffic should pay a close attention to TLD zone selection in order to defend their position as a primary source for unique image files.

Finally, the obtained results from the experiments dealing with domain history imply that old-aged websites with solid content have a competitive advantage over their “young” counterparts. In other words, search engines view domain age as one of the indicators of trustworthiness and adjust their algorithms accordingly. These results suggest that new companies that aim to enter competitive market segments can have serious difficulties in achieving desired SEM results even backed up with high-quality content because of the existence of big web portals with a long history in the market. Although domain name trustworthiness depends on the content quality, changing domain names at specific point of time will result in losing all accumulated trust assigned by search engines to previous domain. Speaking more simply, the trustworthiness cannot be transferred from one domain to another, even if the content is kept unchanged.

Empirical Application: The research findings clearly indicate that website TLD properties should be considered seriously in SEM. The way of how the obtained results should be applied in organizational search marketing strategy depends on how long the company is running its business on-line and what kind of search traffic it is hunting for.

Online business newbies, as opposed to the “veterans”,

have a possibility to carefully examine the target market and choose the most appropriate TLD design for entering the market, whereas the “old players” cannot easily shift between domain names without losing the accumulated value. Thus, for the mature companies, which possess domain names with a solid history and trust, will be better off in case of keeping the old domain name and using mirror domains as a supplemental tool for targeting new keyword segments. On the other hand, if the domain name has a dubious past, TLD changing process should be considered at the first place.

The obtained findings also suggest that TLD zone can play a significant role mainly for companies interested in image search traffic. If a company already entered the market with a country-specific TLD zone, an additional domain name purchase at .com zone should be considered by the marketing team in order to secure the maximum possible indexation speed by search engines via parked domain. On the contrary, TLD zone type will not hurt companies which mainly operate within traditional search traffic.

Overall, it can be concluded that running an SEM campaign with cleverly selected and managed domains will surely produce better results, whereas irrelevant or ambiguous domains can hinder the promotion of the content. Moreover, as the results show, maintaining TLD trustworthiness level over time can be vital for future search marketing success. Thus, ignoring domain-related factors can cost organizations in losing potential customers to competitors and the role of website TLD properties in SEM should not be underestimated both for online startups and mature companies.

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## Glossary

- PR – Page Rank  
 TLD – Top Level Domain  
 SEM – Search Engine Marketing  
 SEO – Search Engine Optimization  
 SERP – Search Engine Results Page