

Typo-pirates hijack your visitors

Typos are big business

You know the phenomenon. You type an Internet address in the address bar of your browser, inadvertently making a small typo. Most of the time, you end up on a website you're absolutely not looking for, crammed with advertisements or even undesired content. It's obvious that the website that you wanted to visit fell victim to a typo-pirate.

Dishonest organisations hijack your domain name

Sometimes, such a situation is related to an unhappy coincidence. For instance, the Belgian site klara.be is the official website for the classical radio station of the VRT (the Flemish radio and television broadcasting corporation). But at Klara.nl, on the other hand, you can find a sex shop. Often, the problem lies deeper and involves typo-pirates.

Typo-pirates look for existing domain names and register variations with typos. That way, they hope that unsuspecting Internet users will make typos when typing a URL. Usually, typo-pirates place paying text links on their websites, hoping that visitors will click them and be redirected to other websites, thereby generating a nice income. The examples are legion: google.be is linked to a B2B portal, disny.nl is jam-packed with advertisements for financial products, wwwteletubbies.nl offers dating possibilities and micro-soft.be is linked to a web shop where you can buy ink cartridges. It's obvious that all business sectors are in danger. Some typo names even redirect Internet users to porn websites. And that's something with which you, as a company, would rather not be associated.

Moreover, a recent study conducted by a Dutch parents' association revealed that it's mostly children who fall victim to this phenomenon. Typo-pirates register names with typos that children often make. Children will be tempted more easily than adults to

click – unsuspectingly making money for the typo-pirates. The small cost it takes a typo-pirate to register a domain is earned back in a jiffy.

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The problem is not new, but in the meantime it has become more stringent than ever. For instance, last year, the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) registered a record amount of complaints from famous people or companies. Websites, which have a name very similar to the name of a well-known company, government or event's website, are registered en masse and stuffed with advertisements, counterfeit merchandise or links to spyware.

In the meantime, the practices used by typo-pirates oblige many companies to take legal action. E.g., the computer company DELL sued a group of domain hijackers in October 2007. They had registered about 1,000 variations on DELL's domain names. The legal investigation revealed that the domain hijackers made 10,000 \$ on average per domain name. Moreover, the swindlers didn't only target DELL. It was later revealed that they had purchased no less than 64 million unique variations on domain names.

According to the judge, the liability is in part ascribable to Google AdSense, Google's advertising system, which is often used to attract visitors. Part of the liability would also have to be borne by managing entities of a number of domain extensions. These entities offer the possibility to register a domain name for a couple of days, after which they cancel it. However, this system has been created precisely to give registrants an easy way out in case they made an accidental typo when registering domain names, without having to pay for their mistake.

Luckily, there are plans to close this loophole by e.g. charging a small fee per registration, even if the domain name is cancelled within a few hours or days. This should prevent abuse.

The situation in Belgium and in the Netherlands

.be and .nl domain names aren't spared from these dishonest practices either. There have been many examples of typo names already. A well-known example is the Dutch version of the popular Wikipedia encyclopaedia, of which typo squatters registered the typo version 'nl.wikipedja.org'. This site is chock-full of advertisements.

Sometimes, there are even companies that register typo names of their competitors' names in order to steal some of their customers. There are even a couple of international entities that register variations (even in Dutch) of Belgian and Dutch websites. It is indeed very easy to search for popular keywords and websites via search engines and certain scripts can easily compile a list of possible typos for one particular domain name.

Arnold Schwarzenegger, the well-known movie actor and current governor of California, for one, has taken his precautions. It is said that he owns the domains for the ten most frequent misspellings of his surname.

Register your important typo names before it's too late

It's better to be safe than sorry. If someone registers a typo version of your domain name, you could try to set things straight through legal channels, but usually, you'll have no leg to stand on, for typo-pirates don't register an identical copy of your company or domain name, which makes it difficult to win such a case. And that's without even mentioning the supplementary costs that a trial entails. To put it shortly, it's smart to act proactively and to register the most important typo names yourself.

COMBELL's Typo Generator

COMBELL has developed a nifty Typo Generator (<http://www.combell.com/en/domains/typo-generator>), which you can use to generate typos for your domain names in seconds. After having entered your domain name (e.g. combell.com), you immediately get the variations with a typo, like e.g. kombell.com, combel.com, vombell.com, etc. Don't wait any longer and protect your visitors from being misled.

COMBELL GROUP NV

www.combell.com

sales@combell.com