

Intellectual Property Magazine

Net danger

Protecting a business from brand hijacking now requires a working domain name strategy, explains Simon Whitehouse

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There have recently been several major brands that have been victims of prominent online hoaxes and social media attacks. Brands both big and small must be fast and agile in order to prevent online attacks and brand hijacking from taking place.

What can businesses learn from these events? This article will explore steps that all business owners should take when looking to protect their brand online.

Invest in a brand protection strategy

Businesses of all sizes that trade and advertise online need to be aware of the risk that brand impersonation represents, be aware that it runs rampant online and that no industry is immune. From pirated music and films to travel scams, fake pharmaceuticals, car parts, apparel and accessories, anything and everything can be exploited. Brandjackers simply take content and imagery, use URLs that appear authentic and employ other techniques that aim to siphon away traffic from its intended destination. In these ways imposters can easily hijack a brand and the businesses being duped lose both customers and profits.

The need for an online brand protection strategy to address these risks has never been greater. In particular, what is required is a strategy that can protect a business against the negative effects that occur when someone else exploits a business for their own gain. During the last 12 months this has perhaps become more important in light of developments in the internet name space.

Keep your brand safe on social media

Social media presents the modern small business with the opportunity to better engage with audiences, monitor emerging trends and even take advantage of the immediacy of the phenomenon by conducting real-time market research. Social media also enables companies to listen to customers, take note of their feedback and adapt offerings and customer service approaches accordingly.



In the earlier days of social media the focus for small and medium-sized businesses was to promote their brand online rather than protect it. The platforms available were viewed as the perfect opportunity for companies to build brand awareness and engage directly with consumers to showcase specific products and services. But following the prolific growth of social media in recent years many businesses have had to review their digital marketing strategies to account for the exponential number of users, the emergence of multiple new niche platforms and the increased threats to their brand.

The very characteristics that make social media incredibly appealing to consumers are the same ones that make it ripe for those with ill intent. The viral, instant and widespread nature of social media also has downsides that organisations often overlook, such as the need to monitor for brand protection-related issues, including brand impersonation, account spoofing and counterfeit goods. This is reinforced by research conducted by Grant Thornton in which it was found that 59% of businesses do not perform a risk assessment when it comes to their social media strategy.

Another big risk that your business faces on social media is impersonation. The nature of the internet is such that impersonators can use items such as copyrighted images, photos or trademarked brand names or slogans to communicate with an audience in the guise of being the company itself. The motivation for impersonation tends to vary from financial gain, to merely wishing to discredit or damage the brand. Regardless of the reason, this can negatively affect the perceptions that your customers and the local community as a whole, have of your business.

To avoid having your business impersonated online, register it across all major social media websites. Certain sites have a verification process whereby brands or organisations can prove their legitimacy. For those sites that do not offer this option, organisations can ensure that their official website includes icons, information and links that explain and lead to their social media sites.

Domains are key to protecting your brand

The launch of the new generic top-level domains (gTLDs) has seen a dramatic increase in the number of gTLDs with more than 600 new ones coming into play in the next three years. The changes to gTLDs should form an integral part of your business's future online brand protection strategy.

Domain name attacks have grown in frequency as hackers have discovered that many small and medium-sized businesses are relatively soft targets. Targeting these companies with the aim of pointing the domains to a different location is becoming more prevalent and is a danger that must be addressed by a solid domain security strategy. According to the Internet Corporation for Names and Numbers (ICANN), businesses both big and small have suffered such attacks, so every company needs to take action and harden the security of their domain name portfolio.

Know which domains you own and make sure you have a global, centralised view of all your domain names across all offices and locations. Maintaining careful records and keeping track of your entire domain portfolio is half of the battle. Partnering with a registrar that is committed to supporting new gTLDs globally is key.

Stop keyword abuse from damaging your brand

By having an effective digital brand protection strategy you can recapture revenue, enjoy direct cost savings and safeguard your marketing campaign spend. Ensuring authentic brand experiences has the added benefit of solidifying brand reputation while reducing instances of online fraud and unauthorised channels. Smart brands recognise this and are crafting specific brand protection strategies to address the risks presented by the digital world. By elevating digital brand protection within their businesses and partnering with experts who set the standard for protecting brands online, small and medium-sized businesses can safeguard their online investments.

It's imperative that brands take immediate steps to safeguard themselves in the digital channels, as brand abuse in this space is constantly evolving.

Evidence shows that early detection and action substantially increase the success of brand protection efforts. Rogue site operators are much more likely to comply with requests to take down infringing domains when the infringement is detected early, before they invest significant time or money building the site and driving traffic to it. In other words, timely detection – and ongoing vigilance in monitoring rogue sites – leads to better enforcement results.

By using your branded keywords, imposter websites can steal your organic search traffic. Another common practice is for counterfeiters to run their own search advertising campaigns to tout their fake wares. Not only do you lose valuable traffic, but you're also forced to compete against your own branded keywords, driving up digital marketing costs and compromising campaign performance.

How big is the problem? Data shows that rogue websites selling counterfeit wares generate more than 53bn visits per year. Many consumers find these sites through search engines while seeking legitimate goods. Search term analysis shows that for every shopper searching for fake goods, 20 other shoppers were simply looking for bargains. One in five of those bargain hunters fell for a counterfeit site, and would have purchased the real thing if they hadn't been cheated and misled. This calls for investing in a comprehensive digital brand protection strategy that includes effective enforcement.

Stay safe online with brand protection experts

Success often hinges on having a well thought out brand protection strategy that addresses the specific risks faced by a particular brand and use of best practices. Many businesses call in a brand protection expert to craft the strategy and guide implementation and enforcement.

When it comes to maintaining a professional online presence, your business must be ready to deliver trusted, credible brand experiences across digital channels, whenever and wherever customers look for them. Standing in your way are online brandjackers, who can undermine these experiences by impersonating brands. While some SMBs accept this as the cost of doing business online, smart business owners recognise the intrinsic value of developing a specific brand protection strategy for their digital presence.

Partnering with brand protection experts can yield even greater returns, using best practices to guide effective enforcement and providing deeper intelligence into counterfeiters' activities. Every employee across your business – from manufacturing and marketing to branding, customer support, IT and legal – can use this information to produce results that help your business to remain safe online.

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