

Control Your Domain Registration

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But you do need to worry about it. In fact, you need to take control of it, and review that control regularly to make sure you still have it. If you lose control, it can be time consuming and difficult to get it back - in fact, you could even lose your domain name, though that's not the subject discussed here.

Let's review DNS for a moment. This is external DNS, not the DNS you may be using inside your own network to identify machines. This DNS is the one that lets you get mail if you have a mail server and lets people get to your website. It is extremely important. Yes, it's geek talk, you don't want to hear it, you want someone else to take care of this, but it's too important for that. You need to understand this or everything can come to a grinding halt.

Your web site is registered with one of the official registrars. From your point of view, you may have paid money to someone else for the domain registration, but it's one of these places that really did the work, and there is one critical piece of information they control about your domain. That piece of data is the address of the name servers responsible for resolving addresses in your domain. So, if you are xyz.com, somewhere there is a name server that knows where www.xyz.com is, where mail.xyz.com is and so on. The registrar doesn't necessarily know or care where www.xyz.com is, but they do have to know who does know that.

Life used to be more simple. There was one, and exactly one registrar: Network Solutions. You did the domain registration with them, and that was it. Actually, there was a time when it was even more simple, but from your point of view, somewhere there is a database that keeps track of you and me and everyone else. It isn't your registrar who actually keeps that database, but they are allowed to access it to update information. So that's the flow: your registrar knows where your DNS servers are, and they tell the central servers. The overall control of all this is now in the hands of ICANN.

Do we have the picture now? Your ISP may actually provide DNS information, but it's the registrar who tells the central DNS to go ask your ISP for IP addresses and reverse lookups. If the registrar told the central servers that a different outfit was responsible for your domain, that's where the ip address for www.xyz.com would come from.

This is important, so I'm going to be pedantic here just in case you aren't getting this yet. Let's say that the DNS server at worldnic.com says that your www address is 64.226.42.29 and the DNS server at your ISP says it's 82.165.235.25. Which address will you get if you "ping www.xyz.com"?

The answer depends on who your registrar says is your DNS server. If they say worldnic is responsible, then your ping will go to 64.226.42.29, but if they say your ISP's servers are the authority for your domain, then it goes to 82.165.235.25. Two different addresses, and possibly different web sites.

It's possible for things to be more confusing. If you use your web hosting company's name servers for DNS, but the registrar has a different name server recorded for your domain, you could get a different answer than anyone not using that ISP. I have seen this happen more than once.

You can use "dig" on a Unix or Linux box to query specific nameservers: dig @somedns xyz.com. That bypasses your normal DNS and directly asks the server you specify

So now for the really important question. Who controls the registrar?

If the answer isn't "I do", then you have a problem. Is it the guy who designed your web site? Who was that guy, anyway? Or maybe it's the ISP who unfortunately just went out of business and isn't answering the phone any more. You "own" your domain, and want to move it to a new ISP, but how's that going to happen if you don't control the registrar?

Well, it can be difficult. You are going to have to prove that you really do own xyz.com, that the guy who designed the site or the defunct ISP was just acting on your behalf, and then you can tell the registrar where to point your DNS (or can control it yourself right at the registrar for example Network Solutions allows you to maintain your own DNS).

You may actually already have an account with the registrar. That may have been setup for you when you first created your domain. When you set up an account, they usually want an email address for you. That address is important, because usually that's all they need to prove your identity later: they just send a query to the address they have for you, and if you can respond to it, well, that's you then. But what if the email address you used was an old aol account that you let lapse? They can't send mail to it, so you can't prove you own the domain that way.

There are, of course procedures for this kind of situation. You may be able to fax a simple form that sets the domain registration information straight. It obviously shouldn't be too easy: you wouldn't want someone to be able to steal your domain or divert it elsewhere simply by saying "that's mine".

There have been cases of hijacking, including the famous "sex.com" dispute. If you have the wrong people listed in the "whois" for your domain, it can be dangerously easy.

By the way, you also need to watch out for these fly by night and fake domain renewals. Know who you are supposed to renew your domain with so you don't get caught by one of these folks. I have had more than one client think that they renewed but actually they just paid money for some valueless "listing service" masquerading as domain renewal.

The time to get it all sorted out is before you need to. You don't want to find out you have a problem with your registrar on the day your ISP goes belly up or when someone tries to hijack your domain name. So.. take a moment now to dig into this. If you don't know who has control of your registrar, find out. If it is you, make sure you have account names and passwords and that any information they have about you (email, postal address, phone) is current and accurate.

Controlling your domain registration and DNS with your registrar is important Look into it today.

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