



How accounting firms can elevate their brand with new web domains

If you have a website, you have a digital brand – is it sending the right signal?





The .cpa domain is the only restricted top-level web domain exclusive to the accounting profession

The .cpa domain is managed by the AICPA and CPA.com

Your website address is hiding a powerful secret

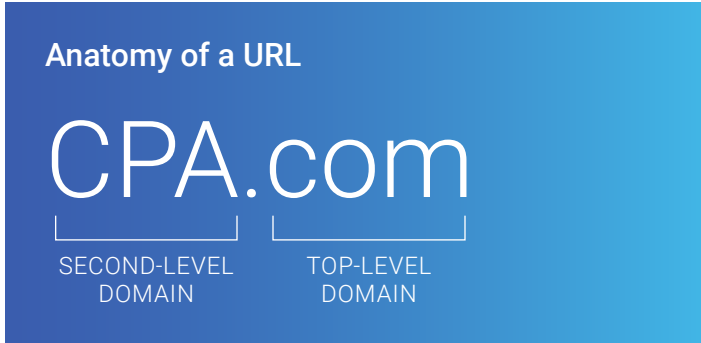
A deceptively small part of your website can have a big impact on your firm's brand.

Here's how.

Clients and prospects are actively influenced by a firm's website every time they engage with it. It is the manifestation of the firm's brand. Their experience with that brand starts with the site's domain and top-level domain (TLD), as shown in the example at right. The moment a client, prospect or partner first encounters your internet address, they make several snap assessments based on these two fundamental elements, including:

- Do I trust this firm based on the domains/web address they've chosen?
- Is the firm likely to have strong technological capabilities, or is it a laggard?
- Does the firm make wise choices regarding its brand and reputation?

Today, firms are finally able to choose new TLDs (and by extension, new domains) that can contribute to a stronger brand experience, and which bring a host of other new advantages. In this article we will explore these opportunities, like the restricted .cpa domain exclusive to CPAs and CPA firms, in detail.



New options at the right moment

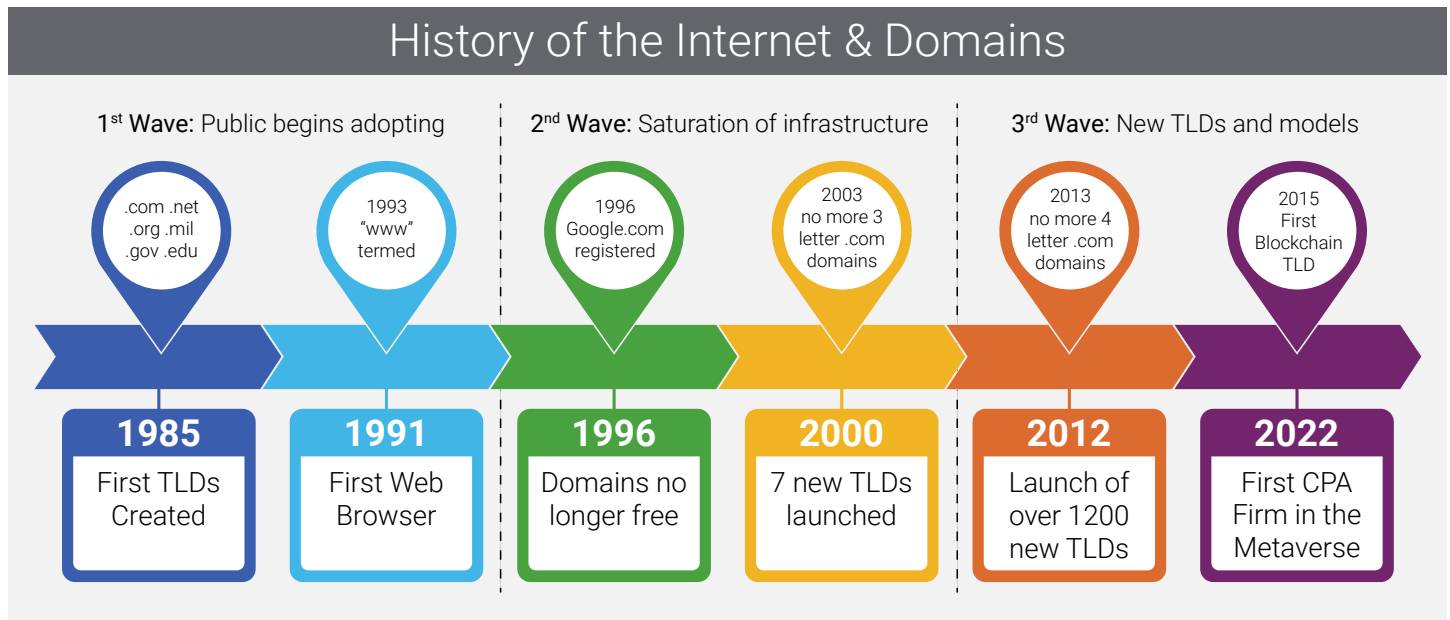
New TLD options have been made available intermittently beginning in the early 2000s, when TLDs such as .biz and .net, as well as country codes such as .ca (for Canada) and .us (for the United States) appeared. Later, in 2012, the organization that governs and administers the internet (ICANN) allowed additional TLDs to be offered, including .law, .pharmacy, .realtor and others. Since then, more than 1200 TLDs have launched, and there were many reasons behind this expansion. For one, the dominance of the .com TLD made it a magnet for domain squatters to buy all the best domains in hopes of selling them for big profits. More TLDs offered more choices to businesses and individuals at a time when the most desirable .com-based domains were already taken.

These new TLDs are available at a time when the value of firms' digital real estate is rising. Sites that may have once served primarily as digital business cards are beginning to function as business relationship hubs, where clients visit to share data with the firm, access reports and more. As firms and their clients are more digitally connected with each passing year, having a website that serves as both a practical tool and brand asset is more important than ever.

Your firm's web domain directly impacts clients' and prospects' perceptions

Not sure whether your firm has a digital brand – much less a digital brand strategy? If it has a website, it has a brand. The digital brand is the culmination of all the digital assets clients encounter from a firm, with the website itself being most prominent. Digital brands have always been an important part of the marketing mix, but they are increasingly important today, given our growing reliance on digital tools to engage with one another. A firm's website is not simply where clients and prospects go to find contact information. Today, the website is also where these audiences frequently go to engage in a growing range of business activities, from the sales cycle to ongoing service.

The firm's web address serves as the North Star for all these activities. It is a consistent, ever-present guide in digital interactions. In this context, domains and TLDs together serve as a linchpin of the firm's digital brand, impacting how clients and prospects perceive the firm, starting with their very first interactions.



What signals does a firm's domain send about its brand?

Any firm's brand is defined by much more than its web address. The client experience, marketing strategies and messaging, online experience, and many other aspects combine to create the brand. But the domain sends prospects and clients one of the earliest, most prominent signals about the firm's brand. Here are some of the aspects of the brand that a smart TLD strategy can significantly improve.

Safety, security and trustworthiness

In the accounting profession, a .cpa domain tells the world that the firm is licensed and approved – unlike a .com domain, .cpa domains are not available to anyone with a credit card. Restricted TLDs have an eligibility requirement that must be met prior to registering a domain. As a result, TLD operators can restrict access to the TLD to a specific group, community or profession. Organizations using domains in TLDs such as .pharmacy, .realtor and .cpa have all been verified, providing visitors with a similar level of trust as a .gov TLD.

That's why existing and new clients can feel secure sharing their sensitive data with firms using the .cpa TLD. This level of trust will only grow as restricted TLDs become more widespread across industries.

This impact is already being felt in other industries. For example, only Major League Baseball teams qualify to use the .mlb TLD. So when fans visit a .mlb site, they can trust that it is a legitimate site – safe, secure and trustworthy. This becomes even more important at a moment when "spoof" sites (which add easily overlooked letters, numbers and other characters to familiar web addresses to impersonate them) and other fraudulent, misleading digital

activities are creating confusion and uncertainty for people online. This presents an unacceptable level of risk for organizations such as CPA firms which are handling clients' sensitive financial information.

Restricted TLDs ensure that cyber squatters, who reserve domains with no intention of using them, do not have access to valuable domains. Cyber criminals are locked out as well, since restricted TLDs make it extremely difficult to use look-alike domains as part of an attack against clients, partners or employees.

Distinctiveness: Standing apart from the pack

The best web addresses are short and memorable. But as the number of websites has grown exponentially over decades – not to mention the fact that many organizations in entirely different industries may share the same or similar names – many firms' first choices for web addresses are now unavailable. The result? Long, confusing web addresses that are difficult to remember and look out of place in promotional materials and email addresses – a negative mark for the firm's brand. Even adding "LLP" to the domain names – a tactic used by many firms seeking to highlight their status as a licensed firm – adds clutter and confusion to the domain. These domains are more difficult to remember, visually unappealing, and distracting in branding and marketing materials.

The new era of TLDs has opened new possibilities for firms that may have resigned themselves to subpar domain names. Because many preferred domains that were already reserved at more traditional .com or .net TLDs are readily available with a .cpa TLD, and the only competition for these domains comes from other registered accounting firms. As a result, the more distinctive web addresses that firms prefer are within reach again.

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Technology savvy

With each passing year, clients expect their firms to be more tech-savvy. They want to know that they are pushing the boundaries of what's possible with technology, making it easier to interact with clients, share data and reporting, and more. They also know that technology-forward firms are more likely to ensure they are ready for what's next.

When existing and prospective clients see firms move to a new TLD like .cpa, they take it as a sign that the firm is ahead of the technology curve, making proactive moves to prepare themselves for the future. In this context, displaying a high comfort level in a changing technology environment becomes a strong brand attribute, just as up-to-date content and easy, trustworthy access to cloud-based subscription services for clients reflect a technology-forward organization. Conversely, a stale, outdated website using a second-tier domain signals a firm that is behind the times.



.cpa Value Framework



Security

- Mitigate firm risk (e.g. cyber-squatting, phishing attacks)
- Added layer to protect client data



Trust

- A verified digital identity helps build trust and credibility with clients
- Restricted domains provide trust through community



Brand

- Amplify your online presence
- Distinction through community
- You're a digitally progressive firm

Search relevance

While word of mouth will always be an important source of new client introductions, many prospective clients start with a simple web search. When they scan the results of their online search for a CPA firm, they are looking for relevance – and the shorter and more focused the domain, the more relevant it is perceived to be. For example, a prospective client in Miami is more likely to click on a short domain that includes “Miami.” Similarly, someone looking for expertise in audit is more likely to click through to a site that includes “audit” in the domain. Many firms choose to reserve and promote these highly focused domains to redirect visitors to a central, more traditional “hub” domain. The domain does not need to be the primary site name to be effective in online searches.

Over the past decade, new TLDs have been introduced to provide a better fit for the needs of companies, brands, and their audiences – and they continue to gain in popularity and adoption.



Small step, big impact

The web is changing rapidly, and CPA firms need to keep pace with its evolution. Over the past decade, new TLDs have been introduced to provide a better fit for the needs of companies, brands, and their audiences – and they continue to gain in popularity and adoption. This is only the beginning. Another expansion of TLDs is already being planned, which will broaden the global internet address book in the future.

At any given moment, there is a long list of “website wish list” items that most firms would pursue, if they only had the time and resources to do so. A new homepage design.

An improved client portal. Updated bios on the “about us” page. And so on. “Updating our domain” may not appear on that list today, but it should. It is one of the easiest actions a firm can take to improve its brand while also attaining practical, technical benefits in other areas such as security and risk management. It also helps ensure that as the web continues to change, CPA firms will not be left behind on the technology front.

For firms looking to make this relatively simple update to their sites, CPA.com has made it easy to search for available domains and apply. Visit www.cpa.com/dotcpa to get started or to find out more about this important new opportunity.

Check to see if your new domain is available.
Reserve it today at register.domains.cpa



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