

Don't be Generic; Get Yourself a Domain Name

Technology & Business Resource Guide 2008

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Do you have a generic e-mail address? For example, jeff@hotmail.com, jeff@yahoo.com or jeff@aol.com. If so, you may have had the desire to upgrade your e-mail to a more professional address—something like jeff@clickconsulting.com or jeff@yourfirmname.com.

Besides being more professional to your clients, there are other advantages to getting a domain name for e-mail: you can retain the same e-mail address when you change service providers; everyone at your firm can have consistent e-mail accounts; and you can add server-level spam and virus protection.

Register a Domain

The first step is to register a domain name. More precisely, you are obtaining the right to use the domain name for a specific period of time. You do not own the domain. Typically, domain names are registered in one-year increments, for an average of \$35 per year.

Entities that register the domain on your behalf are called registrars, of which there are many. A quick search on Google will provide a list to choose from. Once you find a registrar you trust, you register your domain name with it, and it takes care of the technical details. Specifically, the registrar inserts your domain name into the root domain name system (DNS) servers so that the internet knows your name exists and knows how to get information about it. Domain names for CPA firms generally take the form of firmnamecpa.com.

While your clients will be impressed when you show up with CPA@yourfirm.com as your e-mail address, the internet itself won't be.

In fact, "yourfirm.com" means nothing to the internet.

Computers connected to each other through the internet find each other through what's called an IP address (such as 198.162.99.01). The DNS was created to translate those long complicated strings of numbers into words that humans can more easily remember. A DNS server is little more than a list of domain names and their associated IP addresses—but it is a mighty big list.

Get Hosting

Now that you have the right to use the domain name, it's time to attach internet services

to it, the most popular being e-mail. This is typically done through a third-party e-mail hosting provider. Sometimes, registrars will offer e-mail and web hosting, but a dedicated hosting company generally provides e-mail service.

Things to look for in a hosting company include support (do people answer the phone?), high-quality hardware and hard-drive redundancy.

Redundancy is important. Just ask your service provider what happens if the server that hosts your files crashes. If the provider's response is not "we have redundant servers as back up. If one goes down, there will be no loss of service," then find another host. Also important is high-quality and reliable software, such as Linux, and a high-quality data center. Additionally, most e-mail hosting providers offer webmail access, meaning that while you travel you can check e-mail through an internet site with your browser.

Once you find a hosting company you trust, set up an account. Typical hosting fees range from \$20-\$50 per month, depending on options, such as the amount of hard drive storage space, the number of e-mail accounts you can create, and the amount of bandwidth you can use.

The hosting company must provide a server that is online 24/7, ready to accept inbound e-mail and inbound web traffic. This server collects all e-mail intended for you. Periodically, your desktop computer running an e-mail program, say Microsoft Outlook or Mozilla Thunderbird, will check the e-mail server for any new messages you may have. Setting up your Outlook is a relatively straightforward process.

Set Up Outlook

Now that you have registered your domain and set up hosting, it is time to set up Outlook.

First, set up an e-mail address within your hosting control panel (provided by the hosting company). Next, open your e-mail program, in this example, Microsoft Outlook. Simply go to "Tools," then "Accounts" and then "add."

There are four settings that are important to enter into Outlook:

- User name. Generally your e-mail address.
- Password. The e-mail account password that you established in your hosting control panel.
- POP (incoming) server. The name of your hosted e-mail server; generally something like mail.yourdomain.com. It is the server responsible for collecting inbound e-mail.
- SMTP (outgoing) server. This can either be set to the e-mail server of your ISP or your hosted e-mail server (same setting as the POP server). It represents the server responsible for sending e-mail you compose.

If you get stuck with these settings, your hosting company should be able to provide you with the proper settings.

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