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Managing your global online brand portfolio
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*Building IP value
in the 21st century*

Managing your global online brand portfolio

By **Vincent D'Angelo**, CSC Digital Brand Services

If you are not online, you are not in business. Today, this holds true not just for internet-based companies, but for any organisation with a website or an email address. Nearly all businesses rely on a stable online presence in order to function properly. And while the digital era has created huge opportunities, it also presents brands with unfamiliar threats. So how can you respond?

The effort that you put into protecting, promoting and building your brand online affects your company's reputation, relationships and prosperity. Yet many organisations still lack company-wide strategies for managing their greatest intangible asset.

All brand portfolios are digital today

At a strategic level, astute businesses do not organise their brands as distinct, standalone assets. Instead they view them as a single entity – a global brand portfolio – in which they can allocate resources to individual brands depending on their priority. This holistic approach to brand portfolio management should be the same for digital brands. And for best-in-class brand leaders, it is.

But many companies have a much looser grip on their digital portfolio than other areas of brand strategy. This is partly because global IP management is complex and digital technologies are growing rapidly alongside changing consumer preferences. However, it is mostly because brand owners do not have a holistic overview of their entire digital brand portfolio. This is no surprise, because a brand portfolio can be vast. It incorporates everything that affects the brand in the digital environment, from registered trademarks to individual brands, sub-brands and product names, logos, domain names

(including new generic top-level domains (gTLDs) and country-specific TLDs), social media usernames and mobile apps. The list is lengthy and it is likely to get longer.

Different companies have different digital needs

What is more, managing a contemporary online portfolio is fraught with danger. The bigger the brand – or the aspirations for it – the more complex the job becomes.

All companies want to protect their brands online while minimising the associated costs. They all want to succeed globally in a rapidly evolving digital brand marketplace while fending off cybercriminals and other digital IP infringers. And they all need to manage their digital brand assets centrally. However, there are some subtle differences for different types of organisation.

Long-established global consumer brands must deal with the sheer size, complexity and international spread of their IP portfolios. 'Internet generation' companies, founded by digital-savvy leaders when the Internet was young, may find themselves with a digital brand footprint that has become larger and costlier than necessary. Contemporary start-ups, focused on growth and cost control, need answers to difficult questions about how to manage intellectual property in the markets in which they are expanding.

Why an online brand strategy is so important

Whatever your organisation's size or reach, the need for a coherent digital brand strategy is made more urgent by the speed with which digital footprints are growing and the risks to reputation posed by social media.

Digital footprints are getting bigger

Your organisation's digital footprint is probably bigger than you think. Today, it most likely comprises geographic or country domains, email addresses, Twitter handles, Facebook and LinkedIn pages, mobile apps, blogs and more. Your company may have a 'shadow' digital footprint too – an unapproved and infringing brand expression that diverts traffic, spreads misinformation, steals data or distributes malware.

For an organisation of any scale, faced with protecting, monitoring and enforcing every brand in every emerging digital channel can seem unwieldy and expensive. But minimising costs can mean spending a little to save a lot.

Social media increases reputational risk

A small number of activists who may have something against your company specifically, or your industry more generally, can cause a disproportionate amount of reputational damage. But a disproportionate response can be damaging too. It is a question of picking your battles.

Mobile devices create more immediacy

As mobile devices become ubiquitous and the tentacles of social media reach into every aspect of our lives, brands can communicate more personally and in real time. Avoiding the downsides of this open forum demands early protection, effective monitoring and appropriate enforcement.

How organisations of all sizes can respond: steps to successful online brand management

These building blocks form the foundation for successful online brand portfolio management: protection, monitoring and enforcement.

Protection and promotion: cost-effective safeguarding

Prevention is not just better than cure: it is also considerably cheaper. It begins with establishing an identifiable global digital brand strategy, in which the brand portfolio is centralised and clear protocols are established for how the brand can be used online.

The recommended approach to protecting and promoting brands online is as follows:

- Consolidate – audit and streamline domain name portfolios, domain name system and security sockets layer coverage and social media usernames. It is not unusual for organisations to be paying for domains that they do not use or applying the wrong levels of protection to different assets. There are often savings to be had by consolidating a digital IP portfolio: for example, centralising it so that domain names can be seen alongside social media handles and digital certificates makes management much easier.
- Utilise – ensure that digital intellectual property resolves to relevant content and is measured to quantify impact. Is your intellectual property working hard enough? Making sure that URLs and usernames are being properly used helps to ensure that you are getting a return on your IP investment.
- Rationalise – allow domains that have no value to lapse and explore divesting domains that do. There are almost always opportunities to save and make money in a digital brand portfolio – it is better to realise this sooner rather than later.
- Optimise – identify and register 'high-impact/high-risk' available domains and social media usernames. At this stage, you should also consider registering domain names (including new gTLDs) similar to

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your own, including slight typographical differences. The chances are that if you do not, someone else will. It is also worth advance registering vanity URLs on social media. This final step is a critical part of digital brand protection, as it ensures that your most business-critical properties and most valuable brands have the highest level of protection against infringement.

Monitoring: a holistic view

Knowing what is happening with your brand online is critical. What unauthorised mobile apps are being downloaded by your customers? What damage are third-party registrations doing? What is being said about your brands in social media? How is your brand being represented in searches? Is your brand name being misused online?

Clearly, monitoring must cover the digital spaces that the organisation uses, but it should also extend to those that it does not use – or at least, that it does not use at the moment. Because future plans can change, monitoring strategies must be broad. For example, looking for trademark infringements by mobile apps – even if you have not developed any apps – could detect unlicensed uses of intellectual property. Unless you have the in-house resources to monitor this rapidly growing space too, your brand is at risk.

Successful monitoring of digital intellectual property means looking at the entire name space to identify high-impact infringing cases in web, mobile app, social media, search, domain name, affiliate and email channels.

Monitoring needs to be logical, comprehensive and detailed, and accompanied by analytics so that organisations can address the issues that matter and ignore those that do not. In order to work best, monitoring needs the following:

- Stakeholders from different teams – marketing, legal, IT and others should be involved, because one department cannot handle the problem alone.
- Good planning and budgeting – by matching monitoring activity to the size of your digital footprint, you can ensure that your time and money are well spent.

Contributing profiles



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Vincent D'Angelo is the director of global brand advisory at CSC Digital Brand Services, where he assists large brand owners in mitigating risk and maximising traffic to their web properties by sharing best practices and strategy related to domain names, new generic top-level domains, social media URL coverage, paid searches, search engine optimisation, social media marketing, mobile apps and quick response codes.

Mr D'Angelo has 14 years' experience in the brand protection and management industry. He was also named inventor on a domain and brand risk assessment patent. His team continues to perform research to quantify further the value of digital assets and their impact on direct navigation, search engines, social media and mobile app marketplaces.

- Scalability – starting small and leaving room to grow makes the monitoring task more manageable from the beginning.
- Analysis – understanding which incidents are the most damaging helps you to prioritise enforcement.

Enforcement: effective action

Even organisations with a comprehensive online digital strategy face attacks on their domain names, mobile apps, social media registrations and content, and even on specific hashtags. The numbers tell the story. In 2013 alone nearly 2,600 domain cases were filed through the Uniform Domain Name

Dispute Resolution Policy established by the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers. With 1,000 new gTLDs on the way, someone somewhere will attempt to register a domain that infringes on a global brand.

Where enforcement is needed, the precise course of action to be taken depends on the severity of the threat, the motive of the infringer and the resolution mechanisms available for the property registered. It must reflect good knowledge of the type of infringement, because different mechanisms are available depending whether your brands are experiencing unwanted domain or new gTLD registrations, internet content abuse, logo infringements or abuse of trademarks in social media or app stores.

Bringing everything together

The best practices set out here can help organisations of any size to manage their digital brand portfolio successfully and thrive in today's complex landscape.

Global brand owners should consider digital channels in a holistic manner, not in isolation. As consumers use apps, email, social media and websites to learn and acquire services, so do cybercriminals. Activity in one digital channel will have an impact on other digital channels.

Taking a holistic view of your digital intellectual property is cost effective and can minimise your chances of missing out on opportunities and threats.

Ultimately, when being in business means staying online, protecting your digital assets is one of the most important investments that you can make. **iam**



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