

# The real cost of virtual real estate

Contributed by Debbie Smit  
Sunday, 03 June 2007  
Last Updated Thursday, 19 July 2007

In the beginning, when the World Wide Web was without form and void you could buy an island in it for a song, without having to concern yourself with hostile natives.

Some early colonists bought out what amounted to whole continents of real estate.

In 1994, [[Gary Kremen]] registered sex.com. Stephen M. Cohen stole it through devious means. After developing it, it was reported that he was raking in up to \$500 000 a month. A lengthy court battle ensued, with Kremen lodging lawsuits against Network solutions (now Verisign) and Cohen. Kremen eventually profited handsomely from the saga. Judgements in his favour total about \$85 million.

Kremen's fight for domain restitution is the subject of a recently-published book by Kieren McCarthy, called, simply, sex.com.

Today, sex.com is a sad little porn site (it couldn't be anything else really) and all the good names are taken.

Of the world's ten most popular websites (as ranked by alexa.com), half have silly names &ndash; Yahoo! (at number one with more than 412 million unique users) is lifted from Gulliver's Travels. It is Swift's name for a rude and unsophisticated person. Google (3) is a misspelling of googol, 10 to the power of 100 and Orkut, ranked eighth, is named after Google employee and creator, Turkish software engineer, Orkut Büyükkökten. Baidu (7), a Chinese search engine, derives its name from a Song Dynasty poem written by Xin Qiji in the 12th century. At number ten is qq.com (also known as tencent), the most popular free instant messaging computer program in Asia, originally known as OICQ (Oh, I seek you).

Just ten years ago the web was home to a then milestone million websites. Today it accommodates more than 100 million. Getting noticed takes more than a clever name.

Sex.com won't get you very far. There can be only one costadaplenty.com.

Nevertheless, because of the bizarre semantic morphing that can occur when there are no spaces used between words, caution should be exercised when choosing a name for your online house.

An Italian battery manufacturer called Powergen discovered this when they called their website powergenitalia.com, a name which suggests the sale of industrial strength sex toys. A database listing representative agencies for the rich and famous was dubbed whorepresents.com and a perfectly innocent forum for exchanging knowledge and views became expertsexchange.com. You'd be forgiven for thinking that therapistfinder.com is a service for outing sex offenders rather than a therapist-locating service.

If you think you have a name that could rival sex.com in the saleability stakes, do a domain check on one of the many hundreds of sites which offer the service. Being original is not easy.

I thought com.ma (.ma is the signifier for Moroccan domain names) was quite clever. It's been taken. But when I typed in the address, all I got was the French equivalent of "Sorry, this web page could not be accessed". Jouma.se (.se stands for Sweden) is also taken, even though typing it into my address bar yielded no results. I was offered the option of having it acquired for me on the "secondary market".

So, you have a brilliant name (like sex.com) but some enterprising person has snapped it up already. Trouble is, they're not actually using it. It's just sitting there getting choked up with weeds; a deserted plot on the Information Superhighway. What do you do? You could, like Mr Cohen, obtain it through devious means, or you could obtain it legally by paying lots of money to a broker.

Or you could, in the spirit of Web 2.0 and Dr Seuss, make up a beautiful and unique name (snozdot.com?) and use it to develop a magnificent website that is useful and profitable, and worthy of being shared with netizens all over the world.