What Is A Domain Name, Anyway?

"What's the relationship between a Web site, e-mail and domain name?" The client wanted to know if they had to have a Web site in order to have e-mail. "The short answer is no", I replied helpfully. "And the long answer is also no." "Then what *is* a domain name?", he continued.

Good question. If all you need is an e-mail address, you can simply sign up with an Internet Service Provider (ISP). The monthly service usually includes one to five e-mail addresses; your e-mail address will be something like "flopsy@ispname.net".

Suppose that you want your e-mail address to reflect your organization's name, for presence or to make it easier for people to remember. Now you need to reserve a domain name, a unique name by which your organization will be known in cyberspace, which only you may use. Say you work for Flopsy, Mopsy, Cotton-tail & Peter, LLC, and the domain name you select is FlopsyMopsyLLC.com. First you'll need to contact a domain name registrar to reserve your chosen domain name. This usually costs $15-25 per year per domain name. Then you would arrange with a service provider, which doesn't have to be your ISP, to set up your e-mail addresses with that domain name. For a small to mid-size organization (say, 20 users) e-mail and web hosting will cost $6 - $25 per month. Now your e-mail address is flopsy@FlopsyMopsyLLC.com.

Although your e-mail comes to your domain name, you don't have a Web site. Anyone who searches for www.FlopsyMopsyLLC.com will get a "connection with the server could not be established" or "this page is reserved for FlopsyMopsyLLC.com" message. If you want Web surfers, prospects, customers or the general public to see the services or products you offer (or buy them online), then a Web site is for you. Most small and mid-size organizations have an outside company "host" the site for them. Although many ISPs provide hosting services you do *not* have to select the same provider that provides your e-mail service or your Internet access.

Besides finding someone to host the site, you'll need to design it. Designing a Web site is part art, part programming, part psychology, and is best done by professionals. Before engaging a designer you should peruse a few of the books on the topic available at most large bookstores. There are even books on bad Web sites! A well-designed site makes it easy to locate the information the viewer wants and always provides a way to communicate with the operator, usually via e-mail. After talking to designers, see the sites they've done. Is a site clearly organized? Is it visually appealing? (There are some truly ugly web sites.) You have less than 10 seconds to catch the casual surfer.

"Do I need a Web site?", the client asked. "Not yet; let's get you going with e-mail first. That will have visible productivity benefits. Then we'll look at a web site."

Hosting, service providers, ISPs, domain name registration, … confused yet? No? OK, let's discuss search engine optimization – some other time.

This column by Denis Williamson of MacLamor Computer Consulting aims to help readers maximize the value of information technology. You can reach Denis at 845-357-1877 or denis@maclamor.com