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Museums Briefing

Essential information for Museums Association members
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.museum

a new domain name for museums

Museums currently have an opportunity to register web and email addresses using a format exclusively available to the museum sector. The new .museum top-level domain for museum websites was introduced in 2000. Take up has been slow, but the opportunity to acquire a museum address for your museum may not be available forever. Museums need to act soon, or risk missing out.

**MUSEUMS
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▶ Image courtesy of the Oriental
Museum, University of Durham



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Background and benefits

All web addresses end in a generic suffix known as a top-level domain: .uk, .com, .edu, .org, and so on. These currently indicate either what country an organisation is based in, or broadly what kind of organisation it is. As the internet grows in size, more of these top-level domains are needed in order to provide more scope for organisations across the world to have simple and meaningful web addresses. The proposal is that new top-level domains should indicate more precisely what kind of organisation a website belongs to.

As a pilot exercise in 2000, the organisation that regulates the naming of websites launched seven new top-level domains. Some are open to anyone in the same way as current top-level domains like .com. But three are restricted to certain kinds of organisations: .aero for the air transport industry, .coop for the international co-operative movement and .museum. Of the three, .museum is the only one exclusively for public sector organisations. Much rides on its success: if .museum is not successful, there may never be a .library or a .theatre, or any other similar sector specific domain names. Other sectors regard it as a great coup for museums that the international museum community was successful in securing a new top-level domain in the first round. Museums owe it to themselves and to others to make sure that .museum is made to work.

What are the benefits?

The key benefits for museums in using the .museum top-level domain are about authenticity and community.

.museum provides an assurance to users that the content of a site is reliable. With .museum, there will be no danger of users being misled by other organisations seeking to pass themselves off as museums or to gain commercial advantage from an apparent association with a museum. With the current slowdown in the dotcom industry, museums may not currently feel at risk from this kind of exploitation. However, this slump will not last forever.

Museums should take the opportunity to establish .museum now so that its benefits are still available to them in the future.

.museum also provides museums with a shared online identity. This is helpful in promoting a sense of community within the sector and recognition from outside. All museums, big or small, will have the same opportunity to play a part in this new online community.

.museum offers other benefits. It has the potential to make it easier for users to find your museum site. It can provide a simple, memorable web address – something that might be particularly valuable for museums with complicated web addresses, or whose website is currently buried within a larger site.

Museums have nothing to lose by adopting .museum. If museums are unsure about taking the new name, or if they have a well-established web address already which they are reluctant to lose, they can establish a .museum address which simply redirects users to their main site. Commercial companies very commonly do this: for example, if you type marksandsparks.co.uk into your browser, you will be automatically redirected to marksandspencer.com. As .museum becomes better known, it will be a great advantage to have this kind of parallel identity, so that users guessing your web address will find their way to your site.

How does it work?

Who's who in .museum
ICOM initiated the process which secured a top-level domain for museums and established an organisation called MuseDoma to run .museum. To date, MuseDoma has been funded by ICOM and the J. Paul Getty Trust.

MuseDoma is currently running an awareness-raising project called MuseNic, funded by the European Union. The campaign began last year and from autumn 2003 it will focus principally on the UK, France, Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands. A website, <http://about.museum>, gives more details.

Who is eligible for .museum?
Museums that comply with the ICOM definition of a museum are eligible to use .museum addresses. MuseDoma will work with the relevant museum organisation in each country to determine eligibility: in the UK, all Registered museums will be eligible.

.museum is also open to museum organisations. And individuals working in the museum sector can have personal .museum email addresses which will travel with them even if they move jobs.

The structure of .museum names

Web addresses using the .museum top-level domain have to have at least three levels.

These fictitious examples illustrate how the naming works:

third level	.second level	.top level
anytown	.art	.museum
science	.anytown	.museum
uniquename	.anytown	.museum
history	.english	.museum
the	.anytown	.museum

MuseDoma controls a list of acceptable terms for the second level domain. In practice, most possible terms are acceptable but they do have to be shared; no organisation can monopolise a second level domain. So, for example, trademarks are not suitable; a company museum would not be able to use town.companyname.museum as its address. It could, however, use companyname.town.museum. The third level domain can be anything you choose, as long as the whole address relates clearly to the name of your museum and distinguishes it sufficiently from other museums.

These naming rules seem to be a stumbling block for many museums thinking of adopting a .museum web address. Some think that they are unwieldy or do not suit the structure of their museum's name. However, many museum in the UK have registered .museum names and the list opposite illustrates a range of possible solutions.

One of the difficulties .museum faces is that it represents a new form of naming. People are used to current conventions like name.org.uk. However, eventually, all web addresses will be constructed in this way: museums are just facing the difficulties that come from being the first in a particular field.

Applying, cost and registering

How to apply

Museums interested in taking up a .museum web address have to apply to MuseDoma. There is a one-off fee for this application.

MuseDoma then refers applicants to a small number of commercial registrars who have been appointed by MuseDoma and who can register a museum's chosen name and sell the right to use it.

Further information about how to register a name is available on the MuseDoma website.

For information on how to register or for more details about .museum, visit <http://about.museum>

What does it cost?

Costs are relatively low. There is currently a one-off application fee of \$100 to MuseDoma, plus a fee of about \$80-\$100 each year to the registrar for each name.

Why should I register now?

There are already about 2,000 .museum names registered internationally. Once .museum achieves a certain critical mass, it will be imperative for every museum to have a .museum name; but, of course, critical mass will not be achieved unless more museums are prepared to take the step of registering now.

.museum is not going to go away. Now that the top-level domain has been established, it will be a permanent feature of the internet. However, there is a risk that museums' control over .museum could be lost. To register .museum on behalf of the museum community, MuseDoma has to pay a substantial fee to the organisation which controls naming conventions for the internet. To date, it has received significant financial

support from ICOM and from the J. Paul Getty Trust but it needs to sustain a good level of registrations in order to be financially viable in the long term.

If control over the name is lost, museums may lose out. Museums that have not registered their names may find their identities usurped by all kinds of unwelcome intruders. Commercial dealers and amateurs setting up family history sites could make use of .museum if this were to happen: it is vital it does not. Although it is not clear how long the present mode of financing .museum will prove viable, museums safely have about one further year to make sufficient registrations to demonstrate that the professional museum community can make .museum viable. If this is not achieved, the profession risks losing control of the name.

Examples of .museum names

The following names are all in use by museums in the UK. Some currently redirect the user to an old-style web address, but they give an indication of the range of formats that can be used. For a full list, see <http://about.museum>

Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums:
aberdeen.artgallery.museum

Tank Museum:
bovington.tank.museum

Manx National Heritage:
isleofman.history.museum

Grand Lodge of Scotland Museum:
freemasonry.scotland.museum

Ironbridge Gorge Museum:
ironbridge.gorge.museum

Natural History Museum:
naturalhistory.london.museum

National Museum of Photography, Film and Television:
uk.photography.museum, uk.film.museum and uk.television.museum

Victoria and Albert Museum:
victoriaandalbert.london.museum and vam.london.museum

National Museums and Galleries of Wales: a case study

The National Museums and Galleries of Wales (NMGW) has registered several .museum names, including national.wales.museum and a Welsh equivalent, cenedlaethol.cymru.museum. NMGW has been using these names in parallel with its existing web addresses for some time. It does not currently promote its .museum addresses to the public, but plans to switch to using them for its main online identity in the future, once .museum is more widely used and recognised.

Iwan Standley, web officer at NMGW, says that the main attraction of .museum was that it could give the national museums more meaningful and straightforward addresses. The current addresses – www.nmgw.ac.uk and www.aocc.ac.uk mean little to most visitors.

One disadvantage for NMGW is that .museum does not work well in Welsh: a Welsh speaker might be surprised to find the English word 'museum' at the end of a Welsh address. 'Museum' was chosen as an internationally recognised term but some compromises are necessary when .museum is used in languages which have a different word for museum.