



Google Search Bias & Domain Neutrality

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.inc MEANS
BUSINESS

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Meet the researchers



Professor Jason Dojc

Jason Dojc teaches digital marketing in four different programs at Seneca College. An Adobe Creative Educator he has been at the forefront of digital education serving as a faculty mentor helping other faculty with their online courses. The self-proclaimed “unaccredited anthropologist” Jason specializes in the effect of digital technology consumer behaviour.



SEO Specialist Berker Gezer

Berker Gezer is a hands-on SEO specialist and UX designer. His strong educational background and diverse experience across numerous industries, including finance, hospitality, education, real estate, and e-commerce, enable him to develop holistic strategies while using cutting-edge techniques to build customer-centric digital experiences. Berker is currently working on various projects and continues to create search engine optimized, user-friendly websites.

What's in a Domain Name?

For almost all new businesses, one of the first things founders do is check to see if the preferred name has been registered. Or, more accurately, they check to see if [theirpreferredomainname].com has been registered.

At the time of this writing, 370.1 million domain names have been registered¹, and 148.7 million or 40% are using the top level domain (or “TLD”) .com.

Here is the structure of a Universal Resource Locator (or “URL”):



According to the Internet Assigned Numbers Authority (IANA), the organization that oversees root zone management (meaning the top level domains in the domain name system), there are 1,511 top level domains as of June 2020². And yet, one top level domain (.com) has 40% share of all domain names, and 10 TLDs have 73% of all domain names. We see that kind of unequal distribution in many areas, but why top level domain names specifically?

A standard answer would be that .com is by far the most familiar, and thus has created a winner take [nearly] all type marketplace. That may have made sense in the early days of the Internet, when search engines weren't as powerful, browser bars didn't autofill entries (including top level domains) and committing a domain name to memory was the most comfortable way a customer could find a business. Back then, .com was a convenient heuristic.

But in the age of Google and autofill, does a .com advantage still exist?

We conducted a pair of experiments to answer that question, and our results showed that content and name matters, whereas using a .com domain does not matter as much.

¹ The VeriSign Domain Name Brief https://www.verisign.com/en_US/domain-names/dnib/index.xhtml

² "Daily TLD DNSSEC Report". icann.org. ICANN. 31 May 2020. Retrieved 31 May 2020.

What's in a Top Level Domain?

Most businesses want to use their company name as their website address. But what happens if their desired name is not available?

There are typically two choices: see if the current owner of the domain is willing to sell it, or use a domain name which deviates from the company's true name.

The first option requires time to negotiate a price and other fees associated with a domain name transfer, and the business owner may not be able to come to an agreed-upon price with the domain owner. Moreover, old domain names may have been penalized by Google in the past, and although a new owner may take over the name, it can be challenging to recover the domain name's reputation. (There is a manual process to request reconsideration from Google, but this requires extra effort and time.)

The second option ultimately means choosing a domain name that is different from the company name. For example, the app Pocket did not secure www.pocket.com, so they registered www.getpocket.com. This also happens frequently with Twitter and Instagram handles. For example, while Blake Lively secured her name on Twitter (@blakelively), her husband, Ryan Reynolds, had a more common name, and chose @VancityReynolds.

Google Says TLD Doesn't Matter

According to Google, using a new domain ending will not hurt a site's search presence. In the eyes of Google, a new TLD will not affect your search engine ranking, or put it lower in the list of websites that appear based on a search³.

To test this, with the help of my students, I designed an experiment to verify Google's claim. We created four sites containing the same content, but using different TLDs: .com, .net, .dealer, and .inc. The sites were compared along the following dimensions: traffic, backlinks, crawlability, indexability. The experiment showed negligible differences across all four TLDs. Here are the results in detail.

³ https://domains.google/intl/en_in/learn/traditional-vs-new/domain-endings.html#/

Key Terms

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Traffic

Website traffic refers to web users who visit a website. Web traffic is measured in visits, sometimes called "sessions," and is a common way to measure an online business' effectiveness at attracting an audience.



Backlinks

Backlinks are links from outside domains that point to pages on your domain; essentially linking back from their domain to yours.



Crawlability

Crawlability describes the search engine's ability to access and crawl content on a page. If a site has no crawlability issues, then web crawlers can access all its content easily by following links between pages.



Indexability

Indexability refers to the search engine's capability of analyzing and adding a page to its index.

The Experiment

We built four web sites, used a topical topic ("stay home fashion trends"), provided nearly identical content, and used different top level domains. Which did Google crawl the most?

Over the 90 days of our experiment, Google crawled between 10 and 14 pages per day.

To ensure that parity wasn't related to the topic, we simultaneously launched four other sites on a different topic ("gig work"). The results were nearly the same as with stay home fashion trends.

Does Top Level Domain Preference Exist?

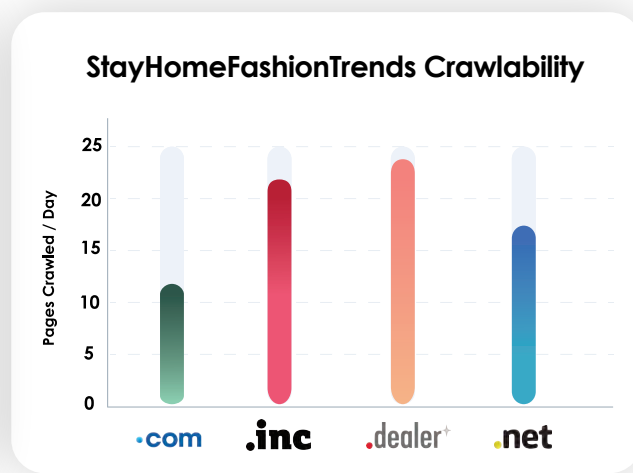
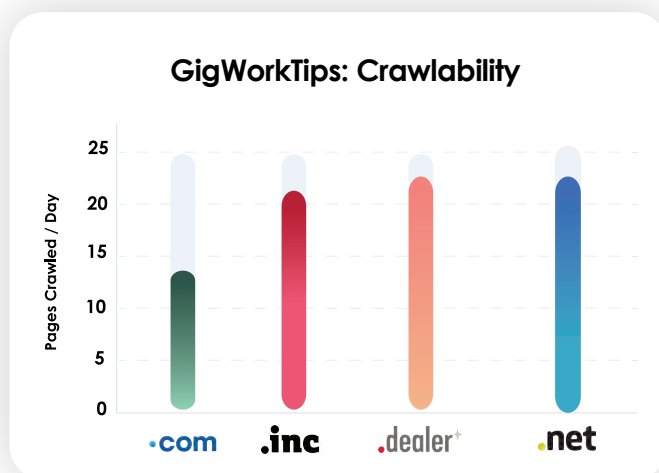
Methodology

Because Google penalizes identical content, the sites were nearly identical. Each website contained an index page and three articles on stay at home fashion. Given this penalization for similar content, the articles were not identical but very similar. Google additionally penalizes articles that it detects were written by bots, so we used human writers. One writer would write an article, and then three other writers would adapt that same article for the other websites.

To ensure that the website topic was not a factor, four other websites on both topics were created using the same methodology. These websites were:

| GIG WORK |
|--------------------|
| GigWorkTips.com |
| GigWorkTips.inc |
| GigworkTips.dealer |
| GigWorkTips.net |

| STAY HOME FASHION |
|------------------------------|
| StayHomeFashionTrends.com |
| StayHomeFashionTrends.inc |
| StayHomeFashionTrends.dealer |
| StayHomeFashionTrends.net |

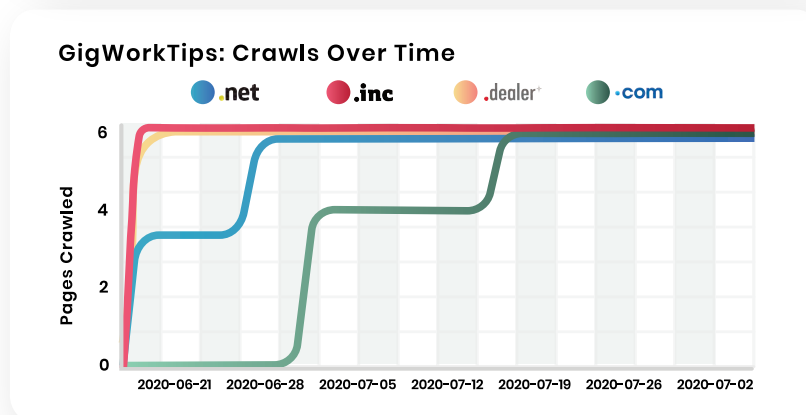
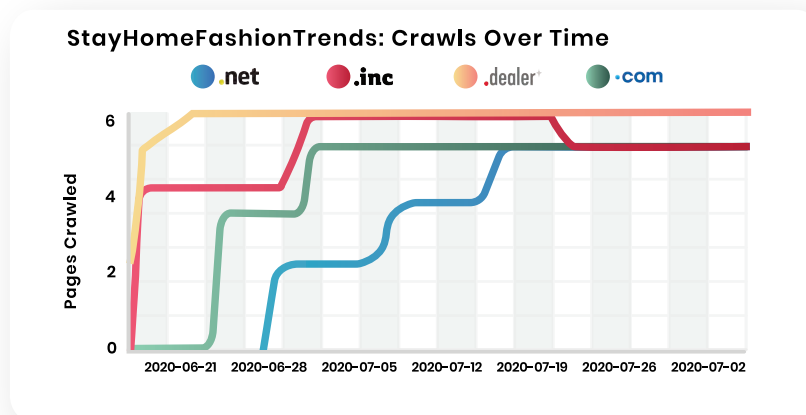


Results

Because promoting any site would bias the results, we didn't.

We only submitted sitemaps and URLs simultaneously to Google. Our results show similarity in terms of frequency that was relative to the size of our websites.

| StayatHomeFashion | Days Until 1st Crawl | GigWorkTips | Days Until 1st Crawl |
|----------------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|
| .dealer⁺ | 1 | .dealer⁺ | 1 |
| .inc | 2 | .net | 1 |
| .com | 5 | .inc | 2 |
| .net | 15 | .com | 12 |



Conclusion

Top level domain name does not affect traffic, crawlability, or crawl frequency, nor does it affect Search Engine Optimization (SEO) results. Google's statement on TLDs has been validated.

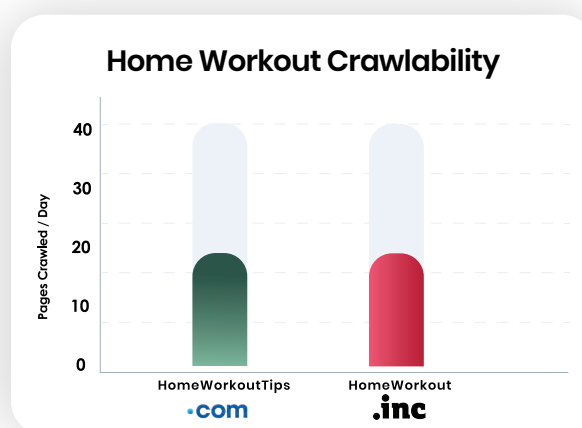
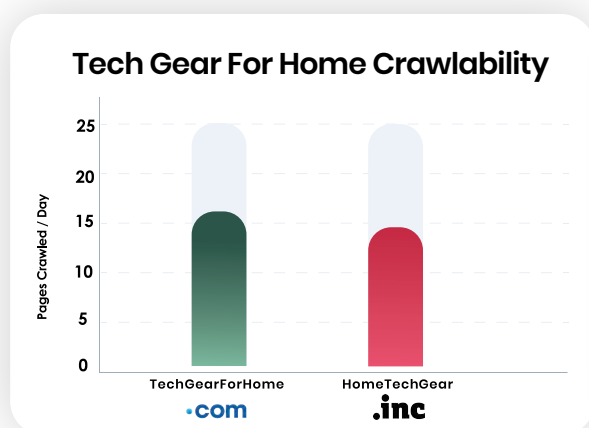
Does Domain Length Matter?

Methodology

As mentioned earlier in our Pocket/GetPocket example, a business owner may often choose a different (and longer) domain name to secure a .com. We designed an experiment to test whether a shorter .inc domain name would have similar crawlability and crawl frequency as a longer .com domain.

Two nearly identical websites were created using the same methodology as the first experiment. To control for the effect of the website topic, a second set of websites were created.

| TLD TYPE | TECH GEAR FOR HOME | HOME WORKOUTS |
|-----------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Long.com | TechGearForHome.com | HomeWorkoutTips.com |
| Short.inc | HomeTechGear.inc | HomeWorkout.inc |



Results

Again, because promoting any site would bias the results, we didn't.

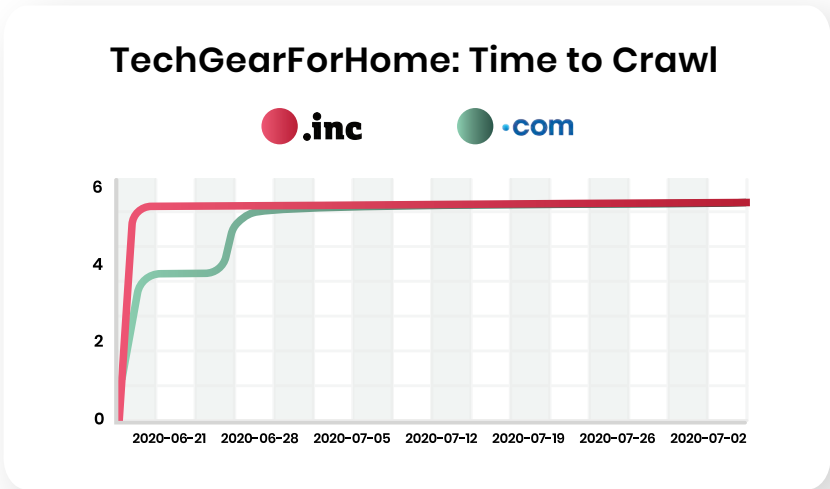
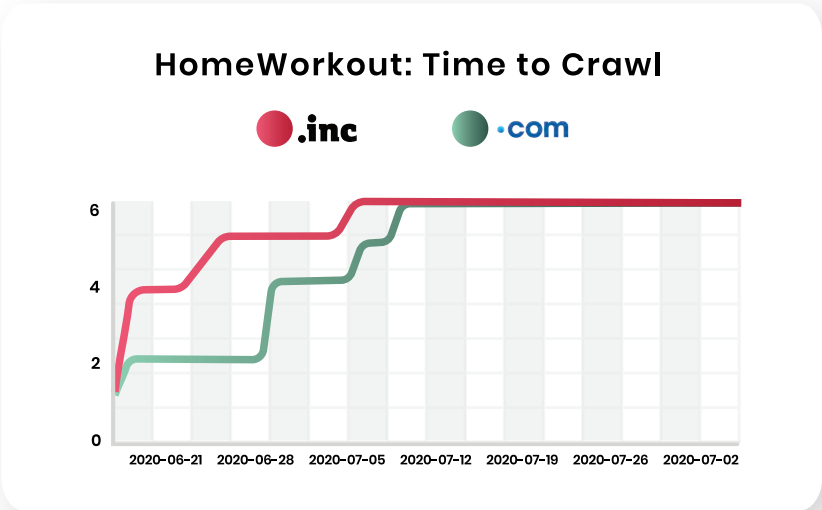
And once again, we submitted sitemaps and URLs simultaneously to Google, and our results again show similarity in terms of frequency that was relative to the size of our websites.

Conclusion

There is no discernable difference in crawlability or crawl frequency between a longer.com domain and a shorter .inc domain.

| | Site Name | Days Until 1st Crawl |
|-------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| .com | TechGearForHome | 1 |
| .inc | HomeTechGear | 2 |

| | Site Name | Days Until 1st Crawl |
|-------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| .com | HomeWorkOutTips | 1 |
| .inc | HomeWorkOut | 2 |



Experiment Conclusion

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Results

After putting Google's statements to the test, it is clear they do not discriminate between different top level domains. Therefore, there is no SEO advantage to having a .com domain in terms of crawlability and indexability.

As we have shown in our experiments, having a longer, more descriptive domain name with .com does not provide any advantage. In fact, it is quite the opposite: it can clutter your brand's appearance on the web, and devalue your brand image.

| StayHomeFashion | Days Until 1st Crawl | GigWorkTips | Days Until 1st Crawl |
|----------------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|
| .dealer⁺ | 1 | .dealer⁺ | 1 |
| .inc | 2 | .net | 1 |
| .com | 5 | .inc | 2 |
| .net | 15 | .com | 12 |

While there was one outlier that was crawled later, it wasn't consistent.

Now let's look at the head-to-head:

| | Site Name | Days Until 1st Crawl | | Site Name | Days Until 1st Crawl |
|-------------|-----------------|----------------------|-------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| .com | TechGearForHome | 1 | .com | HomeWorkOutTips | 1 |
| .inc | HomeTechGear | 2 | .inc | HomeWorkOut | 2 |

The one-day difference for .com in the first and a tie in the second illustrates that Google does not have any preference for top level domains.

This means business owners should concentrate on having the right name, full stop.

There is No .com Advantage

There is no traffic or backlink advantage, no crawlability advantage, nor any indexability advantage to having a .com domain name for a website. Our second experiment showed having a longer and more descriptive domain name with .com does not confer any advantage. Given a business's name has heritage, status, brand equity, and mental familiarity, it is not worth choosing a less than optimal name simply to secure the .com version of the domain name.

Moreover, newer top level domains can drive better innovation. For example, hip hop artist Will.i.am uses the domain <http://will.i.am>. The app Music.ly app was widely popular and sold to TikTok without a .com. Self Credit Builder Loans re-branded using self.inc.

Your Name = Your Brand. It Matters.

Businesses can spend thousands of dollars on naming services to get the name right. Think about how Patagonia, Columbia, and North Face, all evoke the “outdoorsy” lifestyle, or how McDonald’s evokes middle Americana. Even a completely made up name like Dasani carries replenishment associations, with a touch of the exotic in the consumer’s memory.

A brand name is so important that it doesn’t make sense to change it for a .com, or to negotiate an expensive buyout. Find a top level domain that fits the brand, instead of fitting the brand into a domain name that is less than optimal.

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