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TRANSCRIPT

Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman Bruce Billson interview with Phil Staley.

ABC Far North

Subject: Internet domain name changes

Phil Staley

Now, I'll tell you what, need a hero? Your hero might be my next guest if you're a small business owner that operates a website. Of course, so many of us do. So many of us shifted to online commerce in the last 2 to 3 years. But I wonder, how would you feel if a competitor in your business, a cybercriminal, cyber squatter, owned your website name?

Literally, if your name's, you know, Tyrone's Shoes. Hey, that just made me think Tyrone Shoelaces – that'd be a good name for a business. But what if someone could take your domain? It's a serious problem that many Australian businesses could be facing from next week. New rules rolled out earlier this year mean that businesses could start dropping the .com.au from the end of their website. So, it would just be .au

Abc.net.au that you hear all the time, that would become abc.au

So far those websites have only been available for existing businesses who already own their domain name. But from this Tuesday coming, all of those domain names ending in .au become available to the general public, meaning if you haven't claimed yours, a competitor could, or at worse, a cybercriminal posing as you could buy that domain name.

To to explain more, I'm joined by the Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman, Bruce Billson.

Bruce, good morning.

Bruce Billson

Phil, fab to be with you and your listeners and how good is a bit of Bonnie Tyler in the morning?

Phil Staley

It gets you going doesn't it. You go, oh, I don't like this and by the end of the song you're sweating.

Let's talk about this, because this sounds serious. The new .au domain names, when do they become available?

Bruce Billson

Well, they're available now for people with an existing domain name where they're looking to get the shorter version. So, as you described, if you had fabphil.com.au or fabphil.net.au you have until the 20th - so just a few short days away - to apply for fabphil.au

So, ditch the com, ditch the net, and you've got priority access for that like-for-like domain name.

Now after that, a few days pass and then those domain names become available to the general public. And I was concerned that the level of awareness of this change, particularly among small and family businesses, many of whom, like you describe, Phil, rely on their Internet presence, their website, those channels delight customers to stay in touch and present their goods and services, and they would not know that.

And we've already seen some people, a little bit on the smart - can't use that word on the ABC - little too clever by half, looking to emulate websites to try and stooge customers into coming onto another website that isn't the one that they think they are. And also we've seen people sort of emulating websites and intervening in customer traffic over the Internet to sort of advance cyber security objectives.

So, this is a really big deal. It's a decision that's been made by the non-government regulator, auDA, the au Domain Administrators. I've been urging them to make another year available so businesses can protect their interests and not have someone else take advantage of their good work on their web presence and pinch their domain name. But I was unsuccessful in persuading the non-government regulator to do that.

So, what's the most constructive thing I can do? Get on my bike, make people aware of it, and urge them, Phil, to take a few minutes to think would I be upset if someone had a shortened version of my domain name? Or in many cases, should I take the defensive interest and secure that for myself just to make sure someone else doesn't pinch it?

Phil Staley

Yeah. So, you're thinking, you might own sallysflowers.com.au and in the same town someone could buy sallysflowers.au and when they're Google searching flowers they could click on theirs, buy flowers that is completely illegitimate, and then contact you going 'where's me flowers?' And you go 'I've never heard you'. It could be a disaster.

Bruce Billson

Yeah, and that's sort of ambush marketing online happens now. I know smart small businesses think about that and protect their interests. But let's think about your audience across Queensland. I mean so much of the product they sell and the services that are provided have a story behind them and people want to connect with that.

Now that authenticity is a real advantage for businesses operating a website and using that as their main channel to connect with and delight customers. And if someone messes with that, that's not only bad for the business, it can really leave a bad taste in the mouth of customers. So, it's bad news. And that's why I'm urging people, take a few minutes, ask yourself, would I be upset if someone else got a shortened version of my domain name?

And if the answer is yeah, I would be upset, then I'm urging them to spend a few dollars and reserve that domain name while they have priority access for like-to-like domain names. And that's what I'm urging and that's what I'm hoping to get across to small and family businesses.

Phil Staley

Well, you just touched on this because I'm thinking why do these new domain names exist? And I reckon if I'm a business owner and, you just mentioned the word pay, you'd be thinking, why should I have to fork up for another domain name? So why is this happening?

Bruce Billson

Well, there's a little bit in that. It does represent a new asset that the domain name administration agency in Australia, the non-government authority, can sell. So obviously there's some revenue upside there. Their argument is that it's shorter, it's funkier. I mean, we'd know about funky wouldn't we Phil, but apparently you have your business name and then the statement that you connected with Australia being the .au, some people say that's very attractive.

There's some suggestion more domain names are needed. I'm not sure they're spectacularly compelling arguments and I think most businesses who will engage with this change will engage for a defensive reason just to make sure that their interests aren't disadvantaged.

Maybe new people looking for domain names might just go straight to the shortened version. But right now in this priority allocation window where people with existing domain names can apply for and secure the shorter version, I think most people will be doing that to defend their interests, not to necessarily present a funkier picture to their customers.

Phil Staley

Definitely. My guest is Bruce Billson, the Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman. I'd never heard of the term cyber squatter. What is that and what does a cyber squatter threaten me with all this?

Bruce Billson

Well, a cyber squatter is an unfortunate entrepreneur that sees a domain name and thinks somebody down the track is going to want that domain name because it's central to their business. So, you know, if you are running Phil's Fabulous Snails in France, you're wanting to go global, someone would take a punt, effectively, and secure philsfabuloussnails.au and know that when you bring that international business to Australia you'll be looking for a domain name. And guess what? Someone else has got it and they'll offer it to you for a very handsome figure.

Phil Staley

And is that legal? Because we've had texts on that. Brant from Port Douglas saying, maybe just joking, saying he'll buy the domain name philstaley.au and wait for me to get famous and then sell it to me.

Bruce Billson

You can let him know I've already got that one!

Phil Staley

Oh, have you?

Bruce Billson

No, no.

Looking at business names, it can happen. And you often see it with slight variations. You know, the department store Myer. Some people still call it Myers. But in other cases it's people anticipating what will happen. I mean many years ago in public life I went to register brucebillson.com.au and found that someone already had it and shortly thereafter contacted me saying, you know, for a handsome price you can have it.

Phil Staley

Is that legal?

Bruce Billson

It is. It's unfortunate. There's supposed to be an arrangement where if your personal name is being used, you tend to have phil.id.au and that's for an individual name, but not many people have used that. And it comes up more in the commercial world where business names, even some of them that are clever, they're cute, but someone might want down the track and there's a market in it Phil. There's brokers that actually buy and sell these domain names, recognising they've got considerable value and getting a great domain name that's easy to remember and encapsulates what your business is about can be a real advantage and people are prepared to pay for that.

Phil Staley

You're taking it upon yourself to make this well known, which I appreciate. There hasn't been much publicity though. So, whose responsibility is it to promote this really, and if I'm a small business owner who do I contact?

Bruce Billson

Well, a couple of things there. It's the responsibility of the non-government domain administration agency in Australia, which is auDA, au being the shorthand version for Australia, DA being domain administration. They've done some things. They've been particularly relying on their connections with the businesses that buy and sell and help you register domain names. So, think of GoDaddy and those kinds of organisations.

So, they've been they've been leaning heavily on that. I've been saying to them, look, that's interesting but the people who are going to be harmed and whose assets it actually is, is the business themselves. You should be doing a public education campaign to let people know, not just talk to the in-crowd that trades in and helps you register domain names.

Now, I haven't won that argument, Phil. I've tried to be persuasive but didn't quite get there. They thought everything was going fine. My sense was, yeah, I don't think so. I haven't met a small business that knows this going on. But I have met many small businesses who've had a cyber criminal intervene in their web presence, in their online business strategy. And that's why I'm up on my bike trying to do something about it.

Phil Staley

All right. So, to wrap this up, if I'm a business owner, I've got the .com.au

Whoever I went with to help me with my web design, I should contact them straight away.

Bruce Billson

Jump on them. If you've got a firm that helps with your I.T. they'll be able to assist you. Or you can go to some of those website retailers. I mentioned GoDaddy, and there are others, and you can plug in your details and the shortened web name that you want. I've done that over the weekend for some businesses that my wife and I have, and we were able to secure most of them because we could point to the actual longer version of the website.

So right now it's like-for-like registration is a priority, minus the .com, .net, or whatever it is. But then in a few short weeks it's open slather everybody. So, if you've got a current domain name, you're in that priority stream. They'll probably ask you for a token or something, but that'll all connect up. But if you haven't done that before, check with your I.T. provider, whoever helped you with your domain name, or wander on to one of those sites where you can register.

Phil Staley

All right, Bruce Billson, good advice. Thanks for taking it upon yourself to let people now. I'm sure there's people scrambling right now, so I appreciate that. And we'll talk again soon.

Bruce Billson

Thanks Phil. Take care and best wishes to you and your listeners.

Phil Staley

Cheers. Thank you. Bruce Billson there. Not something to be ignored, you'd reckon.