

Understanding the **gTLD** Opportunity for Brands

A report from ICANN

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Foreword

The Internet is built on opportunity, and today that opportunity is arguably greater than ever – particularly for the brands that truly understand how to unlock its rich potential.

In April 2026, the **New Generic Top-Level Domains (gTLD) Program: Next Round will open for businesses and entities to apply to operate a new gTLD. This next round is a significant landmark on the journey to further expand the Domain Name System (DNS) and make the Internet more accessible to all.**

Expanding the DNS

Over its 50-year existence, the Internet has become an integral part of life for more than 5.5 billion people. By spurring digital transformation, the Internet has fueled economies and societies, and enabled much of the world, and in particular developing countries, to thrive.

The vast network of thousands of networks that make up the Internet is made navigable by the DNS, a foundational aspect of the Internet infrastructure. The DNS translates long strings of numbers into memorable domain names, used as website addresses, or URLs.

Traditionally, the DNS has relied on domains that are three characters long and that are rooted in the English language, such as .com, .org, or .net, as well as country code TLDs like .uk (United Kingdom) and .br (Brazil). However, the DNS expanded greatly in 2012, when more than 1,200 domain names were introduced into the DNS in varying lengths and in multiple scripts (e.g., .paris, .microsoft, .商标).

The opportunity ahead

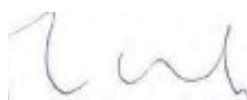
For brands, operating a gTLD can be an opportunity to enhance brand identity, improve customer engagement, foster innovation, and expand global reach. However, new ICANN research reveals that cost, awareness, and a knowledge gap are preventing many brands from taking advantage of the opportunity that managing their own gTLD can bring.

The purpose of the research was to create a picture of the evolving digital marketing landscape by understanding the key challenges, priorities, and trends that are top of mind for marketers today. Additionally, we wanted to understand their perspectives on online branding and assess the level of awareness and perceptions towards gTLDs in light of the upcoming next round of applications. While the findings highlight an overwhelming acknowledgement that gTLDs represent an opportunity, they also reveal a number of barriers that are preventing brands from applying for a new TLD.

For this report, a vendor surveyed over 2,000 marketing decision makers across the UK, US, Brazil, China, India, Mexico, Nigeria, and South Africa – of the total survey, respondents consisted of Marketing Managers/Directors (31%), CMOs (16%), Digital Marketing Managers (14%), Heads of Marketing (13%), Brand Managers/Directors (9%), and VPs of Marketing (4%). Other job titles made up the remainder. The results of the survey provide fascinating insight into the challenges facing marketers today.

While the opportunity in the Next Round is clear, at ICANN we also understand that the process of applying for and managing a new gTLD is resource-intensive, potentially creating barriers for some communities and organizations. To address this challenge, ICANN is highlighting accessibility and inclusivity through the Applicant Support Program (ASP), designed to empower underrepresented communities and organizations by providing financial and non-financial assistance throughout the gTLD application process.

The opportunity is fast-approaching and the time to focus on it is now. I hope you find the report instructive and thought provoking, and I look forward to working with you in 2025 and beyond.



Theresa Swinehart,
SVP, Global Domains & Strategy



With technology transforming the business landscape at a relentless pace, staying ahead of the curve is a daily challenge for marketing leaders.



Loyalty

Brand awareness

**But what exactly
is at the top of
their 'to do' list?**

Visibility

Customer retention

Expansion

Understand the challenge, unlock the opportunity

According to our new global research, increasing brand awareness and visibility is the number one priority for marketing leaders, with more than half (54%) citing this as their primary focus. Next in line were improving customer retention and loyalty (45%) and expanding into new markets (40%).

While increasing brand awareness and visibility and improving customer retention and loyalty tend to be consistently at the top, other priorities vary slightly across markets. A top priority in China is leveraging data and analytics, while adopting new technologies is number one in Brazil, India, and Nigeria.

When considering business challenges specifically, the top three priorities respondents highlighted for the next 12 months were standing out from competitors (53%), attracting and engaging the right audience (52%), and keeping up with the pace of digital trends (47%). China over-indexes on demonstrating Return On Investment, with 46% citing this as a key factor.

More than 90% of marketing leaders globally believe that online branding is extremely important (59%) or very important (32%). Social media content (80%), paid advertisements (63%), and online events/webinars (44%) are used the most as part of marketing leaders' digital marketing strategy.

When asked about trends for the next five years, AI was identified as the biggest trend in digital marketing and branding (67%), followed by the 'growing importance of data privacy and security' (45%), and 'social commerce and shoppable content' (44%).

Theresa Swinehart, SVP, Global Domains & Strategy, said: "When you consider the priorities, challenges, and trends identified by marketers in this research, it is clear that the Internet plays a pivotal role as the cornerstone of the marketing mix for millions of global businesses. On top of this, the specific gTLD opportunity to extend visibility and brand reach is potentially transformational for organizations of all sizes and sectors. At ICANN, we believe we are at a critical moment for brands to truly expand their horizons."

With AI and data privacy/security the top two trends for the next five years, an entity operating a gTLD can provide its users and customers with an extra measure of confidence in its security and legitimacy, which can build trust in the organization associated with the gTLD. This can be valuable in today's environment, where users often don't know whether they can trust the source on the Internet. A gTLD enables the operator to regulate the names under a TLD.

As highlighted in the previous section, online branding is important to more than 90% of marketing leaders.

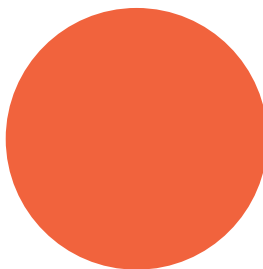

It is, therefore, no surprise that more than half (52%) of the marketers surveyed believe that gTLDs have strong potential for branding and online presence. Similarly, 48% globally believe gTLDs are useful for specific branding strategies.

Perceptions were especially positive in Nigeria, with 74% believing that gTLDs have strong potential for branding and online presence and 64% believing they are useful for specific branding strategies. Respondents from India reported the next most positive perceptions with 61% believing gTLDs have strong potential for branding and online presence and 57% believing gTLDs are useful for specific branding strategies.

While 50% of Chinese marketing leaders identified that gTLDs have strong potential for branding and online presence and the same number believe it is useful for specific branding strategies, 51% felt it was a niche opportunity with limited applicability.

After defining a gTLD, 92% of those surveyed believe there could be benefits to gTLDs, highlighting them as follows – enhanced brand differentiation/identity (46%), improved customer trust and engagement (45%), better control over online presence (44%), and improved Search Engine Optimization (44%).



Those whose organizations have gTLDs said it improved their branding and online identity, enhanced credibility and trust, and increased visibility and traffic.



Read how global brands are using gTLDs in their use cases available at

<https://newgtldprogram.icann.org/en/resources/usecases>





“Generic top-level domain names are unique digital assets that can be used in meaningful and innovative ways to help achieve long-term goals. Whether building a brand for a company, spotlighting a geographic region or city on the world stage, reflecting a societal issue, reaching out to new customers via an Internationalized Domain Name, or launching a business to offer domain names under a new registry, a new gTLD can be an innovative tool for commerce and communication.

For businesses, the opportunities offered through a new gTLD are limited only by imagination – allowing enterprises in specific countries, sectors, or niche markets to create an exclusive, descriptive, and memorable label on the Internet.”

Theresa Swinehart,
SVP, Global Domains & Strategy

**As noted earlier,
the majority of
marketing leaders
(52%) believe
that gTLDs have
strong potential
for branding and
online presence.**

Bridging the gap

However, according to the latest research, that acknowledgement doesn't always translate into action, with only 19% of marketing leaders working for organizations that have applied for a new gTLD before*. Although more than a decade has passed since the last round of new domain names, this is potentially a missed opportunity for four-fifths of global businesses. In addition, the findings also revealed that 9% of marketers work for an organization that has considered a new gTLD but didn't apply*.

Indeed, almost a third of marketing leaders are unfamiliar with gTLDs (68% of marketing leaders globally are either somewhat or very familiar with gTLDs), and on average 50% of marketing leaders globally could not correctly identify the definition of a gTLD. The most common incorrect responses were 'it is a website URL extension reserved exclusively for government entities in a particular country' (16%), and 'it is a type of international trade agreement between multiple countries' (9%), with 15% saying they don't know. The lowest correct responses were in South Africa (47%), China (46%), and India (46%).

When asked to identify the main barriers to application, marketing leaders selected cost as the number one factor at 31%, followed by 27% who cited not enough knowledge. An equal proportion of participants chose 'insufficient staff and time', 'unclear ROI' or 'worries about potential security vulnerabilities' as an obstacle, with 24% selecting each.

In the US and South Africa, the top barrier was a lack of knowledge (both 37%), and in China, UK, Brazil, Nigeria, and Mexico it was cost (36%, 33%, 32%, 30%, and 29%, respectively). In India, the main barrier was satisfaction with the current domain name (34%).

Marketing leaders agreed that financial incentives (45%), expert recommendations (44%), and case studies/success stories (43%) would be most likely to encourage their organization to consider a gTLD.

Marika Konings, VP, New gTLD Program Lead said: "Next year, the New gTLD Program: Next Round will enable businesses, communities, governments, and others to apply for new top-level domains tailored to fit their organization, community, culture, language, and customer interests. Now is the moment for brands to begin contemplating this opportunity, and doing that starts by bridging the cost, awareness, and knowledge gap highlighted in this report.

"We appreciate that gTLDs may not be for everyone. The process of applying for a gTLD is much more complex than registering a domain name, which any individual or organization can do. Applying for a gTLD means that you are applying to run a registry and with that comes both technical and contractual responsibilities. However, for those who are keen to explore the opportunity, we are here to help bridge this gap in two ways – by raising awareness of the opportunity offered by gTLDs as the next evolution in online branding, and by making practical resources available to help organizations understand the program."

*After removing those without familiarity or demonstrated understanding.

Conclusion

As we highlighted at the start of the report, the Internet is built on opportunity and today brands have the opportunity to unlock the potential of a new gTLD through the New gTLD Program: Next Round.

Despite the clear opportunity to enhance brand identity, improve customer engagement, foster innovation, and expand global reach represented by gTLDs, our new research reveals that cost, awareness and a knowledge gap are preventing many brands from taking advantage of the opportunity that a TLD can bring.

The moment to bridge this gap is not April 2026 when the next round opens, but now. Our message to brands who want to take the next step is twofold – this is the time to start planning for next year, and we are here to help.



Questions about the
**New gTLD Program:
Next Round** can be sent to
globalsupport@icann.org

