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On the Net, name wars accelerate

Competition is fierce for popular addresses in phone book of cyberspace

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Special to the Mercury News

Think of it as the Internet's first War of the Wiener. Earlier this year, Mark Clear, chief executive of Internet Marketing Services in Madison, Wis., landed his first really big client: Oscar Mayer. But when Clear went to register Oscar Mayer's name with the Internet's Network Information Center, or InterNIC, he discovered that the names *oscar-mayer.com*, *wiener.com*, *wienermobile.com* and *hotdog.com* had been taken — by an Internet com-

pany in Texas.

"Rather than even bothering with these bozos, [and] with the client's clear approval, we just went ahead and registered *oscar-mayer.com*," Clear says.

InterNIC is the phone book of cyberspace. It tells computers how to convert easy-to-remember names, like *ibm.com* or *aol.com*, into the obscure Internet addresses, called IP numbers, that the Internet actually uses. While InterNIC has worked fairly well until now, it's increasingly at the center of Internet name squabbles.

The issue highlights the growing

problems with Internet addresses. Companies and individuals are competing for the same domain names, with particularly popular names — say a McDonald's or a Sears — having to wage warfare to gain access to their own trademark names. And with the number of people logging on growing at exponential rates each year, the issues undoubtedly will become even more complex and cantankerous, experts believe.

After Clear set up a Web site for Oscar Mayer, he managed to get it listed on the Netscape Navigator's "What's New" page. Before he knew

it, the site was getting thousands of hits a day.

Then on July 20, Clear received an e-mail message from InterNIC. The message said that InterNIC had received a routine request to update the address for *oscar-mayer.com*. There was just one problem: Clear hadn't asked for the address change.

As he scrutinized the message, it became obvious what was going on: His competitor in Texas was stealing his big customer. Clear sent a message back to InterNIC, saying he had not authorized the change. But instead of getting back a message from a human, he got back a note from InterNIC's computer saying that there were more than 10,000 messages in InterNIC's mail queue, and that his request would be serviced in four to six weeks.

The next day, the Internet's phone book was changed, and the Oscar May-

er Web site "dropped off the face of the earth," Clear says. All of the electronic calls for hotdogs were going down to Texas, and not to Clear's computer in Wisconsin.

Clear says he was "terrified that I was about to get sued by a client I hadn't even fully closed yet." But after a series of phone calls, Clear learned that the change had been carried out with Oscar Mayer's permission. The company had decided to use the Texas firm for its Internet connection; the company simply hadn't bothered to tell Clear.

Today there is still an Oscar Mayer Web site, but it's no longer open to the public. Try to look up in the computer *www.oscar-mayer.com*, and you'll be asked for a password.

Shelagh Thomee, Oscar Mayer's as-

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sociate director of corporate communications, defends her company's actions, saying that Oscar Mayer never signed a contract with Internet Marketing Services. When the decision was made, Oscar Mayer picked the Texas firm. "In no way has Oscar Mayer acted in an unprofessional or questionable manner," she said.

Internet Marketing Service has gone on to other clients, and Clear says that he considers the Oscar Mayer fiasco "dead." Nevertheless, he's concerned that it was so easy for the Texas company to take away the *oscar-mayer.com* Internet domain. These days he's joking about sending in a change request to InterNIC, asking to update the records for *ibm.com* so that they point to his computers.

Name theft rare on Internet

To date, there are few cases of domain name theft in cyberspace. "We haven't had any of our customers indicate that they have had a problem," says John Curran, chief technical officer of BBN Planet, one of the nation's larger Internet providers.

On the other hand, says Curran, a few of BBN Planet's customers have had their domain names handed to other firms as the result of an accident. Reason: InterNIC thought that the request for a new domain was actually a change request for an existing one. "If you are not careful, it is possible to obtain a domain name of someone already registered," Curran says.

InterNIC also has run afoul of trademark law. Earlier this year, Network Solutions Inc., the company that runs InterNIC, was named as a co-defendant in a trademark infringement lawsuit. InterNIC had registered the name *knowledgenet.com* to a computer consultant who had wanted to set

InterNIC: how it works

The InterNIC is the directory assistance of cyberspace.

To understand how it works, consider what happens when a person tries to access IBM's Web site on the Internet by typing the address "www.ibm.com" into the Web browser.

If the browser doesn't know the address for the computer WWW.IBM.COM, it fires off a request to the InterNIC asking for the domain server for the domain IBM.COM.

The response comes back quickly: The domain server is WATSON.IBM.COM at address 129.34.139.4. The browser then asks the computer WATSON for the address of the computer WATSON.IBM.COM. The answer comes back just as fast: 165.87.194.133.

The browser then opens up a connection to this address, and IBM's home page appears on the user's screen. All of this is accomplished in a few seconds.

problem, says BBN's Curran, is that InterNIC has no system for verifying that the change requests that it receives are legitimate. Instead, InterNIC simply trusts every message that it gets.

"The Internet infrastructure isn't necessarily as robust as any of us would like," Curran says. Although systems for encrypting mail and signing messages with digital signatures have been available for years, Curran says, the Internet has lacked the neces-

less than a year, Curran says.

But encryption alone won't do anything to solve another problem that InterNIC has been having: the explosion of companies trying to register their domain names, and the possibility that InterNIC funding soon will be drying up.

"As the popularity of the Internet has grown, there has been a significant increase in the number of entities that have registered in the .com domain," says Dave Graves, Internet business manager for Network Solutions.

For example, says Graves, in December 1994 there were 3,600 new domains registered on the Internet. In May 1995, there were 14,000. Nearly 94 percent of those registrations were businesses who wanted a domain with the letters .com at its end.

Currently, there is no charge for the service. As a result, some companies — such as Oscar Mayer — have been registered under multiple names. Increasingly, individuals have registered themselves in the .com domain as well.

One solution now under consideration is for InterNIC to charge a nominal yearly fee for each name registered in the .com domain. Such a fee could pay for the running of the InterNIC as well as for the Internet Engineering Task Force — the organization that sets the Net's technical standards.

"There will be people who will yell and scream when charging comes," says Gordon Cook, who publishes The Cook Report on the Internet.

Charging each holder of a commercial domain name a small uniform fee "should help to preserve the independence of the IETF," Cook says. The fee probably would be less than \$100 per year and could be in place within a matter of months.

Meanwhile, Cook is worried about the safety of his own Inter-