Firms can sign up for ‘adult’ site address to beat squatters

SOME tech-savvy local companies are planning to register .xxx Web addresses to pre-empt mischief or blackmail attempts later on.

While the controversial suffix is meant for websites run by adult industry players, industry observers warn these addresses are likely to be abused by cyber-squatters.

The cyber-squatters "may register someone else's trademark or name in the .xxx registry, and later seek a sum of money to remove or transfer the title of the Web address", said lawyer Bryan Tan.

They are likely to be inspired by the story of popular adult site sex.com, which sold last October for a whopping US$13 million (S$16 million). At one time, it was under the control of a man who stole it from its original owner.

For this reason, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (Icann), the agency administering Web addresses, is allowing companies in non-adult industry sectors that already own existing Web addresses ending with other suffixes such as .com or .org to pre-emptively register for .xxx addresses starting in September.

These companies will be charged a one-time fee of US$245 (S$302); a successful registration blocks all future attempts to obtain the address.

Some local companies, including UOB, are planning to do just this. "As .xxx is commonly linked with unwholesome material, we will reserve uob.xxx to prevent association of the UOB brand with unsuitable content," said a bank spokesman.

Others, such as OCBC and StarHub, say they are currently weighing the financial cost of launching such a pre-emptive strike.

But others, like SingTel, say they currently have no plans to do so.

A SingTel spokesman said it is confident customers would know the company was not behind such a site.

Companies that do not register the site and subsequently find a cyber-squatter having the wrong kind of fun with their names can still appeal to Icann to shut down the cyber-squatter's site.

OCBC already does this on a weekly basis, scouring the Web to find names similar to its main www.ocbc.com site, said its head of information security, Mr Andrew Wong.

When it finds such sites - some it discovered in the past include www.ocbcbank.com or www.bankocbc.com - Mr Wong's team "will work with the domain registrar which the domain is registered with to have it removed."

What OCBC does, said Singapore Management University law professor David Llewelyn, is a "very effective, and relatively cheap, way of getting the domain name transferred from the cyber-squatter, although it takes valuable time."

Even so, said Mr Tan, "prevention is always better than cure... being associated with the .xxx Web address bears strong implications on reputation, especially if one's business has no relation to the adult entertainment industry".

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