FAIRWINDS

From Domains to Digital Identity:
Preparing for the Next gTLD Expansion with .BRANDs

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Introduction

The Internet's Domain Name System (DNS) has evolved dramatically since its early days, expanding from a handful of generic top-level domains (gTLDs) to a diverse and dynamic namespace including hundreds of gTLDs and plays a central role in internet mapping, brand strategy, digital security, and online innovation. With another application round for new gTLDs scheduled to open in April of 2026, prospective TLD owners once again have the opportunity to play a significant role in shaping the future of the internet.

This white paper explores the history and future of gTLDs, outlines what it takes to own and operate a TLD, and offers strategic guidance for prospective applicants. Whether your TLD-goals are defensive, innovative, or visionary, now is the time to assess the potential of owning a TLD and prepare accordingly.

The Evolution and Future of TLDs

The growth of gTLDs reflects the Internet's expansion from a handful of extensions to a broad digital ecosystem enabling branding, innovation, and global reach.

In the 1980s, six original TLDs – **.COM**, **.NET**, **.ORG**, **.EDU**, **.GOV**, and **.MIL** – were managed under U.S. government oversight, each serving a specific purpose. In 1998, ICANN was created to oversee the Domain Name System (DNS) under a multistakeholder governance model. Soon after, ICANN introduced the first new gTLDs: **.BIZ**, **.INFO**, **.NAME**, and **.PRO** for professional use, and **.AERO**, **.COOP**, **.MUSEUM**, and **.CAT** as community-based or sponsored TLDs.

A major turning point came in 2012, when ICANN opened its first large-scale new TLD application round. Over 1,900 applications were submitted, spanning generic terms (e.g., .SHOP, .APP, .TECH) and brand-owned strings (e.g., .GOOGLE, .BMW, .MARRIOTT), otherwise known as .BRAND TLDs. More than 1,200 gTLDs were approved and delegated to the internet's root infrastructure, reshaping how businesses and communities manage digital identity.

Looking ahead, ICANN's next application round is set to open in April 2026, offering brands and innovators another opportunity to secure meaningful digital real estate – with improved processes and safeguards informed by lessons from the 2012 application round.

Domain Name Registration vs. TLD Ownership

Organizations considering a new gTLD must understand the difference between registering a domain name and operating a TLD:

Aspect	Domain Name Registration	TLD Ownership
Purpose	Acquire a specific 2nd level domain under an existing TLD	Operate an entire TLD at the top level
Registration Method	Purchased through a registrar or registry	Created by registry operator once the TLD has been applied for and secured
Governing Authority	Registrar/Registry	ICANN
Cost	~$10 - $2,000 or more per year per domain	$227,000 for application + $50,000+/year per TLD with unlimited domain possibilities for incremental fees
Technical Requirements	Minimal	Moderate (ICANN, registry, etc. simplified with outsource arrangements)
Timeline	Minutes to hours	~2 years (mostly waiting)
Control	Limited	Full control over policies
Compliance	Basic (depends on TLD)	Moderate – requires adhering to ICANN compliance policies
Strategic Impact	Brand presence/utilization or protection	Brand exclusivity & control
Complexity	Low	Moderate

For certain needs, second-level domain registration suffices. But for organizations seeking complete control, exclusivity, and long-term digital flexibility, owning a TLD offers strategic advantages that traditional domains cannot match.

How to Succeed in the 2026 Round

Success in the next round depends on early planning, strategic clarity, and post-launch readiness.

1. Define Your Strategy
Clearly articulate why you want a TLD:

- Enhance security through DNS-level trust
- Launch branded experiences or microsites
- Secure future naming rights for brand protection
- Reserve the TLD to have option to develop strategy later

Align this purpose across legal, marketing, and IT teams from the outset.

2. Plan Early
The 2026 application window will be limited. Begin preparing now to:

- Identify and vet TLD string options
- Account for internal approvals and external dependencies
- Build flexibility into your planning for future needs

3. Prepare for Reveal Day
When ICANN publishes all applied-for strings:

- Be ready to assess potential conflicts
- Assert trademark rights if applicable
- Coordinate legal and communications responses

4. Post-Delegation Planning
Owning a TLD requires more than just winning the string. Plan for:

- **Registry Operations (your TLD(s))**
  - Budget for backend provider, ICANN fees, and data escrow
  - Budget for partner that will manage all aspects of registry-ownership
  - Create internal policies for domain usage, naming, and access control

- **Defensive Registrations (third party TLDs)**
  - Budget for domains in open TLDs to prevent misuse
  - Define internal roles for legal, IT, and brand teams

- **Monitoring (third party TLDs)**
  - Deploy tools to detect typosquatting, IDN variants, phishing, and impersonation

- **Dispute Resolution (third party TLDs)**
  - Establish UDRP/URS response protocols
  - Define enforcement standards and ownership workflows

Preparation across these dimensions ensures your brand is protected in others' TLDs and your .BRAND delivers sustained value and protection.

How to Apply for a TLD

Applying for a gTLD involves several critical steps governed by ICANN's Applicant Guidebook (AGB).

Step 1: Choose Your Application Type

- Standard Applicant: The most common type, open to commercial entities and general users that would like to operate a TLD open to the general public
- .BRAND Applicant: A .BRAND TLD is operated exclusively by a brand owner and dedicated to that brand's ethos, partnerships, branding, and products and/or services
- Community Applicant: Represents a clearly defined community (e.g., geographic, cultural, or professional) and may receive preference in string contention, provided strict eligibility and support criteria are met

Step 2: Prepare Your Application

Applicants can:

- DIY: Prepare the application internally (risky without significant in-house internet governance, domain, and TLD expertise)
- Hire a Consultant: Recommended path to simplify the process and gain assurances that the TLD application(s) will be defect free

You must also:

- Select a Backend (registry infrastructure) Provider: Required to meet ICANN's technical criteria and make your TLD function on the internet
- Pay the Application Fee: Each application will cost $227,000; additional fees may be required based on the application type (e.g., $500 for .BRAND evaluation)

Step 3: Submit and Manage Your Application

During ICANN's review, applications go through:

- Administrative and completeness checks
- Public comment and objection windows

Applicants must be ready to respond to follow-up questions and challenges.

Step 4: Resolve String Contention

If multiple applicants apply for the same string, options include:

- Use a replacement string (proposed as an alternative within the application)
- ICANN auction of last resort
- Brand String Change request (adding a word from your Trademark's Goods & Services description to the string)

Community applicants may receive preferential consideration if qualified.

Step 5: Pass ICANN's Evaluation Processes

After the string has cleared the contention hurdle, the application goes through:

- Applicant background screenings
- Technical and financial evaluations
- Other conditional evaluations, like the Brand Eligibility Evaluation

Applicants must be ready to respond to clarifying questions from the evaluators.

Step 6: Sign the Registry Agreement

Successful applicants are invited to:

- Sign a contract with ICANN
- Proceed with technical onboarding, testing, and launch

What It Means to Run a TLD Registry

Operating a TLD – especially a .BRAND TLD – provides control, trust, and long-term digital flexibility, but also requires careful operational and financial planning, typically handled by a coordinating partner.

Financial Considerations
Registry operators must budget for:

- ICANN fees (~$25,000+/year)
- Backend (registry infrastructure) service providers
- Data escrow, DNS infrastructure, and monitoring
- Legal, compliance, and administrative costs

Compliance Obligations
As an ICANN-accredited registry, you must adhere to your Registry Agreement (RA) and pass periodic compliance reviews. Key responsibilities include:

- Maintaining secure and stable DNS operations
- Enforcing your domain registration and use policies
- Submitting periodic reports and updates to ICANN

These obligations are manageable with a capable backend provider, an expert ICANN TLD consulting partner, and clear internal governance.

No Need to Migrate
Owning a .BRAND TLD does not require you to move any of your websites. Many brands use their TLDs selectively – for campaigns, portals, or internal tools.

Explore real-world .BRAND use cases on FairWinds' blog for inspiration.

Creating Second-Level Domains
Once your TLD is live, you can create second-level domains (e.g., careers.brand, login.brand, category-term.brand, product.brand), enabling:

- Trusted navigation and DNS-based security
- Internal or external use
- Flexible naming policies and workflows

This level of control is unmatched by conventional second-level domains, such as brand.com, and allows organizations to tailor their digital footprint with precision.

Conclusion

The 2026 new gTLD application window presents a rare opportunity for forward-thinking organizations to take greater control of their digital identity, improve brand security, and future-proof their online presence. But seizing this opportunity requires strategic planning and cross-functional coordination.

Start by identifying and engaging internal stakeholders – legal, IT, marketing, and executive leadership. Make sure everyone understands what it means to apply for and operate a TLD, and collectively decide whether pursuing one aligns with your brand's broader goals.

It's important to note that having a fully defined use case is not a prerequisite for applying. Many successful applicants from the 2012 round secured their TLDs simply to keep the door open for future innovation, brand protection, or internal and external initiatives. The key is optionality – owning the TLD gives you the flexibility to activate it when and how it makes sense. There is no guidance on when another round will occur. Fourteen years span the 2012 and 2026 rounds and brand owners must critically consider what it may mean to be locked out if they overlook the 2026 application window of opportunity to secure their TLD(s).

If your organization chooses to proceed, your plan should be anchored in your long-term brand strategy. At a minimum, you'll need to map out resources, internal decision-making timelines, and partner requirements. To apply on time, aim to begin and execute the application process by Q1 2026, in line with ICANN's projected timeline.

Finally, don't feel pressure to do it all alone. If it's not practical to prepare the application internally – or if the stakes are too high to risk getting it wrong – engage trusted experts with proven success from the 2012 round. Whether you need full support or targeted guidance, the right partners can help you navigate the complexities, reduce risk, and ensure a smoother path to delegation.

Owning your own TLD is a bold move, but with the right preparation, it can be a strategic asset that delivers lasting value.

About FairWinds

Headquartered in Washington, D.C., FairWinds is the leading domain name consultancy that elevates online presence by increasing website traffic, growing revenue, and improving online customer experiences. FairWinds has a track record of obtaining dotBrand TLDs for brands, as well as managing their domain name portfolios and monitoring against digital brand infringements. In 2012 FairWinds secured over 130 TLDs for clients and .FAIRWINDS for ourselves. For more information, visit contact.fairwinds.

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