

The best domains in life are free? Freenom partners with '.gq' Equatorial Guinea - Hogan Lovells LLP

Domain names

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A number of country-code top-level domain (ccTLD) registries offer domain name registrations free of charge. The most famous example is '.tk', the ccTLD for Tokelau, a small group of Pacific islands located off the coast of New Zealand.

This business model of free domain name registrations has enabled '.tk' to become the largest ccTLD in terms of number of domain name registrations under management (with over 27 million registered domain names), and the second largest TLD behind '.com'. Boosted by this success, [Freenom](#), the company that operates the '.tk' registry, has also partnered with other ccTLDs, namely Mali ('.ml'), Gabon ('.ga') and the Central African Republic ('.cf') in order to operate their ccTLDs on the same model of free domain name registrations. It appears that this business model holds some appeal to certain ccTLD registries, as Freenom has recently partnered with another country, Equatorial Guinea, in order to develop its ccTLD, '.gq'.

The launch of '.gq' took place on October 1 2014 according to the following schedule:

- Sunrise period (giving priority to trademark holders) - October 1 to October 31 2014.
- Landrush period - November 1 to November 30 2014.
- General availability - from December 1 2014 onwards.

There are no restrictions to register under '.gq' and thus anyone can apply for any domain name. Free domain names were available only as from December 1 when general availability started.

To be able to register a domain name for free, registrants need to "have a website, homepage or web page online on an existing web address or the capability of setting up [their] own website/server with content". Registrants of free domain names are also subject to a content policy. As such, any website content associated with these domain names cannot include racism, insults, adult entertainment, drugs, weapons/terrorism, gambling/casino, viruses/spyware or domain name parking.

It should also be noted that registrants of free domain names have no ownership rights over the domain names as they only act as users of the domain name. Freenom is the actual legal owner of the domain names and appears as such in the WHOIS. However, if a registrant is willing to pay a registration fee for their domain name registration, then they will have full ownership rights over the domain name and are not subject to the website content policy.

As with the other TLDs operated by Freenom, certain domain names are not available under the free registration programme and can only be purchased. Examples of such domain names include all one, two and three-character labels, as well as common dictionary terms.

The fact that Freenom chooses to partner with African countries is not a coincidence. In a recent [press release](#), Joost Zuurbier, CEO at Freenom, stated:

"Free domains make a lot of sense in countries where the banking penetration is in the single digit range. The demand for free domains is enormous because people in those nations may not have a credit card to buy domains, but they do have a profound need to communicate and build their presence online. Free domains are an important catalyst that directly enables local content creation and internet entrepreneurship."

The press release also stressed that "free domains can dramatically change how African internet users are represented online".

While the free domain name model may assist Equatorial Guinea in building up the '.gq' ccTLD and provide opportunities for its populace to secure and make use of domain names under '.gq', the potential downside is that '.gq' may well become another haven for phishing. Phishing is an attempt by malicious third parties to fool internet users into revealing sensitive data such as usernames, passwords and credit card details. This is often done by sending an email which purports to be from a genuine company, but sends internet users to a phishing website which resembles the company website and prompts users to provide their details.

The preferred TLDs for phishing attacks have unsurprisingly been those ccTLDs that offer free domain name registrations. Thus, there are fears that '.gq' may go the same way as the other ccTLDs operated by Freenom. We will be watching this trend.

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