

The Domain Breakthrough

How names are valued — starting with the fact that most are worth nothing.

This is how buyers actually decide what a name is worth, how to tell a name with a buyer from a name with a nice ring to it, and the mechanics of buying, holding and transferring one safely.

domainbreakthrough.com · Nothing in this guide is investment, financial, tax or legal advice. Domain names are not a regulated investment product. Registration and renewal fees are real costs payable regardless of outcome, and most domain names never sell.

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Sheets Eight printable pages — fill these in by hand

How to use this guide

Read Part 1 twice

Everything useful in this subject follows from taking seriously that most names never sell. If that sentence does not change how you read the rest, the rest will not help.

Do Worksheet 1 before you buy anything

Your annual holding limit, decided in advance. It is the only thing standing between a hobby and an open-ended bill.

The sheets are the product

Eight printable pages at the back. The renewal calendar and the budget are the two that matter most; everything expensive that happens in this market happens because somebody did not keep them.

Why there are no numbers anywhere

No sale prices, no appraisals, no averages. A figure with no buyer attached anchors you to a price you will then refuse to move from while the renewals keep arriving. The omission is the lesson.

PART 1

What the market actually is

Most hand-registered domain names never sell. Not for a little, not at all. Everything useful in this subject follows from taking that seriously rather than treating it as a disclaimer.

Why it is taught badly

This subject is taught almost entirely through success stories, and a success story is the least informative thing about a market where the overwhelming majority of participants never make a sale. You are being shown the surviving end of a distribution and invited to assume it is the middle of one.

Who the buyers actually are

Almost always a business that already exists and already has a name. They want the matching domain because their current one is awkward, because a competitor is adjacent, or because they are rebranding. They are not browsing. They are solving one specific problem, and your name is either the solution to it or it is nothing to them.

What follows from that

A name's value is not a property of the name. It is a property of the relationship between that name and a particular buyer who may or may not exist. This is why no tool can price a name and why this guide contains no figures of any kind.

The honest framing

Treat this as a trade with real recurring costs and an uncertain, frequently absent payoff. It is not an investment programme, it is not regulated, and nobody — including this guide — can tell you what any name will do.

Where this goes wrong

People enter after reading about a sale, register thirty names in a weekend on instinct, and meet the renewal bill a year later with nothing sold and no buyer ever identified for any of them. The entry cost felt trivial. The recurring cost was the actual decision and nobody made it.

A worked example

Someone who set an annual limit first registered four names in their own industry over six months rather than thirty in a weekend. Three went nowhere and were dropped at renewal. That is a normal result and it cost them a known, budgeted amount instead of an open-ended one.

Everything in the rest of this book is about reasoning well under that uncertainty, not about escaping it.

DO THIS BEFORE THE NEXT PART

- Write down, in one sentence, why you want to be in this market.

- Decide the annual amount you can lose entirely without it mattering.
- Start Worksheet 1: your holding-cost budget.

How a name gets valued

Not what it is worth — how a buyer reasons. That reasoning is learnable, and it is the part that transfers to every name you ever look at.

The term

Is it a phrase people actually use, in an industry where somebody sells something? A name made of two words a business would say to a customer is in a different category from a name that merely sounds good. Say it aloud down a phone line: if it needs spelling, that is a real cost to the buyer, every day, forever.

The extension

.com remains the default assumption in most markets, and anything else needs a reason the buyer finds convincing. Country extensions are strong inside their country and weak outside it.

Length, clarity, and the spelling test

Shorter is better only when it stays clear. Hyphens and numbers almost always weaken a name because they fail the phone test. Deliberate misspellings fail it twice.

Existing traffic

A name that already receives type-in traffic is a different proposition from one that does not, and it is one of the few things about a name that can be evidenced rather than argued.

Why there are no numbers in this book

Appraisal tools produce a figure with no buyer attached. A figure with no buyer behind it is the most expensive thing in this business to believe, because it anchors you to a price you will then refuse to negotiate away from while the renewals keep coming due. You will not find a sale price, an average or an appraisal anywhere in these pages, and that omission is deliberate.

Where this goes wrong

Falling for a name you find clever. Cleverness is a property of the name; value is a property of the buyer. The two are unrelated and the first one is much more fun to think about, which is why so much money goes into it.

A worked example

Two names, same length, same extension. One is a phrase a trade actually uses when talking to customers. The other is a coined word that sounds modern. The first has an identifiable type of buyer who could be named in one line. The second has an audience of its owner.

Worksheet 2 is a reasoning sheet, not a scoring system. It makes you write down who the buyer is. If you cannot name a type of business that would want the name, that is the answer.

- Run three names you like through Worksheet 2.
- For each, write the specific kind of business that would want it.
- Discard any where you cannot answer that in one line.

Research

Searching properly, and understanding what the tools do and do not know.

Start from the business, not the name

Pick an industry you understand. List the terms its customers actually search and say. Work outward from there. Starting from a clever name and hunting for a buyer afterwards is the reverse of how the market works.

What the tools know

Registration data, expiry dates, and sometimes traffic estimates. That is genuinely useful. What they do not know is whether anyone wants it, which is the only question that decides the outcome.

Search without paying to look

Registrar search, WHOIS, and simply typing the name into a browser to see what is there will answer most questions for free. Paid tools accelerate research; they do not substitute for judgement and they cannot tell you about a buyer who does not exist yet.

Keep a discard list

Write down the names you considered and rejected, with the reason. In three months you will reconsider half of them, and the note saves you making the same bad call twice.

Where this goes wrong

Buying a research tool before doing any research. The tool then has to be justified, which creates pressure to register something, which is exactly the pressure you want to avoid at the start.

A worked example

An hour spent listing the words a specific trade uses with its customers produced twenty terms. Cutting to five took ten minutes and three of the five turned out to be long gone. The two that remained were worth real thought — and that whole process cost nothing but the hour.

Research is the cheap part. Do more of it than feels necessary, because every hour here is an hour not spent renewing something pointless.

DO THIS BEFORE THE NEXT PART

- Pick one industry you genuinely understand.
- Fill Worksheet 3 with twenty terms from it, then cut to five.
- Start the discard list and keep it.

PART 4

Sources, and the traps in each

Registration, private purchase, expiry and auction. Each has its own failure mode and they are not interchangeable.

Hand registration

Cheapest to enter, hardest to exit. The name is available because nobody has wanted it so far, which is information rather than opportunity. This is where almost all the never-sell names come from.

Buying from a current holder

Expensive but the name has been validated by somebody wanting it already. Covered properly in Parts 7 and 8, because this is where the transfer mechanics actually matter.

Expiring names

A real source with a real trap: the previous owner usually let it go on purpose, and any traffic or links it had may be stale, poor quality, or about to disappear. Check what the name was used for before, not just what it is called.

Auctions

Transparent, competitive, and the easiest place to overpay, because an auction is designed to find the highest price in the room rather than a fair one. Decide your limit before bidding, write it down, and treat it as fixed. Deciding during is how a limit becomes a suggestion.

Where this goes wrong

Bidding past a limit because the auction is nearly over and somebody else wants it. The competing bidder is not evidence of value; they may be making the same mistake you are, for the same reason, in the same room.

A worked example

A name at auction looked strong until a check of what it had previously hosted showed a site that had been penalised and abandoned. The history was the whole story and it took four minutes to find. The bid was not placed.

Whichever source: the renewal starts the moment you own it, and it does not care how you acquired it.

DO THIS BEFORE THE NEXT PART

- Choose one source and learn it before adding a second.
- For expiring names, research the prior use before you bid.
- Write your auction limit on Worksheet 4 before you look at any lot.

Holding

Renewals are what quietly empties this hobby's pockets, and they are entirely predictable, which makes them entirely manageable.

The annual limit

Decide what you can spend on renewals every year, indefinitely, without it mattering. That number is your portfolio size. Not your ambition, not your optimism — that number. Write it on Worksheet 1 and treat it as the hard ceiling it is.

The renewal calendar

Every name, its renewal date and its cost, on one sheet. Auto-renew prevents accidental loss and also prevents noticing, so pair it with a deliberate annual review where you decide what to keep.

The drop decision

A name you have held for a year with no interest, that you cannot name a buyer for, is telling you something. Letting names go is a skill. Holding everything is how a portfolio becomes a subscription you pay forever for nothing.

Registrar choice and locks

Keep names where transfers are straightforward and support is reachable. Keep registrar lock on by default and turn it off only for a transfer actually in progress. Keep your contact email current — losing access to the inbox a domain is registered to is one of the few genuinely unrecoverable mistakes in this business.

Where this goes wrong

Auto-renew left on with no annual review. The portfolio quietly becomes a standing order for names the owner would not buy again today. The fix is not turning auto-renew off — it is scheduling the decision.

A worked example

A holder reviewed fourteen names against one question: would I register this today at full price? Nine got dropped. The annual cost fell by most of its total and nothing of value was lost, because none of the nine had ever attracted a single enquiry.

Two-factor authentication on the registrar account, today. The account is the asset; the names are just entries in it.

DO THIS BEFORE THE NEXT PART

- Build the renewal calendar on Worksheet 5. Every name, every date.
- Turn on two-factor authentication at your registrar now.
- Mark every name you would not re-register today at full price.

Development

An empty name is a harder sell than a small working site, for reasons that have nothing to do with the site being impressive.

What development actually does

It demonstrates that the name works in use. A buyer looking at a parked page has to imagine the name as a business. A buyer looking at a small, tidy, functioning site does not have to imagine anything, and removing imagination from a purchase decision is most of the work.

Small is the point

A single clear page about the topic, loading fast, with real content and a way to make contact. Not a large site, not a blog you will abandon in six weeks. Something you can build in an afternoon and leave running.

What it should not be

Not a parking page full of adverts, which signals the name is inventory. Not a fake business with invented testimonials or made-up credentials — that is fraud, and it poisons the sale if the buyer looks closely, which a serious buyer will.

The side effect

A developed name may attract the buyer directly, because the business that wants it finds it by searching for the topic rather than by being approached. That is the cheapest acquisition of a buyer there is.

Where this goes wrong

Building something large, losing interest, and leaving a half-finished site that looks abandoned — which is worse than a clean holding page. One finished page beats five unfinished ones every time.

A worked example

A single page explaining the topic properly, with a contact form and nothing else, took an afternoon. It needed no maintenance, it loaded fast, and it demonstrated the name in use. That is the whole brief.

Development costs hosting and an afternoon. Weigh that against the renewal you are already paying.

DO THIS BEFORE THE NEXT PART

- Pick your single strongest name and build one real page for it.
- No parking adverts, no invented testimonials, no fake company.
- Record what you built and when on Worksheet 6.

Outreach and negotiation

How to approach a possible buyer without sounding like the hundred emails they already delete, and how to know when to stop.

Find the right person

Not the general enquiries inbox. The person whose problem the name solves — usually whoever owns marketing or the business itself in a smaller company. One accurate recipient beats fifty addresses.

The approach

Short. Say what you have, say why you think it fits their business specifically, and ask whether it is of interest. No urgency, no invented other buyer, no appraisal figure attached. Every one of those is a standard tactic and every one of them reads as a standard tactic.

Do not lie about interest

Claiming another buyer is circling when none exists is a lie that is easy to tell and expensive when it collapses. It also fails more often than it works, because experienced buyers have heard it.

Naming a price

If they ask, give a number and be able to say what it is based on. If you cannot justify it beyond wanting it, you are not ready to negotiate. This guide will not tell you what to ask — it is your name, your buyer and your decision, and any figure printed here would be invented.

When to stop

One approach, one polite follow-up, then stop. Unsolicited contact beyond that is spam, may breach the rules of the platform you sent it through, and is in some jurisdictions a legal problem. Record who you contacted and when on Worksheet 7 so you do not approach them twice.

Where this goes wrong

Sending the same message to fifty addresses at one company. That is spam, it gets the sender blocked, and it converts a possible buyer into someone who now associates the name with a nuisance.

A worked example

One short message to one correct person, saying what the name was and why it fit that specific business, with no urgency and no figure attached. Most such messages get no reply at all, and the ones that do start an actual conversation rather than a defensive one.

Most approaches get no reply. That is the normal outcome, not a sign you did it wrong.

DO THIS BEFORE THE NEXT PART

- Write your approach in under a hundred words.

- Identify the specific person, not the general inbox.
- Log every approach on Worksheet 7, including the non-replies.

Transfer and escrow

The mechanical part, where the money and the asset change hands. Do it in order and nothing goes wrong.

Use escrow, always

A reputable escrow service holds the funds, confirms the transfer, then releases payment. For any amount that would matter to lose, this is not optional. Direct payment to a stranger for an intangible asset is how people get robbed in this market, and it happens to experienced people too.

The order of operations

Agree terms in writing. Open escrow. Buyer funds escrow. Seller unlocks the name and provides the authorisation code. Transfer initiated. Transfer confirmed at the gaining registrar. Escrow releases. Never reorder these, and never hand over the authorisation code before the escrow is funded.

Registrar lock and the auth code

The name must be unlocked and the authorisation code issued to the buyer for a transfer to proceed. That code is the key to the asset. It goes to one person, at the point in the sequence above where it belongs, and nowhere else.

Timing and the sixty-day rule

Transfers are not instant and most registrars impose a lock period after a transfer or a change of registrant, commonly around sixty days. Tell the buyer this up front. A buyer who was not warned assumes something has gone wrong and starts an escrow dispute over a normal waiting period.

Keep the paperwork

The agreement, the escrow record and the transfer confirmation. Keep them. If there is ever a dispute, the person with records wins it.

Where this goes wrong

Handing over the authorisation code before escrow is funded, because the buyer sounds reasonable and asks nicely. The code is the asset. Once it is sent, the leverage is gone and so, sometimes, is the name.

A worked example

A seller who warned the buyer in advance about the post-transfer lock period avoided an escrow dispute entirely. The buyer had expected the name to be usable immediately; being told up front turned a month of silence from alarming into expected.

If any part of a deal requires you to skip a step in the order above, that is the deal telling you what it is.

- Read your registrar's transfer documentation before you need it.
- Choose an escrow service now, not mid-negotiation.
- Use Worksheet 8 as the checklist for every transfer, every time.

The eight sheets

Print these and work on paper. The sheets that matter most are the first and the fifth: the budget and the renewal calendar. Everything expensive that happens in this market happens because somebody did not keep those two.

WORKSHEET 1

Holding-cost budget

Your annual limit, decided before you buy anything. This is the hard ceiling.

[illegible]

WORKSHEET 2

Name reasoning sheet

One row per name. If you cannot fill the buyer column, that is your answer.

[illegible]

WORKSHEET 3

Research terms

Twenty terms from one industry you understand, then cut to five.

[illegible]

WORKSHEET 4

Auction limits

Write the limit BEFORE the lot opens. It is fixed once written.

[illegible]

Renewal calendar

Every name you hold. The most important page in this guide.

[illegible]

WORKSHEET 6

Development log

What you built, when, and where it is hosted.

[illegible]

WORKSHEET 7

Outreach log

One approach, one follow-up, then stop. Log the non-replies too.

[illegible]

Transfer checklist

Tick in order. Never reorder. Never give the auth code early.

[illegible]

Registrar account security

The account is the asset. Check this twice a year.

[illegible]

Annual keep-or-drop review

One question per name: would I register this today at full price?

[illegible]

Deal record

Keep this. If there is ever a dispute, the person with records wins it.

[illegible]

A short glossary

The terms that cost people money are the ones they did not ask about. These are the ones to know before you buy anything.

TLD — Top-level domain — the part after the final dot. .com, .co.uk, .org. The extension.

WHOIS — The public registration record for a domain. Often redacted for privacy, but still shows registrar and dates.

Registrar — The company you register and hold the name through. Where your account lives, and therefore where your asset actually sits.

Registrar lock — A setting that blocks transfers. Keep it ON by default and turn it off only for a transfer actually in progress.

Authorisation code — Also called an auth code, EPP code or transfer code. The key that permits a transfer. Treat it exactly as you would treat a key to anything else you own.

Escrow — A third party who holds the buyer's funds, confirms the transfer happened, then releases payment. For any amount that would matter to lose, this is not optional.

Transfer lock period — A window after a transfer or registrant change — commonly around sixty days — during which the name cannot be transferred again. Normal. Warn your buyer about it in advance.

Parking — Pointing a name at a page of adverts. It signals the name is inventory, which is the opposite of what a developed page signals.

Type-in traffic — Visitors who arrive by typing the name directly. One of the very few things about a name that can be evidenced rather than argued.

Hand registration — Registering an available name directly. Cheapest to enter, hardest to exit, and where almost all never-sell names come from.

The first month

If the whole guide feels like a lot, this is the order. Note that nothing in week one costs anything, which is deliberate.

Week one — decide the limit

Worksheet 1. The annual amount you can spend on renewals, indefinitely, without it mattering. Everything else is bounded by this number and deciding it afterwards is how people end up with a portfolio they resent.

Week two — research only

Pick one industry you genuinely understand. Twenty terms, cut to five, using free tools only. Register nothing. The discipline of a research week with no purchases is the single best habit available in this market.

Week three — reason about names

Run your shortlist through Worksheet 2. For each one, name the type of business that would want it, in a line. Discard anything where you cannot. Most of the list will go, and that is the sheet working.

Week four — act, carefully

If anything survived, acquire it — within the limit, from a source you have learned, with the renewal added to Worksheet 5 the same day. If nothing survived, register nothing. A month that ends with no purchase and a working process is a good month.

After that

Development on your strongest name, then outreach when there is something to show. The annual keep-or-drop review every year without fail. That is the whole loop.

Last page

The two sheets that decide how this goes for you are the budget and the renewal calendar. Everything else in this guide is judgement, and judgement improves with practice. Those two are arithmetic, and arithmetic does not improve — you either do it or you do not.

Turn on two-factor authentication at your registrar before you close this file, if you have not already. The account is the asset; the names are entries in it, and losing access to the account is one of the few genuinely unrecoverable mistakes available in this market.

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