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New domain name practice criticized

AP Associated Press

By ANICK JESDANUN, AP Internet Writer

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A company that sells Internet domain names is facing criticisms for holding some in reserve as a consumer-protection measure, a move that also prevents interested parties from shopping around for better prices.

After weeks of testing, Network Solutions LLC began this week to grab names that people search for on its Web site but don't immediately register.

The name is locked up for about four days, during which the person who made the search can buy it directly from the company for \$35 a year — a few times more than what many of its rivals charge. After that, the name returns to the pool and can be registered by anyone through any registration company.

Spokeswoman Susan Wade said Network Solutions was trying to combat domain name front running — the use of insider information to snatch desired domain names before an individual or business can register them.

But what it's doing shares similarities with the practice the company says it is trying to prevent, which the Internet's oversight agency for domain names already is investigating.

One blogger termed Network Solutions' action "deplorable."

"They actually think they are doing customers favors with this little dirty trick," wrote Jay Westerdal, president of Name Intelligence Inc., which analyzes domain name patterns. "These guys are clueless!"

Wade said the company was making adjustments in response to feedback but considered its measure a benefit for customers — by preventing domain name speculators and others with questionable intentions from grabbing the name first.

"We are not front running," she said. "We are not monetizing the page. We have no intent in keeping it. We have no intent in selling it in secondary markets at inflated prices — that is front running."

In October, the Security and Stability Advisory Committee of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers launched a probe into domain name front running and likened it to a stock broker buying or selling shares ahead of a client's trade, in anticipation of a movement in price.

The committee said the practice isn't necessarily prohibited under current regulations but could dampen the domain name industry's image within the Internet community.

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