

# dotBrand Strategy Guide

## A Comprehensive Guide to Understanding, Planning, and Launching Your Branded Top-Level Domain

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# DotBrands

## An Essential Briefing

### What is a dotBrand?

A “dotBrand” is an exclusive Top-Level Domain (TLD) operated solely by a brand owner for their organization’s use. This means only the brand and its authorized partners can register domains under the extension, providing greater control, security, and innovation in a company’s digital identity.

### Who manages the program?

As the governing body, ICANN is responsible for coordinating the global internet’s naming and numbering systems and manages the new gTLD program. The application process is comprehensive, with each application subject to technical review and public comment. Third parties also have opportunities to object based on trademark rights or public interest.

### How do we apply?

#### 2012: The Last Round

The largest expansion of the domain name system in history was launched by ICANN in 2012, introducing over 1,000 new extensions. This included geographic, generic, and brand-specific TLDs like .google and .barclays. The process was competitive and rigorous, requiring applicants to submit detailed technical, financial, and operational plans. Today, there are 368 active dotBrand TLDs, with 118 terminated.

#### 2026: The Next Round

This application window is a strategic opportunity to secure a permanent spot on the internet under your direct control. With the last round occurring 14 years ago and the next potentially a decade or more away, this decision is about anticipating what may be important many years from now.

Based on lessons learned, ICANN has worked to streamline the application process, aiming to shorten the evaluation period. Applying for a dotBrand is a long-term brand and digital infrastructure investment, not a fast go-to-market tactic.

### Key Dates & Details

The next round of new gTLD applications is a rare strategic opportunity, with the last one taking place in 2012.

- The application period is anticipated to open in **April 2026** and last for a limited 15-week window.
- The timeline from application to delegation is a long-term investment; the TLD would not to be operational until **late 2027 or early 2028**.
- New rules have been implemented for this round, including a policy that will not allow both singular and plural applications to move forward.

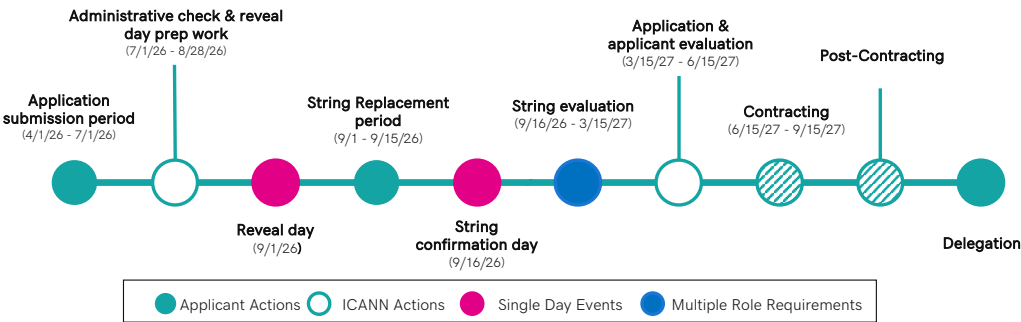
# Terminology

- **ICANN:** The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, the international non-profit body that governs the internet's naming and numbering systems. ICANN launched and oversees the new gTLD program.
- **gTLD:** Generic Top-Level Domain. These are the extensions at the end of a domain name that are not country codes. Examples include .com, .app, and .shop.
- **dotBrand:** A type of gTLD that is owned and operated exclusively by a single brand or its affiliates. The primary purpose of a dotBrand is to provide a trusted, secure, and controlled digital namespace for a company.
- **New gTLD Program:** ICANN's initiative to expand the domain namespace by allowing new gTLDs to be created. The next application round is projected to open in April 2026.
- **Registry Operator:** The organization that runs and manages a TLD under contract with ICANN. For a dotBrand, the brand itself becomes the registry operator, giving them full control.
- **Registry Service Provider (RSP):** A company that provides the technical infrastructure and operational support for a registry operator. Many brands outsource the technical complexities of running their TLD to a specialized RSP.
- **Registrar:** A company that sells domain names to the public. For dotBrands, registrars are generally not involved, as registrations are closed to the public and reserved for the brand's exclusive use.
- **Specification 13 (Spec 13):** A specific section of the Registry Agreement that details the special rules and benefits for dotBrands. These include exclusive use, a trademark basis for the TLD, and exemption from certain public-facing requirements.
- **Registry Agreement (RA):** The 10-year contract between ICANN and a registry operator. This agreement outlines all the rules, obligations, and financial commitments required to operate a gTLD.
- **Trademark Clearinghouse (TMCH):** A centralized, verified database of trademarks. Registration in the TMCH is a critical first step for brands to protect their intellectual property and to qualify for a dotBrand application.
- **Sunrise & Claims:** Intellectual property protection mechanisms that are typically required for new gTLDs. A Sunrise period is a pre-launch window for trademark holders to register their names. A Claims service provides notice to future registrants if they are about to register a domain name that matches a trademark. DotBrands that qualify for Specification 13 are exempt from these obligations.
- **SLAs:** Service Level Agreements. The performance and uptime targets ICANN requires all registry operators to meet. These ensure the reliability and stability of a TLD's technical infrastructure.
- **Data Escrow:** The daily deposit of a registry's data with an ICANN-approved third party. This is a critical business continuity measure that protects domain name information in the event of a registry failure.
- **DNSSEC:** Domain Name System Security Extensions. A security protocol that all TLDs must implement to protect against data tampering and DNS spoofing.
- **WHOIS / RDAP:** Databases or protocols that provide registration information about domain names. RDAP (Registration Data Access Protocol) is the modern, more secure replacement for WHOIS

# From Application To Activation

The next application window, expected to open in April 2026 for a limited 15-week period, is a rare strategic opportunity.

- **Comprehensive Documentation:** Applicants must provide detailed documentation covering technical capabilities, financial stability, and operational plans.
- **Trademark Protection:** Brand marks must be protected through the Trademark Clearinghouse.
- **Cross-Functional Alignment:** The process requires buy-in from legal, technical, marketing, and executive teams.
- **Long-Term Vision:** A dotBrand is a strategic asset that requires a long-term vision for its use and management.



## The DotBrand Application Timeline

The timeline for the next application round is a key consideration for brand owners. While dates are subject to change, GoDaddy Corporate Domains provides the following best-case scenario timeline, which estimates the process from application submission to delegation will take approximately 20 months.

- **Application Submission:** The window is expected to open in April 2026 and will run for approximately 12 to 15 weeks until early July.
- **Internal Work & Reveal Day:** Following the application period’s closure, approximately two months of internal work will be conducted, culminating in the public announcement of all applied-for strings on Reveal Day.
- **String Evaluation & Contention Resolution:** This period is estimated to last six months. A new addition to the application process, this round allows applicants to select an alternate string they can switch to in the event of a contention set. Unlike the last round, where private resolutions were allowed, this time a contention set will go to an auction of last resort.
- **Application & Applicant Evaluation:** If your application moves forward, it will undergo a technical and financial evaluation by ICANN, which could take up to three months.
- **Contracting & Delegation:** This final stage of legal work and onboarding is estimated to take three months. Best-case scenario, the TLD could be delegated by early December 2027.

# Securing Your DotBrand

## A Breakdown of Investment

The next round of new gTLD applications is anticipated to begin in April 2026 for a 15-week period. This is a rare and significant opportunity to secure a dotBrand Top-Level Domain (TLD). This is a chance to acquire a long-term strategic asset that can serve as a branded slice of internet infrastructure for years to come. A dotBrand is not merely a digital marketing asset; it's a foundational investment in your company's digital future, requiring both upfront and ongoing financial commitment.

Here is a breakdown of the estimated costs associated with applying for and maintaining a dotBrand TLD.

### One-Time Application Costs

The application process is comprehensive, requiring detailed documentation and cross-functional alignment from legal, technical, and marketing teams.

Fee Type	Description	Estimated Cost
ICANN Application Fee	The one-time fee to apply for a new gTLD.	\$227,500 per TLD
Consulting & Application Support	Services from a domain strategy consultant to assist with the application process.	Est. \$25,000-\$50,000
Trademark Clearinghouse Protection	To ensure trademarks are protected; includes an additional fee for dotBrand evaluation.	\$500

### Ongoing Annual Costs

A dotBrand is a long-term investment, with usability not expected until late 2027 or early 2028. Organizations should plan for continuous management and measurement of ROI.

Fee Type	Description	Estimated Annual Cost
ICANN & Data Escrow Fees	Mandatory fees for maintaining your TLD and ensuring compliance with ICANN's contractual obligations.	Est. \$30,000 per TLD
Outsourced Registry, Registrar, & Operational Support	Outsourced solutions for day-to-day management, compliance, and best-practices guidance. These services can help provide the technology backbone for domain security, abuse monitoring, and mitigation, including management.	Est. \$15,000-\$50,000

## Strategic Value Beyond the Numbers

While the costs are significant, the value of a dotBrand extends far beyond the financial investment. A dotBrand can:

- **Enhance Trust and Security:** Exclusively owned domains prevent phishing and cybersquatting and allow for the implementation of strict security standards like DMARC and HTTPS across all domains within the TLD.
- **Improve Brand Differentiation and Flexibility:** DotBrands enable the creation of unique, memorable URLs (e.g., careers.godaddy or on.citi) that reinforce brand identity and can be used for specific campaigns, product launches, and regional sites.
- **Streamline Portfolio Management:** Consolidate digital assets under a single, branded namespace, reducing the complexity and cost of managing a large domain portfolio over time.

The decision to apply for a dotBrand should be viewed as a long-term strategic move to secure a permanent, trusted piece of the internet, complementing an existing portfolio rather than replacing it.

# Real-World DotBrands

## How Companies Drive Value

DotBrands have been leveraged in diverse ways to enhance security, improve marketing flexibility, and create a strong brand presence. With the next application window likely a decade or more away, today’s decisions are about anticipating what may be important many years from now.

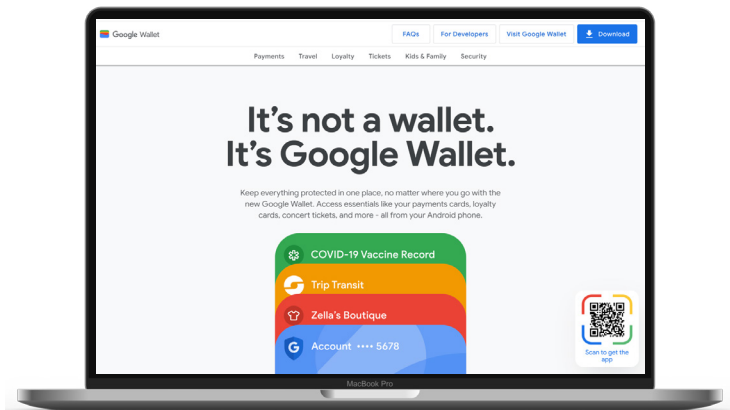
Organizations vary widely in how they leverage their dotBrand domains, with many strategic use cases available. The examples below highlight this range of opportunities, demonstrating that a dotBrand can be a powerful asset for your organization.

### Security & Trust

- Johnson & Johnson: `vaxcheck.jnj` was used as a platform for medical personnel to check the expiration dates of Johnson and Johnson COVID vaccines.
- Microsoft: The company has consolidated all Microsoft 365 apps onto a single, simplified domain, `cloud.microsoft`. This approach is designed to improve user experience, trust, and security.
- Nike: Nike uses the `swoosh.nike` domain to ensure a safe and trusted space for its Web3-enabled platform,

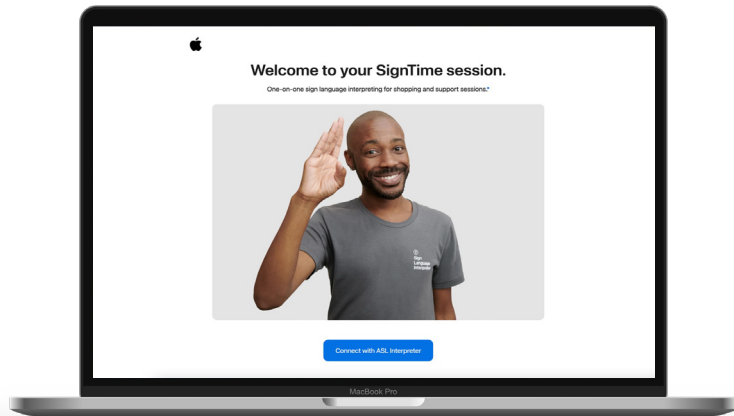
### Marketing & Brand Experience

- Amazon: `pharmacyservices.amazon` was used to launch their new medication delivery service. It is a dedicated portal for Amazon’s Pharmacy Partner Services business.
- Amazon: `partyrock.aws` is used to create useful applications with generative AI.
- Apple: `applemusicforbusiness.apple` and `applecard.apple` were noteworthy landing pages for Apple products.
- Citi: Citi uses `on.citi` as a branded URL shortener for social engagement.
- FAGE: `home.fage` and `splitpot.fage` are examples of sites the company uses.
- Google: `grow.google` is a page hosting training content for individual careers and businesses, from cybersecurity to AI prompts. Google also uses `codeassist.google` as a branded destination for its AI-powered coding assistant and `wallet.google` for its payment app.



## Portfolio & Operational Efficiency

- **Abbott:** Abbott Laboratories leverages its dotBrand to solve global domain challenges. The company uses [countrycode].abbott (e.g., de.abbott or ca.abbott) for its local sites instead of relying on ccTLDs.
- **BMW:** BMW uses a templated approach for its licensed dealers, hosting their websites on domains like [dealername].bmw. This ensures brand consistency, compliance, and cost control.
- **GoDaddy:** GoDaddy uses careers.godaddy as its official career site, providing a secure, branded destination for job seekers.



## Microsites, Tools, & Utility

- **Abbott:** diagnostics.abbott is a microsite dedicated to an entire division.
- **Apple:** signtime.apple is a site set up for customers and employees who are hard of hearing to engage an ASL interpreter.
- **FAGE:** digitalassets.fage is a page used for the company's digital asset management (DAM) system.
- **FOX:** mediacloud.fox is an example of a DAM site.
- **Intercontinental Exchange Inc.:** secure.ice is used as an interstitial warning page.
- **KPMG:** The company uses social.kpmg for short social links.
- **KPMG:** climateinsights.kpmg is a microsite for all climate-related research and insights.
- **Sandvik:** my.sandvik is a new customer portal with project management tools.
- **Sky:** skyaccessibility.sky hosts all information and aids for accessibility.
- **State Farm:** goodneighbor5k.statefarm was a microsite designed for a charitable 5k event. statefarmevents.statefarm and mvp.statefarm are other notable sites.
- **ZARA:** go.zara is a link shortener used for all social media linking.

