



An SEO Case Study on gTLDs, Domain Names, & SEO Performance

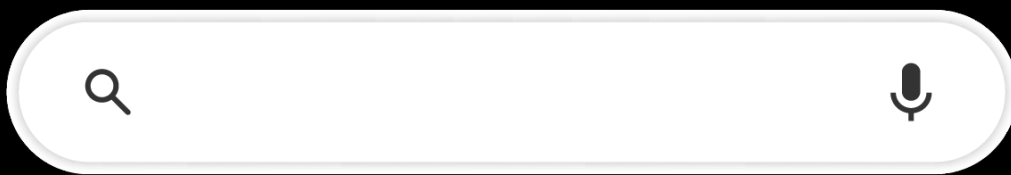




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Letter From Head of Business, Leigh Aragon

For years, the SEO conversation around generic top-level domains (gTLDs) has focused on whether domain extensions impact search performance; particularly, how keyword-aligned gTLDs can influence search rankings within Google.

Despite the attention this question has received, the industry has lacked rigorous, evidence-based research to validate these claims. Much of the debate has been driven by opinions, anecdotal observations, and isolated test results rather than large-scale, controlled experimentation.

To move the discussion past speculation, we partnered on a controlled study designed to measure these effects directly.

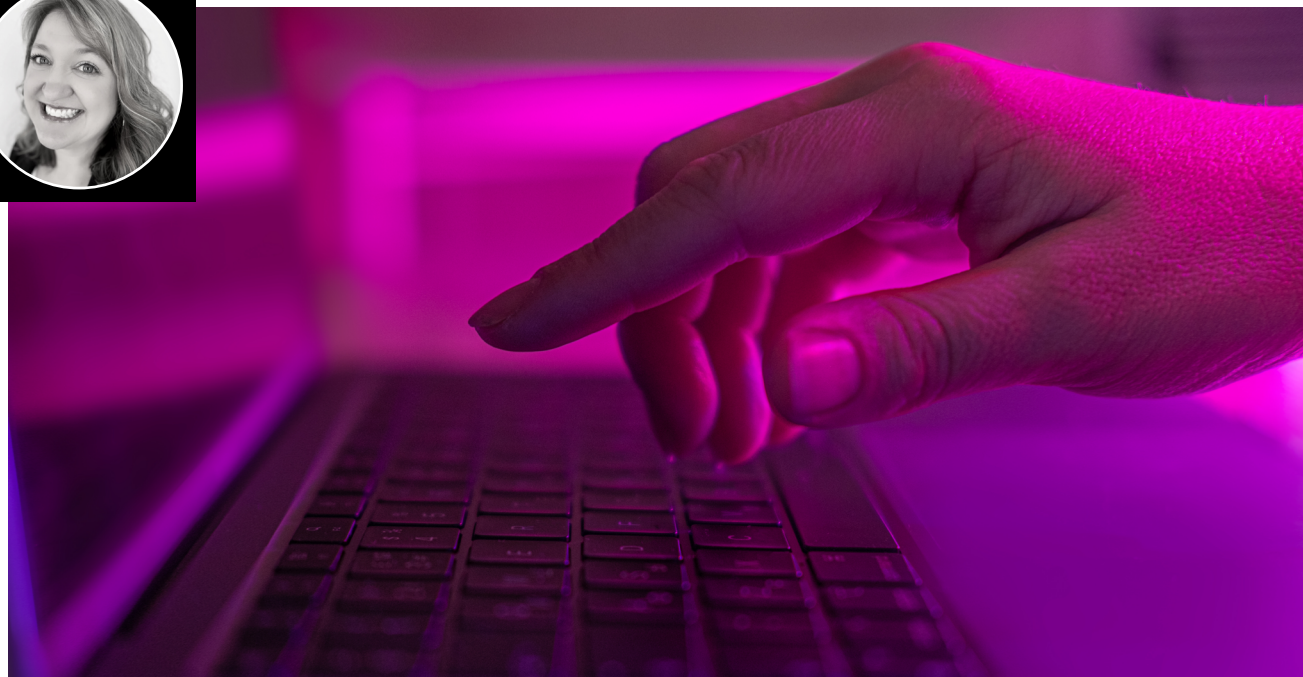
In collaboration with Kyle Roof, an internationally recognized SEO expert, we launched one of the most comprehensive gTLD SEO studies in over a decade. Using a controlled testing environment, the research was designed to measure how search engines interpret domain extensions and whether keyword-relevant gTLDs influence search visibility.

The result is a rare, data-driven examination of a topic where subjective assumptions have often outpaced objective evidence. The findings challenge several long-held beliefs and reveal measurable differences in performance between keyword-aligned gTLDs and traditional domain naming approaches.

Whether you're an SEO professional looking for evidence-based insights or a business owner evaluating the impact of your domain strategy, the findings offer valuable perspective on the role domain names may play in overall search performance.

We hope you enjoy,

Leigh Aragon, Sr. Director at GoDaddy Registry



Reframing a Decade of gTLD Assumptions

Since the expansion of gTLDs in the early 2010s, brands have been left with conflicting signals:

- Google has stated that domain extensions do not influence search rankings
- Market adoption of newer gTLDs has lagged due to awareness gaps and uncertainty
- Industry Research has relied on correlation rather than controlled experimentation

As a result, much of the conversation has been shaped by interpretation rather than controlled testing.

Until now, no one had rigorously tested how gTLDs perform in isolation – making it difficult for brands to make fully informed decisions about their search visibility and rankings.

Why This Study Is Different

This isn't another observational dataset or correlation study. It is built on a fundamentally different approach: Controlled SEO experimentation.

Kyle Roof, an established SEO expert known for his data-driven testing methodology, approached us to see if we would be interested in partnering with him on a never-been-done-before study on the performance of gTLDs in search. Given the lack of controlled, experimental data in the industry, we agreed.

Rather than analyzing existing websites (where ranking signals are influenced by countless overlapping variables), Kyle's methodology focuses on creating environments that allow for unbiased insight to how search engines respond. Through Kyle's patented framework, this study:

- Isolates variables (same content, different domains)
- Runs parallel tests under identical conditions
- Measures indexing, ranking speed, and position changes
- Repeats tests across multiple domains and query types

This approach enables a level of accuracy that traditional SEO research typically can't achieve; while traditional SEO studies often analyze millions of pages, they rarely isolate a single variable to explain why those outcomes occur. Controlled testing can.

What We Set Out to Answer, and Why This Matters Now

Across both studies, we focused on two core questions:

1. Do gTLDs impact search rankings?
2. Does domain structure (like URL length) influence ranking performance?

These are foundational questions for anyone making decisions about domain strategy, branding, or SEO investment. And they're becoming increasingly more important.

With ICANN opening new gTLD applications in 2026, we are looking at another expansion of the internet, and a flooding of domain options for brands to consider in the future.

We hope this research helps bring clarity to the conversation around gTLDs and SEO, giving you and your brand the data and confidence to make informed decisions about your domain strategy and how you represent your brand online. As the domain landscape continues to evolve, we also look forward to conducting more industry-breaking research that challenges conventional domain rhetoric and uncover insights that help shape the future of the domain industry.



Key Terms

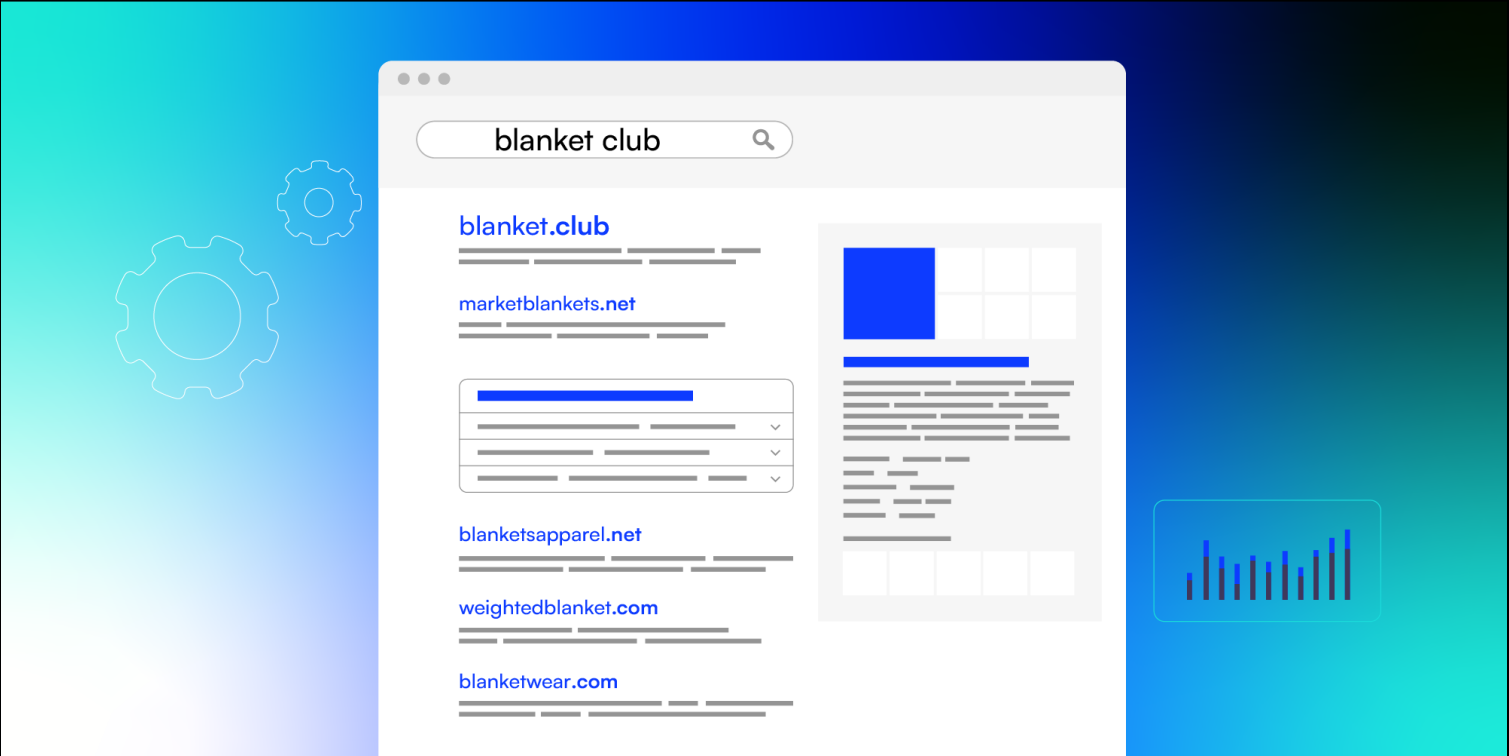
Throughout this whitepaper, you'll see the terms EMD and PMD referenced when discussing domain naming strategies and SEO performance. Use the definitions below as a quick reference guide while reviewing the research findings.

Exact Match Domain (EMD): The search query exactly matches the domain name

- Blanket.club** → Query: "blanket club"
- Poptemp.art** → Query: "pop tempo art"
- Danos.design** → Query: "danos design"

Partial Match Domain (PMD): Only part of the query appears in the domain

- Makeblankets.net** → Query: partial "blanket club"
- Popartpros.com** → Query: partial "pop tempo art"
- Danosartwork.com** → Query: partial "danos design"



STUDY 1:

gTLD SEO Keyword Performance Study

A controlled experiment comparing descriptive gTLDs against traditional .com domains.

The findings discussed in this section are based on the original study, IMG.courses gTLD SEO Performance Study, which contains the complete methodology, data, and results.

25 Test Domains | 9 gTLD Types | 90+ Days Tracked

- PMDs with descriptive gTLDs frequently outperformed traditional PMDs
- Results suggest keyword-aligned gTLDs can reinforce relevance signals

When the internet expanded beyond .com into hundreds of descriptive, industry-specific extensions, a new question emerged: can the domain you choose influence how your site performs in search?

More specifically, can a keyword-aligned domain – like a .design, .club, or .art – help reinforce what your site is about in a way that impacts ranking in Google?

Until recently, most answers to that question were based on assumption, correlation, or anecdotal evidence. So instead of speculating, we tested it.

Study Hypotheses

- Using Exact Match Domains (EMD) or Partial Match Domains (PMD) with descriptive TLDs will improve search engine rankings compared to traditional .com/.net domains when all other factors (content, indexing, SEO setup) are identical.
- PMDs leveraging a gTLD relevant to the search query will rank higher than equivalent PMDs using a traditional .com domain.

Platform & Configuration Setup

To ensure any ranking differences could be attributed to the domain rather than external factors, all test sites were built identically with the following configurations:

- Built in WordPress with an SEO Press plugin used for SEO management
- Google Search Console connected; sitemaps submitted
- Content generated via ChatGPT in HTML to ensure identical content
- Rankings tracked for US desktop searches in English
- Sites removed if server stability issues affected rankings

We then used the following test pairs:

EMD Test Examples

DESCRIPTIVE TLD		TRADITIONAL .COM/.NET		QUERY
Blanket.club	vs	Blanketclub.net	→	Blanket Club
Danos.design	vs	Danosdesign.com	→	Danos Design
Designer.us	vs	Designerbus.com	→	Designer Buses
Poptempo.art	vs	Poptempoart.com	→	Pop Tempo Art
Bloomhaven.florist	vs	Bloomhavenflorist.com	→	Bloom Haven Florist

PMD Test Examples

DESCRIPTIVE TLD		TRADITIONAL .COM/.NET		QUERY
Blanket.club	vs	Makeblankets.net	→	Blanket Club
Danos.design	vs	Danosartwork.com	→	Danos Design
Designer.us	vs	Artisticbus.com	→	Designer Buses
Poptempo.art	vs	Popartpros.com	→	Pop Tempo Art
Bloomhaven.florist	vs	Bloomingroseshop.com	→	Bloom Haven Florist

Artificial/Nonsensical Keyword Test Examples

DESCRIPTIVE TLD		TRADITIONAL .COM/.NET		QUERY
Dribzbc.us	vs	Dribzbcus.com	→	Dribzbcus
Sepliti.co	vs	Seplitico.com	→	Seplitico
Shanbolo.fit	vs	Shanbolofit.net	→	Shanbolofit
Canessordes.pet	vs	Canessordespet.com	→	Canessordes pet
Drodigonally.ai	vs	Drodigonallyai.com	→	drodigonally

*The purpose of the nonsensical keyword test is to remove real-world noise entirely: these are terms with no search history, no competition, and no existing content – enabling us to isolate the effect of domain extensions when other ranking signals are essentially absent.



EMD Test - Rankings (US Desktop)

SEARCH QUERY	EMD DOMAIN	RANK	NON-EMD DOMAIN	RANK
blanket club	blanket.club	34	blanketclub.net	-
danos design	danos.design	-	danosdesign.com	2
designer buses	designerb.us	-	designerbus.com	-
pop tempo art	poptempo.art	1	poptempoart.com	-
bloom haven florist	bloomhaven.florist	-	bloomhavenflorist.com	-

PMD Test - Rankings (US Desktop)

SEARCH QUERY	EMD DOMAIN	RANK	NON-EMD DOMAIN	RANK
blanket club	blanket.club	34	makeblankets.net	-
danos design	danos.design	-	makeblankets.net	-
designer buses	artisticbus.com	2	makeblankets.net	-
pop tempo art	poptempo.art	1	popartpros.com	-
bloom haven florist	bloomhaven.florist	-	bloomingroseshop.com	-

DAY 14 • INITIAL RANKINGS

QUERY	DOMAIN 1 (TLD)	RANK	DOMAIN 1 (.COM)	RANK
dribzbcus	dribzbc.us	-	dribzbcus.com	-
seplitico	sepliti.co	14	sepliticotsk.com	-
shanbolofit	shanbolo.fit	1	shanbol.net	-
canessordes pet	canessordes.pet	5	canessordes.com	-
drodigonally	drodigonally.ai	-	drodigonally.com	-

NOVEMBER 21, 2025

QUERY	DOMAIN 1 (TLD)	RANK	DOMAIN 1 (.COM)	RANK
dribzbcus	dribzbc.us	-	dribzbcus.com	-
seplitico	sepliti.co	10	sepliticotsk.com	-
shanbolofit	shanbolo.fit	1	shanbol.net	-
canessordes pet	canessordes.pet	9	canessordes.com	-
drodigonally	drodigonally.ai	-	drodigonally.com	-

DECEMBER 17, 2025

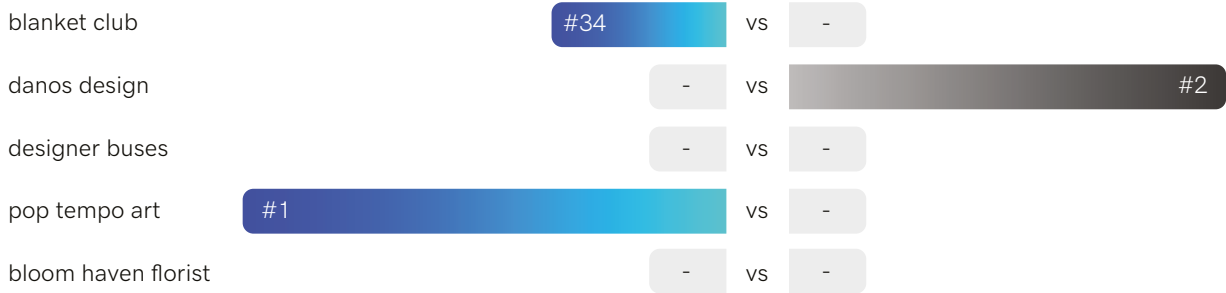
QUERY	DOMAIN 1 (TLD)	RANK	DOMAIN 1 (.COM)	RANK
dribzbcus	dribzbc.us	-	dribzbcus.com	-
seplitico	sepliti.co	6	sepliticotsk.com	-
shanbolofit	shanbolo.fit	1	shanbol.net	-
canessordes pet	canessordes.pet	3	canessordes.com	23
drodigonally	drodigonally.ai	-	drodigonally.com	-

Chart

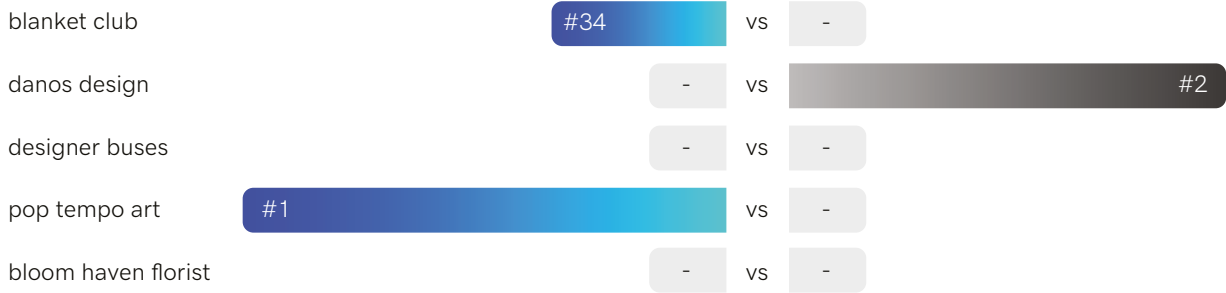
Bars sized by rank position (lower = better = longer bar). Unranked shown as -.

Descriptive gTLD Traditional Domain Unranked

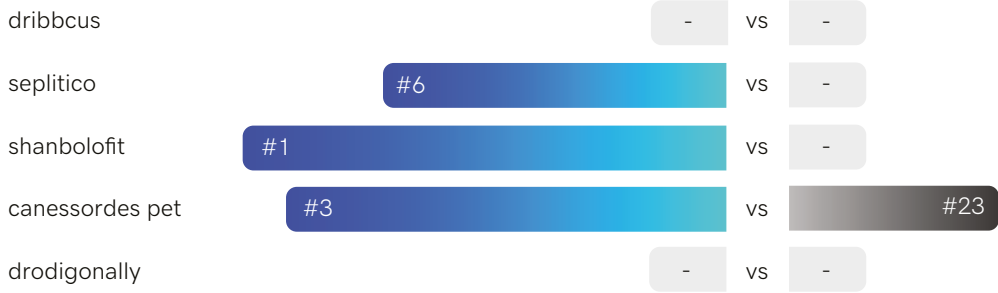
EMD TEST



PMD TEST



ARTIFICIAL KEYWORDS (DEC 17)



Observations

- Descriptive TLDs (.art, .design, .pet) frequently outperformed traditional domains, especially in PMD tests.
- EMD advantage was inconsistent; .com domains often outperformed in artificial keyword tests.
- Plural vs. singular mismatches impacted results (designerb.us vs. designerbus.com).
- Server stability affected rankings, highlighting the importance of hosting reliability.
- Partial Match Domains leveraging descriptive gTLDs consistently outperformed traditional PMDs.

Key Findings

1. Keywords matter more than expected

One of the clearest insights from the study was the apparent relationship between domain-level keyword relevance and search performance. The results suggest that when a descriptive gTLD reinforces the intended search query, it may provide an additional relevance signal that search engines can interpret.

In tests using PMDs, domains with descriptive gTLDs frequently performed better when the domain structure closely aligned with the target keyword.

Often, those domains:

- Ranked higher than their traditional counterparts, or
- Were the only domains in their test group to rank at all.

In the tests using EMDs, results were mixed: some domains performed exceptionally well, while others didn't rank at all.

Artificial Keyword Testing: Removing Real-World Bias

We also wanted to test keywords while removing real-world noise entirely, and therefore introduced a set of invented keywords: terms with no search history, no competition, and no existing content. Across multiple tests, descriptive domain extensions that matched the search queries consistently:

- Achieved higher rankings
- Improved faster over time
- Outperformed their .com equivalents

With no historical signals to rely on, domain structure became one of the most visible differentiators. This reinforces the idea that **when other ranking factors are neutralized, domain-level relevance becomes more influential.**

Takeaway: Keyword alignment at the domain level can reinforce relevance signals, particularly when the TLD itself contributes meaning to the query.

2. Google Parses Domains Linguistically

In one test, a domain intended to target a plural keyword failed to rank because the TLD created a singular form mismatch. In another, a clean keyword-TLD pairing resulted in a top-ranking position – indicating that the closer the alignment between domain structure and search intent, the stronger the potential signal.

Singular vs Plural in Ranking

Query: "designer buses" → designerb.us = "designer b" + ".us" ≠ "buses"

X Problem

designerb.us

Google reads this as "designerb" + "us" not "designer" + "bus". The singular .us TLD breaks the keyword match.

Unranked

✓ No Mismatch

poptempo.art

Clean split: "poptempo" + ".art" matches "pop tempo art" exactly. No singular/plural conflict.

Ranked #1

Takeaway: When using a ccTLD as part of the keyword (domain hack), check that the TLD doesn't create a singular/plural mismatch with the target query.

→ Actionable Recommendations for Brands/SEOs

For brands and marketers, the data around gTLDs is clear: strategic keyword alignment in your domain matters. Descriptive TLDs aligned with search intent can provide a significant SEO advantage, and PMDs with descriptive TLDs often outperform traditional PMDs, balancing SEO and branding flexibility.

When deciding how to choose a TLD for SEO, ask yourself:

1. **Identify Target Keywords:** What queries does the site need to rank for?
2. **Match a Descriptive TLD:** Does a gTLD align with the keyword? (.art, .cooking, .garden)
3. **Check for Mismatches:** No singular/plural conflicts? Clean word split in the URL?
4. **Register & Track:** Launch with solid on-page SEO & monitor for 90+ days.

Outside of the technical, it's also important to remember that your domain alone is not enough to rank. Content and technical SEO is still critical for long-term website success: even with descriptive TLDs, poor content, slow sites, or indexing issues will ultimately limit performance.

The takeaway is not that a gTLD can replace a strong SEO strategy; it's that your domain can be part of that strategy. When chosen intentionally, a descriptive TLD can reinforce search intent, create a more meaningful and memorable web address, and give brands another opportunity to align their digital identity with what their audiences are searching for. As the domain landscape continues to expand, brands and SEOs have more choices than ever. The opportunity is to move beyond the assumption that every successful website needs to look the same, and use the data to make a domain choice that works harder for the brand.

STUDY 2:

Does Domain Length Matter for SEO?

We Put the Theory to the Test

A controlled experiment comparing the impacts of domain length and their impact on SEO.

The findings discussed in this section are based on the original study, IMG.courses gTLD & URL Length Ranking Study, which contains the complete methodology, data, and results.

12+ Test Domains | 59+ Days Tracked

- Shorter domains tended to appear in Google search results sooner than longer alternatives.
- Domain length did not appear to dictate long-term rankings, but it may influence early search visibility and discovery

The first phase of our research explored whether keyword-aligned gTLDs could influence search performance compared to traditional domain extensions such as .com and .net. The results from the study suggested that keyword alignment at the domain level reinforced relevance signals, particularly when the TLD itself contributes meaning to the query.

That finding led to a natural follow-up question: Does the length of a domain matter?

While shorter names are often preferred for branding, memorability, and user experience, little research has examined whether domain length itself plays a measurable role in organic search performance.

To explore this question, we conducted a second controlled study focused specifically on domain length. The research examined two key hypotheses: first, whether the overall length of a domain name (second-level domain plus top-level domain) influences rankings; and second, whether shorter two- and three-character gTLDs perform differently than longer domain extensions.

The results provide a data-driven perspective on another widely discussed SEO theory, helping separate convention from evidence and offering new insights into how domain structure may influence search visibility.

Study Hypotheses

1. Shorter character-length domains may outrank longer ones, even if the longer domain contains the target keyword.
2. Shorter TLD extensions (e.g., .co, .us, .tv) may rank higher than longer extensions (.online, .design, .florist), assuming identical domain names and page content.

Platform & Configuration Setup

To ensure any ranking differences could be attributed to the domain structure rather than external factors, all test sites were built identically with the following configurations:

- Built in WordPress with an SEO Press plugin used for SEO management
- Google Search Console connected; sitemaps submitted
- Content generated via ChatGPT in HTML to ensure identical content
- Rankings tracked for US desktop searches in English
- Sites removed if server stability issues affected rankings

We then used the following test pairs:

Domain Length

SHORT DOMAIN		LONG DOMAIN		SEARCH QUERY
Veg.cooking	vs	Veggiecookingathome.com	→	How to properly cook asparagus
Blanket.club	vs	Sewingblanketclub.net	→	Grandma's woolen blankets
Danos.design	vs	Danoswebsitedesign.com	→	Freelance graphic artist

TLD Length

SHORT TLD DOMAIN		LONG TLD DOMAIN		SEARCH QUERY
Cookveggies.us	vs	Healthyveg.cooking	→	How to properly cook asparagus
Jumps.co	vs	Jumps.fashion	→	Gymnastics custom printed holiday apparel
Netteam.biz	vs	Team.compare	→	Bargain deals for summer mosquito control



The Results

Test 2A - Domain Length

SEARCH QUERY	SHORT DOMAIN	11/21/25	12/17/25	01/19/26	LONG DOMAIN	11/21/25	12/17/25	01/19/26
how to properly cook asparagus	veg.cooking	-	-	-	veggiecookingathome.com	-	-	3
grandma's woolen blankets from the 20s	blanket.club	2	-	-	sewingblanketclub.net	-	1	33
freelance graphic artist	danos.design	-	-	-	danoswebsitedesign.com	-	-	-

Test 2B - TLD Length

SEARCH QUERY	SHORT TLD DOMAIN	11/21/25	12/17/25	01/19/26	LONG TLD DOMAIN	11/21/25	12/17/25	01/19/26
how to properly cook asparagus	cookveggies.us	-	-	-	veggiecookingathome.com	-	-	-
gymnastics custom printed holiday apparel	jumps.co	1	-	-	sewingblanketclub.net	-	-	1
bargain deals for summer mosquito control	netteam.biz	-	2	18	danoswebsitedesign.com	-	-	-

Observations

- Shorter domains frequently achieved rankings earlier than longer comparison domains.
- Longer domains often reached comparable rankings over time.
- Shorter TLDs (.co, .us, .tv) commonly appeared in search results earlier than longer TLDs.
- Ranking differences were most visible during the initial indexing phase.

Key Findings

1. Shorter domains rank quickly

Shorter domains showed a tendency to achieve earlier visibility in search results, particularly during the initial indexing phase. In some cases, shorter domains ranked quickly while longer versions lagged. However, over time the longer domains were able to catch up.

This suggests that simplicity may offer an early advantage, even if long-term performance depends on broader SEO factors. **For brands evaluating premium domains, this finding adds another dimension to the value proposition: a shorter, more memorable domain may not only strengthen branding and usability, but may also provide an early SEO visibility advantage.** While domain length alone does not determine ranking performance, the potential benefits of a concise domain make brevity a factor worth considering when evaluating premium domain investments.

2. TLD Length May Influence Early Search Visibility

A similar pattern appeared when comparing TLD length. Shorter extensions like .co or .us appeared in search results sooner than longer extensions, such as .fashion or .cooking. While longer extensions were often able to reach competitive positions over time, the initial visibility advantages tended to favor shorter TLD structures.

Importantly, this pattern appeared even when content, site configuration, and other ranking variables were held constant. While the study does not suggest that shorter TLDs produce superior long-term rankings, the findings indicate that TLD structure itself may play a role during the early stages of indexing and search visibility.

For brands evaluating domain options, this introduces a consideration beyond branding alone. The length and structure of a TLD may influence how quickly a new website gains traction in search, even when long-term performance is ultimately driven by broader SEO factors.

Takeaway: Keyword alignment at the domain level can reinforce relevance signals, particularly when the TLD itself contributes meaning to the query.

→ Actionable Recommendations for Brands/SEOs

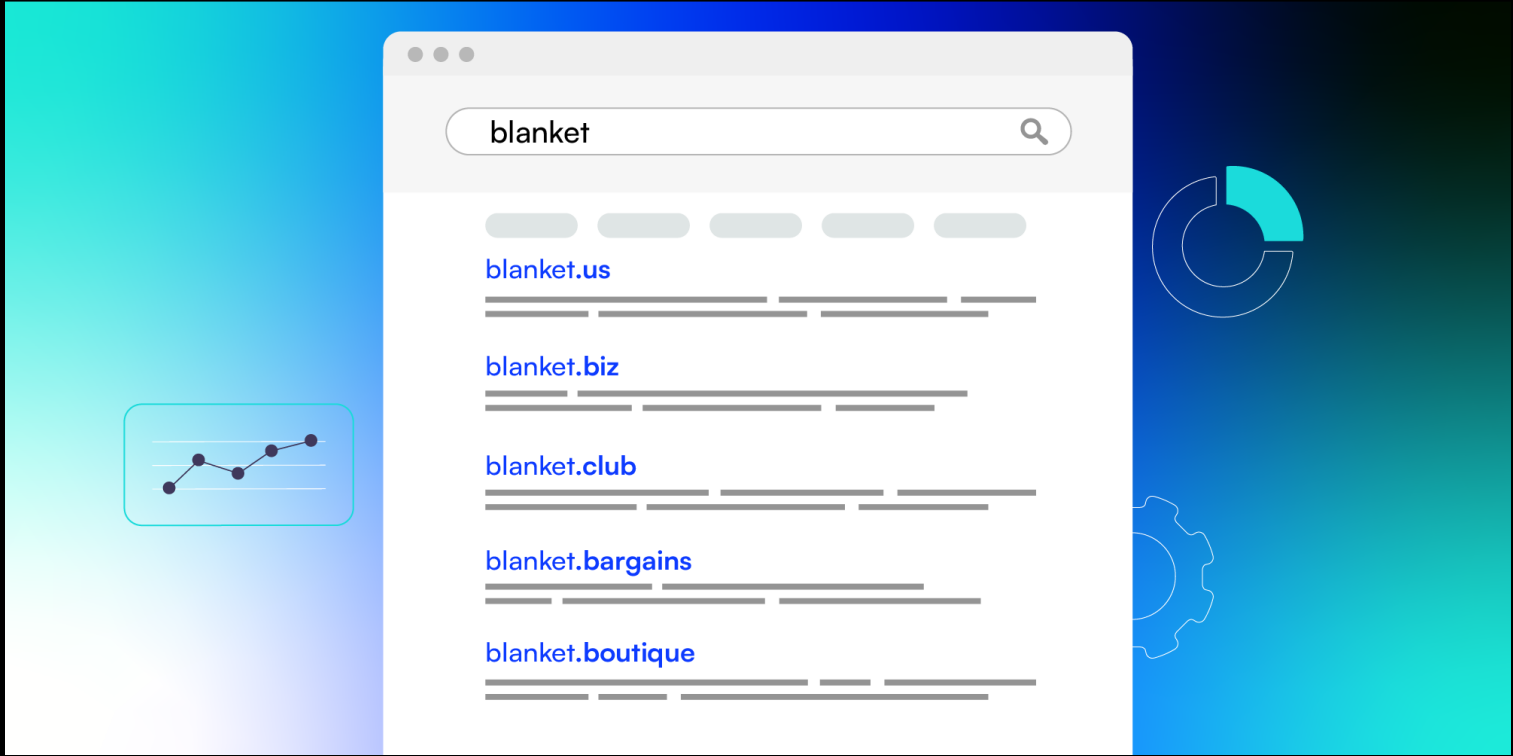
For brands and marketers, the data suggests that domain brevity may offer benefits beyond branding alone. In our testing, shorter domains and shorter TLD structures frequently achieved visibility earlier during the indexing phase, even when content, site configuration, and other ranking factors were held constant. While longer domains often reached competitive positions over time, shorter domains appeared to establish visibility more quickly.

For brands evaluating domain options, this finding adds another consideration to the domain selection process. A shorter, more memorable domain may not only improve branding and usability, but may also provide an advantage during the early stages of search visibility. While brevity alone does not guarantee stronger rankings, it may help a new website establish momentum sooner.

When deciding how to choose a TLD for SEO, consider:

- **Prioritize Brevity:** Can the domain be shortened without sacrificing brand clarity or keyword relevance?
- **Choose Memorable Names:** Is the domain easy to type, remember, and share across marketing channels?
- **Evaluate TLD Structure:** If multiple TLD options are available, would a shorter extension support the same branding goals?
- **Launch & Track:** Implement strong on-page SEO and monitor indexing and ranking performance over time.

The takeaway is not that shorter domains automatically rank better than longer ones. Rather, the findings suggest that brevity may influence how quickly a new website gains visibility in search. When paired with strong content and technical SEO, a shorter domain can provide brands with another advantage, combining memorability, usability, and potential early search visibility into a single asset.



What the Findings Mean for Domain Strategy

Throughout this study, we set out to examine a series of long-debated SEO assumptions through controlled testing. While the results do not suggest that domain names alone determine long-term search success, they do provide valuable insight into how domain characteristics may influence visibility, discoverability, and user engagement.

In the first study, keyword-aligned gTLDs consistently outperformed comparable .com and .net domains, suggesting that when a domain extension reinforces the meaning of a search query, it may strengthen relevance signals and improve search visibility.

In the second study, shorter domains demonstrated a tendency to achieve visibility in search results more quickly than longer alternatives during the initial indexing phase. While longer domains often caught up over time, the results indicate that domain brevity may provide an early advantage in discoverability.

The two characteristics that repeatedly emerged from controlled testing were relevance and brevity. Many premium domains naturally combine both.

While a premium domain is not a substitute for a strong SEO strategy, the data suggests it can be a strategic asset that supports broader marketing and search objectives.

A domain is not simply a destination for a website. It is a signal that appears across search results, advertising, social media, email communications, and countless customer interactions.

Many premium domains naturally align with the characteristics highlighted in this research. They are often shorter, easier to remember, and built around meaningful keywords or highly relevant terms. While no domain guarantees search success, selecting a concise and relevant domain may support both discoverability and brand recognition.

Branding isn't the only reason to value a shorter domain. Our controlled SEO research found that shorter domains showed a tendency to achieve **earlier visibility in search results**, particularly during the initial indexing phase.

For organizations launching new websites, this finding may be particularly relevant during the early stages of search visibility and website discovery. A shorter domain may give a website a stronger starting point while the broader SEO strategy begins to take effect. And because premium domains are often characterized by their brevity, this gives brands another factor to consider when evaluating their potential value.

Strategic Takeaways for Domain Owners

The broader takeaway from this research is not that every business needs a premium domain. Rather, it is that domain selection deserves greater consideration than it often receives. **Our findings indicate that both keyword relevance and domain length can influence early search performance under controlled conditions**, challenging common assumptions about how domain names interact with modern search engines.

As the domain landscape continues to expand beyond traditional extensions, organizations have more options than ever before. The most effective choice will ultimately depend on a brand's goals, audience, and strategy. Under the controlled conditions tested in this research, keyword-aligned gTLDs outperformed comparable .com and .net domains, while shorter domains demonstrated an advantage during the initial indexing phase.

Although further study is warranted, the findings challenge several long-held assumptions about domain names and suggest that domain names should be treated as a strategic marketing and search asset, not merely a technical requirement. What surprised us most was not that domain names matter more than content or technical SEO. They don't. It was that under controlled conditions, domain characteristics consistently influenced visibility in ways that many marketers have long assumed were irrelevant.



Appendix: Expert Commentary

Beyond the Findings

For years, businesses have had more choices than ever when it comes to selecting a domain name. Alongside traditional extensions like .com and .net, descriptive domain extensions such as .design, .club, and .courses have given brands new ways to create memorable, relevant online identities.

But while domain choice has evolved, much of the SEO conversation around domain extensions has remained rooted in assumptions rather than data. Do descriptive domain extensions perform differently in search? Does domain length matter? And how much of the conventional wisdom surrounding domain names still holds up today?

Those questions led SEO expert Kyle Roof to partner with us on two controlled studies designed to isolate and measure the impact of domain-related variables on search performance. With more than a decade of experience in SEO and a reputation for rigorous testing, Roof has built his career on challenging assumptions and validating ideas with data. We sat down with him to discuss what inspired the studies, what surprised him most, and what questions he wants to test next.

From Building Websites to Testing Search Rankings

Today, Kyle Roof is known throughout the SEO industry for his testing-first approach to search. Over the past several years, he has run more than 400 controlled SEO experiments designed to better understand how Google's algorithm works. Most notably, Kyle holds the US utility patent #10,540,263 B1 for testing and rating individual ranking variables used in search engine algorithms. This became the foundation of the SEO tool PageOptimizer Pro, informs the work of his agency, and is shared with marketers through conferences, podcasts, and IMG, the SEO education platform he co-founded.

His reputation for challenging conventional wisdom stems from a simple belief: SEO should be measured, not assumed. But Roof's path into SEO wasn't part of a grand plan.

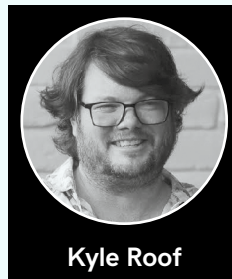
"I got into building websites as a side project, and marketing came out of that naturally," he explains. "What I found pretty quickly was that I was a lot better at marketing websites than building them."

That realization pulled him deeper into SEO, but it wasn't the marketing side alone that kept his attention.

"Once I got there, the testing side of it really hooked me. You could change an input, measure the result, and learn what actually moved rankings. That is still the part I love most."

Why Test Domain Extensions at All?

The inspiration for the studies came as ICANN prepared to open the next application round for new gTLDs. With organizations around the world applying for their own domain extensions, questions about domain name performance are once again top of mind.



"There has been a very persistent assumption in the industry that .com will always win," Roof says. "People tend to treat anything outside the traditional extensions as second-tier by default."

Rather than accepting that belief at face value, he wanted to see what the data would reveal.

"Once you have descriptive extensions like .art, .design, .florist, or .pet, it makes sense to ask whether those domains might actually be helping in some situations instead of hurting. If an extension reinforces the topic, then it is worth measuring rather than guessing."

For Roof, familiarity and performance are two different conversations.

".com is familiar, yes . . . But that does not mean it is always the strongest strategic choice. If you have a descriptive TLD that lines up tightly with the keyword, the topic, or the brand, that can be a real advantage."

The real question, he says, isn't whether .com remains the default.

"The right question is, 'What actually performs better when you control the variables?'"

Building a Study That Removes the Noise

The first study set out to answer a simple question: when all other factors are equal, how do descriptive domain extensions perform in Google compared to traditional .com and .net domains? The second study expanded the scope by examining domain length and TLD length as independent variables.

"The goal was to strip away as much noise as possible," he says.

The testing environments used identical WordPress installations, page structures, Search Console integrations, and content. Rankings were tracked using U.S. desktop English search results, and the study incorporated both real-world keywords and artificial keywords to minimize the influence of brand history and other external signals.

"Artificial queries are useful when you want to reduce noise from brand history and other outside signals," Roof explains.

Even in controlled environments, SEO testing isn't always straightforward. According to Roof, one of the biggest challenges was keyword parsing: the process in which a search engine interprets and separates the words and meanings within a query or domain name.

"A domain might look like a clean keyword match to a human, but Google may split it differently," Roof explains. "We saw that clearly in the singular and plural issues, where the intended keyword match did not line up the way you would expect."

He points to the domain designerb.us, which was intended to target the keyword phrase “designer buses.”

“Google split the domain as ‘designerb’ plus ‘.us’ instead of ‘designer’ plus ‘bus,’ so the intended match never registered.”

Meanwhile, another test domain behaved exactly as expected: Poptempo.art was split cleanly into ‘poptempo’ and ‘art,’ resulting in the first ranked website for ‘pop tempo art.’

While the studies produced multiple interesting findings, one stood above the rest for Roof.

“The biggest surprise was how well the descriptive gTLDs performed, especially in partial match setups,” Roof says. “That’s where the pattern became hard to ignore. The descriptive extension was not just competitive with the traditional domain. It was the better option.”

The domain length research produced another noteworthy trend: both shorter domains, and shorter TLDs, appeared earlier in Google Search results. Taken together, the findings point toward a more nuanced understanding of domain strategy.

“The takeaway is not that one format always wins. It is that there are real advantages outside the .com default, and those advantages show up in more than one way.”

Ranking Signals, Trust, and User Behavior

Of course, rankings are only part of the equation. Many brand owners still wonder whether consumer trust and click-through behavior outweigh any search advantage a descriptive domain might provide. Roof believes the discussion is often framed incorrectly. Rather than asking whether trust outweighs ranking signals – or vice versa – brand owners should focus on choosing a domain that is strategic.

“A strong descriptive TLD can improve clarity, memorability, and immediate topical relevance. A domain has to work both for search engines and for people. In many cases, a non-.com can do both very well.”

When it comes to choosing a domain, Roof believes company size matters: small businesses often benefit most from flexibility. Descriptive domains can still play an important role in marketing campaigns, product launches, and supporting brand assets.

“If they can secure a domain that is short, memorable, and tightly aligned with what they do, a descriptive TLD can be a smart move. It may actually be the better option than forcing a .com that is awkward, bloated, or less relevant.”

What Kyle Would Choose Today

If Roof were launching a brand from scratch today, domain choice would remain a meaningful part of the strategy. His checklist is straightforward.

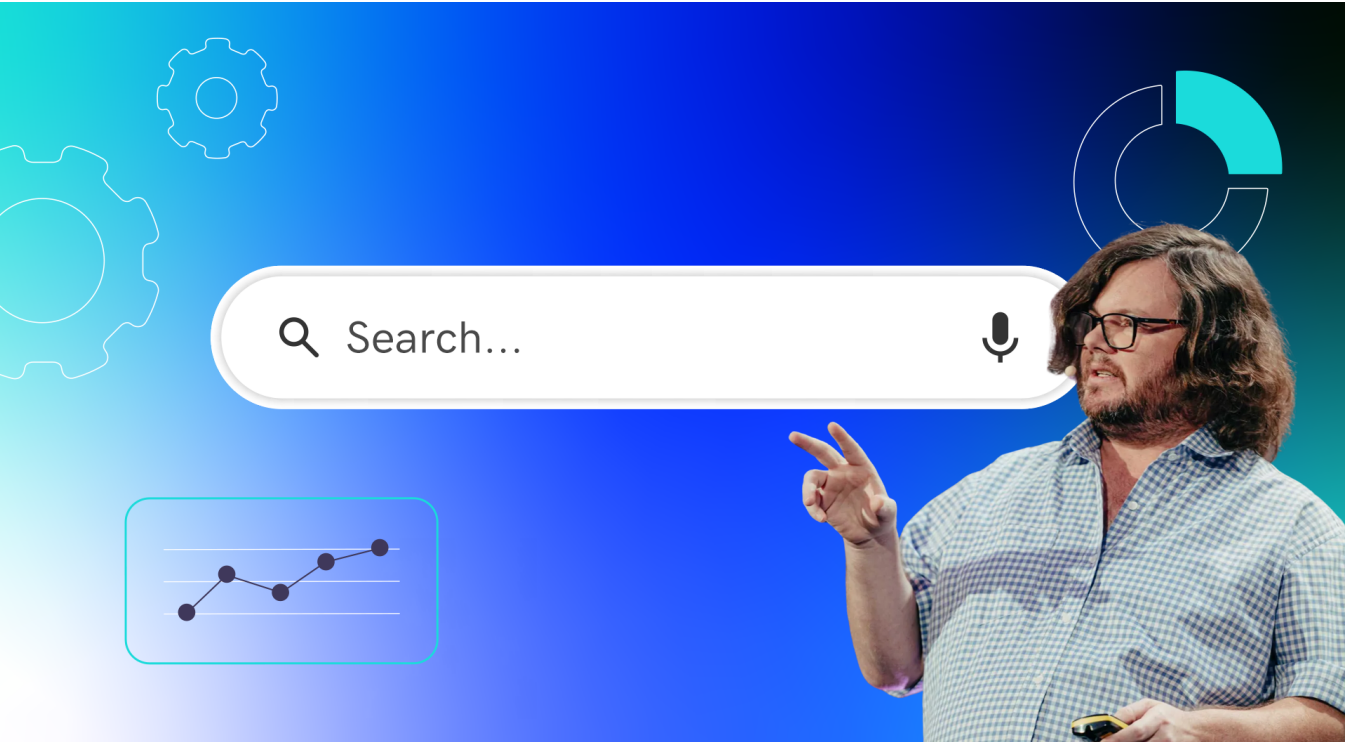
“I would care about whether the domain is easy to remember, easy to parse, topically aligned, and not unnecessarily long.”

And if a descriptive extension helps achieve those goals?

“I would absolutely use it.”

After all, he already does. Roof and his team chose IMG.courses when launching their SEO education platform in 2023, and the brand has since grown into a thriving destination for SEO training and community. The choice was pragmatic rather than ideological.

“We use IMG.courses ourselves, so I am clearly comfortable with that choice when it fits the brand. I would not force a .com just because people assume it is safer. In some cases, the non-.com is the cleaner, more strategic option.”



The SEO Advice Roof Thinks the Industry Should Stop Repeating

We asked Roof what SEO belief he thinks is most overdue for retirement, and his answer extends well beyond domain names.

“That one-size-fits-all SEO rules are good enough. Usually they are not.”

He points to several examples: ‘.com always wins.’ ‘Shorter URLs rank better.’ ‘Exact match domains do not work.’ The problem isn’t that these statements are always wrong, it’s that they’re often repeated without context.

“The better approach is to test the claim, look at the conditions, and figure out when it holds up and when it does not. Test – not assume – and focus on what actually moves rankings rather than recycle best practices.”

As AI reshapes search experiences, many marketers are wondering whether domain names will matter less in the future. Roof believes their role may evolve, but not disappear. Branding, memorability, clarity, and topical relevance will continue to matter, regardless of how search interfaces change.

“I do not think AI-driven search suddenly makes domain strategy irrelevant. I think it just makes it one part of a larger system.”

And in that system, clear and relevant domains still provide value.

Stop Treating Non-.com Domains Like a Compromise

Following the domain studies, Roof already has his eye on another widely debated topic: content management systems.

“There is a long-standing assumption that certain platforms cannot rank, or that Google quietly favors one platform over another.”

As with domain extensions, he sees a lack of definitive evidence: “If people are confidently repeating it and the data behind it is thin, that usually means there is a real test there.”

If there is one lesson Roof hopes marketers take away from the studies, it’s for marketers and brand owners to stop treating non-.com domains like a compromise. The research suggests that descriptive gTLDs can compete, win, and offer strategic advantages over traditional choices when they align closely with a brand and its topic.

“That does not mean .com is bad,” Roof says. “It means .com is not automatically best.”

“The right domain choice depends on relevance, clarity, brevity, and how well the whole thing works together.”

