

DotBrand Readiness in the Indian Subcontinent



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Introduction

The liberalisation of the domain name space in 2012 was the opportunity for organisations to play their part in the online revolution. Just over a decade later, rather than seeing a revolution in the digital space it has been more of an evolution. After a relatively slow start to active registration and usage of dotBrand domain names, we are now starting to see some innovative use cases by a number of organisations.

The clamour for a second round started almost immediately as the announcement of the successful applications was made, with many brands seeing their competitors potentially stealing a march with their new dotBrands. Behind the scenes, the ICANN community started working on a comprehensive review of the whole program, from application to launch, spending years debating the detail. In the last few months, the finalisation of that work has been published, opening the door for the second round to begin in Q2 2026.

Whilst that still may seem some way off into the future, many ambitious brands who see how owning their own TLD could create a competitive advantage for them in the online space are already in the feasibility and planning stage for the second round, ensuring they stay one step ahead of the process to be fast and first when the time is right.

Before we can explore the future, it is important that we look at some of the lessons from the past, especially when determining the opportunities that exist today and tomorrow in the Indian market. With web usage predicted to continue to grow in the region, driven by the double-digit growth in mobile internet access, the opportunities for ambitious brands to create a digital advantage and move one step ahead of the competition and the bad actors has never been stronger. However, there are some important considerations when applying for a dotBrand.



Whilst the dotBrand landscape is still in its infancy in India, there is a great opportunity for some of the ambitious, digitally focused brands to create compelling usage scenarios.

The first application round

Organisations began considering an application for a new gTLD once the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) finally agreed to an expansion of the domain name space at their public meeting in Singapore in June 2011. The UK-based tech industry website, The Register (www.theregister.co.uk), suggested that there would be “as many as 500 applications for new TLDs, with a substantial portion being dotBrands”

ICANN insiders predicted that between 100 and 200 brand holders would make an application to join a very exclusive club; one that offered the benefit of owning a slice of the internet, stressing that this would be a “once in a digital lifetime” opportunity to apply to run a Top-Level Domain.

Come June 2012, when the names and numbers were revealed, almost 650 organisations had invested time and resources in making an application to run at least one dotBrand. They came from all four corners of the globe and from every conceivable business sector. A significant number were household names, brand leaders with perceived sizeable marketing budgets. They would be the chosen few who had the genuine opportunity to gain a competitive advantage over rivals that had missed out. Interestingly, the concept of “dotBrand envy” started to raise its head after the applications were revealed, with executives asking why their company hadn’t applied, and offering to write a blank cheque to get in on the act.

DotBrand usage in India

The 2012 new gTLD round was a momentous occasion for the Indian domain industry and brought the hitherto unknown aspects of the DNS into light for a multitude of businesses and brands.

About 1.2% (22) of the total applications came from India, of which 16 were eventually delegated. These included – Airtel, HDFC Bank, Reliance Industries, State Bank of India, and Tata Motors. Some of these organisations, such as Reliance Industries, applied for more than one.

Barring the application for dotOOO, all applications were for dotBrands. Most of the applications were more in-line with the existing domain acquisition strategy and were “defensive” in nature, which explains the relatively low active usage for many to date. A few applicants had a business plan to utilise the brand TLD, but it was mostly made irrelevant by the long assessment period of up to 3-4 years, by which time many of the original stakeholder team members had moved onto new roles or left the organisation.

However, one company that has actively used its dotBrand and is carving a path for others to follow is India’s largest bank and one of the top 50 in the world by total assets, the State Bank of India.

The Bank applied for two dotBrand TLDs in the first application round – dotSBI and dotStateBank. It has been the former TLD that the bank has developed as their core digital asset, with over 110 domain names registered as of the 31st October 2023.



The decision to participate in the new gTLD round was driven from the very top in State Bank of India and that is reflected in the coherent way the TLDs have been applied across Marketing, Customer service, IT and Cybersecurity verticals within the bank.

With over 2.2 million unique visitors every month, the website "onlinesbi.com" was one of the most visited financial services websites in the world. The bank made the decision to fully migrate to their dotBrand, rather than using a web forward meaning that onlinesbi.sbi is now the most visited dotBrand domain name in the world today.

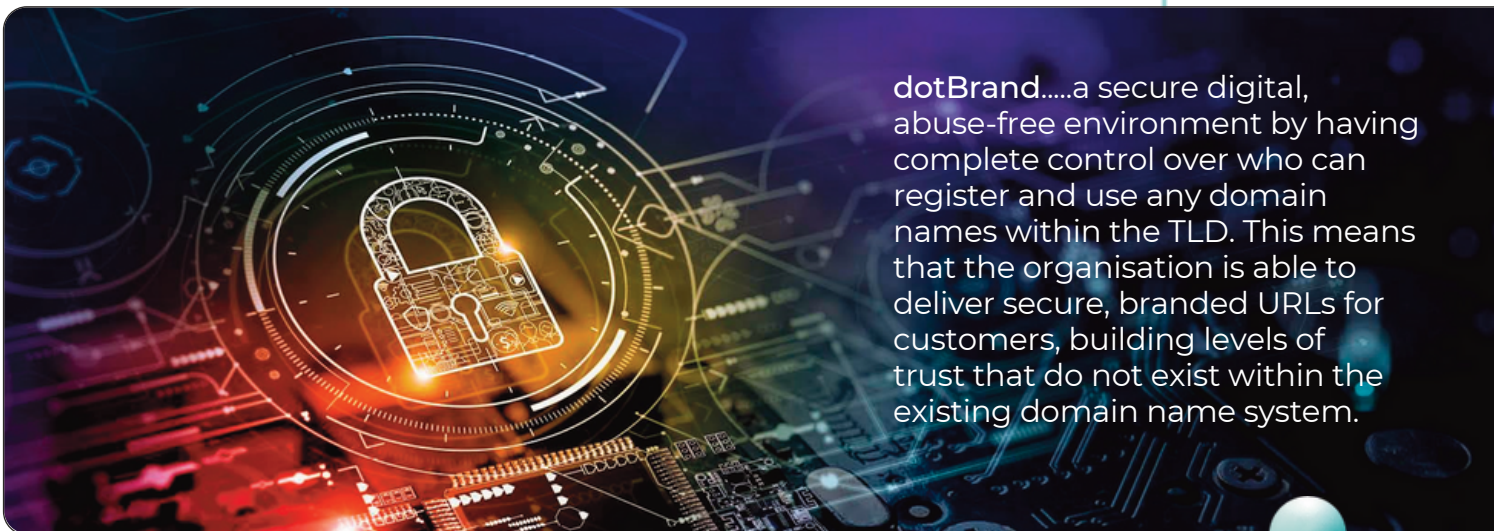
They have also registered, and are actively using a number of other dotBrand domain names, reflecting different product sets and business units including homeloans.sbi, prepaid.sbi and yonobusiness.sbi.

There are two major benefits from using the dotBrand TLD for the bank.

1. By using the dotSBI TLD, clients understand that any communication using the TLD is genuine, making it a key initiative in the fight against online fraud. This in turn improves the year-on-year Cybersecurity rating for the bank because of the increased security that dotSBI offers, due to it being an abuse-free space.
2. The bank is able to create new domains and websites at will, underpinned by their own security credentials, which improves user experiences through simplification of naming conventions and URL structures. This in turn improves natural SEO ranking results.



onlinesbi.sbi



dotBrand.....a secure digital, abuse-free environment by having complete control over who can register and use any domain names within the TLD. This means that the organisation is able to deliver secure, branded URLs for customers, building levels of trust that do not exist within the existing domain name system.

The path to the second application round

With the clock now ticking down on the launch of the second application round, announced by ICANN as commencing in Q2 2026, brand holders that are considering applying for their own dotBrand (or dotBrands) should begin planning to ensure they are ready when the window opens.

The Applicant Guidebook will provide the necessary detail for successful applications when it is published at some point in 2025. However, it is prudent now for organisations in India to be considering whether or not they are going to make an application for a dotBrand. That will require planning both from a financial and operational perspective.

The key to hitting the ground running with a dotBrand application is to ensure that there are defined usage scenarios in place, aligned to wider business goals and metrics, as well as being able to internally justify the return on investment. The decision on whether to apply for a dotBrand should not be made on the perceived success of the first round, although history has taught us that the organisations that have successfully adopted a dotBrand have been those that created a vision, and were prepared to challenge the norms.

There is tremendous potential for the second round of gTLDs in the Indian subcontinent, driven by the following factors:

- Internet penetration has grown in India from 12.6% in 2012 to 48.7% in 2023 which represents 692 million users that access services and make purchases using the internet [1]
- India now boasts of over 100+ startups worth more than \$1billion each, which primarily are internet based and use a domain name as a gateway to their business. [2]
- Technology is elevating every aspect of human life using the internet as the backbone for delivery of services, creating new businesses that understand the importance of domain names and branding. This includes sectors such as EdTech, AgriTech, MedTech, GovTech, FinTech, Deftech, a fact underlined by Union Minister Rajeev Chandrasekhar when he commented that *"The digital economy has gone from 4-4.5% in 2014 of the total GDP to 11% of the total GDP today. And we expect the digital economy to contribute over 20% of our GDP by 2026,"* [3]
- There is a big push from the government to make services available in local languages and Internationalised Domain Names (or IDNs, which are domain names in non-Latin scripts) can help make this a reality online. The lack of existing TLDs in local languages mean there is a great opportunity for organisations to apply for, and operate new IDN TLDs to access the bottom of the pyramid.



Many businesses who either did not apply in the first round or were not successful in acquiring a dotBrand TLD, will use the opportunity presented by Round 2 to claim a piece of the internet for their brand and business, such as Air India, Indigo, Adani, Apollo, Alembic, Asian Paints, and many others.

[1] <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-india>

[2] <https://inc42.com/features/indias-unicorn-club-the-comprehensive-list-of-unicorns-in-india/>

[3] <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/technology/digital-economy-to-contribute-over-20-of-indias-gdp-by-2026-union-minister-rajeev-chandrasekhar/articleshow/102799686.cms>

Reasons to apply for a dotBrand

Most organisations that applied in the first application round went through significant amounts of due diligence before they decided to apply for their dotBrands. Whilst some will have applied to purely support a digital brand protection strategy, many created compelling application and usage reasons which have become more relevant over time.

However, it should be noted that many of these benefits can really only be realised if the dotBrand is actively used. These benefits have included:

- Offering a secure digital, abuse-free environment by having complete control over who can register and use any domain names within the TLD. This means that the organisation is able to deliver secure, branded URLs for customers, building levels of trust that do not exist within the existing domain name system.
- The ability to create a unique, user-friendly naming convention and structure for URLs that not only makes hierarchical sense but delivers key benefits from natural search and SEO purposes.
- The creation of additional, innovative domain security measures that could include encryption and unique identification. With many organisations looking at adopting blockchain technologies, owning a digital asset that could be easily adapted for unique addressing is highly beneficial.
- The opportunity to reduce existing domain name and infrastructure costs (as there will be less need to keep large portfolios of defensive domain names) and reduce some SEO spend.
- Using the dotBrand at the heart of business continuity planning by creating a 'lift and shift' strategy for core and critical domain names.

The opportunity to acquire a dotBrand is coming, and brand holders are assessing the potential benefits for their digital futures. While a dotBrand is not right for every organisation, there is merit applying to register core trademarked terms with the potential to implement innovative use cases. Use cases which, in turn, will provide measures of project success.



With the clock now ticking on the second-round opportunity, it is important for any brand that is considering an application to start the preparation work today.

The next steps

Steps should be taken today to assess the opportunity and understand the requirements of running a dotBrand. There are many considerations, including the choice of TLD, who should be in the stakeholder team, website naming conventions/taxonomy and assessing whether an application will succeed. The importance of undertaking a feasibility study – identifying any potential issues with your desired string – as early as possible can head off significant work, resources, and cost at a later point.

Once the feasibility study has been delivered, organisations will have a very good feel on whether an application is likely to succeed. At this stage many potential applicants will start to engage a wider internal team and develop a business plan for the TLD(s) as part of the Pre-Application phase.

With the second-round application window announced by ICANN to start in 2026, it is likely that the Pre-Application planning work will need to start in late 2024, providing a 12–18-month runway for creating the business plan, building the internal stakeholder team, developing potential use case scenarios, and engaging with relevant third parties, such as a Registry Services Provider to provide the technology platform for the TLD.

Summary

The fast-approaching second ICANN gTLD application period is another compelling moment in the evolution of the domain name industry. It has been over a decade since any organisation was able to apply for a dotBrand, and there has been a growing demand from brand holders across verticals and regions.

Whilst the dotBrand landscape is still in its infancy in India, aside from the strategy being followed by State Bank of India, there is a great opportunity for some of the ambitious, digitally focused brands to create compelling usage scenarios. With the funded start up market growing in value, and the development of technology hubs in regions such as Bengaluru, Chennai and Mumbai driving future growth, we will see more engagement both from applicants and web users in the future. The increase in number of IDNs, reflecting local language usage of the web, will also play a major part in the future success of the dotBrand programme.

Second Round demand is likely to come once again from a core set of industries: financial services; telecommunications and technology; and market segments that demand high levels of brand protection, trust, and innovation.

With the second-round just over two years away, now is the time to begin consideration of the opportunity and planning for an application.

Contact us today to discuss how Com Laude's dotBrand experts will guide you to a brighter digital future.

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