Canadian registrars making money with .mobi

The frontier of the World Wide Web expanded in September with the public launch of a domain geared to viewing on mobile devices. Far from the dot-com gold rush mentality of a decade ago, however, registration is largely happening at a more measured — but still respectable — pace.

“Definitely it was pretty quick uptake,” says Cybelle Negri, co-founder and CEO of Webnames.ca, a Vancouver-based Internet registrar which signed up 5,000 domains for a number of top-level domains including the two-month-old .mobi domain for mobile devices.

With an impressive group of backers including Ericsson, Google, Microsoft and Nokia, the .mobi domain was perhaps born with something of a silver spoon in its mouth. After becoming generally available on September 27, global registration for the domain hit 700,000 within a month.

Negri says that while the .mobi domain still accounts for the majority of Webnames.ca’s business — 75% of total sales last month — .mobi now accounts for 20% of the firm’s domain sales, putting it solidly in second place. By comparison, the .com domain accounted for 45% of domain sales.

To date, Negri says many of the early comers of .mobi domains have been corporations looking to protect their intellectual property in this new frontier, while others have been “domainer” investors who are geeks and build a portfolio of domains that they believe have potential to make the future. One of the latter is Florida’s Rick Schwartz, who paid US$350,000 for the Rumsey.mobi domain at an auction in October. 

Richard Schreier, CEO of Ottawa-based registrar Pool.com, says that while there likely won’t many when .mobi domains that will carry that kind of price tag. “I think it at least demonstrates that these are buyers of inventors who expect the (mobi top-level domain) to be successful in the future.”

Like Negri, Schreier says Pool.com has been doing a brisk trade in .mobi registrations since registration opened. “We had originally more than 10,000 unique backorders for .mobi domains from 50 countries around the world,” he says.

The .mobi domain isn’t without its detractors, however. In May 2005, the non-profit Internet personality Tim Berners-Lee urged the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), the global non-profit agency overseeing the Internet domain registration system, not to approve .mobi domains. An director of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) and acknowledged inventor of the Web, Berners-Lee penned considerable support for his objections that the .mobi domain would lead to further fragmentation and commercialization of the Web — and that registra who support .mobi would cause a result.

It’s an argument Negri has heard before. To the critics, the .mobi domain is “just an simmering pool for the registrants and for ICANN to get some dollars from other people’s pockets,” she says.

Negri acknowledges some of the critiques made by others — namely, that Web browsers can access a .mobi site just as easily — but points out that the .mobi top-level domain also includes a set of standards, including the use of XHTML for site design. “I think an a multi-optimized site will still hold faster on mobile devices, something that’s important in Canada with a large of the all you can see mobile data plan that are so popular in the US, Europe and the Pacific Rim.”

And though it may seem that .mobi, at first letters, might be more cumbersome than a three-letter domain extension to type on the often tiny keyboards of mobile devices, Schreier notes that mobile-device owners can set up to automatically fill the .mobi at the end of a URL on behalf of the user.

“The one really strong factor is the support from the manufacturers of mobile devices who perceive some level of integration with .mobi,” he says. With that support, .mobi’s future may be all but assured. FO