

Frequently Asked Questions

We have limited resources. Why should we devote them to ICANN?

Because you can make a tangible difference. There is a growing consumer movement within ICANN. Within two years, it has succeeded in convincing the ICANN board to open up a slot to a representative from the Internet community. Further, ICANN's main policymaking body, the general names supporting organization (GNSO) is undergoing reform that, no matter what course it takes, will result in more user representation. As venues for consumer voices increase, so their messages will be more frequently heard and acted upon.

What exactly does ICANN do? We seem to get a different answer depending on who's asked.

ICANN's mandate is to oversee the Internet's domain name system, specifically, the assignment of addresses and names. Though that activity may sound circumscribed, policy debates can include some of the most important consumer Internet issues: Privacy, security, free speech, pricing of domain names, ability to reregister expired names. Other compelling issues include international sovereignty, intellectual property, diversity and multicultural concerns, language and culture. Debate continues over ICANN's role as an "enforcer" or "regulator" over issues in its mandate. Some believe the less influence ICANN has over the Internet, the better. Others believe it could do more to enforce its registrar accreditation agreement, or RAA. This contract contains many critical provisions affecting consumers. Part of ICANN's mandate also includes the safety, stability and security of the Internet, which includes responding to malware attacks such as the Conficker worm.

What are the most important consumer issues?

Answers to this question might vary, depending on whom you talk to. In 2009, the introduction of new "top-level domains" (such as .com, .biz, and .net) prompted discussion on intellectual property and copyright issues, as well as concerns about the safety and stability of the DNS, and whether it could absorb potentially hundreds of new domains. Changes to the registrar accreditation agreement, or RAA, also took place, though some of the more consumer-focused members of the ICANN community argued some changes didn't go far enough. The community continues to study WHOIS, the database that underlies all Internet domain registrations with identity information. The state of WHOIS has been debated in the ICANN community to the point of stalemate, with no compromises emerging that all sides can agree on.

The most difficult WHOIS aspect to resolve hinges on privacy – should Internet registration be anonymous, to defend rights of expression who might use it to publicize the actions of an oppressive government? Or does such privacy come at the price of millions of fraudulent registrations used for criminal activity? Consumer organizations themselves are divided on the topic. Law-enforcement organizations and intellectual property attorneys argue for access to data that is accurate and useful for investigating criminal activity and trademark infringement.

Intellectual property also forms the core of a number of issues in the consumer interest, from trademark protection and consumer confusion concerns (particularly important in the marketing and purchasing of pharmaceutical and medical products online). Freedom-of-expression issues also raise some fascinating questions (should the general public be prohibited from creating and purchasing a .hitler domain? Who should own the rights to .god? Or .allah?)

How Does Our Organization Get Involved?

There are a number of ways, though those that will have the most impact require some sort of formal commitment. A consumer organization could join the at-large advisory committee (ALAC), the non-commercial stakeholders group (NCSG), or both. The Consumer Constituency within the generic names supporting organization (GNSO) is another venue. Within these communities, working groups are constantly being formed