

When Your Web Designer Steals Your Domain Name: A Growing Problem Businesses and Non-Profits Need to Understand



Bill Hartzer ✓

SEO & Domain Name Consultant, Website Marketing & Domain Name Expert Witness



May 8, 2026

A non-profit organization is currently fighting to recover its stolen domain names after their web designer allegedly took control of the domains.

Unfortunately, this situation is far more common than most business owners, non-profits, and organizations realize.

Over the years, I've seen countless cases where a company hires a web designer, web developer, SEO agency, or marketing consultant to help build or manage their online presence. In the process, the third party registers the domain names on behalf of the organization. The problem is that the domains are often registered under the web designer's name, email address, or registrar account instead of the actual business or non-profit.

At first, this may not seem like a problem. The website gets built. Email works. Everything appears normal.

But when the relationship breaks down, the organization suddenly discovers they do not actually control their own domain names.

That's when the real problems begin.

The domain may be held hostage over unpaid invoices. The web designer may refuse to transfer ownership. The domain could be pointed elsewhere, taken offline, or even transferred to another registrar entirely. In some cases, businesses lose access to their email accounts, website, customer inquiries, donor communications, and years of brand equity overnight.

For a non-profit organization, the damage can be especially severe. Donations may stop. Volunteers cannot communicate. Public trust suffers. Search engine rankings disappear. Years of work can vanish because someone else controlled the digital assets.

Why Domain Ownership Matters

Your domain name is one of the most valuable digital assets your organization owns.

It is not just a website address. Your domain controls:

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- Your website
- Your business email
- Your DNS records
- Third-party platform integrations
- Online reputation
- Search engine visibility
- Customer and donor trust

If someone else controls the domain registration, they effectively control your online identity.

That is why businesses and organizations should always maintain direct ownership and control of their domain names.

You Do Not Need to Give Your Web Designer Access to Your Registrar Account

One of the biggest misconceptions in the industry is that web designers, developers, or SEO providers need full access to the registrar account where the domain name is managed.

In most cases, they do not.

Modern hosting environments and DNS providers allow technical access without surrendering ownership of the domain itself.

For example:

- A web developer may only need access to DNS settings
- A hosting provider may only need nameserver changes
- An SEO consultant typically does not need registrar access at all
- Email configuration can usually be handled through DNS management only

There is rarely a legitimate reason for a third party to own the domain registration itself.

Even if technical access is temporarily required, organizations should maintain primary control over:

- The registrar account
- The account email address
- Multi-factor authentication (MFA)
- Recovery phone numbers
- Administrative contact information

The organization—not the vendor—should always be listed as the registrant.

registrant.

Best Practices for Protecting Your Domain Names

Businesses and non-profits can dramatically reduce their risk by following a few important security and ownership practices.

Register Domains Yourself

Always register your own domain names using an account owned by the business or organization. Use an email address tied to the organization's primary domain or business operations rather than a personal email account.

Use a Secure Registrar

Choose a reputable registrar that offers:

- Multi-factor authentication
- Registrar lock
- Registry lock options
- Account activity notifications
- Strong account recovery procedures

Limit Third-Party Access

Avoid sharing the primary registrar login credentials.

If technical support is needed, grant only the minimum access necessary for the work being performed.

Maintain Updated WHOIS Information

Ensure the registrant, administrative, and technical contact information reflects the organization and not a contractor or outside vendor.

Enable Auto-Renewal

Many domain disputes begin after a domain accidentally expires. Always enable auto-renewal and maintain valid payment information.

Keep Documentation

Maintain records showing:

- Domain purchase receipts
- Business ownership
- Trademark rights
- Website usage history
- Vendor agreements

These records become critically important if a dispute arises.

Recovering a Stolen Domain Name

Recovering a stolen or improperly controlled domain name is rarely simple.

In some cases, legal action may be required. Other cases involve filing a UDRP (Uniform Domain-Name Dispute-Resolution Policy) complaint through an ICANN-approved dispute provider.

A UDRP proceeding can help recover a domain name when bad faith registration or use can be demonstrated, but filing fees and legal costs can become expensive very quickly. For non-profits and small businesses, those costs can create a significant burden.

That is exactly what this non-profit organization is facing right now.

We are helping raise funds to assist with the costs associated with recovering their domain names and restoring control of their online presence.

Every Like, Share, and Donation helps raise awareness about a problem that affects businesses and organizations far too often.

Support the fundraiser here: <https://www.gofundme.com/f/support-make-a-home>

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Bill Hartzler

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