Comprehensive guide to exact match domains in 2020

Exact match domains (EMDs) are domain names that incorporate the exact keywords that you are trying to rank for in Google's SERPs.

Examples of exact match domains include:

- carinsurance.com
- buygroceries.com
- dogfood.com

In some industries, people will call their company's name after the product that they offer, for example, Window Cleaners London.

But in the competitive world of SEO, EMDs are commonly bought by webmasters to gain a quick advantage when it comes to ranking on search engines.

Other studies have shown that having an EMD can help clicks with PPC, given that it targets a particular search enquiry.

The history of exact match domains

Looking back at the evolution of SEO over the past 20 years, having an exact match domain was originally a sure-fire way to rank top of Google.

Even dating back 10 years ago, many SEO practitioners benefitted from just buying an exact match domain, adding a bit of content and getting links from directories and this was enough to secure a page one position.

A new market emerged from domain-name selling. Many entrepreneurs were eager to get their hands on a valuable

domain name, whilst thrifty businesspeople held onto domain names hoping to ‘flip’ them at a higher price.

This market continues today, with companies like GoDaddy and 123 Reg offering a marketplace for buying and selling domains, amongst other products.

But webmasters holding onto domains for their potential value has seen the most promising businesses never seen to be made, with websites such as cars.com, food.com, loans.com offering affiliate sites but not transpiring into major brands.

With long-winded exact match domains starting to rank such as buybluejeans.com and carinsurancequotesonline.com – Google responded with an EMD update in 2012 to penalize and filter these out.

Is using exact match domains a problem in 2020?

Not necessarily, there is a place for EMDs in 2020 and the right level of SEO can make it successful.

You do not get penalized just for having an EMD and in some cases, you will get a boost.

However, for the larger part, using exact match domains is going to be like walking on thin ice and could make you very prone to Google penalties.

For instance, creating new landing pages becomes an issue and you risk the possibility of keyword stuffing or over-optimization.

Your homepage should be the welcome page for your website and you should have nicely optimized landing pages coming off it and this where a lot of your SEO traffic will go to. The issue is that if your homepage is homeinsurance.com, using the right

words for landing pages becomes tricky. Would you realistically create a page homeinsurance.com/home-insurance and would Google rank this?

When your homepage is likely to have more links pointing to it initially, there will be difficulty in ranking for other landing pages for that exact match keyword.

However, it is link-building that really becomes tricky.

Whatever anchor text you use, you risk the chance of using too much exact match anchor text – and this is a simple way to get a penalty. There are ways around this, such as using a wide range of anchor text, but finding the balance is tricky and it only takes one link of yours to be shared numerous times to make it look like you are running an exact match anchor text campaign.

The role of partial match domain names

Partial match domain names are a combination of the main keyword you are trying to target and something that is not related. A number of successful brands have used other words with the main keyword such as “hut”, “hub”, “network”, “market”, and so on.

Some examples of partial match domain names:

- suitsdirect.co.uk
- booksetc.co.uk
- brownsfashion.com
- sunglasseshut.com

These brands only use half the target keyword, service or object, such as “sunglasses” or “fashion”.

This approach means that natural landing pages can be created

without the risk of keyword stuffing and there is no risk of anchor text causing penalties when the brand name is linked.

Another partial match option is that you take a different word, which is more of an adjective or selling point.

A good example is a price comparison site, Forces Compare, which benefits from having ‘compare’ in its domain, and therefore gets a boost for every product it compares across cards, accounts, loans, and more.

There is also the business provider, Funding Invoice, which benefits from having the word “invoice” in its domain.

Some smart uses of partial matches could involve using words such as “free”, “cheap”, and “best” or locations such as “London” and “California”.

Using the right words by association

If you want to generate brand value, but do not want to risk the chance of a Google penalty, you can use a domain that has an association. You do not gain any immediate benefits from Google, but it will certainly look good from a user’s perspective and gaining a good click-through rate (CTR) will notably benefit your rankings.

This includes the infamous doorbell company, Ring.com, the dog food provider, Paws.com and the dating site, Match.com.

Are some industries better than others for using exact match domains?

Yes, we have to accept that Google treats some sectors very

differently and when it comes to very competitive industries such as fashion, insurance and finance, they do not want to give anyone a quick advantage just because they own an EMD.

The best approach is to look at each industry and the SERPs that you are targeting. For some industries such as loans and insurance, there are very few (if any) in the UK search results, where “loans” and “insurance” are mentioned in the domain and they are positioned on page one.

However, if you look at the key term “casino bonuses”, around seven to eight sites on page one have the word “casino” in their domain name – highlighting the importance of researching each industry.

For industries where there is less competition and fewer penalties handed out (and this is particularly in local listings), there is only going to be a handful of people searching for “good plumbers in Orange County” or “pizza places in Brooklyn”– you are more likely to be successful using an exact match domain.

Is it too late to change my exact match domain?

No, if you have started with an EMD and have struggled to get it to rank or have been subject to penalties, you can look at changing the domain and you will still hold a lot of the good SEO you have built up.

Doing a 301 redirect to the new domain will hold 90% to 95% of the SEO value and also have a very quick turnaround time, providing that you have good content and UX to back it up.

A recent rebrand of the company Bridging Loan Hub to Octagon Capital showed that the rankings were restored within two weeks and continued to grow back to their original positions, and higher.



Conclusion: Do your research and focus on the brand

Exact match domains (EMDs) still have a role to play in successful SEO and this includes some target industries and local searches.

One has to be careful if they have a large SEO strategy depending on optimizing an exact match domain since this could see initial growth but also be high-risk in the penalty department.

The best advice is to research the industry and see who is ranking on pages one and two of Google. Do they use exact match, partial match or neither?

Either way, Google does not want SEO to be easy and they want it to be earned through other factors such as good design, UX, content, and link-building.

Every time, the most effective and risk-free approach will be to create a keyword-free brand name and build an online brand using good, clean SEO. This should be complemented with other traffic sources such as direct, email, referral and social media to see the maximum effect.

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More about:

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