
ICANN85 Mumbai | CF – 2026 Round: 2026 Round .Brand Applicant Journey with Q and A
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KRISTY BUCKLEY

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JARED ERWIN

Thanks, Kristy. Hi everyone. This is Jared Erwin. Welcome. Thanks for joining us for this 2026 round on .brand applicants and their journey in the application process. I think we can go to the next slide. There we go.

Also, this is probably the tenth time I have introduced myself this week already, but for clarity, my name is Jared Erwin. I am a senior director on the program and was working with Lars, who is next to me, and several others on developing the applicant guidebook and getting that published and ready along with the Implementation Review Team. Now I am working to help operationalize the program. I have several folks from my team here today from ICANN that will hopefully help us walk through the presentation and any questions you might have. Grant specifically will also be helping present today.

You will also see these introductory slides several times over the course of the week for our 2026 round sessions. It is important to note that in terms of the content you see today in the slides, while we have tried to ensure it is as accurate as possible, the authoritative information is found in the 2026 round applicant guidebook, which is published on the New gTLD Program website. In case there happens to be any discrepancy between what you see here on the screen and the applicant guidebook, the applicant guidebook prevails.

Thank you. Again, you will have seen this slide already and we will see it again, but we have already conducted other webinars on the 2026 round, and those are available to listen to and to read through those presentations on the 2026 round website, the New gTLD Program website. Next slide, please.

Here you see the lay of the land for the week in terms of what presentations we are giving. Tomorrow we have one with the TAMS demo, the TLD Application Management System demo, as well as geographic names, and then Wednesday, community applicant journey, and a wrap-up on Thursday. Thank you, Renata.

Here is the agenda for today. We are going to talk about .brands and their journey in the application, the New gTLD Program, and the application processes. We will cover what a brand application is, how it qualifies as such, and all the different preparations and evaluations they will need to go through as they go through the process, and other resources and support available for potential applicants.

The session objective today: by the end of the session, we are hopeful that you will be able to better understand the requirements for applying for a .brand gTLD and that you are able to identify and prepare responses to application questions specific to .brand gTLDs. Just a short overview. That is okay, Renata. Go ahead, please. Thank you.

Just to set the context a little bit, in terms of other types of applications, this is a specialized type, the .brand type. You can see

examples of other types: community, geographic, reserved names, variants, and IDNs. This presentation is specific to .brands and the specialized requirements for those. Now I will turn it to Grant to walk us through the first part of the .brand journey. Grant?

GRANT NAKATA

Thanks, Jared, and thanks everyone. Grant Nakata here supporting the implementation of the 2026 round. I am happy to describe a little bit of the journey for a .brand applicant and what they can expect. Before I go into the next slide, it may be useful to look back into the 2012 round. If people recall, we did not actually finalize Specification 13 from the 2012 round until 2014. A benefit going into the 2026 round is that now that we have considered it and it is in front of the community, an applicant can articulate that desire and request upfront within its application. Next slide, please. Thank you.

As the name suggests and why you are all here, we are referring to brand TLDs that want to apply for their company name or brand to be used as that .TLD. For reference and good housekeeping, the definition of a brand TLD is specifically stated in Specification 13, Section 9.3. Keep that as a reference in review and as a complement to the applicant guidebook that we will walk through a little bit more. We are expecting those that want to operate those company names as that .TLD, but the definition itself expects that those potential TLDs are identical to the textual elements of a

registered trademark. That should be clear enough. Next slide, please.

We are not expecting a brand applicant to register names to the general public. These are more enclosed spaces where only the registered operator, affiliate, and trademark licensees are the registrants in that space, so the operator is in control of that space. One thing to note is the benefit with the brand application and Specification 13 is that it comes with a Code of Conduct exemption. A key point to highlight here is when you are applying for Specification 13 within your application, there is no need to also request a Code of Conduct exemption. The expectation is that you are using this trademark, which is the same as what you are applying for in terms of that string, in the ordinary course of business. As described in the next slides, it is also recorded with the Trademark Clearinghouse. Next slide, Renata.

A big highlight here and helpful to know is that you will need to start taking some steps to ensure that the trademarks are in fact issued and recorded with the Trademark Clearinghouse so you can obtain a signed mark data file, which is essentially the secure encrypted token issued from the Trademark Clearinghouse. That is something that, upon submission of the application, will be requested and required. Next slide, Renata.

A few key points with the TMCH: as you are preparing for the submission, the SMD is going to lay out many of the key criteria of the trademark itself. Keep in mind, especially as you are applying

for the string and potentially any variants, that the actual label is clearly defined and the same as what you are requesting in your application. Other areas: a trademark holder needs to be either the registered operator or an affiliate. The trademark needs to be issued prior to the filing of your application, and it is going to list the same goods and services reflected from your trademark. I should pause because I feel like there is a lot, much of which is the same that you would see today in Specification 13. Any questions thus far?

JARED ERWIN

Is the next slide... Okay. Thanks, Grant. That was more about the pre-submission things to think about as you are preparing to apply as a .brand TLD. Once the application submission period opens and you are starting to work on your application, this is what will happen. An applicant for a .brand TLD will be asked specialized questions or additional questions regarding their application for a .brand TLD, specifically regarding its brand trademark. These questions are in the applicant guidebook in question set 13. Be sure to look at those as you are preparing to apply.

An applicant must also be prepared to confirm that it is not planning to operate their .brand TLD as a generic string. It cannot be an exclusive use TLD. This is defined in Specification 11 of the base RA in Section 3d, what a generic string is. An applicant will have to attest to that in their application, that they have a brand for the string and they are not intending to operate as a generic string.

Other unique documents required for a .brand applicant: they must have an accurate and complete copy of the trademark registration and a signed mark data file, SMD file. Yes, Mark, please go ahead.

MARK TRACHTENBERG

Mark Trachtenberg for the record. There are some questions that I think are not directed at .brand applicants but are relevant for .brands, which may cause some confusion as to what the answer should be for those intending to apply for a .brand. This was submitted to ICANN before, but I will ask it again in this session since I think it is relevant. One of them is question 164, which asks, "Will people see a domain name as more trustworthy because it is registered in your TLD?" I think the answer could reasonably be yes if you are applying for a .brand. However, the problem is if the answer to that question is yes, then the applicant guidebook says that you have to put in place safeguards one through three. This creates additional obligations potentially on a .brand, which I do not think were intended or contemplated. I think this was an unintended consequence. Question 165 is similar. It says, "Is it likely that consumers will face significant risks if domain names in the TLDs in the application are abused?" These are two examples. There may be more in the applicant guidebook, but if some thought could be given to these two questions in particular and clarified that maybe these do not apply for a .brand, or at least provide some guidance on how a .brand applicant should answer these questions, that would be helpful.

JARED ERWIN

Thanks, Mark. I recall that question coming up in a few different ways. I am not sure off the top of my head how answers were sent or who received those answers. Our general response to this question is that we understand that potential confusion, and these questions you are referring to do relate to safeguard commitments. A positive response to that question does not necessarily mean that an applicant has to include those safeguard commitments in their RA. It is simply a signal to ICANN or for the panel to review, but it does not necessarily indicate that they are binding themselves to including them in their RA. You are picking up on something that is not clear, so we need to perhaps think about an FAQ or something to ensure that is clear for applicants. I want to emphasize that saying yes to that does not mean any applicant, not just brands, will automatically have safeguard commitments in their RA. It is simply a signal to ICANN and the panel to review that. I hope that makes sense.

MARK TRACHTENBERG

I think some clarification from ICANN officially would be helpful because it seems in the applicant guidebook, the obligation is pretty clear that it must be considered as part of safeguards one through three. Any clarity there would be appreciated.

JARED ERWIN

Okay. Thanks, Mark. I see, Karen, your comment in the chat about awaiting a response from global support. We will take a look at that as well. Thank you. Here is more just an FYI that .brand applicants do not receive any kind of special status in terms of prioritization in the application processing. This is referring to the prioritization draw and application prioritization, which has to do with the processing of applications, not to be confused with any kind of contention set priority for community priority evaluation. This is in reference to the order in which applications will be processed. They do not receive any kind of prioritization via that draw, and participation in the draw is optional for all applicants.

Moving into contention. From SubPro policy, there was a special recommendation or provision that .brand applicants be given an opportunity to change their string to get out of contention. That has been implemented in the applicant guidebook. You can see the section there. If an application for a .brand TLD is in contention with another string for the same applied-for string, that applicant does have the opportunity to request a string change to its applied-for string in order to avoid that contention. There are a few stipulations and requirements described in the AGB, but that change must add one or more words to the applied-for string that appear in the description of goods and services of the applicant's trademark registration or equivalent document. That new string must not create or expand a contention set. It should alleviate that contention; it should not create a new kind of contention with a different string.

Additionally, as part of changing that string, it is a new name, a new string. There may be reevaluations and string evaluations that are required, and there may be fees associated with that string change that the applicant should be aware of. We plan to provide more info on that as it becomes available. I also want to point out that sometimes there is confusion about this string change request and the replacement string. These are separate concepts. The brand string change request is not related to the replacement string, so the .brand TLD may have a separate replacement string at its discretion. That does not have anything to do with a string change request that may come later after contention is revealed. Speaking of which, a string change request would not be considered before the applicant has been successfully evaluated as qualifying for a .brand designation, which makes sense. You have to be shown to be a .brand before you can qualify for a .brand string change request. Those string changes could be submitted up to thirty days following the formation of contention sets after string similarity evaluation or the publication of the string confusion objection panel determination or an appellate panel determination involving the application subject to the .brand string change request. I am noting Maxim's comment there. If we do not have something already about that, I think that is a good addition. Thank you, Maxim. We will take a note of that.

Here you can see a little bit more about the .brand TLD eligibility evaluation. How is it confirmed that a .brand application is indeed a .brand? The evaluation is to confirm that it meets the criteria for

that designation. It is a conditional evaluation in the sense that not every applicant goes through this. It is only for the .brand TLD application, but it is required of all .brand TLD applications. They must go through this in order to qualify as a .brand. Some evaluations, per SubPro policy and as described in the AGB, are eligible for either extended evaluation or a challenge. This particular evaluation is not eligible for either, mainly because ICANN plans to work with the applicant on any issues that come up in the course of the evaluation, including via clarifying questions, where the applicant will have the opportunity to address any concerns regarding meeting any of the criteria for the .brand TLD designation. Grant already covered the scope of the evaluation, so I do not think I will repeat that. You can see the requirements that must be met, also relating to Specification 13 of the RA. An applicant designating itself as a .brand will trigger this evaluation. The outcomes: the applied-for string would qualify for .brand TLD designation and would have a Specification 13 added to the RA. On the other side, if it does not qualify for whatever reason, then the applicant can proceed as a non-.brand TLD or may choose to withdraw their application. This evaluation occurs during the application evaluation portion of the program, and those results would be released as part of that. I see, Mark, you have your hand up. Please.

MARK TRACHTENBERG

Just a quick question. Is this intended to be a screenshot from TAMS, or is this just a stylistic choice? Okay.

JARED ERWIN

Stylistic. Please send any feedback privately to avoid hurting any feelings. No, thank you. It is not TAMS. Next slide, please. In terms of contracting, an application qualifying as a .brand TLD would have a Specification 13 added to their registry agreement. That would be executed through the contracting process, which is described in the applicant guidebook as well. That is really all we have. The rest is high-level resources that we will show in all presentations. We have a few specific links that might be of use. As I mentioned before, the questions are in question set 13 of Appendix 1, where all the application questions appear. The relevant section in the AGB is 7.3. The brand string change is discussed in the contention resolution portion of the AGB in Module 5. Then, of course, the contracting section. We do have a wealth of material on the New gTLD Program website, including FAQs and topic overviews. There is a .brand topic overview that you may wish to peruse. I will plug Global Support; that is the best avenue for sending in questions to ICANN. If you do have questions after this presentation, please send them there. Any questions in the room? I see some hands. Mohit.

MOHIT

Hi. Mohit here from [inaudible] My question is in TAMS. We have two primary users and five additional users. The five additional users do

not have the ability to submit; they can only draft responses. From what I understand on TAMS, these five users can see responses to all the questions, correct? Can we have a functionality wherein the primary users can allocate certain questions to additional users because these are sensitive responses? You do not want everyone to see responses, for example, the financial statements. Can we have a functionality wherein the primary users can assign that this additional user can only see question set 18 and 19?

JUSTIN HO

Thanks. This is Justin. Thanks for the suggestion, but right now we are focused on the launch, and part of that is getting through a lot of internal testing, security testing, and other types of testing that I am not as familiar with as some of our other colleagues. My response is that is not something we are prepared to do. That would be something that, on your end, you would have to manage on your side. But we appreciate the suggestion.

JARED ERWIN

Thanks, Justin. Mohit, do you mind closing your mic? Thank you. Karen, please.

KAREN DAY

Thank you. This is Karen Day for the record. With regard to a brand applicant that is a standard profile, not a publicly traded company, part of the standard profile submissions are the worst case and best case financial scenarios. A brand is not going to be selling

TLDs, so their income is going to be zero across the board. We have had a lot of questions from potential applicants about that. The best case and the worst case are going to look the same. Their costs are fixed. There is going to be no income. Could you do an FAQ about what guidance you would offer a brand to do that? In terms of the evaluation, is there going to be recognition that the brand model is not to sell this, but these best and worst case scenarios are set up for an open TLD?

JARED ERWIN

Thanks, Karen. I think an FAQ is a great idea. I do not know if the team has any specific responses to how that might be handled, but it is a great idea to provide that guidance because your comment is fully understood. I think Elaine's comment as well makes sense. Thanks. I see a question about the RA. I do have a colleague in the room who could probably answer that. I think I know the answer, and she can correct me if I am wrong. The question in the chat is about the status of the finalization of the registry agreement for the 2026 round. The Board is planning to consider that at its meeting on Thursday. We should have more news in a couple of days.

KARLA HAKANSSON

Exactly right. I am going to put a link to the base RA webpage that was just updated a few days ago with the latest versions following the second public comment. You can find it there, and this is what the Board is going to be reviewing this week.

JARED ERWIN

Thanks, Karla. Any other questions? I do not want to preempt anyone, but if not, we can let folks go a little early. Mohit, do you have another question? Go ahead.

MOHIT

This is question 215. The question is: "With the exception of employee agreements, provide all material outsource contracts, LOIs, proposals." In 2012, there was this documentation of a fund sanction letter wherein the company says that they are willing to fund all the operating costs. When you talk about the LOI here, is it similar to the fund sanction letter wherein the company states that they have all the funds secured for financing all the operating costs?

GRANT NAKATA

In this case, what this is referring to is more so alluding to your back-end service providers or other contracts required for operations. There is a separate requirement regarding self-certifications of funding to ensure long-term sustainability, but it is different than this question 215.

JARED ERWIN

Also, I do not know if your question is about COIs, which was a requirement from the last round, but that is not a requirement for this round.

MOHIT

Yes, I just wanted to understand. On the contracts part, some companies might have reservations regarding disclosing their private contracts. How would you resolve that if the brand is not comfortable sharing their private contracts? They can tell you their proposals and LOIs. Would that suffice if we cannot submit contracts?

JARED ERWIN

I think we have had a similar question. We will need to take a look at that, and we can get back to you with a more thorough answer. Your question is understood. Thank you. Oh, a hand. Atsushi.

ATSUSHI ENDO

Thank you very much. Atsushi Endo for the record. Could you go back to the slide about .brand eligibility qualification? The note says brand applicants do not need to apply separately for Code of Conduct exemption. I have a question about question 188 of the application that says confirm then specify why the application of the Code of Conduct to the applied-for string is not necessary to protect public interest. We asked Global Support if this question needs to be answered or not if an applicant chooses .brand, but we still do not have a concrete answer. I would like to ask this. Thank you.

GRANT NAKATA

Atsushi, which question did you say again? 188? I see. This note specifically was intended to articulate that if you are applying as a brand TLD, there is a set of brand questions. If you are doing that, then the Code of Conduct questions will not be applicable because it will come through a brand Specification 13. If you do not end up qualifying as a brand TLD, this could be an avenue to provide a change request and then submit responses to these questions. However, the system itself, if you are applying as a brand, will not make this section applicable. Does that answer your question?

ATSUSHI ENDO

I think so. Could you put it on an FAQ or related information for confirmation?

GRANT NAKATA

Of course.

JARED ERWIN

And we will also check on your question to Global Support. You mentioned you have an open question with them, right? Okay. We will see about that. There was a question in the chat which was a suggestion for possible discussion. It is an interesting question regarding enthusiasm for brand TLDs. Any other questions about this presentation or qualifying as a .brand TLD? Okay. Thank you all. Appreciate your time. With all of our sessions this week, we encourage you to take the survey to give us any feedback about our presentation today. Thanks again. Have a great rest of your day.

JUSTIN HO

I was just going to plug tomorrow at 13:15 UTC, the TAMS demo session. Some of the stuff we talked about starting Sunday and today, you will get to see some narrated videos. Eduardo and I will be guiding that session. Hope to see you all there.

JARED ERWIN

Thank you. We can end the recording.

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