



# Watching the web



BP employs more than 100,000 people across 100 countries, throughout six continents. With such an enormous global presence, monitoring BP's reputation on the Internet is quite a task, as **Mike Keogh**, a senior trademark officer with BP, explains to Vicky Bamforth

A search of 'BP' on Google.com throws up an astonishing 11,600,000 websites. A search of 'British Petroleum' yields a slightly more manageable, but no less daunting, 523,000 websites. Any one of these could contain images or wording detrimental to BP, as Mike Keogh, BP's senior trademark officer, knows. Mike works in BP's trademarks group at the company's London offices. His job is divided between taking responsibility for BP's corporate trademarks, including the well-known Helios logo and the BP letters, and managing BP's presence on the Internet.

Mike arrived at BP, seven years ago, after completing a law degree. 'I was fresh from college,' he recalls, 'and Robin Hadfield, BP's former head of trademarks, asked me to look into domain names. I didn't even know what they were! It was like being thrown into the deep end, but luckily it was right at the beginning, in the 'Wild West' days of the Internet, when no one knew what the future would hold, so I ran with it.'

Now BP has 2,000 domain names registered, about half of which are generics (ie .com/.net/.org) and the other half of which are country codes. 'Our policy is to register BP in every country that we can,' explains Mike.

As the Internet took off, and the number of BP's domain name registrations started to build up, Mike began getting up to 30 registration requests each day. Now he looks after the legal side of the Internet, while another BP employee, Cavan Quek, who works in the US (for the Digital Business team), administers the registrations. 'Like most other multinational companies, in the beginning we didn't know which BP domain names were registered or by whom, and we had to rely on WHOIS data to find out,' admits Mike. 'There was a lot of uncertainty in those days! Now we have better policies in place, an extensive database listing all we need to know, and a generic e-mail address, which registration and renewal notices are sent to.'

## BP's calling card

BP's main site, www.BP.com was set up in the early 1990s, when the company wisely secured the name www.BP.com and a few other main brand names. 'www.BP.com is one of the company's most valuable assets,' says Mike, with an evident sense of pride. 'It is our calling card, our public face. If we were to lose that domain name, there would be serious repercussions. If it got into the wrong hands, I'm sure we would be asked at least a six-figure sum to buy it back. Looking after the legal side of www.BP.com is quite a big responsibility.'

Watching over www.BP.com is not just a question of making sure the domain name is registered. In 1999, BP had to deal with one of the first cases of cyber picketing. 'The issue of copyright in the homepage arose, and it was at that point that we had to find out who had developed the website. It focused our minds,' admits Mike.

Now, when the site is updated, the IT department sends it to Mike for a



general legal review, which includes looking at copyright issues, legal notices and use of pictures. 'We work very closely with the IT department. We've learned by our mistakes.'

### Racing to register

Looking after BP's name on the Internet is more complex. The 'Wild West' days are definitely over, but there's still a lot to deal with. 'Five years ago, when cyber squatting was at its height, there used to be 20 speculative domain registrations a month, but now we might get one or two. We never pay ransoms to cyber squatters, and we stick to that policy strictly,' Mike says firmly. 'We go to ICANN, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers. We've had to do it three times, and on each

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occasion, we've submitted a really strong, water-tight case, which the other party hasn't even answered, let alone contested. Cyber squatting is dying, there was big money to be made from it once, but not any more. That doesn't stop them trying though and we still have to be very careful. For example, any speculation of a merger or take-over in the media will send cyber squatters racing to register the likely company names. We can't register every variant, but we do register the main ones and monitor the others, and in the unlikely event that they're used in a way that damages our interests, we take action.'

'If we want to obtain a domain that has already been legitimately registered by a third party, then we would consider purchasing the name. However we would normally approach them via a third party

or a hotmail account than do it directly – a bit of cloak and dagger work!'

'How much we spend depends on how important the name is to the department in question, how much they have in their budget, and how far they are down the track with the brand's development,' says Mike. 'Obviously we wish to avoid a situation where a new brand has been developed but the appropriate domain names have not been secured. It is very important for the marketing and trademark departments to communicate fully. Ideally, marketers should involve us early on. If BP is launching a high-profile brand, then it is important we secure the .com version of the name, because that's what everyone looks up. If what they

find is a porn site or a competitor, it could be very embarrassing.'

### A 24-hour watch

Oil companies have come in for heavy criticism about their work around the world, so how does BP deal with this criticism on the web? 'We monitor what is being written, but we do bear in mind that many activists are simply hoping for a reaction from us. Obviously, there is a line at which we would take a stand, but I can't think of a single occasion where we've had to.'

BP monitors the Internet using image-recognition software. It searches for websites where the BP brand is misrepresented, for BP dealers who misapply BP's visual standards and for websites that have stolen BP's logo. 'It's amazing what we find.'



Mike hands over some low quality copies of the Helios, discovered on a Polish website selling alcohol.

'After we found it, the site disappeared overnight. Perhaps they saw a lot of BP IP addresses looking at them! When I find something like this, it often opens doors to larger trademark infringement issues.'

'One of our recent problems has been potentially infringing articles for sale on eBay.' From his pile, Mike pulls out a printout of an eBay auction. 'I found this today. It's BP signage, six foot by six foot, and it's too big for a collector's lounge. If it appeared on a garage forecourt, it could be very damaging for BP.'

'Once I discovered a decommissioned BP tanker for auction on eBay. It's not what we want to see careering down the road. It could end up overseas, delivering fuel. I log onto eBay every day, looking for things that could cause us commercial harm.'

Fortunately eBay's system to protect IP owners, called the Verified Rights Owner (VeRO) program, is designed to help trademark owners. If a rights' owner spots a potential infringement, eBay will stop the auction, and hand over the seller's registration details and addresses to the rights' owner.

So what challenges does Mike see in the future? 'It's impossible to say what's round the corner. That's part of the problem,' admits Mike. 'It's an industry that changes very swiftly. Cybersquatters and scammers act quickly to take advantage. Every three months I join a forum with opposite numbers from other companies. We discuss the problems that each of us has experienced recently and I find that really helpful. It's protected BP from scams I wouldn't have known about it, were I working alone.'

'Keeping one step ahead is important. I was lucky to start at the beginning, and I've been able to move with it. Coming in cold would be very difficult now.'