Case study | MarkMonitor

Helping Ministry Brands gather its domain flock

Helping a faith-based digital enterprise gain control over a vast domain portfolio

Ministry Brands LLC is a family of software companies dedicated to empowering churches and faith-based organizations in a digital world. Founded in 2012, the company serves more than 115,000 churches and organizations nationwide with a range of solutions, including website services.

Senior Systems Engineer Wesley Kirkland and Systems Engineer Jon Knight manage a portfolio of more than 1,300 domain names. When Kirkland joined the company in 2017, there were more than 75 accounts spread across multiple registrars, making managing the portfolio a major challenge.

"It was really unruly. We were losing track of domains, letting them expire," Kirkland recalls. "If we had to make a change to a domain, we often didn't know which registrar had the account. We were in a bad place."

Recognizing that they needed help, Kirkland and Knight researched well-known websites to see who their domain registrar was, ultimately focusing on the Alexa Top 10 sites. "We discovered that seven of the Alexa Top 10 were held by MarkMonitor. I figured we needed to talk to them." Soon, Ministry Brands transferred its domain portfolio to MarkMonitor, consolidating with a single, trusted registrar.

Single source of truth

A key factor in the decision was MarkMonitor's technical leadership and extensible application programming interfaces (APIs). These allow tight integration between MarkMonitor and Ministry Brands' systems.

"We use MarkMonitor as our single source of truth and domain database," Kirkland explains, noting that MarkMonitor provides a central endpoint that disseminates data to Ministry Brands' systems for managing DNS, SSL certificates, and other assets. "If the data is in MarkMonitor, it's accessible via an API."

The Ministry Brands team now has easy access to domain information. "If someone wants a report on all of their domains, it's as simple as logging into the portal and all the information is right there." Knight says.

Automated activity tracking

Ministry Brands also has high praise for MarkMonitor's automatic audit trail, providing a comprehensive activity history and associated documents – essential security insight.

"The case log is super awesome. It provides accurate information on who touched what, what happened and why it happened. Having that information is invaluable," Kirkland explains. "When something breaks, we don't have to guess who had access. MarkMonitor gives us actionable data that's very granular. If someone spun up a site we can track them and see that they did not abide by our registration policies and take appropriate action."

75+

accounts across multiple registrars by 2017 made portfolio management a challenge

Having easy access to this information has enabled the Ministry Brands domain team to enforce corporate policies for registering domains, while supporting autonomy of individual business units. "We wanted to have central control while giving the business units freedom," Knight says. "Eventually, we'd like to automate the process to allow the businesses to do it themselves to continue to have that oversight."

Billing made easy

MarkMonitor APIs also provide the ability to automate and streamline billing for Ministry Brands, where individual business units are responsible for their own budget.

"Using MarkMonitor's APIs, we can generate a spending report that we can send to our accounting department for billing back to each business unit based on their spend," Kirkland explains. "Without the APIs, it would have to be done manually."

"MarkMonitor's combination of best-of-breed technology and industry expertise is really unique. It makes our job a lot easier."

Jon Knight, Systems Engineer

The Ministry Brands team also uses MarkMonitor APIs to submit domain transfers and bulk information updates. "Right now, we're in the process of doing 1,000 domain transfers into MarkMonitor. We use their APIs to automatically update all the backend data," Knight says.

Managing SSL certificates

Keeping track of SSL certificates for more than 1,300 domains is a constant challenge. But MarkMonitor data feeds make it a lot simpler, Kirkland says.

"We have a lot of wildcard SSL certificates, so we don't always know when they expire. That could cause certificate outages," he explains. "Once a week, we download the data from MarkMonitor and track whether we have found all our certificates. We read certificate transparency logs and match them with our DNS records. Then we feed it downstream to create Service Now tickets to address any issues. If the domain doesn't exist in MarkMonitor, we know we don't have to search for SSL certificates."

Ensuring account security

Security is another important area of concern for the Ministry Brands team. With MarkMonitor, they have an enforced single sign-on (SSO) account integrated with their third-party identity provider (IDP).

"Once we turn off a user in our identity system, they can no longer access our MarkMonitor account," Knight explains, noting that MarkMonitor offers local accounts for scenarios where SSO is not an option.
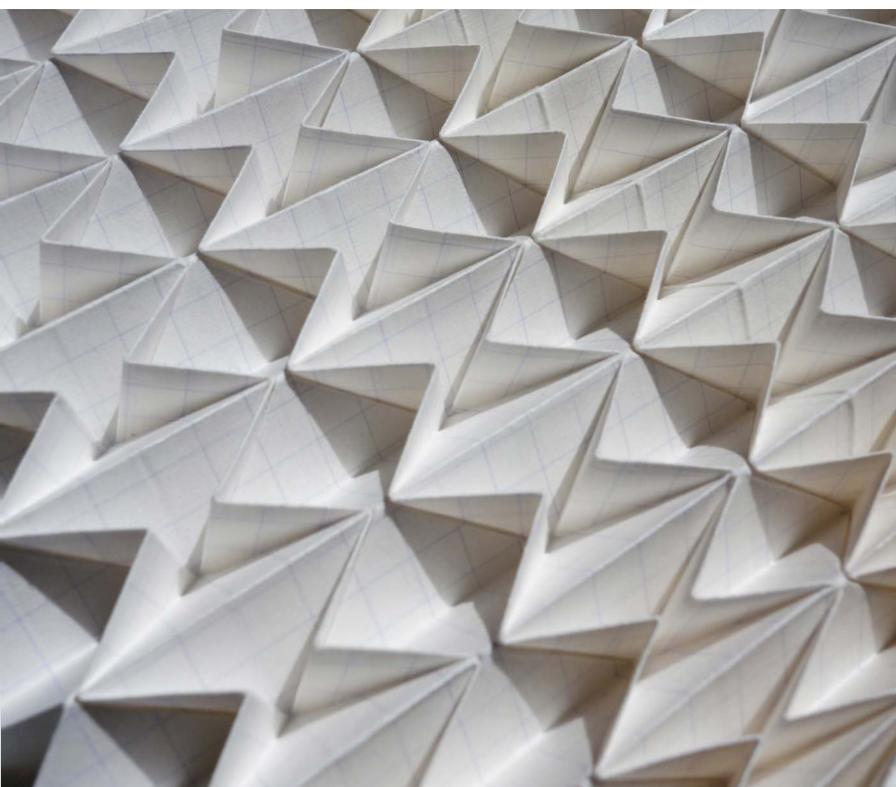
For maximum security on the most business-critical domains, MarkMonitor offers registry locks for many top-level domains (TLDs). "To perform updates on these domains, we need to contact MarkMonitor. Our custom security protocol requires authentication by two people. There are limits to what can be changed and it's only unlocked for 15 minutes," Kirkland explains. "If one of our team's accounts is compromised, a bad actor can't touch our business-critical domains. That gives us an extra layer of security." MarkMonitor is an industry leader in supporting registry locks, consistently working with registries to implement this important security feature.

Industry expertise and contacts

Ministry Brands also relies on MarkMonitor for information, expertise and, occasionally, for intervention.

"MarkMonitor has extensive industry contacts. We had a situation with one country where they didn't recognize our ownership of a domain name in their ccTLD. MarkMonitor negotiated on our behalf and was able to successfully make the case that the domain name was ours," Kirkland recalls. He also noted MarkMonitor's anonymous acquisition service, enabling clients to purchase domain names while masking their identity.

1.3k+

domain names are managed by the Ministry Brands LLC team

The Ministry Brands team also appreciates the domain information resources available from MarkMonitor, including the online TLD Requirements database. "Their expertise in the area of EURid [the organization that manages .eu domains] and Brexit has been invaluable. We were able to go to our business units and advise them on how to register .eu domain names correctly," Knight says.

MarkMonitor also provides access to account statistics, such as a visual map showing where Ministry Brands owns ccTLDs and a KPI dashboard that shows how well the company's domain name servers (DNS) are configured as compared to other organizations in the same industry. Properly configured DNS records, such as SPF and DMARC, can help prevent email spoofing. Kirkland also praised MarkMonitor's research reports – including a report of common misspellings used by people searching for the company's sites.

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Wesley Kirkland, Senior Systems Engineer

"That data was spot-on. We ended up acquiring many of those misspelled domain names and redirecting them," Kirkland says, noting this enabled them to target defensive registrations to reduce the risk of typosquatting and to capture traffic that otherwise would have been lost.

Having easy access to case log information has enabled the Ministry Brands domain team to enforce corporate policies for registering domains, while supporting autonomy of individual business units.

A valued partnership

As Ministry Brands continues to grow, so will the size and value of its domain name portfolio. But with MarkMonitor, the domain team will be ready for whatever lies ahead.

"MarkMonitor has been a great partner for Ministry Brands. We really appreciate Cody, our Customer Service Manager, and the back-end teams that have gone above and beyond to help us accomplish our goals," Kirkland says.

"MarkMonitor's combination of best-of-breed technology and industry expertise is really unique. It makes our job a lot easier," adds Knight.

About Clarivate

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Contact our experts today:

+1 215 386 0100 (U.S.)
+44 (0) 20 7433 4000 (Europe)

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