

Internet : UK Police close 1200+ websites

London's Metropolitan Police (which polices the Capital excluding the City of London) has investigated and, in one move, closed 1,219 websites for marketing goods using illegal copies of trademarks.

One has to be old and possessed of a wild sense of irony and humour to understand the name of the Metropolitan Police's Central eCrime Unit (PCeU) which struck at the heart of the trade in goods bearing counterfeit trade marks in the past few days.

Called "Operation Papworth," it identified well over 1000 websites, all with .co.uk names that were marketing (not necessarily selling - some were, apparently, out and out frauds and no goods were supplied) handbags, jewellery and clothing, amongst other things, bearing the name of Tiffany and Co, Links of London and - Ugg, the iconic Australian footwear.

The eCrime unit said "This operation was instigated by the PCeU to target the criminal misuse of the UK domain name system, with the objective of preventing harm to British citizens and making it safer to trade online.

The PCeU worked in partnership with Nominet - the body responsible for UK domain name registrations and one of the world's largest internet registries, managing over eight million domain names. As a result the PCeU has deregistered 1,219 website domain names - taking them down at the registry level to prevent re-registration."

Nominet left the world in no doubt that they did not get a request from the Met: Lesley Cowley, chief executive of Nominet, said: "We received clear instructions from the PCeU to take down the .co.uk domain names, which have been under investigation for criminal activity."

The Met's investigation revealed that the vast majority of the sites were registered from Asia, despite their UK domain names, mostly using false or misleading details. That made it almost impossible for victims to complain about poor quality, counterfeited items or goods not received. It also makes it difficult for Trading Standards or other law enforcement agencies to take action."

Because the action was taken at TLD level, the names are now permanently removed from circulation. Had they been deregistered at a lower level, then another registrar would have been able to reactivate the name.

But some of the fake sites were clones or near clones of genuine sites.

That leads to the risk of serious confusion.

UGGAustralia.Com is operated by Deckers Outdoor Corp, a US corporation. based in the USA. It has a feature called "counterfeit website lookup." Deckers has been active in pressing trademark claims for the boots.

But with Ugg there is a problem rooted in history: for the boots themselves are, originally, nothing more than sheepskin boots. And the boots long predate the trademark, originally registered in Australia in 1971. The rights were subsequently acquired by Deckers which registered marks in the USA and the EU. But Deckers has lost the right to use the mark in Australia where it has been held to be a generic term for boots of that type. That action was brought by a company called Uggs-N-Rugs. Decker's response? To register the domain name uggsnrugs.com.

Of course, no one has actually challenged the question of UGG Australia being a US company. And the boots may be made in China.

It seems that the irony of this has not hit home.

And nor has the irony of Papworth: it's the name of the hospital where heart surgery in the UK was perfected.