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How to choose the right web host

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How to choose the right web host

Your web host needed to be reliable, capable and affordable. But what features should you look for in a hosting company? Here are some ideas.

RELIABILITY AND SPEED

Often "hosting companies" are actually resellers. This means they own nothing other than the web site where you sign up. What you want is to deal with a company that owns its own equipment and can guarantee 99% or better availability of your web site. That means you can count on your site being live virtually all of the time and that you will have access to it and your email. Being able to guarantee that type of reliability will generally require that the host have back up server capability. If you're not sure, check before you commit. Resellers can be a good thing if they bring better and more knowledgeable support to their resold services. Unfortunately, many resellers do not really have the resources or knowledge to adequately support you.

EASILY ACCESSIBLE CUSTOMER SUPPORT

Look for both web-based and telephone support. One or the other should be available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Web solutions may include both email (or an email-based support ticket system) and live chat. You'll also want the support to be intelligent, reliable, and friendly. In addition, it will be helpful if they offer help files you can download or access online. Actually try their support and see if they respond quickly enough for your needs and if their support staff is helpful and knowledgeable.

OPERATING SYSTEMS

Do they use a standard operating system configuration that they keep updated on a routine basis? If they do not, you may have trouble getting newer scripts to work. They should offer both Linux and Windows servers for greatest flexibility.

MULTIPLE DOMAIN HOSTING

If you never plan to create more than one website, this feature may not be important to you. But for most businesses, this is an important consideration when choosing a web host. Most web hosts today offer cost-effective options for hosting more than one domain on an account. Some even offer unlimited domains for one low monthly (or quarterly) rate. See www.hostseveralsites.com for a good example.

EMAIL

How many email accounts do they provide? Are they POP email accounts? Can you add forwarders and email aliases? Look for web mail access as well. The better the service, the more options they will provide for email.

USER CONTROL PANEL

Look for a comprehensive user control panel that allows you to manage your hosting account. There are many control panels than these so take a look at their demo system if they have one so that you can test it out.

STORAGE SPACE AND BANDWIDTH

You want to plan for future growth of your site, both in terms of the size of the site itself, and in the amount of traffic it attracts. Ideally, you'll sign up with a web host that won't penalize you for your growth, at least not for a long time. 1Gb is a good minimum, and if necessary you should be able to easily upgrade your space without having to switch hosts.

LANGUAGE AND DATABASE SUPPORT

They should support the key programming languages and databases that are used by web site scripts and should keep these up to date as well. On Linux you should look for PHP and Perl at the least. For a database, look for MySQL. You should be allowed at least one database. You should have your own CGI Bin. On Windows systems, look for MS Access at the least and MS SQL Server for power and speed. If you want to use the Microsoft .NET framework, your hosting will need to support that.

FTP ACCESS

Many inexpensive hosting services do not provide File Transfer Protocol (FTP) access. You will need FTP access if you plan to add much material to your website or if you need to install scripts on your website. Also check that you can change permissions on your files via FTP or through SSH.

DOMAIN NAMES

You should be able to register your domain names through the web hosting company. Otherwise you will find it difficult to administer things and set up sites. So check they do domain registration. There should be no restrictions on sub-domains.

LOG FILES AND STATISTICS

You'll want to evaluate your site's performance over time, once it gets going. So having access to free statistics software and web logs will help with that analysis. Does the hosting service include a statistics program so you can monitor your website traffic?

BANDWIDTH

The main difference between the basic and expensive plans of any hosting service is the amount of bandwidth allowed per month. To figure how much bandwidth you need per month, multiply your visits per day x page views per visit x average page size x 30 days.

Example: 100 visits per day, 5 page views per visit, with a page size of 45 kb: $100 \times 5 \times 45 \text{ KB} \times 30 = 675,000 \text{ KB} = 675 \text{ MB}$.

Try to get as much bandwidth for your money as possible, but beware of web hosting services that offer unlimited bandwidth. Read the fine print and their terms of use carefully. There is usually some kind of restriction that you will need to be aware of. Make sure you read up on how they charge you if you exceed your monthly bandwidth and what upgrades they have available.

BACKUPS

There should be some sort of plan for backups with your web host. Ideally, they'll include it in your price, but you may have to pay extra. All companies, though, should be doing some sort of backing up as a routine

security measure. Find out, too, what is backed up, e.g., files, databases, server settings, etc.

ECOMMERCE

If you plan to run a shopping cart or secure payments or data transfers on your website, you need to make sure that the hosting service supports SSL.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

You pay for what you get. If you find free hosting or very cheap hosting expect very cheap levels of service. You are asking for trouble because they probably do not make enough money to adequately support their equipment, systems or you.

Windows servers are usually more expensive than Linux servers because the Windows operating systems are not open source. The hosting company has to pay for using them.

When you are comparing plans, keep in mind that you are getting a better deal at £14.99 per month for ten domain names than £3.99 per month for one.

When you are looking for hosting don't be afraid to ask questions. Good hosting services have no problem directing you to helpful information or answering your questions in a way that you can understand.

GO VIRTUAL

A virtual dedicated server lets you run your sites as if you had your own "dedicated" server, except it is cheaper because you are really just using part of a server that has been split into multiple virtual dedicated servers.

You will find virtual dedicated server accounts starting at just £14.99 a month. You'll get a much larger chunk of bandwidth compared to shared hosting, and none of the problems that go with a shared host. You can also get multiple IP addresses that are exclusive to your sites.

So what's the catch? Not much. You'll probably spend a bit more on hosting each month. The main disadvantage of upgrading to virtual dedicated hosting is that you will need to be more technically proficient so that you can administer the server.

This requires a bit of time learning the necessary skills to make sure your server runs smoothly.

Many hosting providers will have a "premium" support offering that includes a bit more hand holding - this is definitely recommended if you don't have much experience with Linux, or are new to virtual dedicated hosting.

With the increased speed and bandwidth that a virtual dedicated host offers, and none of the shared hosting headaches, the move is one you will never regret. So, the question now becomes, are you ready and willing to take-on the challenge of virtual dedicated web hosting and save yourself some hard earned cash?

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Consultancy,
workshops and
support to help
your business
grow and profit
from the effective
use of the Internet