



What to look for in a Web Host
A guide to carefully selecting the right hosting provider for your business needs.

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What to Look For In a Web Host

Introduction

A recent Google search for the term "website hosting" returned back 36,100,000 websites. Although we're living in the information age, there is such a thing as information overload! Once you have collected your hosting referrals or selected a handful to pick from, how can you compare all the different plans, their features and pricing to decide who the best match for your business is? The task may sound daunting, but I will provide you with the information you'll need to make an informed decision and select the best hosting plan for your budgeted dollar.

Assess Your Needs

Shopping for a web hosting provider without understanding what you need is like shopping for a new car with no idea of the features it needs to have: Do you need to haul with it? Does it need to seat more than two people? Does it need to have power windows, doors, locks? Etc.

The first thing you need to do is assess your needs. Here is a small set of questions to ask which will help you brainstorm:

1. How much disk space do I need? A 5 page website may only require 50mb, but a 200 page site may require 500mb to store all the pages.
2. How much bandwidth will I need?
3. Will I need access to utilities such as databases, chat rooms, forums, blogs or other medium where information can be stored and clients can connect with me?
4. Will I need to install and run special scripts? For example, opt-in mailing lists, calendars or help desk software? If so, are they operating system specific (Windows or Linux)?
5. What am I comfortable paying each month for service?

Once you have answered these questions you are ready to begin your assessment of different web hosting providers. If you are unable to answer some of the questions above, or would like additional assistance determining your needs, please contact [Krista Garren](mailto:krista@ridethewebandwin.com) for a complimentary consultation.

Assessing the Web Host

The next step is to begin to examine the different key areas of website hosting which will affect your decision:

- Disk space
- Bandwidth
- Scripts and utilities
- Dedicated/Shared servers
- Customers service/Support
- Uptime/Reliability
- Price
- Free Hosting Providers

1. Disk Space

This is the amount of storage space the provider is allotting you to store your website. Hosting plans will range anywhere from 25MB to Gigabytes in order to accommodate all range of needs. If your site is already constructed you can generally determine how much storage space is needed by totaling the file sizes of your pages and images. This is the minimum amount of space you will need for your website. A general rule of thumb is to purchase a plan which may have more resources than you currently need, but that provides you the ability to grow; after all, the overall goal is growth right?

2. Bandwidth

What is that anyway? Bandwidth is a measurement of how much information (data) can be transferred from your website and is calculated over a set period of time, usually a month. Each time someone requests content on your website (pages or images) from their web browser, this counts as bandwidth usage. Highly trafficked websites that have large pages or large images that have not been properly optimized will exhaust bandwidth resources much quicker than websites who optimize and control page and image file sizes. Prior to uploading your website, optimize your content and images to get the most bandwidth value for your dollar. Research the amount of traffic you anticipate having initially. For example, will you launch your marketing campaigns immediately after your site launches or will you wait a few months? If you have created a following for a new product whose launch is eagerly awaited, then it may be wise to select a larger plan up front to prepare for the upcoming traffic demands.

Be sure to inquire with the host about bandwidth limitations. Some providers will simply bill you for an overage, whereas others will automatically suspend your account (meaning no one can see your content) until the next billing cycle when your bandwidth is renewed. It would be devastating to try and pull up your website only to find that it has virtually vanished due to a bandwidth overage.

3. Scripts & Utilities

Will you need to store dynamic information online about your products, services or clients? If so you'll want to be sure your plan provides a database tool. Databases are extremely versatile and will vary in flavor depending on the operating system you select for your hosting server. For example, the main freeware database tool in a Linux hosting environment is MySQL. Most hosts will offer this tool to you at no additional charge. However, your hosting plan may limit the *number* of databases you can create, so carefully review each offered hosting plan and take notes for decision making later on.

Other popular scripts which are generally included with your plan (or are available free of charge) include chat rooms, forums (phpBB/Invision Board etc), blogs, calendar programs and help desk software. These scripts included in your hosting plan are pre-configured by the provider to work on their server. Many hosts may even offer the Fantastico script package which is a collection of 36 different free scripts which can be installed on your website with the click of your mouse.

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Some of these scripts and programs will require a database to function. For example, if your selected plan allowed only two MySQL databases, and you needed to install a Chat Room, a Forum and a Calendar, all requiring one database each, you would be unable to do so; you wouldn't have enough database resources to accomplish this task. Carefully consider which utilities you will need, and take notes as to whether they will require a database to function. This will help you determine how many databases your plan needs to allow you to create.

One additional note is to carefully consider which 3rd party scripts you will want to install and what environment they require to run properly. 3rd party scripts are those which can be found on the Internet available for purchase or as freeware which can be installed on your website. Be aware however, that some scripts can run in both a Windows and Linux environment while others may be specific to only one operating system.

4. Dedicated/Shared Servers

The basic difference between a dedicated and shared server is that shared servers host many sites, whereas a dedicated server generally hosts one website.

One of the big advantages of a shared server is the cost savings. Shared hosting simply costs less. Spamming and how to avoid having your website blacklisted from different search engines has been a recent concern with shared hosting environments however. How does this impact me you might ask? If you are sharing a server with an adult website that sends out spam and is eventually dropped from the search engines because of it, your site (once listed) could inadvertently be dropped if you share the same IP address. This is because shared hosting environments usually assign many sites to one IP address. Ask the provider whether a unique IP address can be assigned to your website (generally for an additional small monthly fee) to guard against this should you elect a shared hosting server.

Dedicated servers are best for big, highly trafficked websites which will require large amounts of server resources to run. One of the downsides to shared hosting is that the server's resources are divided across all the sites it's hosting and answering page requests for. If you are in a dedicated environment you can better monitor your server resources. The downside is that dedicated servers will run you generally \$50 per month or more. Shared hosting can be purchased for as little as 5\$ a month. Most small or medium sized businesses will have neither the website size or bandwidth requirements to make dedicated servers cost effective.

5. Customers service/Support

Pre-Sales

What is your preference on customer service? Do you prefer to call in and speak to someone live, or are you satisfied with using email to have your questions answered? Many providers will have a toll-free number you can call to address pre-sales questions while others may provide a pre-sales FAQ document, live chat option or a member's forum where you can scan posts and find answers to commonly asked questions. As a consumer, you want to make sure that you have some options to choose from.

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Support

Many providers will offer support through online Help Desk software. Rather than tying up phone lines with live help, they use their Help Desk to facilitate support request from users. Some providers may have Forums where you can post questions and receive assistance from other hosting customers. If you feel you are not Internet savvy, inquire whether you can receive live phone support. Be aware though that you may be required to pay an additional fee for this privilege.

You should be able to contact your hosting provider by more than one method. Be careful of any provider who does not provide adequate methods of communication and limits you solely to email contact for *both* pre-sales questions and support. Customer friendly hosts generally provide you a contact telephone for questions and most likely it will be toll-free. Should you elect a hosting provider that does not provide any telephone contact, do your research! Do they have testimonials? Do they have a forum where you can openly connect with other hosting customers and ask questions or request help? Has feedback about their service been positive? In this instance you'll have to rely on any posted question/answer responses and your intuition.

6. Uptime/Reliability

Uptime is an important factor to selecting your provider. Does the provider offer a performance guarantee? Specifically, will they rebate you some (or all) of your monthly fees if you experience prolonged periods of downtime? Do they offer a money back guarantee? Most hosts will refund all or part of your monthly fees (provided you weren't spamming or doing anything illegal) if you are not satisfied with their services after a period of time and choose to cancel your service.

You can also search for a testimonials page to see what their own customers are saying about them. Ask friends and colleagues whom they host their site with, and research the provider to determine if they would be a good fit for your website.

7. Price

Hosting normally will cost you somewhere between \$5.00 - \$10.00 dollars per month depending on the plan's features. Anything below \$5.00 per month, although it may sound like a great deal up front, may have to cut corners to offer such rates. Ever heard the saying "*you get what you pay for?*". Do some research on lower cost providers to determine how they are using your dollar and what you are receiving for it. Likewise anything above \$12.00 per month should be packed with features, or possibly include a complimentary domain name* and something other providers do not offer.

* Free domain names can be tricky! ALWAYS check with the provider and ask if the name will be registered in your name with you as the legal owner, or if it's to be registered with the hosting company and leased to you. Often times if registered to the host, you will be unable to take this name with you if you change service providers. Efforts in marketing and search engine optimization and branding can be lost in these situations and result in major headaches and increased spending.

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8. Free Hosting Providers

Website hosting has become so affordable in today's market that it's not worth the aggravation a *free* service will put you through to utilize their resources. I tagged the word free because there's really no such thing as free web hosting providers.

Most free services are offered in exchange for placing ads or other annoying features automatically onto your website. Displaying ads on websites is a process that requires careful consideration – even when you are personally selling ad space on your own site. Placement of the ad, layout and content are all key factors in ensuring your ads do not drive away your target audience. When working with a free hosting service, most likely you do not have control over these items, and could not ensure that their ads would compliment your products and services. Far better to pay the \$5 per month and secure reliable hosting that places no demands on your website than to select a *free* host and take your chances.

Closing

The main idea behind selecting a good web hosting provider is to think ahead. Always purchase as much bandwidth and disk space you can at the most affordable price. Your website will need to have room to grow with your changing business needs without having to continuously switch hosting providers.

About the Author

Krista Garren is a website design consultant and webmaster who specializes in assisting clients with taking their business to the Internet without being overcharged, blown up, or obliterated. For more information on website hosting, website design or Internet marketing, please visit Krista's website at <http://www.ridethewebandwin.com>

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