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__Introduction__

Finding the right Web Host can be very daunting, especially since typing 'web hosting' in Google will get you a million search results. Every Web Host seems to be outselling the others with the best deals and it can be very hard to distinguish the deals we can trust and the ones we need to be wary of.

There are several factors we need to consider before deciding if a particular Web Host is worth our time and money. After all, the last thing anyone wants to do is transfer their entire website every few months because their hosting providers continually fail them.

1. Choosing Between Free or Paid Web Hosting

This all depends on what you want your website for. If you simply want to have a personal blog to share with friends or a place to store your photos then free hosting can be fine. But if you're planning on creating a business or online store then paid hosting is much safer and will have much better features to offer you.

Free websites are excellent for newbies that want to learn all about web design but don't want to risk losing money if they mess up! It's a great way to learn the ins and outs of web building and a super way to test your website before actually using it.

Most free websites have limited disk space, data transfer and bandwidth but this shouldn't be an issue if you just want a small website. Many free hosts will display ads on your site or pop up ads and this can not only be ugly but annoying to your visitors.

Paid hosting will have different plans for you to choose from with added features like free domain names, free sub-domains, unlimited email accounts, GI-Bin, MySQL databases, e-commerce set up, shopping carts, and Microsoft Front Page extensions etc. Many free hosts will not have these services available.

You'll most likely find that paid hosting offers much better customer service and reliability.

BEWARE: One thing that should be known about free hosting is many hosting sites are purposely set up with the intention of selling for profit in a few months. What are the tell tail signs of this?? Usually by offering huge bandwidth and web space amounts per member. It can be over 100GB bandwidth and over 10GB+ web space. This attracts a lot of members which makes it easier for them to sell their business later.

Often with free hosting the company can collapse quite quickly due to inexperienced web masters and running out of funds. You probably won't have to worry about this kind of thing with free hosting from Yahoo or any other huge organization but the chances are much higher coming from tiny companies no-one has heard of.

Free sites that offer MySQL for free can be a danger and should be avoided. Why? Well MySQL is a server's biggest recourse destroyer and with thousands of free members using its features like crazy such as forums, blogs and whatever else will eventually cause slow pages. If a free hosting company offers MySQL they should charge you a small fee for it.

Another problem with free hosting is the size of the files you're allowed to upload. Many sites have a limit of 5mb

which is fine for a lot of people but if you want to start uploading programs and zip files that are over 1gig then this is really going to cause you problems. This isn't usually an issue with paid hosting.

Hidden deep within the terms of service of many free sites is also a condition that 'x' amount UNIQUE people must visit your site per month/week. Many private/personal websites will never be able to get 10 unique visits per week simply because their site was made for their own use or for family and friends. Wouldn't it be a waste to spend all that time making your site just to have it deleted!

So at the end of the day it's usually much safer to get paid hosting, especially if it's to host your business or livelihood.

2. What do you need your site for?

A very important question you need to ask yourself is what kind of website you plan on creating? Is it for personal use, to store graphics, to create an on line business or something else? This is a very important factor as it will largely affect the kind of hosting plan you will need.

Obviously if you just want to have a personal blog or web space about yourself or an interest you have you won't be needing much bandwidth, storage or data transfer per month. However if your planning on creating an on line business that must hold a lot of data and will attract large volumes of visitors per month then your bandwidth and data transfer need to be much higher.

Sometimes it can be a bit bewildering to decipher which plan is right for you if you're not familiar with the terms used in the plans. Let's have a quick look at some of the most

important terms you will need to be familiar with in making the correct hosting plan.

Storage, disk space: This is the amount of storage space allotted for your website. The more content you want to add the more space you will require.

Bandwidth: This is the amount of traffic that is allowed to flow between your web site and the rest of the net.

Data transfer: This is the amount of data you are allowed to deliver from your site in a given month. Each time your Web page is viewed or an image, zip file, etc. is loaded, data transfer is generated and deducted from your allocated amount.

Ok, now that we know what these important terms mean we need to evaluate how much of each of them we will need.

Let's say that you want to have your own e-book business. You may choose to list your e-books on eBay but your customers will need to download the e-books from somewhere. This is where the web space comes in. One e-book alone can be over 6MB so if you plan on selling hundreds of e-books you won't benefit much from having a hosting plan that only gives you 250MB of storage! You'll most likely be needing about 3-10GIG or maybe more.

Similarly if you plan on having a business like that you will expect to have a large amount of visitors who will be downloading a lot of zip files so you need to ensure you have plenty of bandwidth and data transfer.

If your site is just selling mobile phones for example, and you expect a lot of visitors per month to be placing orders

but not downloading anything then your data transfer can be lower. It all depends on what you need your website for.

A good hosting package should give you a generous amount of bandwidth and should even be willing to reset your traffic volume per month so it won't pile up.

If your website is just going to be about your love of dogs and how to take care of them properly then your disk space and data transfer can be much lower, so too can your bandwidth if you think only a limited amount of people will be visiting your site.

3. What is your content?

It's crucial to ensure that the hosting company you plan to use actually ALLOWS the kind of content you want to upload. It's no use signing up with a company to host your adult videos on only to find out later that your site was deleted because they don't allow that kind of content. So ALWAYS read the terms and conditions of each host VERY carefully before signing up. Yes it's very boring and time consuming but in the end it will really pay off. A lot of times you may find that there a rules and regulations that don't suit you anyway.

Similarly if you were planning to have an on line store only to find out later that the web hosting company doesn't allow that sort of thing or doesn't supply the right kind of software to implement a shopping cart then you would have wasted your money. Always make sure that the hosting company's features meet your demands.

4. What does the Hosting Company offer?

Don't just look at the prices! Many times you really do get what you pay for! There are many other factors to look at besides the price and the amount of space and bandwidth you get. To get a general idea of the overall service value of a hosting company you need to evaluate the following features:

~ **Customer Service/Support.** Let's face it, even with the BEST hosting company things can and will go wrong! It's just life and no one is perfect but it shouldn't be a huge task to find the answer to a question or have a problem solved by your support team.

There should be a wealth of information in the FAQ section and the best form of help is Live Chat! This is a very important feature as it's free, fast and instant. You won't have to wait for days to get a question answered and can usually get a problem solved instantly! The customer Service people should have excellent knowledge of their field and should be extremely polite and patient.

If live support isn't available then you should be able to submit a support ticket and get responded to quickly or be given a customer service phone number to use. The last thing you want is to be left hanging for days and weeks waiting for assistance.

~ **Cost:** Don't let this be the ONLY factor that drives your decision to host your site somewhere. Just because a certain plan is cheap doesn't mean that it will meet your criteria. Paying a little bit extra can really go a long way. Work out your budget and try and match it to the best plan. You will need to decide on your billing cycle. Most sites want you to sign up for a 12 or 24 month period and offer a lower price per month the longer you sign up for. If you opt for a 1, 3 or 6 month plan then you will most likely being paying more

per month a one time set up fee. In the long run it's usually much cheaper to sign up for 12 months or more but you must have the funds available upfront.

~ **Guarantee of uptime:** Always look for a guarantee of minimal downtime and strict service monitoring. If you see "99.9% uptime" guarantee then you can feel quite safe that your site will be running smoothly. Its not a really big deal if your personal website goes down, even if its for a while but if your on line business goes down it can be a huge problem, especially if it was down for a week!

As there is no such thing as 100% uptime guarantee I would avoid companies that claim this. A good reliable host will post statistics of any downtime on their site for everyone to view or they should at least tell you if you ask. Be weary if information about downtime and interruption aren't shown or told to you if you ask about it. www.siteuptime.com is a great free tool that you can use to monitor your hosting if you need or want to monitor it yourself.

~ **Backups:** Even though everyone should ALWAYS keep their own backup of their site on hand it is also very important for the hosting company to have regular backups. You won't have to worry much about this if your hosting provides cPanel as it has a very quick and reliable back up system.

~ **Good terms and conditions:** If your reading the terms of service agreement of a particular company and it looks very short and un-detailed then this could be a problem. Everyone hates reading through the terms of service but it's something very important. The company you want to join should care about what kind of things are hosted on their customers sites and should have many restrictions on illegal

practices such as spamming, child pornography, hate sites and so on.

If too many people start spamming then the hosts IP address can be blacklisted, your site may slow down and your emails may not be sent. www.DNSstuff.com is a great place to go if you want to check if a web host is blacklisted or not. If the hosting company detects anyone using their site to send spam or containing anything illegal then their site should be shut down and their account canceled. The Web masters should really care what their customers are using their websites for and have many strict rules about it.

BEWARE: There is NO such thing as 'unlimited' bandwidth or web space. This is false advertising and you should be very careful about signing up with these companies. "Why would they offer it if it isn't real?" you ask! Because it attracts customers! Besides, they really don't expect everyone to really be using that much space and bandwidth anyway. They figure people will use 1 or 2 gig of bandwidth a month so they feel safe to offer you an unlimited package. But let's look at it seriously for a moment.

If I own an Apple Orchid and I have thousands of apples and I tell all my customers that they can have unlimited apples each month is that really true??? Of course not! I only have a 'limited' amount of apples in the first place and it all costs money but I simply offer this as a way to get people to buy my produce. I know that most people will be happy to take a few baskets and go. But what happens if they all decide they want hundreds and take more than I can offer or afford??? What happens when I run out of money to supply what they are demanding??

This is what happens with hosting. They tell you its unlimited but in all reality hosts have to pay for each GB

that is used and hard drives aren't free so it's not possible to ever guarantee unlimited services. They only expect you to use a certain amount and if you go over it by a lot then you're likely to get your hosting canceled. Buried deep in most terms of service you can see that 'unlimited' really means about 40gig.

~ Domain names: It's great if a hosting company provides you with a domain name. Many hosts offer a free domain name with certain packages but make sure they register it in YOUR NAME. If it isn't then you will have problems in the future if you want to transfer it to another host. You will ALWAYS need to have your own domain name for a paid hosting company so make sure you only purchase one that you will definitely own. It's also important to see if they allow you to host more than one domain with them or if they provide sub domains and how many. This is more important if you have a large business or want a few different sites.

~ Control Panel: This isn't very necessary for amateur or personal websites but it is crucial for a business. This powerful tool lets you view statistics, manage files and email, make backups, manage add-ons and many other very important features. cPanel is one of the most complex and popular control panels today that gives you the best controllability and management over your site. If you plan on having shopping carts, forums, newsletters or anything else like that on your site then you will definitely want cPanel or something very similar to manage it all on.

~ Add-ons: Add-ons are great but don't judge the value of a hosting plan solely on what bonuses or extras they offer. Features like pre-made web templates, template wizards and auto-install scripts that make adding features like counters, contact forms and other such things easy to install can be great, especially for a novice web site builder. Having

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