

## **Finding the Web Hosting Co. That's Right for You**

By Lee Creek

Whether you're a small business or a large corporation, if you're going to have a web site, you'll have to have a web host. Lee Creek offers sage advice on how to find the host that's right for you. At times, finding a good host for a web site is like discovering a fat guy appearing in an advertisement for a fancy health club -- it never happens unless they need a "before" model standing next to the well chiseled "after" guy. Sure, there are plenty of good web hosts out there, I'm told, but it can be difficult to find one that is right for a user's particular purpose. What may be an excellent choice for one user could be a major mistake for another. And that, my friends, is the first factor to consider when searching for a web host. What exactly do you need?

Finding the perfect host should begin by analyzing what is needed for the web site. If a host doesn't offer the services needed, then nothing else makes it worth bothering with, including price. Knowing what you need can also eliminate wasted time looking at hosts that do not offer services matching your needs. For individuals and some small businesses, the solution sometimes is as simple as storing the web site on the space they got when they chose their internet service provider. Those sites usually cost about \$20 a month and come with a limited amount of space or data transfer allowance. Frequently, however, that allowance is too little, and/or the host may not offer other services that a small company may require, including e-commerce or CGI-bin access or even customer service. Further, the ISP may also charge a punishing fee for those who exceed their allotted storage and usage amounts. That is why it is important to not only consider current needs but to allow for future growth. Another thing to think about is the location of the hosting company. While brick and mortar businesses are sometimes limited geographically, internet businesses have the world in reach at the touch of a button. Thus, if you cannot get a good local company to meet your hosting needs, look around for the company that best suits your needs and billfold, and don't worry about location. However, you do want to make sure they have a toll-free number to use to contact them. People are often lured by free web hosting sites, but that comes with a cost that is sometimes too high. The dollars may be right, but users are forced to build their site with the hosting company's online builder, costing time to make changes, more difficult, and often virtually impossible to customize. Another factor with free web hosting is that it can require the user to put up with ads or aggravating watermarks that appear on all the pages on their sites. To eliminate that problem, users should choose hosting companies that allow 24/7 FTP access. Changes that need to be made can be made as the user needs, and they can be customized to the user's desires. Is the host reliable?

The next item to check out are the ISP's downtime history, for obvious reasons: If the server is down, so is your web site. My current host site was great at first, but recently the server has been down almost as much as my stock shares; thus, I am on the lookout for a good ISP (and an even better stockbroker). It is very frustrating to pay for something you don't get, and how many of us have gotten home from the local fast food restaurant only to discover the beef is missing. That is probably the same feeling users have when they (or anyone else) cannot access their web site or e-mail. When considering a host site, ask them what their uptime percentage is, and it should be just under 100 percent. Any lower than that, you'd be better off posting your web site at that fast food restaurant. Clearly, failure to stay up and running can be costly to e-commerce businesses, but it is just as costly to companies that depend on the web for part of their advertising and public identification. One way to get a true reading on a hosting company's reliability is to check with some of its existing clients to determine what they think about it. Any one of them can be an eye opener, so make sure you check with several to get a real picture. Give your host a call - if you can!

Free telephone support from your web hosting company is critical. Why? If the server is down, there goes your e-mail capabilities, too. I recently found a company of interest to me, but when I asked them for their 24/7 telephone support number, they said they only offered e-mail support. Perhaps they are expecting users to write letters to report their problems when the server is down, but I'll never know because I immediately scratched them off my list. Some companies may not have a toll-free number to call, but at least the support itself is free. Others charge for the support, which means you pay that in addition to the cost of the telephone call. Perhaps the best way to determine how reliable a web hosting company's support is, is to send an e-mail to them on Saturday night. If you don't get a response until Monday, then you will know that in the future that if problems occur early in the weekend, your site will probably stay down until the work week begins on Monday. That could be quite costly. At this point, if your ISP has not met the criteria discussed above, it may be time to be looking for another home for your web site. Moving to another site can be a pain, but your domain registrar can usually be of help, and so can the host you choose to replace the old one.

### **Top 10 Requirements for Choosing the Right Web Host**

After you've selected a great domain name and you're ready to get started, the next step is choosing the "right" web host for your business needs.

Your web site will be the very foundation of your Internet presence. Selecting the right web hosting service is critical to your success. I am sure you have heard the old saying, "you get what you pay for". This usually rings true on the internet, as well as in the real world.

### **Consider your choices:**

- 1) Free Websites. A few megabytes of storage space, slow servers, usually no customer support, can't use your own domain name, bogged down with their advertisements, are not indexed by most search engines, and none of the features you'll need to make money.
- 2) Low Cost Web Hosting. Often unreliable, bare essentials, little or no real technical support, lacking in features, not really for a serious online business.
- 3) The Right Choice. Lots of storage space, super fast servers, real people to speak with in case of problems, all the features necessary to make big bucks. (your own cgi-bin for interactive features, autoresponders, form mail, secure server, etc.)

If you are serious about your online business success, the choice is obvious. Why not use a web hosting service that allows you to take full advantage of the Internet's capabilities. You will most likely, not be able to compete and will be losing big money as a result. Here are the essential features you should be looking for in a quality web hosting package:

- 1) Fast Servers - Quality hardware and redundant OC3 or T3 connections. How fast your web pages load is directly proportional to your income. Don't let anyone tell you a server can be too fast.
- 2) Domain Name Support & Registration Services - Your web host must allow the use of your own domain name. They should offer free registration and work closely with Internic to get things done fast.
- 3) No Bandwidth, No Access, or Hit Charges - There is absolutely no reason to use a web host that charges for bandwidth, access, or hit fees. Unless you have an adult web site. The best hosting services offer unlimited bandwidth with standard packages.
- 4) Unlimited CGI Access (FTP/Telenet) - You will need CGI scripts at some time or another. Make sure that you have your own cgi-bin and the ability to upload any scripts you want. Never use a web host that limits you to their scripts only.
- 5) Unlimited Technical Support - A good web host should have live humans to speak with on the phone. Insist on free, unlimited technical support via both email and telephone. You'll be glad you did.

6) Control Panel or Web Based Administration - Most quality web hosts have some type of interface that allows you to manage your server via the web. This is not necessary, but can be very handy for many who don't consider themselves to be the technical type.

7) Secure Server - If you plan on selling anything directly from your web site, you'll need secure server capabilities. The best offer low or no additional setup fees, and a low or no monthly fee for SSL.

8) Email Services - Your web host should offer full email services. Including, POP mailboxes, unlimited email aliases, and a generous supply autoresponders. Do not pay extra for these features.

9) No Minimum Contract - Don't ever sign a long term contract. It's not necessary. If something should happen and you decide to switch hosts, being locked into a long term contract could be very costly.

10) Money Back Guarantee - A quality web host offers a 30 day money back guarantee. You should insist on it! It is the sign of a professional company that will stand behind it's service.

Don't make the common mistake of sacrificing quality and essential features just to save a couple of dollars. The simple truth is that using an inferior web host will not save you money at all. You will inevitably end up paying a lot more due to down time and lost profits.

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## **Web Hosting - Why Pay?**

By Michael McCarthy

If you're in the process of finding an appropriate host for your site, you'll probably ask yourself "Why should I pay for hosting when I can get it for free?" The answer depends on the nature of your site. A paid hosting plan is essential for some sites, while for others a free host might offer all the facilities you need. But which should you choose?

### **Free Hosting Pitfalls**

If you've been developing Web pages for over a year, then chances are that you're considering the move to paid hosting, if you're not already on a paid plan. As an experienced coder and designer, you're probably familiar with the frustrations involved with hosting your site on a free server...

#### **1. Advertising Overload**

Probably the first thing that comes to mind when you think of free hosting is the proliferation of unwanted ads on all your pages. Unfortunately, many free hosts rely solely on these ads to earn money, so very few offer services that are free of forced advertising. The end result? Visitors to your site see a 468x60 pixel banner ad on the top of each of your pages. Or maybe they're hit with a pop-up banner after each click-through. Whatever the case, these ads can severely reduce the professionalism of well-designed pages.

#### **2. More Downtime**

Downtime plagues many free web hosts. The fact that their subscribers don't pay for services means that many free hosts feel less than obligated when it comes to dependability. Free hosts are rarely bothered if some of users are dissatisfied with the service - this small minority are of little or no real benefit to the host anyway.

#### **3. Poor Customer Support**

The majority of free hosts don't have the funds to hire customer support teams. If you experience problems, you can find yourself relying heavily on the host's Frequently Asked Questions page - after all, the chances of receiving any live or email support can be almost non-existent.

#### **4. Limited Space**

If your site is large, then you might find free web hosts quite limiting. Most free hosts only provide customers with 5 to 10 MB of space, so you'll never be able to expand your site beyond your allotted disk space without moving to a paid host.

## **5. Restricted Ad Revenues**

Many free hosts don't allow you to sell advertising space on your site. This might be fine if you're simply maintaining a personal homepage, but can severely impact on revenues for business Websites. For these sites, a paid service may be the only viable hosting option.

**6. No Secure Server Access** If you plan on building an online store, you'll need a secure server to enable secure online credit card processing. Most free hosts don't support secure web servers, and, given customer fears about fraud, privacy and security, the lack of secure serving can make it virtually impossible for an online store to survive on a free service.

## **7. File Type Restrictions**

Many free web hosts don't support file extensions other than .html, which can be really limiting. For example, if you build a large web site with the same navigation on each page, you might use SSI, which gives you the ability to alter the navigation style on one page, and have that same alteration automatically carried across all pages. SSI can save you a great deal of time and frustration, but it produces files that end in .shtml. To cater for these files, you'll need an SSI-enabled server, which can be almost impossible to find through a free host.

## **8. Long Domain Names**

Paid hosts allow their customers to use their own domain names, while most free services require you to take a subdomain off the host's name. In the case of Geocities, a typical URL could resemble "http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Shadowlands/2719/Food/pizza.htm." Domains like this almost entirely prevent users from visiting your site from memory - they'll need to bookmark your site, or be able to find it easily through a search engine or other linked sites. Obviously, this can seriously affect the traffic your site receives. Free or Paid? It's up to you.

As you can see, in most cases, a paid web host provides a significantly better service than do free hosts. Free Web hosting might be ideal for personal homepages and sites that don't rely on online advertising or sales revenues. But for those in business, whether they're selling online, or simply wish to present a professional Web presence, paid hosting is typically the only option worth considering. Maybe the old saying's true: You do get what you pay for.

## **Avoid eCommerce Hosting Horror**

By Adam Kling

There seems to be a lack of information on the subject of Web hosting. It amazes me, because the Web host is literally the backbone of your site. If you get stuck with a shoddy host your site won't appear on the Net. Your email won't come through. Your shopping cart won't function. Without a dependable Web host... your online business would be out of business! So how do you make heads or tails out of the bandwidth, megabytes, POP3s, FTPs and SSLs? Due to the lack of information available, most site owners make one of two choices: they pick the least expensive package, or they choose the one that offers the most features "just to be safe". Allow me to define a few of the more common terms that you might hear in your search for the ideal host. I'll also offer some guidelines to help you make a knowledgeable decision about exactly which features you really need.

### **The Basics**

#### **Storage Space**

This is the amount of space you lease on the host's server, and it's measured in megabytes. So how much do you need for your site? Well, on most Websites, one page with limited graphics and some text would take (on average) 5 kilobytes (Kb). If you have heavy graphics, photos, etc. your pages might require up to 30 Kb. Multiply the number of pages by the number of kilobytes to calculate a rough estimate of how much space your site currently needs. Also, don't forget to account for space that will be used by other things you'll store on the server. eBooks take up an enormous amount of space, as do Flash movies. They'll also be stored on the host's server, and need to be included in your estimate. Try to anticipate what you're likely to add to the site in the future, and include that in your total -- you'll want to allow some room for growth. A quick tip: just look at the file index on your computer to see the size of each page, ebook or Flash presentation.

#### **Bandwidth**

When files are transferred from the host's server to the site visitor, they use up bandwidth. When pages are clicked and displayed on the screen, when ebooks are downloaded, when shopping carts are put to use, bandwidth comes into play. The more "active" your site is -- the more there is for the site visitor to do -- the more bandwidth you'll need.

#### **Email Accounts**

There are two primary types of email that Web hosts offer. Web mail is email that can be accessed online using your browser. You pull it up and view it just as you would any other Website. POP3 email is that which can be used with email software (called an email client) such

as Outlook Express, Outlook, Eudora or Pegasus. Where you need to be careful is in determining how you'll manage your email accounts, and what charges are involved with each alternative. Some hosts offer a limited number of POP3 addresses and then charge you for additional ones. Others may not offer a "control panel" for the maintenance of your email addresses, and might charge you to process any changes you need to make.

## **The Extras**

Now let's consider a few items that you'll probably have heard of, and see how they can help you run an online business smoothly.

### **Autoresponders**

One additional service that will come in very handy is that of an autoresponder. This will allow you to send an automatic message to people who email you. You will find this service useful when you're on vacation, or when you want to reassure customers that their message has gotten through, without having to make a personal reply to this effect every time you receive an email.

### **FTP and Front Page**

FTP stands for File Transfer Protocol. This is the protocol used to upload your Website to the host's server. Most Web design software includes an FTP application that incorporates Dreamweaver and Go Live. Note that Microsoft's Front Page does not include FTP. It also has some other special considerations that make it necessary for your host to specifically support Front Page, if that's the software you use -- check with your potential host for more details.

### **SSL (Secure Socket Layer)**

This is the process that allows the secure, encrypted transfer of data. Some confuse this with the acceptance of credit cards. Although most shopping carts and online merchant accounts use SSL, it does NOT mean that your host includes a merchant account with your hosting package. In addition to payment options, SSL can be used to collect sensitive data from your site visitors, to ensure that your emails are not intercepted online, and to provide a sense of security for your customers.

## **"There's More?!"**

Yes! Choosing a Web host is a serious process. A few other questions to consider during this decision-making time revolve around the function of your site.

- **Are you going to offer purchases online?** If so, you'll need a shopping cart.

- **Are you going to provide an ezine or newsletter?** If so, it would be beneficial to find a host that offers list servers. If not, you can find a free one (which will include advertisements) or you'll have to pay for this service from another provider.
- **Do you want to track your site visitors?** That would be very wise! Be sure to view the types of traffic statistics the host offers. Unfortunately, some don't provide very detailed information. At a minimum you'll want to see the referring URL (where the visitor came from), the number of hits per month and the pages on your site that are receiving the most views.
- **Think you'll have questions from time to time?** Then it would be an excellent idea to find a host that offers 24/7/365 tech support via chat or telephone.

And last, but certainly not least, be very sure to check out the "up time" and security of the host. As I mentioned in the beginning of this article, if the host isn't dependable, your business will be out of business! It's imperative that your host has measures in place in case of crashes or outages. Likewise, you'll want a host that offers security for the information you'll be storing on his/her server. Find out about firewalls and other security precautions they've taken.

Knowledge is power! Knowing what to look for can save you a lot of money, time and aggravation. And it can keep your business IN business.

## **WebHosting Bandwidth - An Introduction**

By Adam Eisner

When choosing a host, the amount of bandwidth you purchase can be crucial to the success of your site. Generally speaking, the more bandwidth you have, the more traffic your site will be able to handle at one time.

### **How much bandwidth do I need?**

To determine how much bandwidth you'll need, you must first:

- estimate how big each page on your site is, and
- how many people are going to view it.

To do this, add up the size of every image on the page and the size of the page's HTML files. Then multiply this figure by the number of views you expect for that page per month. For example, if you had three 10k images on your page and a 2k HTML file, you would have 32k of data on that page. Multiply that by your expected page views (let's say 100,000 per month), and you get 3.2G of data to be transferred that month for that page. Now recalculate this number for each page, and you'll know approximately how much bandwidth your entire site requires.

### **How can I save bandwidth?**

There are three key ways to optimize your bandwidth usage:

#### **1. Keep your pages as small as possible.**

This means tight HTML programming to reduce file size, and compacting your pictures and graphics to reduce image size ( NetMechanic has a free, easy-to-use file compression utility). Use the JPEG image format for your photos and the GIF format for graphics - their compression abilities are second to none.

Dr. HTML's site has useful tools that will analyze your site's image sizes, transfer amounts, table structure and more.

#### **2. Use images that aren't stored on your site.**

You can do this by replacing the file name in your <IMG SRC> tag with a URL that gives the location of the image you want to use. Before doing this, however, make sure you have the permission of the site you are linking to. Otherwise, you're stealing bandwidth, which is considered pirating and is therefore illegal (for more information, see "How can I prevent bandwidth theft?" below).

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