

# Choosing a Web Host

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 Wednesday, 12 December 2007  
 Last Updated Wednesday, 09 April 2008

**Web Hosting 101** Whether you are just trying to publish a small site to put up your family's blog, or you've just fronted a sizeable amount of money in order to start up a large e-commerce site, the process of choosing a web hosting provider can be both confusing and intimidating. There are literally thousands of different web hosting providers and easily as many different hosting packages offered by them. Without having had any prior experience with web hosting, most people either pick the first cheap package that they can find on the internet or they err on the side of caution and end up buying a plan that offers much more than they really need. It's no wonder that many people end up unsatisfied with their hosting experiences. This section of pickingawebhost.com is dedicated to helping first time purchasers of web hosting space gain the knowledge that they will need in order to make an educated decision when purchasing a web hosting package. At the end of this section you will find some links to some basic information about the components of web hosting. While knowing the mechanics behind hosting a website is not necessary by any means, knowing a little bit can go a long way towards helping you understand what you are buying. It can also allow you be more proactive in requesting support from your web host when you need it. It's all about support!>> 1. It's all about Support

The first and most important thing to remember when picking a web host is that you get what you pay for. Don't pick a \$5 a month hosting plan and expect to get instant access to a technician every time that you call in with a problem. There are four basic components to any web hosting plan: disk space, bandwidth, software costs, and man-hours. While large web hosts have many ways to spread the physical and software costs out between their many customers, there are only a certain amount of hours in any tech's workday and tech time isn't cheap. Large, inexpensive hosts try to minimize their support costs by automating as much of their infrastructure as possible and giving their customers the tools they need to make account changes on their own. They often offer forums, frequently asked questions sections, and help pages to allow customers to answer their own questions without calling in. If you do need support from an actual tech, though, you'll end up waiting a day or more for a response as often as not. The more expensive plans from smaller hosts will often have the cost of quick personal support built into them. When dealing with small hosts, make sure you know what type of company you trust your website to. Every year hundreds of people happily put their sites into the hands of a small, responsive web host only to find out three months later that their site is down and they can't get a hold of anyone at the hosting company to get it back up because the company just went out of business. Before you do put your trust into a hosting company make sure that you're confident that they will be there two or three years down the road. Two general rules of thumb to use when trying to decide the amount of support that you will need are:

1. The less comfortable you are with technology the more personal support you will need. 2. The more money your site brings in, the more you will need high quality responsive support.

If you have a personal blog and knack for solving minor technical issues on your own, you shouldn't have any issues with purchasing an inexpensive hosting package from one of the large hosting providers. If you have a high volume, high revenue site or would rather not have to take the time to go looking for answers anytime you have questions, then you will want to either go with a reliable smaller host, a more expensive package or pay for premium support from one of the larger companies. No matter what hosting company you decide to pick make sure that they are a match for you. If you end up choosing a bad hosting company, it can cause you a lot of problems down the line. If the uptime of your website is important to your business be especially careful. Look at the company's forums, and see what kind of experiences their customers are having, see how long the company has been around, find out about any uptime and disaster recovery policies they might have, and do anything else that you can think of to gauge whether this company is a match for you. Picking a hosting plan>> Picking a plan

Once you've narrowed your choice of hosting providers down to a few acceptable candidates you'll need to begin to compare plans and prices between them. If you don't work with websites for a living, though, how are you supposed to know how much bandwidth you will use, if you should get a virtual private server, or even what those terms mean? Here is a rundown of the basic components of a hosting plan that should make that choice easier. Types of Plans

- Shared Hosting - Shared hosting plans are the bread and butter of the web hosting industry. The vast majority of people starting a new site will want to begin with this type of plan. In a shared hosting environment anywhere from several hundred to thousands of websites are hosted in the same environment. The advantage to hosting in this type of environment is that by sharing a common hosting environment hosts can minimize their cost per site and can therefore offer their customers a much lower price per site. The disadvantage of this type of environment is that your neighbor's problems can easily become your problem. Hosts have little control over the code that is put onto their servers. If someone puts code that maxes out the server's resources then your site will go down as well as theirs. If you have a site that is getting less than 10,000 hits per day and that is not bringing in a huge amount of revenue, then this type of hosting is the type of hosting for you.

- Reseller Hosting &ndash; Reseller hosting plans are basically just volume shared hosting plans. They give the reseller a certain set of resources and allow them to set up new sites until that set of resources is used up. This type of plan is best for people such as website developers who need to put up hundreds of sites and want easy manageability and a good rate.

- Virtual Private Servers &ndash; Virtual Private Servers are the next step up from a shared hosting plan. Virtual Private Servers take care of the bad neighbor problem that share hosting plans have by dedicating certain portions of the hardware to each account. If a site uses up all of its resources, it will quit working, but the other sites on the server will continue to run just as they always did. Virtual Private Servers also usually have fewer sites per hosting environment and, because of this, will often allot each customer more resources per account. This type of plan is best for people for whom uptime is very important and people whose sites require a fair amount of resources.

- Dedicated Servers &ndash; Dedicated servers give you full access to the hardware of a server. When you pick a dedicated server plan you will have all the resources of a single server to yourself. Many dedicated server plans also give you full control of the operating system environment that is running on top of the servers. This means that you can configure the server however you want to. Dedicated servers are best for people who have specialized configuration requirements, those who need the full resources of a piece of hardware due to performance and uptime requirements, and those who have the knowledge required to configure and manage the software that the servers runs.

- Managed Servers/Managed Services &ndash; Managed Servers and Managed Services are by far the most expensive of all hosting packages. When you purchased a managed server plan, you are purchasing the exclusive use of a single server and the management of the software running on top of that server. These plans usually include monitoring, backup, very low downtimes, and expert support anytime you have an issue. Managed Services provide the same set of benefits but they do this for all of the equipment/software used to make a service run. These plans are best for individuals with very high uptime requirements, complex systems, and a desire to not have to invest in the technical skills needed to run a web server or server environment on their own. Many individuals see substantial savings by moving dedicated services to managed services since they can eliminate the need to invest in resources such as 24x7 technical support, storage technologies, networking technologies, and monitoring.

Plan Physical Components Bandwidth &ndash; Bandwidth is usually promoted as x number of megabytes or gigabytes per month or as x number of MB per second. One thousand megabytes is equal to one gigabyte. One gigabyte of data per month is equal to about 100,000 hits for a normal website. 3000 GB per month is equal to about one MBps. A normal website that is not transferring large files and that doesn't get many hits will stay under this range. If you have people downloading files or PDFs you will want 100 or more GB/month. If you have a large site semi-popular site with some a fair amount of files, you will want 3000 GB/month or more.

Disk &ndash; Many people choose the type of hosting plan they pick based on the amount of disk space that they are offered. The fact is that most web hosts offer far more disk space than they really have and unless you have a site that you know will use more space than the disk space offered by a plan tends to be pretty meaningless.

- SLA/Uptime &ndash; This is a very important number. Although many hosting companies don't offer you much recourse if they fall below their advertised uptimes, the uptime they print can give you some insight into how well their operation runs. Pretty much all hosts will offer 99.xxx (where the x's are replaced by one or more 9s) percent uptime. The more 9s that come after the decimal, the less often your site will be down.

99.9% uptime means that your site can be down for up to 9 hours per year.

99.99% uptime means that your site can be down for about 1 hour over the course of a year.

99.999% uptime means that your site can be down for about 5 minutes over the course of a year.

#### Plan Software Components

OS &ndash; When picking a shared, managed or dedicated hosting plan, you will need pick an operating system that your site will run on. Plans that run on top of Linux distributions tend to be cheaper than plans that run on top of Windows Server distributions. If you have decided on a shared plan and your site is written in PHP, HTML, Perl, or Ruby on Rails, I would recommend using a Linux plan. If your site is written in ASP, ASP.Net, or uses Frontpage Extensions, then you should probably select a Windows hosting plan. If you are going to have a managed or dedicated hosting plan use the OS that best matches your site but make sure that you are comfortable with it. PHP will run on windows so if you don't know much about linux don't get a linux dedicated server just because it is better suited to running PHP. Stick with what you know.

Supported Languages &ndash; Obviously if your site is written in a language you'll need to make sure that your hosting package supports that language. Make sure that you are also thinking about where your site may go in the future. If you currently have an HTML only site, but are thinking about moving to PHP, picking a plan that supports both will save you the trouble of having to move your site. If the languages supported aren't specified, you can assume that Linux plans will support PHP, Windows plans will support ASP.Net, and that if a plan doesn't specify that it supports Coldfusion or Ruby on Rails then it doesn't.

Databases &ndash; If your site stores data you will probably want to put it into a database. You have two main options here: MSSQL and MySQL. MSSQL is more expensive but works well with ASP and ASP.Net. MySQL works well with

PHP and is usually better suited to a Linux/Apache/PHP environment.

**Control Panel** – Most shared web hosting packages will come with a control panel of some sort. While some control panels are easier to use than others, they all offer similar levels of functionality. Once you've taken the time to learn to use a certain control panel it's usually easier to stick with that type of panel but don't let the fact that another hosting provider doesn't have the panel that you are used to keep you from switching. If you know how to use one control panel, you should be able to figure out the others.

**Email** – The majority of hosts who offer web hosting also offer email accounts with their web hosting services. The amount of email accounts offered is much like the amount of disk space offered. Many hosts will basically offer you as many email accounts as you want. With email, though, it is especially important to keep in mind how important service is. When email goes down many companies businesses grind to a near standstill. If email is important to your business don't choose a plan just because it is cheap. For more information see our article on Email.

**Extras** – Many hosting companies will offer a mind-boggling amount of extra features. This is because they don't cost them much, and they know that many people will just compare the number of extras in two plans and assume that the one with the most is the best. If you have already written your site, or your site has been professionally written for you, you probably won't need the majority of the extras that hosts offer. If you are in the initial stages of creating your site, or think that your site could take advantage of some of the extras that the web host provides then the extras could prove useful to you. Be wary of any components offered by your host that you can't find at other hosts. If you integrate your site too tightly with your host, you may find yourself in a bad spot if you ever want to leave them.

### Setting up your hosting plan >> 3. Getting Started

Once you've purchased a hosting plan you will need to get your site up and running. This is where choosing a host with good support can really help. Good hosts will hold your hand through the entire transfer process and some will even transfer your site to their servers for you. Here are the steps you or your host will need to take to transfer your site:

- If you are transferring email set up your email accounts on the hosts email server.
- Transfer your site's content onto the hosts server via FTP. You can use an FTP client such as CuteFTP or use Microsoft's built in FTP client.
- If you have a database back it up and restore it on your hosts database server. Common tools used to manage your database in hosted environments are phpMyAdmin, myLittleAdmin, SQL Management Studio Express, and MySQL Administrator. The first two tools are web based while your host will need to open up a port to their server to your IP in order for you to use the second two tools.
- Check your site using the IP address or hostname that your host gives you for this purpose to ensure that there are no errors.
- Log onto the site where you registered your domain name and change the name servers for your domain to the one's that your host gives you.
- If you are transferring email change your mail clients so that their configuration matches the configuration required by your host. Once you've taken the steps above, your site should be up within 48 hours (the time DNS takes to propagate) and you can sit back, relax and wait for the traffic to start coming in.