

Web Hosting Tips For Beginners

If you are thinking about setting up your first website or registering your own domain name, there are a whole host (pun intended) of companies out there lining up for your business. This is a double edged sword because although it's great for consumers to have choices, the greater they are, the more bewildering they become.

In your attempt to make a decision you will negotiate a minefield of headlines clamoring for your attention and probably baffling you beyond belief, so here are a few ground rules for those first venturing into the world of web hosting.

Before you do anything, it is wise to have a good idea of exactly what kind of user you are – will you be setting up a personal website or blog on your domain or are you a business user? If you are setting up a business website your priorities will probably be somewhat different and likewise your needs. Think carefully about what you want as you research the best deals. I have concentrated more on business users here, as a lot of the issues are perhaps not as vital to many non-commercial webmasters, although they are certainly no less worthy of consideration.

The first thing to remember, as with most things in life, the general rule will be that you get what you pay for. Big numbers and low prices do not always constitute a good deal. When you see companies offering a terabyte of storage for a dollar a month, remember that most websites need nowhere near this amount of disk space – it's a hollow offer because the company knows that you will almost certainly never need it, but big numbers look good, particularly to the uninitiated.

If you have some idea of the amount of space you will need, all well and good, if you don't, you will probably not need more than most companies offer you in a decent package.

If you are a business user, decide what kind of website you are hoping to run and what features you are likely to need – for example, will you want e-commerce facilities for online ordering? A good idea is to look at the websites of your competition as you will probably want something along similar lines. Make sure that the hosting company you choose can support the features you need.

At this point, a quick word about people who are engaged in online marketing – you will have certain requirements that some hosts may not be prepared to accommodate. Some hosts will not allow certain scripts to be hosted on their servers, so once again, buyer beware – if you want to set up a traffic exchange perhaps, or safe lists for example, you need to check before you buy your online space. Some hosting companies are geared far more towards certain markets than others so be sure to position yourself with a service that is sympathetic to your requirements – this applies to everyone, not just online marketers!

Returning to the numbers game, there are some that are very important. Look at the amount of data transfer or bandwidth that you are being offered. If you are expecting a high volume of traffic and a lot of activity (for example downloading of files, particularly large files like sound and video) your bandwidth requirements will be far greater than a personal user with their low traffic site about their daily life. There is nothing worse for business than to see a 'bandwidth exceeded' error when someone tries to access your business online – it looks very unprofessional and people are far less likely to return.

The other vital number is uptime. Once again, for business users in particular, downtime is a credibility and business killer, so the reliability of your host is paramount. Nobody can genuinely offer you one hundred percent uptime guarantee – that is just the nature of the technology, but you should be looking for ninety-nine percent upwards.

This leads us to support from the hosting company – it is almost a requirement nowadays for them to advertise 24/7 support, but remember that talk is cheap, and the definition of 24/7 support can be a very loose one. For you, when things go wrong, you need to be able to contact someone right away, but you also want problems fixed in the minimum amount of time – just having someone around to answer the phones out of office hours does not constitute 24 hour support. If you need technical support, particularly important to new users and less 'techie' types, will your host have the people and the time to assist you and answer your questions? It is difficult to know which hosting companies perform in this area so again, do your research – ask around, visit forums online and check any testimonials from existing customers. You will probably hear many horror stories, but hopefully some good feedback too, and forewarned is forearmed as they say.

Many web hosts rent their server space and although this is not necessarily a bad thing, it is another area where not all hosting companies are the same. If a company owns its own data center, you are often assured of far quicker response times should there be any hardware problems, there being no middle men to slow down the communication process. Hardware problems tend to be solved far more quickly by a host who has direct access to its servers.

As far as a lot of hosting features go, the numbers figure prominently in advertising, so know what they mean and you'll understand if they are important to you. As an example, I have the capability to set up unlimited email accounts, or at least 999. Do I need that many? Certainly not, but for some businesses this could be a very important

feature – particularly if you wish every employee, as well as every department, to have an email account on a given domain.

Talking of domains, how many will you want to host on your web space? If you are only just beginning the journey, you've bought your domain name; can you foresee ever needing unlimited domain name hosting? How many will your business need in the future? How many names do you want to pay for? How many sub-domains do you anticipate wanting to set up? So again, think about your needs before being blinded by marketing excess with the “big numbers” game.

Most hosting companies now offer a range of add-on services, for example, website building software – that sounds great to anyone new to the web but sometimes all it amounts to are a few templates. This might be fine if you have experience in web authoring, HTML, CSS……but if you're inexperienced, some host's web building software won't be of much use. I have heard from any would-be website builders who have spent money on a template, only to be completely lost as to how to edit it!

If these kinds of extras are important to you, be sure to understand what you are buying before parting with your money. There are some web hosting companies who provide a lot of support to new webmasters, both from their own staff and from other users of their hosting services – if you think you'll benefit from extra help in the areas outside of hosting, finding such a company could be invaluable to you.

I haven't gone into too much detail here because, after all, it's a general article aimed at beginners. My resource box at the foot of this article contains some useful links and leads to a lot more information so please check them out.

If you find a good hosting company straight off the bat, it will save you a lot of frustration and worry further down the line, so do shop wisely. Cheap may be just fine for many people and there are plenty of cheap web hosting offers around today, but if your business is going to depend on your web presence, it may not always be the wisest move to cut corners.