

Hosting Hints

By Dave Barrett

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To succeed in today's world of e-commerce, it is absolutely essential that you have a website. The host you choose can have a profound impact on the success or failure of your business.

One thing you need to consider is whether to use a professional host or a free host. I understand the desire to keep expenses down, especially in the critical start-up phase of your business. You'll be tempted to cut corners, but there are some corners you just shouldn't cut, and deciding on your web host is one of them.

On the Internet, image is everything. Do you want your visitors to see a professional business they can trust, or a business that's too cheap to pay a professional service? Or worse, to be dismissed as an amateur. That's the image a free web host conveys. When you weigh in the cost of buying software and the time involved to do it all yourself, you really aren't saving anything.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are some web hosts who try to justify charging higher than average prices by offering a vast assortment of extra features. Most people don't have the computing skills required to take advantage of all the features they offer, and they know it. By offering tons of extras that almost no one will use, they can jack up their rates and gouge their customers. Keep your future needs in mind, but don't pay for services you don't need.

Look for price and volume flexibility. Your host should have the ability to expand your services as your business grows. Most good hosts offer different pricing packages and let you upgrade to a larger package as your needs expand. Pricing varies widely, from inexpensive to unaffordable. Remember, you get what you pay for.

Make sure they offer a full range of hosting services. Even though you may not need advanced features now, it's probably a good idea to go with a host who offers them. By the time your

business expands to the point where you need to upgrade to the deluxe package, you'll have more than enough money to pay the extra costs to incorporate them into your site. Most hosts will even do it for you.

You probably won't need all these features when you are just starting out, but the most common ones to look for are:

- * 24/7 support
- * 24/7 FTP access
- * Guaranteed uptime
- * Regular daily backup
- * Personal CGI-bin
- * Java, Perl, and PHP enabled
- * Browser-compliant
- * Web based email
- * Autoresponders
- * High bandwidth & connection speed
- * Compatible with your software and skills
- * Microsoft Front Page compatible

A quality host must have the ability to properly manage its available bandwidth. If your host is not managing its bandwidth correctly, or using more than it can handle, the results could be disastrous. Hundreds of websites could suddenly go down, including yours, disrupting your sales and costing you money. As a rule, a host shouldn't be using more than 50% of its bandwidth. That's a big enough cushion if the extra bandwidth is ever needed.

Additionally, your host should offer you protection from any attacks by hackers. You should be able to rely on your host to keep a constant vigil over your website. You want the security of knowing your livelihood is being watched over by competent, trustworthy people. That is, after all, part of what you're paying them for.

One factor that cannot be stressed enough is stability. In my opinion, a good host should boast at least 98% uptime. Obviously higher is better, but a minimum of 98% should be guaranteed. If a visitor tries to access your site and it's down, you've lost a potential customer for life.

Make sure your host has regular, and reliable back-up systems. Crashes do happen, though thankfully not very often. In the unforeseen event of a crash, it's imperative that your host has up-to-date backups of your data, so it can be easily reinstalled when the system is back online. It may never happen to you, but it's best to choose a host that is prepared.

This is your livelihood, so always be vigilant. Don't be afraid to treat your web host as you would any other supplier. It's up to you to see to it that your host is providing you with the

services you're paying for. Research your potential host well and make sure they not only offer everything you need, for today and in the future, but are also reliable and trustworthy.

It can often take years to build the kind of reputation you need to truly be successful. Don't postpone starting your business any longer or you could lose momentum. Haven't you deprived yourself of real financial freedom long enough?

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Dave Barrett is editor of eMoney Monthly, official ezine of the eMoney Enterprises family of websites, including:

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