

Selecting the right web host - Part 2

By Michael Bloch

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In the first part of this article, we reviewed the current state of the hosting industry - there's many bargains to be had, but also many companies with traps set for the unwary. Take nothing at face value when choosing a web host, make a list of a number of different companies and don't sign up with any before you've tested out their client support with an email such as the following.

Don't make it too hard on the hosting companies in your email to start off with, you can ask more detailed questions as you reduce the list of possibilities. The following is a template that you might like to use.

The template email:

For the purposes of this exercise, we'll use an example of a typical Internet start-up who won't be looking for streaming-media or hosting large files in the short term. These questions are not highly technical and any sales person should be able to answer them confidently, competently and quickly. This will save you a lot of time in digging through promotional babble on hosting sites and allow you to focus on reviewing a number of companies quickly. It will also test their attention to detail and quality of service. Remember, if you don't get a response within 24 hours, strike them off your list of possibilities.

Even if some of these questions seem a bit simplistic and you already know some of the answers, they don't know that you know :0).

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"Dear Sales,

I am currently searching for a good web hosting service with excellent customer support and you are among the companies I am reviewing. I have taken a quick look at what you have to offer on your web site, but with so many services offering so many different options it can be pretty confusing. I would greatly appreciate you answering a few questions and your thoughts on a plan that would suit my needs.

Here is a list of my basic current needs:

At least 50 meg of Hard Drive space (Note: change this to suit)

At least 1 gig of Bandwidth per month (Note: change this to suit. 1 gig is plenty for most to start out with - beware of services offering unlimited bandwidth or disk space - discussed later in this article)

At least 20 email addresses (Note: change this to suit)

FrontPage 2002 Extensions (even if you don't use FrontPage, handy to have)

PHP 4 (even if you don't need this initially)

Perl 5 (for running scripts)

MySQL (database capabilities)

FTP access

Server logs access (for in-depth web site traffic studies later on)

Web site traffic monitoring reports

Easy to use admin interface

(Any other specific needs)

What would you recommend, bearing in mind that I'll need plenty of room to grow. Please also send the URLs of the suggested package and upgrade options pages. (Many of your questions will be answered on these pages, links will save you from having to hunt around on their sites)

Questions:

1. Are there setup fees?

(A setup fee is not necessarily a horrible thing, it just needs to be factored into your budget)

2. What is your uptime guarantee and downtime compensation policy?

(Look for at least 99.9% uptime over a month with some sort of compensation should it fall below that.)

3. Can I upgrade my plan at any time?

(A good service will allow you to change your plan at any time without penalties)

4. What are your excess bandwidth charges?

(Although unlikely you will get excess traffic during start-up phase, it's important to know how much you will be charged if you use bandwidth beyond your allowance. Data transfer or "bandwidth" refers to the amount of data going in and out of your site e.g. publishing up information or requests from visitors for information including page views.)

5. Is there a minimum contract?

(Some web hosts offer great monthly pricing, but when examining the fine print you may discover that in order to get good prices you must take out a contract for X months).

6. How often will my site be backed up?

(In a number of cases, you'll find that the cheaper the plan, the less likely your site will be backed up on a regular basis)

7. Do you offer secure server and e-commerce capabilities (shopping carts etc.) as an upgrade?

(You may not want this in the beginning, but it's handy to have)

8. Do you offer an affiliate program or bonuses for referring clients?

(If you settle with a host and you are happy with the service, no doubt you'll tell others. Why not make some money from that)

9. Is your free tech support available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week? What is your average response time?

(A VERY important point - many offer this but sometimes all you'll get is a recorded or autoresponder message during weekends and in the early hours of the morning. Telephone support

is not absolutely necessary - a good email support system is actually better than the phone as it provides a record for both parties. I've noticed that many helpdesk telephone support people have very little technical knowledge - they tend to rely on "wizards". If the problem isn't listed in their knowledge base, they may have no idea how to resolve it)

10. Just how large will my web site be permitted to grow in terms of hard drive space and data transfer.

Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions

Me.

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These questions and points are just to get you started in the reviews process and will allow you to weed out many crooks and poorly resourced solutions. It may seem like a lot to ask, but an experienced sales person should be able to complete the questions within a couple of minutes. Always be polite when asking questions as the answers will be provided by a human being with feelings as well. By asking questions in a courteous manner, you will get the relationship off to a good start.

When composing the email, skip a couple of lines between each question to encourage the person responding to put their remarks under the relevant question. This will give you a good record to refer back to in the future. Always respond to each response with a brief thank you note.

The unlimited bandwidth myth.

A number of web site hosting companies offer huge (or unlimited) bandwidth allowances at rock-bottom prices. Be wary of such offers. All bandwidth has to be paid for by someone. The fact is that most hosting services make the most profit from small, bandwidth friendly (low traffic) sites. Some companies offering huge data transfer quotas incorporate interesting "load balancing" techniques once your site does start experiencing heavy traffic flows. The end result is that if other web sites hosted on the same server need resources, your web site loses them and your site visitors may start experiencing massive slowdowns or other mysterious happenings.

The hosting company may also choose to close your account if you begin using what they consider to be too much bandwidth. If you look carefully at the terms and conditions of the vast majority of hosting services, they are able to close your account at any time, for any reason.

A strategic partnership

If you receive incomplete responses to your enquiries, curt remarks etc - no matter how good the offer may look on the web, give it careful consideration. There would be nothing worse than to open an account with a company who really doesn't give a damn about you. The sales process is where the company should be on their best behavior!

Choosing the right web host is crucial to the success of your online presence - it should be viewed as an important partnership/alliance between both parties. The benefits to the host are long term, in the form of you purchasing of other services offered by the company in the future and in referrals that you send to them. In this day of bleeding edge marketing technology, good ole' fashioned word of mouth referrals are still are still very, very powerful.

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