

Your Most Important Online Business Decision

By Barbara Camisa

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Your web business depends on your site's uptime around the clock. When you want to make a purchase online, you most likely take the time to check the credentials of that business. Yet, how many of you actually bother to check out the credentials and competency of a web host, which is absolutely the stronghold of your web business?

I've been in the hosting industry as a reseller for almost 5 years. It's become a zoo out there. With so many hosts coming and going, or sites constantly going down or getting cracked into from lack of security measures (very common), how can you really know for sure if you're going with a reliable and competent host?

Don't judge a host by the looks of their site. A professionally, well-put together hosting site is not a determining factor of a competent host.

Emailing to test their support response is NOT a good indicator of their response time. Some will be very fast for pre-sales questions, but extremely slow or non-responsive for support once you are a customer. On the other hand, sometimes very slow for pre-sales and fast for customer support.

Here are a few important tips to keep in mind when shopping for a web host:

First of all, be sure they have a phone number posted on their site. There's no reason why they shouldn't be reached easily via phone.

Phone them and ask questions. It's preferable to get a technically savvy person to call for you. You need to be assured that the host's staff is competent and security conscious. There are so many variables in securing servers. Only a competent technical person would know the key questions to ask, but importantly, can also tell by conversing with the host how competent they really are. I may sound redundant, but you'd be surprised at how many hosting providers wing their way i.e. they learn as they go along, thus, causing downtime and/or slowing down the speed of your website.

Also, discuss with them what your needs are for your business.

If you need any of the following, it's vital that you find out if the host can accommodate you:

Streaming Media - for live audio and video feeds

SSH (secure shell) - SSH is a secure telnet - Some programs need telnet access for installation.

Also, if you want to add more data to the data base that may be too large to install using a web-based data base system like phpMyAdmin (a common program provided by most hosts), it will require telnet access.

If a host provides unsecure telnet, run the other way!

SSL (secure sockets layer) Certificate - This is needed if you'll be using a merchant account to take payments from the web.

If you use an SSL Certificate, it is mandatory that you get an IP based account, whereby you get your own IP number instead of sharing the same IP number with several other accounts on the server.

Mailing List Accommodation - Many hosts are not equipped to accommodate large mailing lists on their email servers. So, if you have a large list and use your own list software, get the specifics on this.

Data Bases - Think about how many data bases you'll need to start with. For instance, if you'll be running a forum using php software, it will require one data base. You may decide to use a program to make your site data-base driven, that will be yet another data base needed.

CGI and PHP -They should already have this enabled on the server. If they don't, then they aren't keeping up with the latest technology.

Be sure the host can upgrade your account as your business grows.

I don't recommend that you get a dedicated server unless you know how to administer one or can pay for a system administrator to handle your. A lot goes into managing a server. When a host offers 'managed' servers, it doesn't necessarily mean that they take care of everything on your server. You are responsible for maintaining it, otherwise the average tech fees are \$95 per hour.

Find out how many backbone providers they have. A good host would have a minimum of 2, preferably more. That's a very important factor. A few years ago, I was hosted and also was hosting sites from a popular large international hosting provider. All the sites went down for two days due to a problem with their backbone. That's when I discovered that they only had ONE backbone provider. That could have been avoided had they another provider. Had I did my homework more thoroughly, I could have avoided a full day of downtime!

In the event you go over your bandwidth limit, does the site go down or do they just send you a bill with the extra costs, accordingly? You need to know this from the very start, so you don't get surprised if your site goes down from exceeding your bandwidth limit.

Also, there are hosts advertising 'unlimited bandwidth'. There's no such animal. Even backbone providers couldn't guarantee such a thing. That's impossible. Most hosts who advertise unlimited bandwidth have a disclaimer attached to their sites, usually stating that your site will go down or you'll be charged for extra bandwidth if you exceed 4 gigs.

Do they have daily backup? This is Very important! However, be sure to do daily backup of your own sites and any important info to your hard drive for safest measures. Also, download your sites to cd or zips and keep them in a fireproof safe-box along with your other important biz docs.

Word of 'Very Reliable' mouth from someone who has been with a host for at least a year, with minimal or no problems is another good factor. From time to time, problems can occur with the best of them. Importantly is the efficiency of the host, in handling the problems.

You can find out if a host is a reseller by using the tools at either <http://www.Sampade.org> or <http://www.DNSstuff.com> . There's nothing wrong with going with a reseller if they are very competent and manage their business well. Actually, many of the cream-of-the-crop resellers don't even advertise their services, since they get plenty of business via word of mouth.

The advantages of going with a very competent reseller are that you get more personable attention and some will even give you extra services. A reseller should tell you up front that they are a reseller.

If your bread and butter is dependent on your online business, you'll go the extra miles in doing your homework when shopping for a host, less you don't mind losing business and/or moving your sites from host to host.

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