

What Makes For A Good Host?

By Richard Lowe

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Internet Tips And Secrets <http://www.internet-tips.net>

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I've had to change web hosts a number of times. In fact, I spent most of this week changing from one host to another. Believe me, it is a major pain, although I have made sure that my site is always ready to move if necessary.

One thing I've become is very aware of the difference between a good host and a bad host. To put it simply (and obviously) a good host makes it easy for you to create and maintain your web site. A bad host gets in the way and makes you angry, unhappy and gives you an ulcer.

The key point to remember when evaluating hosts is the most important quality is responsiveness - of your site and support people. Your site should be up virtually all of the time (unfortunately computer crashes do happen but they should be rare and far between) and it must be fast. In addition, all good hosts react in a timely manner to support issues and questions. You can tell when a host is going bad from the failure of these key areas - unresponsive technical support, slow servers or constant downtime.

This article is intended as a kind of checklist - what is essential, essential if you need it, optional and not important at all? Look it over, then when you go to find a good host pull out the article and make sure it measures up.

Essential Qualities

There are a few attributes which are common to all good hosts.

Reasonable support - This is something you won't know until you've started using a web host and hopefully you will not need much support. However, when you have a question, concern or problem, it's essential that the you have a way to contact the support staff. Just as important is the handling of the issue needs to be fast and efficient. I wouldn't insist on a phone number, but an email or form interface with quick responses is essential.

Even if you don't have any particular reason to contact support, it's a good idea to send off a message occasionally just to see if they are on the ball.

Access to control panel - You should not use a host unless it gives you access to a well defined control panel. What does this do for you? It allows you to control the features of your web site (account) from your web browser. For example, using the menu you should be able to upload files, protect directories, add autoresponders and so on.

Excellent automation - This is perhaps one of the more important features of a good host. Automation. You should be able to access everything you want from a well designed menu and do virtually anything without involving a human being.

Control of creating protected directories - Sometimes it doesn't seem important, but sooner or later you will almost certainly want to create a protected directory. This is a directory (or folder) on your web site which requires a username and password. Any good web host will allow you to do this directly from your account menu.

Error pages - I would not host my site anywhere I could not create my own 401, 403 and 404 errors pages. I like the idea of letting visitors know in a nice way when there is a problem. The better hosts allow these files to be maintained from the control panel, although some simply allow you to edit your .htaccess file directly.

Reasonable performance - A web site must load quickly. It's hard enough to get page sizes down to the point where they load reasonably quickly without your web host slowing things down.

Domain Parking - It's incredible useful to be able to park a domain on your web site. This can be useful for having several closely related domain names (internet-tips.net and internet-secrets.net for example) as well as to just reserve domains for future use. A good host should be able to allow you to do this for at least a dozen domain names.

Good stuff to have if you need it

Telnet access - Being able to access your site from Telnet (command line) is useful to me, but most webmasters will never need this function. This is especially true if functions such as CRONTAB (scheduling tasks) can be done through the control panel.

Custom CGI scripts - If you are paying for a host, then you should make sure you can install your own CGI scripts. This is not important, of course, if you don't plan on including any of your own scripts.

PERL Support - If you use PERL routines, then this is essential. Again, this is not absolutely necessary if you are not using PERL.

SSI Support - Server Side Includes are a very nice way to make it easy to make changes to your

web pages. Again, you either need it or you don't.

PHP Support - PHP is a great server-side scripting language (far superior to ASP). If you can get it on a host (and most paid hosts support PHP) then you are doing well.

MySQL Support - MySQL is database tool. This allows you to get input from visitors, store it on your web site and allow your visitors to retrieve it later.

Unlimited autoresponders - I think most web hosts offer unlimited autoresponders with the feeling that they will not be used much. They always seem surprised to find that I've used them at all. Autoresponders are a great way to automate your web site, so it's a good idea to get them. If your host doesn't offer them and you wind up needing them, then you will need to purchase them from somewhere else.

Direct access to server logs - You can get along without accessing server logs, but it sure makes it easier to tell how you site is doing.

Upload from the control panel in addition to FTP access - I almost always use FTP access to upload (and download) files from my site. However, there odd occasions when I've used the control panel upload. Not essential, but nice to be able to use once in a while.

SSL Support - This is needed if you want to run secure web pages from your site.

Subdomains - A subdomain is a domain in the format of subdomain.domain. For example, wallpapers.internet-tips.net is a subdomain. These are very useful for separating functional areas of your site. A good web host will allow you to have as many of these on your site as you want.

FrontPage Support - Well, if you use FrontPage then you will obviously need to be able to upload pages. Personally, I would just as soon use FTP, as it's usually faster and better, even when using FrontPage for site development.

Not incredibly useful to most people

Web hosts like to say these things are important, but in reality they are mostly bells and whistles.

Search engine submission - All web hosts will boast in their promotional materials that they will submit your site for you to the search engines. You should be doing this anyway, so it's not incredibly useful that a host will do it for you.

BGMAILBOX and everyone.net support - These can be nice services, but they really are not necessary for most people. I think the main reason why I would want these in a host is simply to know they are available.

PERL modules - A few hosts will install PERL modules for you. This is a way to extend the functionality of PERL, and it's not very useful to most webmasters. However, if you do find a host which will let you do this, then you can be sure you can do almost anything.

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