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What to look for when choosing Web Hosting by JONE Bird

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There are a number of things to look for when choosing web hosting, particularly for your commercial website. Remember that your website is your company's face to the world, so your website needs to run smoothly, efficiently and be able to be visible at all times and as your business grows or expands, your web hosting will need to expand with you.

The first thing to consider is reliability and speed. Your website needs to appear quickly when surfers click to it. If they have to wait, they'll move on, maybe to one of your competitors. Reliability is also key. If your site isn't there when your visitors arrive and they get an error message, they may think you have gone out of business or at the very least think that you aren't bothered about your site. Again, they will move on. Make sure that the host you choose offers at least 99% uptime. Ask them for testimonials and ring them to see if they are satified with the service. Web servers, just like your home or business computers can develop faults from time to time an occasional problems cannot always be avoided, but most reputable hosts will have systems in place for such occaisions so that any downtime can be avoided.

Secondly consider the data transfer you may require. Data transfer is often referred to as traffic or bandwidth. Each time you get a visitor to your site, their web browser downloads images text etc which takes the effect of an amount of bytes which are transferred from your website to your visitor when they browse your site. Most reputable hosts will offer amounts of bandwidth which will more than cater for the average website, but make sure you check what the costs are if you exceed your monthly bandwidth limit even though it is unlikely it will happen. I have to say that in all my years in managing websites and providing web hosting, I have never received or had to invoice anyone for excess bandwidth use, nor have I met anyone who has.

The third thing to consider is disk space. You can be tempted into to choosing hosting accounts with vast amounts of disk space thinking that you need it. Unless you are planning on hosting a large number of video or audio files, most websites take up surprisingly little space, average being less than 5MB, so buying an account with 3GB of space will be overdoing it.

Next on the list to consider, and possibly one of the most important is Technical Support. You may from time to time run into problems with setting up your account, managing your email or need some assistance with some of the server's facilities. make sure you have access to their technical support team. Beware of hosts that just offer email support. Email is OK, but sometimes it helps to talk to somebody, so make sure that your host is available on the phone.

Coming up in fifth place and no less important are the facilities you get with your hosting account such as PHP, MySQL databases, Perl, htaccess. You may need to install various applications on your website such as content management systems, shopping carts etc. These facilities should be installed as standard on your web space. Check with your website developer before you start - he or she will tell you what you may require. If you plan on running an ecommerce store, you may need to have SSL (Secure Socket Layers) which will be needed if you are to take credit card payments. At the very least go for a host who offers shared SSL hosting which is a cheaper (or free) alternative.

Next is email. If you are a company, you may want to have email for yourself and all of your employees, or if you are new in business, you may need more email accounts as you expand so make sure that the hosting account you choose, has more than enough email or pop3 accounts to meet your needs now and in the future. Also look out for the ability to have email forwarding (redirects). If a member of staff leaves, you may need to close their account and redirect their email

to your own so that you can stay in touch with any contacts they have made. It is also useful to have auto responder facilities so that you can send an auto response email to anyone who emails you to inform them if you are out of the office or on holiday. Finally, a webmail account is always useful. If you are out of the office, it is always convenient to be able to log on to a central point on the web and check your mail even in these days of smart phones and tablets.

When you take a hosting account, you will invariably be given access to a control panel so that you can administer your web site and web space. These control panels come in all shapes and sizes, some simple to use and some wildly over complicated. Get your potential hosting provider to give you a guided tour of their control panel prior to signing up. There is always a learning curve in getting used to these panels, but some are uneccessarilly steep and if you want a quick set up, it may not be for you.

Cost is an obvious consideration. Compare different hosts and see what they are providing and what their costs are. As a rule of thumb, you get what you pay for, so don't pick the least expensive and don't go for the most expensive.

Finally, now you are totally confused and about to give up the idea of a website altogether, often the best course of action when choosing a hosting provider, is to give them a call and ask them any questions you may have. You can generally get an idea of the type of company you are dealing with by their approach to you on the phone and how they will deal with you in the future. Over salesy staff are not always a good thing and neither is the over technical approach. You need to understand what you are being told, so talking to a geek every time you need support may not be for you. In short, buying hosting does not have to be too onerous, do your research and it will be fine. Think of it in the same way as buying an insurance policy, go for the one that suits your price bracket and caters for your needs.

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