

# Web Hosting Buying Guide

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## Why the Web Hosting Decision Is So Important

When it comes to getting your website or blog online, the Web hosting company that you choose is very important. In fact, as you begin your search for a web hosting company, you will come across a great deal of information that will probably surprise you.

First, you will see web hosting nightmare stories. These stories tell us of the most awful aspects of web hosting companies. You will read of servers that have gone down at crucial times, sites that have been completely wiped of all of their content (without a backup in place), shoddy customer service, web hosting companies that shut you down for no apparent good reason, and so much more.

These horror stories are why the web hosting decision that you make is so important. These stories are true, and if you don't choose the right web hosting company, these nightmares can become yours – easily.

It really doesn't matter what your purpose in setting up a website is. If you are just setting up some personal pages or building an online business empire, it takes a great deal of your time and work. When you wake up one morning to find that your web hosting company has wiped out your entire site, all of that hard work could simply be gone in the blink of an eye. In the case of a personal site, you've only lost your hard work. However in the case of a business venture, you've probably also lost a great deal of money.

It isn't just the bad service of web hosting that affects you. Many people take the cheap route and wake up to find that their web hosting service has flown the proverbial coop during the night...taking your web pages with them. This happens more often than you might think, and it happens regardless of how far in advance you have paid for the service.

Some web hosting companies try very hard, and don't disappear, but cannot handle the service that you need...simply because they are not set up for that level of service. With many web hosting companies, you can call and upgrade in the blink of an eye if the need arises (such as if you need more bandwidth in a hurry). Others simply don't have the ability to be that flexible.

As you can see, web hosting is not as simplified as we like to think it is. There is more to it than just picking a web hosting company out of a hat, typically based on the cost. You must do your due diligence to find the right web hosting company for your needs, as well as a web hosting company that has stability, in terms of their business structure, to be sure that the host won't disappear into the night. There is a great deal to consider, and it's an important decision. Let's start by discussing the fact that you get what you pay for.

## **You Get What You Pay For**

You get what you pay for. That statement is true no matter what you are purchasing, but it is especially true when it comes to web hosting. Many people who are new to building sites on the Internet will make their web hosting decision based on price, and this is the worst mistake that you can make.

Yes, there are cheap hosting solutions out there. Unfortunately, they don't offer much of a solution. If a web hosting service is going to disappear overnight, it will be one that charged cheap prices in most cases. But your reason for avoiding 'cheap' web hosting goes beyond that.

When we make a purchase, we generally only see things from our own point of view. In the case of web hosting, however, you must also learn to see things from the web hosting company's point of view. If they are charging a ridiculously low price, but advertising great service, you have to ask yourself several questions.

Running a web hosting company isn't cheap. Those servers cost money to purchase and to maintain. Support staff costs money. Networks cost money. There is a high overhead, unless it is a reseller account (we will be discussing account types later). Even if it is a reseller account, the reseller has to pay fees to the main hosting company. So, how is it that they can offer these cheap web hosting prices, and offer this level of service that they are promising?

In most cases, they cannot, which is why you will become an unsatisfied customer, and why so many web hosting companies such as this disappear overnight.

As much as price is a factor, it isn't something that you base your choice on first. In fact, price is the absolute last consideration. The first steps are to figure out what your site will need to do, look at the different types of accounts that are available, determine which features you require, determine how much disk space and bandwidth that you need, look at the reliability of the web hosting company, look at the technical and customer support offered by the company, and so much more.

With that information determined, you can find different web hosting companies that meet all of your requirements, and then – and only then – choose one of those, based on price.

One final thought about getting what you pay for...when it comes to a business site, a free website is never an option. These are suitable for personal web pages, and nothing more. Don't make that fatal error! Pay for your domain, and pay for you're hosting for the best results, and the most positive web hosting experience.

## What Will Your Site Do?

Before you even start looking for web hosting service, you need to be very clear about what you expect your site to do. Your expectations and desires for your site play a huge role in determining which web hosting company, and which web hosting package you end up choosing.

So, what will your site do? Will it require databases? If you plan to have a forum, a database is required. Will it be displaying a lot of pictures and video? This is an indication that you need a fast server. Do you expect a heavy load of traffic? This means you need bandwidth. Will you have tons and tons of files on the site? You need more disk space.

If you will be hosting several domains, you need a web hosting account that is set up for that. If you will be selling items from your website, you may need a web hosting company that has SSL capabilities. As you can see, every decision that you make concerning what your site will contain has a direct impact on the type of web hosting that you need.

So, have a very clear idea about everything that your site will do. These decisions are not best left to when you are actually putting the site together. Site design always starts with a list of 'features' that will be on your website. Get a piece of paper, or fire up your text editor, and start making that list.

Once you think you've finished that list, go back and look at it. These are the things that you want for your site right now. What about later on? The chances are good that you plan for your site to grow at some point – or at least for your business to grow – so what additional things will your site need to have in the future?

Sometimes it is hard to look into the future, but you must try. Moving to a new web hosting company is possible, but it takes a great deal of work, and something invariably goes wrong during the move. Hopefully, you can determine what is expected from your website in the future now, so that you can choose a great web hosting company that will take you and your website on into the future.

Don't rush this process. Take your time and really think about it. Write it down. This is the start of not only your overall site design...it is also the start of your personal checklist when you start shopping for a web hosting service.

This process may not take you very long at all if you plan on having nothing more than a blog on your site, but in the case of static web pages or content management systems, you really have to put some thought into this – and don't forget the future.

## Which Type of Account Do You Need?

In your quest for a good web hosting service, you will see a variety of different account types available. Not all web hosting services offer all types. It is very possible that your site design will require a specific type of service. It is also possible that you have a preference for a type of web hosting account all ready in mind.

If you don't, it is important to know the difference between different account types, and to get a preference in mind. As stated earlier, price is usually the last thing to consider. But different types of accounts have different prices. Obviously, you probably think that you want the best possible type, but there really is no such thing. What is best for some sites isn't necessarily what is best for other sites – or for your pocket book – when it comes to web hosting.

Different types of web hosting include free web hosting, shared hosting, clustered hosting, virtual dedicated servers, reseller hosting, dedicated servers, grid hosting, co-location servers, and virtual private servers. Let's take a look at each type.

- **Free Web Hosting:** As mentioned earlier, free hosting is not an option when it comes to a business website. Of course, this doesn't mean that free web hosting isn't available to you. It just means that first, it is highly unprofessional, and second, a free server most likely won't have the features and services that you require from a web hosting company.
- **Shared Web Hosting:** Shared hosting may also be referred to as virtual hosting. What this means is that you share the server with other customers of the web hosting service. The server is not dedicated to your website. This is an option, but you should be aware that the actions of the other website owners that are on that shared server can impact the performance of your website. If you hear that this isn't so, think about it. If someone else on your server has a ton of files that are being accessed by a ton of traffic, it can bog the whole server down – affecting your site.
- **Clustered Hosting:** Clustered hosting means that there are several different servers, all hosting identical content. It may also entail hosting different content for the same domain. Clustered hosting is designed for sites that have an incredibly large number of files, and a high amount of traffic – like YouTube or Google. This is out of the scope of what most businesses will require, and of course, it is one of the costliest options.
- **Virtual Dedicated Servers:** A virtual dedicated server is also referred to as a virtual private server. This is a server that is actually uses the same

principle as the shared hosting service. The difference is that the server is partitioned, and each partition, known as a virtual dedicated server, actually acts as a dedicated server. It can have a separate or different operating system than the other sites on the server. One of the nice things about a virtual dedicated server is that it can be rebooted, separate from the other virtual servers on the shared server. You basically get most of the benefits of a dedicated server, at a much lower price.

- **Dedicated Servers:** With this type of server, the server is fully dedicated to your site or sites. This means that you are not sharing the server or resources with other site owners. Sometimes, a dedicated server acts as a shared server, but this is typically when the leaser or owner of that server hosts other sites that he owns on that server, or hosts other people's sites for a fee. Typically, however, a dedicated server is needed for large sites that have a high volume of traffic.
- **Reseller Hosting:** This type of service allows you to start your own web hosting service, or to host an unlimited number of domains on one server. The server could be dedicated, or it could be shared. People who need to host a number of domains, such as niche marketers that market in an untold number of niches, will usually go with this option.
- **Co-Location Servers:** This is the most expensive type of web hosting. It is essentially an uber dedicated server, where the server is housed in its own physical location, with its own dedicated team of technical support. Obviously, this is usually the most dependable type of server.
- **Home Servers:** A home server is a server that you run yourself. This means that you must allow access to the server from the world wide web. Operating and maintaining such a server isn't cheap, and in many cases, it is unreliable because of having to settle for a less powerful server due to costs. This is seldom a good option unless you really already know a great deal about running a server.

You must also consider the hosting platform. The platform simply means the type of operating system that the server is using. There are two choices: a Windows Server or a Linux Server.

- **Windows Server –**

- You do not need to host on a Windows server just because you are running Windows on your own system. That is a common misconception.
- Windows servers are often more expensive than Linux servers, although this isn't because Windows is better...it is because Linux is open source,

while Windows has a high licensing fee, which the web hosting company passes on to the consumer.

- A Windows server is needed if you plan to use ASP pages.
- Many claim that Windows isn't as secure as Linux, although many others claim that the security level is about the same.
- Windows does not offer SSH access, but does offer FTP access, as does Linux.
- Windows can be used with Microsoft Front Page, as can Linux.

- **Linux Server –**

- Linux is typically cheaper than Windows.
- Linux is just as secure as Windows, and some claim that it is even more secure.
- ASP pages cannot be used with Linux. However, Linux can handle PHP, Python, XML, and MySQL databases.
- Linux offers FTP access, as well as SSH access.
- Microsoft Front Page can be used with Linux.

Finally, you must consider the different types of control panels that are used for your web hosting account. Cpanel is the most common, and many believe the easiest to use. Cpanel is used on Linux servers.

**Linux Only Control Panels:**

Cpanel  
DirectAdmin  
Interworx

**Windows Only Control Panels:**

Helm  
Hosting Accelerator  
CWI Panel  
InsPanel

**Both Linux and Windows:**

Plesk  
HSphere  
Ensim



## How Much Bandwidth and Disk Space Do You Need?

Bandwidth and disk space are important considerations, because they play a huge role in the overall performance of your web site. Bandwidth and disk space are not the same thing. They are two different things, as follows:

**Bandwidth:** This is the measure of data transfer rate – how fast bits move from one location to another. In terms of web hosting, it describes how fast the information on your website can be displayed on the users screen. But this measures more than speed, it also measures amounts. If you exceed your amount of bandwidth, it can be very costly.

During product launches, servers are often turned off by a web hosting company if bandwidth is being exceeded. Bandwidth may also be exceeded if too many people are trying to access the same file at the same time on your server. Bandwidth is usually available on a 'per month' basis. This means that when the web hosting company states that the account has 6000 gigabytes of bandwidth, you have 6000 gigabytes of bandwidth for the month. Bandwidth is used each time someone visits your site, and it is even used when you are uploading files to your site.

Some companies offer unlimited bandwidth. In some cases, they really mean that, and in others they really don't. Instead, the bandwidth limitation is so high that they simply don't expect you to ever reach it.

So, if we are just talking about the transfer rate of bits of data, why are there limitations? Limitations are extremely important from the web hosts side of the fence – and it should be important to you as well. When bandwidth limits are set and divided among all of the sites on a server, it is essentially a measure of what the server itself can withstand before crashing.

So, how much do you need? A simple formula is:

1. Determine the average size of your pages in Kilobytes, as an example we will use 46KB.
2. Estimate how many visits each page of your site will get during the month. Multiply this number by the total number of pages you expect to have. For our example, we will say that you have ten pages, and you expect ten visitors per month, for a total of 100 views.
3. Multiply the KB by the Page views -  $46\text{KB} \times 100 = 4600\text{KB}$  of bandwidth needed. To be on the safe side, always get more bandwidth than you actually need, even if it costs more!

**Disk Space:** Disk space refers to the amount of hard drive space that has been allocated to you with your web hosting package. In the case of dedicated servers, where the entire hard disk is allocated to you, it refers to the size of the disk. While bandwidth can be exceeded – usually at a monetary cost – disk space cannot be exceeded because the hardware won't allow it.

The amount of disk space that you require can be determined by the sizes of files that you will have loaded on the server. This includes text and HTML pages, script sizes, cascading style sheets, image sizes, media sizes (audio and video), PDF file sizes, and other files, such as downloadable software packages. It all counts towards the amount of disk space that you need and use.

When you think of disk space and its affect on the performance of your site, consider your own personal computer. As you know, the more space that is filled on your hard drive, the slower your computer runs – the performance starts lacking. The same thing happens when the disk space on a server is filled – there is the possibility that the site starts running slower.

Obviously, the more bandwidth and disk space you require, the more your hosting package will cost. Your first instinct may be to get the most bandwidth and the most disk space available, but that may not be the smartest financial move. Remember that you pay for that disk space and bandwidth whether it is used or not – each month or year.

The smarter thing to do is to find a web hosting company that will allow you to upgrade later on if you need to, and to go with slightly more than what you need at this time. Some people play it extremely safe, determine how much disk space and bandwidth they actually need, and then double it – with the option of upgrading to even more disk space and bandwidth later on, for a higher price.

You definitely need to find out a web hosting company's policy on exceeding bandwidth. Again, you cannot possibly exceed disk space without upgrading to a higher disk space account...but you can exceed bandwidth.

Some company's will instantly (temporarily) shut down your site when you exceed bandwidth until they can get in touch with you so that you can upgrade. If you don't upgrade, the site remains shut down (unavailable on the Internet) until the beginning of the monthly cycle, when you get to start your bandwidth count over.

Others will go ahead and let the site keep running, and the bandwidth to keep going over, and then bill you for the overage...which often means shockingly, unexpected – and often unaffordable - high bills. Make sure that you are exceedingly clear concerning the company's policy on bandwidth overage so that you aren't surprised by a shutdown – which can seriously affect your bottom line – or surprised by a high bill, which is also detrimental to your bottom line.

## What Features Do You Require?

As you may now understand, not all web hosting services are created equally. There are many things to consider, but the good news is that no matter what your requirements are, there is a web hosting company or web hosting package out there to meet those requirements. Here are some common features that you might want to look at:

**The Control Panel:** As stated earlier, the most common type of control panel used is Cpanel, but it is only available for Linux servers. Each of the different control panels has different features of their own. For example, Cpanel also includes a feature called Fantastico, which makes installing things such as blogs, content management systems, forums, productivity applications, and more as easy as filling out a short form and clicking a button.

**FTP:** Most web hosting packages will allow you to upload and download files in a web based atmosphere, however you might prefer to use FTP for this (file transfer protocol) as it usually gives you greater control of how the files are uploaded. Not all web hosts provide FTP access.

**Email:** Obviously, you want a web hosting solution that offers email – and unlimited email accounts is preferable. This makes it possible to set up email addresses such as yourname@yourdomain.com, Service@yourdomain.com, etc. The email may be web based only, but the preferred email option is POP3, which means that you can set it up in your favorite email client, such as Microsoft Outlook. You may also want the ability to offer free email accounts to your visitors.

**Backup Services:** As you probably know, backing up your site is essential. You may have copies of your web pages on your own system, and your own personal backups, but what about your databases? Forums, mailing lists, and even blogs use databases, and you want a web hosting company that backs up this information on a regular basis. Not all web hosting companies offer this service – believe it or not.

**Database Support:** Again, many other features will require the use of a database. These features may include forums, mailing lists, blogs, directories, and more. Unlimited databases are preferred. The most common type of database used on the web is MySQL, but your web host may also support Microsoft Access databases as well.

**PHP Support:** PHP is embedded HTML that is server side. It is essentially a scripting language that is very useful for numerous things. While most now offer PHP support, there are still web hosting companies that are living in the dark ages and do not offer such support.

**SSL Support:** If you will be selling things from your site, or collecting any information that may be sensitive from your visitors, you will require SSL support to ensure that the information being transmitted isn't intercepted by hackers or unsavory software applications that hackers use. Make sure that this is offered. Also note that an SSL encrypted page starts with https:// instead of just http://.

**Statistics:** While there are many stand-alone web statistic applications that you can use by just pasting a little code into your pages, you will most likely want a web hosting account that offers statistics. Awstats are the best, but you may also want to be able to get raw access log files as well.

**Sub-Domain Support:** This means two different things in the web hosting world. First, it means that you can have multiple domains (preferably unlimited) on the server – all for one price. The second thing that it means is that you can create and use sub domains, such as subdomain.domain.com. You may also want to check for domain parking support, where you can park domains that you are not currently using.

**.htaccess:** Not all web hosting companies give you access to the .htaccess file. Sometimes, you may have a reason for editing this file. Make sure that you will be able to access it and edit it.

**eCommerce Capabilities:** Is there shopping cart software available for you to use on your account? If you need eCommerce for your site, and this isn't available through the web hosting company, you will have to purchase your own and install it – which can be painful and expensive.

**File Size and Type Limitations:** Many shared hosting accounts have a limitation on the size of the files that you upload. If you plan to upload large video files or software packages for your visitors, this can be a problem. Some will also not allow you to upload certain types of files, such as .exe files. Know what you require, and find out what is and is not allowed.

**SSH Access:** SSH access typically means that you can access your site and your control panel via Telnet. Not many people still use this method, but some prefer it. If you are one of those people, make sure that it is available. Telnet typically offers a more secure way of transferring and working with files on your server.

**Security and Spam Filtering:** How vulnerable is the web hosting servers to DOS attacks? What about spam filtering? Is the range of domains that the web host servers use blocked by spam filters? This is common if the web hosting service is notorious for hosting spammers. It's a good idea to read reviews of the hosting service. Ask around in web hosting forums, or do a search in your

favorite search engine for complaints about your Web hosts name. Don't open yourself up to attack or accusation simply because you were not informed.

**Password Protection:** You may want or need the ability to password protect certain directories on your server. The web hosting account must be set up to handle this, or it can be very complicated. Even if you don't need password protection now, you may at some point, so this is an important feature to have.

**Custom Error Pages:** Not all web hosting companies offer you the option of having your own customized error pages, instead only using ugly pages, or pages that do nothing more than promote their own service. You definitely want the ability to create your own custom error pages. These are the pages that visitors see if they are trying to access a page on your site that doesn't exist, or that no longer exists.

**FrontPage Extensions:** If you plan to use Microsoft FrontPage, you will need Microsoft FrontPage extensions installed on your server. This should be something that the web host provider handles. Not all web hosting companies offer Front Page Extensions support. It is vital that you make sure that they do, and that you request that those extensions be installed when your account is set up. Note that sometimes, FrontPage Extensions count against your disk space.

**Community Support:** Will you have the ability to set up chat rooms or forums? Forums are almost always allowed, but chat rooms are often banned from the service because of the bandwidth that they require. Good web hosts not only allow chat and forums, but also have chat and forum applications ready to install at the click of a button inside your control panel.

**Website Builder:** If you are new to building web sites, you may want to find a web host that offers a built in site builder. Many web hosting companies are making this option available now, often at no extra cost. These applications are usually quite good, and very easy to use – and you won't need any HTML knowledge. Some services don't offer a website builder, but will offer free templates that you can use and customize, although this typically requires HTML knowledge.

**CGI Capabilities:** Many scripts will require the use of a CGI-bin. Some web hosts don't allow access to a CGI-bin, and others won't even provide a CGI-bin. In almost all cases, it is best to have a CGI-bin, as well as access to it. While CGI and Perl have mostly been replaced with PHP and ASP, there are still many applications that will require a CGI-bin.

**Streaming Audio and Video:** If you plan to use streaming audio or video on your website, this must be something that your web host is capable of handling. Make sure that they have support for multimedia such as this. Note that if you are linking to a video or audio file that is not on your server, you don't have a need

for streaming audio and video support. This only pertains to video and audio that will be directly uploaded to and accessed from your site.

**Mailing Lists:** Many people use commercial autoresponders for their mailing lists, but some people want more control, and require a web hosting service that offers mailing lists – unlimited mailing lists are preferable. By hosting your own mailing list, you simply have more control over those lists. However, typically creating and managing mailing lists in this manner is much more complicated than using a commercial autoresponder.

**Multi Language Support:** If your site will cater to different countries, obviously it needs to be available in different languages. This means that your web hosting service must have multi language support. Note that multi-language support does not mean that your site will instantly be translated to a different language. It means that if the end user is using a system or application that can translate to a different language, the host will allow such a system or application to do this on the user's machine. Multi-language support also means that you have the option of creating your entire site in a language other than English, including file names.

**Redirection Services:** If you are redirecting, this means that when someone types in a URL or clicks on a link, they are taken to that page, but then whisked right away to another page or site. Often, depending on how fast the redirection occurs, they never even see the page that they originally went to, and often fail to notice that they've even been redirected to a different page.

Other possible features that you may want to consider include private name servers, a billing system, Ruby on Rails, Python, Cron, Curl, GD, Image manipulation applications, extra ASP hosting if the server doesn't allow it, email aliases, autoresponders (not to be confused with mailing lists), mail forwarding, web based mail, hot link protection, the ability to ban IP addresses, customer support desks, guest books, portals, counters, the ability to easily create and implement forms, and more.

This is not a list of all possible features that could be offered or available. To make such a list may be virtually impossible, since there are so many applications that can be installed on a server it would probably be impossible to even know of all of them.

If you require something different, you will need to check with the web hosting company to be sure that it is offered as a part of the package. In some cases, some features are offered separate from the package, meaning that there is an additional cost for those features or services.



## Learn More about the Web Hosting Company

While features are important, there are other issues that can make you choose one web hosting company over another. Here are some other things that you will want to learn about the web hosting company that you are considering:

- **Uptime:** Many companies will advertise a 99.9% uptime. This means that the server rarely, if ever goes down. Now, before you get excited about that prospect, note that no server can really promise – without a doubt – that there will never be any downtime.

A well maintained server will have down time, but will make that down time very limited because they are keeping up to date with upgrades and always ensuring that things are running smoothly – immediately dealing with problems that could interfere with the overall uptime of the service.

Most companies will state that they have 99.9% uptime, but this doesn't mean that they actually do. The bigger question is if the uptime is guaranteed. Few web hosting companies will guarantee uptime, so you usually have to settle with the 99.9% claim.

- **Money Back Guarantee:** A reputable company will offer anywhere from a thirty to 90 day guarantee on their service. This means that if, within that time frame, you are unhappy with the service, you can request a refund and cancel the web hosting service.

Make sure that you read the conditions and stipulations of that guarantee. In most cases, the guarantee will only apply if you are moving the domain name to another service, and this is verified. This prevents scammers from using the service temporarily, essentially for free, just to run a limited time promotion or things such as this.

- **How You Are Billed:** Some web hosting companies will bill monthly, while others will bill quarterly or yearly. Some will give you a choice, while others will not. Many will make it cheaper for you if you pay by the year or quarter, as opposed to paying monthly. Will you be billed automatically or sent an invoice? Do you have an option? Find these things out, and make sure that the web host that you want to use allows for the way that you prefer to be billed.
- **Set Up Fees:** Many web hosts these days do away with set up fees. Others will waive the set up fee if you purchase a bigger web hosting package, or when they are running specials. Still others will charge a one

time, non-refundable set up fee regardless. How much is that fee, how should it be paid, and what does it entail? Is it a one-time fee?

- **Contracts:** Some web hosting companies will require you to sign a contract, agreeing to use their service for a specified period of time. This is common when using a dedicated server of any type, but less common for shared servers. Are you fully prepared to meet the terms of the contract? If you aren't, don't sign it. If you do sign it, and you break the contract, you are still legally responsible for all of the fees that you would have owed under the terms of that contract, including monthly hosting fees.
- **Stability of the Company:** Remember that we discussed companies that disappear into the night. That really does happen. Find out how long the web hosting company has been in business. Look for signs that the company isn't doing well (this can be researched in any search engine). Better known companies, such as GoDaddy and HostGator have been around for a long time, and aren't likely to disappear.
- **Installation Services:** There may come a point in time when you need certain scripts or software installed for you. If so, will they install these things for you free of charge? If there is a fee, how much is it? Is that fee billed to you or paid upfront? These are very important things to know – especially if you already know that you don't have the technical skills to install such scripts or software yourself.
- **Price:** Finally, we are coming to the point where you can start considering the price, although you will probably want to consider customer and technical support first, which we cover next. But as far as price goes, how does the web hosting company compare to other companies that offer the same features and the same level of service?

Is it possible that you can slightly alter your requirements in order to get a much lower price? In many cases it is, and you will be amazed at how much a few adjustments to your requirements or expectations can change the overall price of the service. Of course, in many cases, you won't be willing or able to sacrifice some features or service levels in an attempt to lower the price of the overall service. There is no set price that one could tell you that you should pay for your service. The cost of your service will depend on too many factors to say specifically that you 'shouldn't pay more than x number of dollars for web hosting service.' Again, consider what it is that you are seeking, and then compare prices.

There may be other things that you consider as well which are not listed here, that are more specific to your own personal situation. Now, what about customer and technical support?



## What About Customer and Technical Support?

Although this is near the bottom of the list in terms of what to look for in a web hosting company, these are two of the most important aspects. Customer service and technical service are vital to the overall operation of your website, although few people realize this.

For example, if the site goes down in the middle of the night, or on the weekend, is there a number that you can call to make a report and have the service restored? If there is some other type of technical issue, how is it reported, and how is it handled? What about billing issues?

All of this matters, and if the customer service and technical support are shoddy, using this web host could turn into an absolute stressful nightmare for you. Let's look at each aspect of this service:

**Customer Service:** Customer service is typically the department or person that you will deal with when you initially establish your service. They are also the ones that you contact regarding billing issues. Past the initial setup and any billing issues or changes that may crop up during the course of the service, the rest of your contact with the web hosting company will probably be with technical support.

Ideally, the customer service department will be well run. If it is, there will be few or no billing issues at all. The customer service staff should be friendly and willing to help you with your problem or concern. However, note that customer service can rarely help you out with technical issues. Instead, they should transfer you to the technical department, or direct your correspondence to tech support. Customer service is rarely offered 24/7.

**Technical Support:** These are the guys that are supposed to get up in the middle of the night to fix your problem. These are the guys that will install your scripts. These are the guys that will cut off your service if you start exceeding bandwidth, although customer service is probably who you would contact to get the service turned back on. These guys can be your best friends, or your worst enemies.

Technical support should be offered 24 hours per day, seven days per week, including holidays. If it isn't, find a web hosting service that does offer this, as there are so many that do that you shouldn't have to settle for one that doesn't.

Ask questions about the technical support staff, and get to know them a bit. What is their experience in this field? What are their skills? You should look at the tech support staff at your web hosting company just as you would look at a child care service for your child. After all, your website could very well become like a child

to you, and you want to be sure that it has the best possible care, and that the staff knows what to do in the event of an emergency – and that they can be reached in such an event.

A good technical support staff will know about problems with your server long before you will – and should already be on top of things by the time that you notice, if you ever even get the chance to notice.

**Dealing with Customer or Technical Support:** You've probably been told, since you were a child, that you could catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. This is absolutely true, and while the customer support and technical support staffs at your web hosting company are there to serve you, it is in your best interest to treat them with a healthy amount of respect and civility.

This doesn't, by any means, mean that you should let them run all over you, or that shoddy service should go unnoticed and unmentioned. It means that when you treat people with healthy respect and decorum, they are more likely to take care of your problem quickly, to the absolute best of their ability.

On the other hand, if you want to call them up with guns blazing, screaming and cursing at them, they are more likely to work more slowly at fixing your problem. In terms of the technical issues that may be experienced, you must realize that humans actually have little control over technology.

Your site most likely didn't stop working properly because a tech support guy wasn't doing his job – it could be that a piece of hardware failed unexpectedly. This happens, and human error plays no role in it.

In terms of customer support, software (technology) is often used to handle billing matters. Sometimes, software goes haywire. You've had that happen yourself, on your own computer. Companies are not infallible in this area either. Software goes haywire, you might get double billed – if you call up and explain the situation, calmly, rationally, and with respect, the customer support team will do everything within their power to rectify the situation and make you happy.

On the other hand, not all customer support staffs and technical support staffs are made up of professionals. If you have tried to be respectful and reasonable, and have been met with less than the same, or with shoddy service, you need to complain to someone higher up the food chain at the company.

If the situation is not rectified at that point, you can assume that the entire service is shoddy, and it is time to consider going through the hassle of moving to a new web hosting company.

## Asking Questions and Getting Honest Answers

When you are first selecting a web hosting question, you will most likely have tons of questions concerning different features and whether or not a host can handle certain aspects of the site that you have planned.

You will of course want to ask the web hosting company those questions. At the same time, however, you must realize that the hosting company is in the business of getting your business and making money. This means that you may not always get the truest answer. That is not to say that all web hosting companies are dishonest, but like any industry, there are some really bad apples.

For this reason, after you've gotten the information that you wanted from the company in question, take those same questions to some of the better known webmaster forums to get an honest answer from those who have had dealings with that particular web hosting company – and those who have nothing to gain in your decision.

If nobody can answer your question in these types of forums (this would be rare), you can use the search engine to possibly find the information. In most cases, if you search hard enough, you will find the honest answer to your question. In some cases, you won't know the answer until you've actually tried the service out.

For this reason, you might want to take things slow when you first sign up with your web hosting service. Just put a few pages up. Use one or two applications that require the database. Take the first week or two to try out the features and see how they work. Is the control panel easy to use? Use applications that let you know each time the site goes down. There are many such applications out there – some are free while others have a cost to use.

During this self created 'trial phase,' make sure that you have at least one technical issue so that you can contact technical support. Have a customer service issue if possible, so that you can contact customer support. How quickly do they respond to you? How quickly and efficiently did they handle your problem?

Hopefully, you've chosen a company that offers that money-back guarantee. If you find that the web hosting service is less than what you expected, simply request a refund, and move your domain name to a new web hosting company and try again, using the same self created trial period as before. Follow this process until you find a web hosting service that you are happy with.

## Web Hosting Resources

### **Web Hosting Companies:**

GoDaddy  
<http://www.godaddy.com>

HostGator  
<http://www.hostgator.com>

RackSpace  
<http://www.rackspace.com>

StartLogic  
<http://www.startlogic.com>

Host Monster  
<http://www.hostmonster.com>

### **Webmaster Forums:**

Webmaster Forums  
<http://www.webmasterforums.com>

Webmaster Talk  
<http://www.webmaster-talk.com/>

Digital Point  
<http://forums.digitalpoint.com/>

Webmaster-Forums  
<http://www.webmaster-forums.net/>

V7N  
<http://www.v7n.com/forums/>

### **Website Utilities:**

Free Webmaster Tools  
<http://www.free-webmaster-tools.com/utilities/index.html>