

Choosing a Good Web Host

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I wrote this for my clients that have questions about picking a good host. Please keep in mind that I can make recommendations only for the hosts I've used myself; these are just my opinions. These recommendations are focused on the shared hosting packages that most clients will use, at least when starting out.

Minimum Hosting Requirements

I recommend that clients choose hosts that offer Unix or Linux operating systems running Apache Server, because this is a stable and easy platform to use. The vast majority of clients will not need Windows-based hosting unless your site was written using ASP.

The host should offer PHP 4 or 5, MySQL 4 or greater and support for, at a bare minimum, the number of databases used on your site (one for your blog, one for your image gallery, etc.). You should be able to set up databases yourself, or have your web designer do it for you; there is no need to go with a host that charges you extra to do this or makes you wait for them to take care of it when they find the time.

The host should offer an easy-to-use control panel with a graphic user interface (GUI) like cPanel; phpMyAdmin or a similar GUI for managing databases, simple data backup options, and FTP access via a desktop client. If a host tells you they only offer command-line access to the hosting server or databases, run away; there is no need to settle for older technology like this, and very few hosts still force their clients to do it.

Some websites and applications will require more specialized options or other server types, and most hosts offer many more features, but a host that meets these minimal requirements will work very well for the majority of clients.

Other Considerations that Add Up

Webmail, email virus scanning, spam filtering, and the ability to blacklist and white-list IP addresses are important features to look for in a host. Many hosts automatically refund downtime that exceeds their uptime guarantees, and this is a good sign of a trustworthy host.

Commercial Web Hosts That I Strongly Recommend

From experience I can recommend Hostgator, Verio and XO.

I have a number of web designer colleagues that strongly endorse **HostGator**

(<http://www.hostgator.com>). Several of my sites are currently hosted there, and most of my clients are now hosted there as well. HostGator gets consistent high marks among hosting reviewers. They have fast shared servers, up-to-date applications including built-in scripts for setting up blogs and many other tools, and exceptional tech support that has repeatedly gone above and beyond, including live chat during business hours.

I formerly hosted my sites and many of my clients' sites with **Verio** (<http://www.verio.com>). They have been around for many years, and while they are not the cheapest, their reliability and guaranteed uptime (with automatic refunds for any downtime that exceeds the guarantee) are valuable features. Verio offers a good GUI control panel of their own design.

Another good commercial host is **XO** (<http://www.xo.com>). We used them for many years for our retail business with virtually no problems. They guarantee uptime and have offer responsive tech support. Like Verio, they are not the cheapest, but more than make up for that through their reliable service.

Discount Hosts

I have never used a discount host, but I have dealt with a few of them in the course of launching and maintaining client sites. What I've seen for the most part is the same: slow response to technical support requests, including long hold times for phone support; no control panel; poor or nonexistent documentation; bottleneck times in FTP service; sketchy email service; bandwidth issues; lack of support for applications running on the server, such as form-to-email service; and numerous issues with databases and general server settings.

Free Hosts

You get little, if any, support with free hosts. You pay nothing, and should expect very little in return. This is in my opinion not a viable option for a business web site. Paying more does not necessarily mean you'll get a better host, but it usually means you'll at least get better support. In general, I believe that the old saying 'you get what you pay for' is very true. If you choose to save a few dollars each month by going with a discount or free host, expect less support, more downtime, and more maintenance needed to keep your site running smoothly.

I cannot make any recommendations for discount or free hosts, but can only say that my business is too important to take risks involved with using some of the hosts with which I've seen my clients struggle.

If this is your business, why run the risk of running into a major problem at the most

inopportune time? Would it be an issue if your site or email service is down in the middle of a busy sales period? Is the money saved worth turning away potential customers and losing sales? In my opinion, the hassles and potential losses are not worth the dollars saved by using a discount or free host. Choose a reliable host at a fair price and you shouldn't have to think about your site's hosting very often.

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