

What to look for when choosing a web hosting service provider

One of the most frequently asked questions I receive from my students pertains to the acquisition of a good web hosting service. There is so much to choose from out there and at times, it can be very overwhelming. However, there are at least 10 important things to look for when choosing a web hosting service. Below is a list that I always recommend to my web customers to follow when selecting a web hosting provider.

1. Number of Domains included with the package pricing. Most hosting service providers offer at least one extra domain in addition to the primary domain. This second domain serves two functions. One is to use if you are planning to build an e-commerce site. It is recommended that you keep the location of your business site separate from the site where you are conducting the actual financial transactions such as your shopping cart area.
2. Number of email addresses. A number of providers will give you a few email addresses but it is important that you know up front exactly how many addresses you would provided. The reason you need these extra email accounts is to use each for separate email correspondence such as advertising, Inquiries, product orders, FAQ's, etc.
3. Scripting Support. This is important when you plan to build pages that require the use of scripting to function properly. An example is a form page where the customer needs to fill in field values and submit them over to the hosting web server. You do not want to use the mailto: tag so the only other option is to create both server side and client side scripts to do this. At minimum, the hosting service should be able to support CGI, Java, and PHP.
4. Number of supported URL addresses. In this case, the hosting service company will typically welcome registered domains to reside on their server. However, some require each domain to sign up with a completely new service contract. What you want is to save your web customers the cost of doing that and host their website under your site contract. In other words, you are allowing other website to reside within your domain but under their own separate domain name. Even though you are paying for their site to be hosted under your name, you can market this as part of your package pricing. Look for those sites that offer at least 12 separate domains to reside within your site domain service.
5. Human to human technical service. Not all web hosting service companies have the ability or the budget to staff a 24 hour help desk. What you are looking for is a hosting service that provides 24 x 7 phone support. This is somewhat difficult to find so the next best alternative is the "live chat" option where you interact with the support technician much like instant messenger. Email support is not the best option primarily due to the time it takes to get a response. You also want to see if they maintain a comprehensive knowledge base, to get answers on common questions quickly and easily.
6. Available Disk Space. Because images and flash content website can use up a great deal of space, it is best to get a web hosting service that offers "unlimited disk space".
7. Domain Cost. Because you will need to pay for use of a registered domain name (i.e. tullycomputerservices.com), there are a number of hosting sites offering "free" domain registration.
8. Money back guarantee. The best hosting service sites will allow you to back out without a fee and at any time.
9. FTP Services. You want to make sure that your web hosting service provider allows you to use your own FTP software to transfer your files to your web server. Most hosting sites will provide their customer with a so called "Control Panel" which allows you to use web tools (like FTP) that are controlled through the control panel. Most web developers prefer to use their own utilities like with FTP via Dreamweaver. If you cannot ftp any other way other than through their control panel, this prohibits you from using Dreamweaver to build your sites.
10. Sub Domains. You want to make certain the hosting service provider gives you at least 6 sub domains. In addition to the primary domain, you will want a sub domain to test your site and another sub domain to stage your site. The rest can be used to stage your other customer site to if you are building sites simultaneously.