



Leading Edge Technology Q4 2011

Tips for Choosing the Right Web Host

We've created a checklist for choosing the right web host for a project and wanted to share it with fellow web developers. Ordered by importance, the checklist is as follows.

1. Does the business offer 24/7 PHONE support?

"Phone" is capitalized for a reason. Lack of phone support is becoming more and more common. Many hosting companies prefer to stick with email for a few reasons:

- They don't have to hire as many persons for their tech support center
- Speaking with someone via email takes the human element out of support, so it's much easier to tell someone "your problem, not ours"
- They can outsource their support without appearing to do so
- They can take longer to provide support -- a phone call would require an immediate resolution to the problem

DO NOT choose a web host that does not offer complete phone technical support.

2. Is hosting the business' primary service?

Many small business get suckered by their ISP into also using their hosting services -- terrible idea. ISPs generally have enough customers (especially cable companies like Virgin and BT) that losing one means absolutely nothing to them, especially if hosting is cheap. Stay away from companies that claim to perform too many services -- that usually means that their techs aren't solely focused on hosting support.

3. Is the host flexible in its server types, supported languages, and features?

If we had a pound for every time a host told us that they couldn't add a PHP/PEAR library or wouldn't allow mod_rewrite, we'd be rich men. Projects don't always go as planned and flexibility within your web host is a key component in picking where the site will live. Flexibility generally means a slightly higher price; pay it, because you may pay a steeper price if you don't.



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4. Does the host keep customers informed about server maintenance, new services, etc.?

We've experienced the following before which is based around true events. One time, at about 2am in the morning, a call from a CEO to state the company website was down led to this technical support doci-do;

Us: Hello, my customer's website appears to be down and showing only a MySQL error.

Tech: Ah, yes, we disabled MySQL throughout all of our servers.

Us: Excuse me?

Tech: We had a security audit and so many peoples' databases were getting injected due to insecure code that we decided to disable MySQL.

Us: Neither myself or my customer received any sort of warning that this was going to happen.

Tech: Right, we didn't have time to do so. We did, however, schedule enough tech persons today to deal with the fallout. Let me enable MySQL for your account again.

We stopped using that host immedietley.

5. Does the host provide an easy, functional control panel?

A hosting control panel is an absolute must when choosing a host. Some hosts use third party control panels like Plesk or cPanel, some have their own custom control panel (GoDaddy and Dream host, for example). Without an adequate control panel, you could find yourself at the mercy of a slow tech support staff just to make a basic change.

The above questions are the most important to ask yourself before choosing a host. Others include:

- Where, physically, is the host located? Down the block or across the country?
- Do they provide adequate space and mailboxes/forwarders for email?
- Is tech support outsourced to foreign countries?
- Can you get a direct phone number to a tech support person you trust?
- Can you connect to the database using a desktop application?



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Don't Be Fooled By Numbers

Hosts do a number of things to fool a prospective client, such as:

- Provide boat loads of bandwidth and disk space -- if you don't need TB's of bandwidth, don't be impressed by the number.
- Twenty 9's of uptime. All hosts promise 99.9999999% uptime. Why? Because nothing binds them to that number. You can't sue them if your site isn't up that percentage, so they can promise anything.
- Cite "rate-a-host" websites that say that have high approval ratings. Most "rate-a-host" websites are loaded with affiliate links which tells you they only recommend hosts to get a percentage of YOUR money.
- Dirt cheap pricing. When it comes to web hosting, you usually get what you pay for.

So Who's Good?

In my experience, the following web hosts make the cut:

- Hosting-Unlimited – These guys are epic. Using cPanel for there Linux hosting, and great Windows hosting also, they do pretty much everything in the hosting world, & we've been using them for over a decade.
- GoDaddy - Best phone support system I've ever experienced. Expect 24/7 technical support from domestic employees -- not outsourcing. Also a great price. *Note: mod_rewrite can cause problems on GoDaddy due to Fast-CGI. If SEF links are a must, call GoDaddy first to see if they can help with mod_rewrite.*
- RackSpace - Pricey but solid hosting and support.

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