Real People Reviews
by Daniel M. East

FINDING A WEB HOSTING COMPANY
A new look at hosting companies, their offerings and the potential problems of growth beyond their means.

PULL QUOTE: "while some companies have a lot to offer, many have grown too quickly and cannot provide adequate support..."

As one of the many millions who spend a lot of time online to get email, shop, learn and find information, I have become spoiled. I take speed for granted and scoff at seemingly dated sites or those that load too slowly; I am the prime example of short attention span theater patrons who just don't bother to scroll when it is just a search for a "how to" or simple manual. The other side of that coin is that I also design web sites and am a reseller for some of my clients. As my humble skills have become dated and I rely more and more on outsourcing for some elements of these packages, I have noticed a disturbing trend in that the hosting companies in that it seems they just can't keep up either.

What seems to be the problem?

Back in the mid 90's, I got involved with a little hosting company in California that offered T3 UNIX based shared servers at a very good price. Especially at that time. After they moved their small office to a whole floor, then a whole square block, and then bought another huge hosting group, their services expanded and their team changed. Bear in mind, this was nearly five years ago and you'd think they'd have overcome the growing pains by now. The reality is that, according to AskJeeves, "Some polls estimate anywhere from 30 million to 200 million people have access to the Internet. " The hosting companies are there responding to the need by almost any business, musician, artist, writer, classroom, university and other entity that needs to be online, so...they just can't seem to keep up.

Customer Service = service for the customer or just a bunch of links?

Now that we know that gazillions of people are online, how is it even possible to have enough staff to address the issues of newbies and power-users as well as SPAM, end-user vs. hosting side problems and all of that? Well, in some cases, hosting groups have resorted to mile-long FAQs (frequently asked questions) that seem to require just the exact keyword string to find an answer that ultimately tells you that you have to call them anyway - and then you sit on hold in limbo taking that zippy Internet down to a turtle crawl. In some cases, it may even be just a mild oversight by either party or even ISP issues out of both parties' hands. So what hope is there?

Shop around

Luckily, there are also review sites like "ePinions" and C-Net where you can find information based on end-user reports. This can be a lot to deal with since experiences may vary by knowledge, need, etc., but it's a start. If you are looking for hosting of a small site and don't need additional email, e-commerce or streaming media (like QuickTime which can run just fine as a downloaded file) you may find that your own ISP offers some basic hosting. Bear in mind that ISP hosting keeps all of your "eggs in one basket" and may also be slower performING in some cases.

What do you really need?

So, my feeling is to find the hosting company that has both what you need (for space, speed, security, reliability, backup and their position on the "backbone" of the Internet) and balance it with what you can afford. Don't worry about what they offer additionally if you won't use it. Ask them if they allow "a la carte" add on items should you want to add an online store or streaming media and find out what setup charges may be incurred. Many sites are under 20Mb while some hosting companies have packages that only start at 100Mb. Overkill is not the answer. Also, be sure you, yourself, have a good FTP client software title (Transmit or Fetch are favorites of mine).

Buyer beware

A really simple test of an ISP is to see how fast their own home page loads on your own computer. If you are using dialup, you'll really see this difference. Remember to notice how much of their front page is text and how much is graphical. Surf around a little. Ask some questions via their support email and see how fast they respond - not from SALES, but from support - and notice if they call you as well as email if you request it. Do they offer dedicated (your own) servers or just shared (several sites on one server) hosting? Is email included (should be in most cases) and do they offer SPAM filtering that you can opt-in/opt-out of if you need it? Do they have 24/7 backup, tech support, restore and/or custom services? There are many more issues to look for, but be sure you have the features you need (especially 24/7 FTP access) so that you don't become one of those sites that gets passed over. While most of these things are now standard, in many cases they are considered options, so do your homework. Beware of offers to register your domain names for you at discounted rates since you may not actually own them as the administrator should you wish to leave a particular host company.

Pricing

Most decent entry level hosting packages range between 19.95/month and 29.95/month depending on your needs. I prefer OS X G5 Xserves, myself, since it seems like a little more attention to detail is in place by those companies that offer them. Maybe Mac-folks have a little more pride in their gear (and confidence) without need for those pesky "FrontPage" extensions and Microsoft add-ons that are more easily accomplished under the Mac OS for servers. The reality is that you do, in fact, get what you pay for in most cases so time spent is time well spent if you find what you really need.

One other thought

If you notice something about a particular site's ease, speed, design, etc., drop a note to their webmaster to see what they use. If you are clear that you are shopping for hosting and not looking for DNS, IPs and info that may lead them to believe that you are looking to attack them, they might be able to let you know what's good and bad about their hosting company. You can always do a WHOIS search on the domain name and look at the DNS to see who hosts the site for them, if you wish.

Conclusion

Don't be sold on volumes of information. Look at quality, value and reliability (like anything else) and talk with people who do a lot of design and hosting to hear what they have to say. If you are looking to host a site for the first time or are just tired of being faithful to a company that has not kept up in one area or another, there are some great new options that employ the great new technologies that will help you put your best first impression on the web.

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