

# Choosing a Hosting Company



By Rodney Ringler

As the owner of a network of web hosting information sites, I often get asked "Which Hosting company should I go with?". Most people are pretty disappointed by my answer. This is a question that requires a lot of additional questions. Which web hosting company is right for your website depends on many factors. What platform does your site run on? Which language was it written in? Is it a business or personal site? How critical is occasional downtime? How web savy are you? What is your budget? How much traffic does the site get?

The reason there are thousands of web hosting companies is because there are millions of sites and these websites use different technologies, have different memory and traffic requirements, have different downtime requirements, etc.

There are 2 large sections that I have broken this discussion into. What types of hosting services do you need/want? And what type of company do you need/want? The reason I chose the words "need" and "want" is because a lot of the answer are your preferences more than absolute needs.

## What Type of Hosting Services Do You Need?

The best way to start this discussion is to determine the type of hosting services that your web business requires. Notice I didn't say website. A lot of people have multiple websites as part of their web business, and this, too, plays a role in selecting a hosting company.

In the big picture of the hosting industry, it all starts with datacenters. These are high availability facilities usually with multiple fiber feeds to them, backup power systems, network switching equipment, and racks of servers. Hosting companies that own and operate their own datacenter sit at the top of the chain. They can offer the complete range of services from shared hosting to co-location, although most specialize in an area.

Next in the chain are hosting companies who own and manage their own set of servers. These companies "co-locate" their servers in a datacenter. Which means they rent space for racks or slots in racks in a datacenter to put their servers. The datacenter provides the fiber connections to the internet and the facilities(power, AC, security, fire suppression, etc.). This starts to get into how to select the right hosting company for co-location services.

Then comes hosting companies that rent Dedicated Servers already in a datacenter. These companies do not have near the capital investment as the first 2 groups because they do not have to build a datacenter or buy servers. But they are dependent on the company they rent servers and rack space from. When selecting a hosting company that uses leased servers it is nice to know if the datacenter is local or in another city. Do they have the ability to troubleshoot their server themselves?

Finally, there are reseller hosting companies. These companies rent space on a dedicated server from another hosting company. They have the least capital investment, the least monthly overhead, but also the least control over there environment. In some cases their are hosting companies buying a reseller plan from a hosting company that leases dedicated servers from another hosting company that owns servers but co-locates them at a final and fourth hosting company's datacenter. If you have a shared hosting plan with this company and the server goes down there are 4 companies that get involved to resolve the issue. At first glance you might ask, Why would I choose such a company? Maybe because he can offer super low plans with his low overhead, and he provides great fast service. But then again you may want the comfort to know that when you call your hosting company for support the server is sitting right there in their datacenter.

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As you can see from the above discussion there are multiple types of hosting companies. But the services they offer can be broken into the following 4 categories, shared hosting, reseller hosting, dedicated servers, co-location.

There are subcategories in each of these. In the dedicated server category for instance, there are managed and unmanaged unix and windows servers. There are certain web hosting companies that specialize in each of these 4 aspects of dedicated server hosting. I would recommend a different company to someone who needs a managed windows servers versus someone who needs an unmanaged unix server.

### **How do you know what category of hosting services fits your needs?**

The majority of all sites use shared hosting plans. These are ideal for personal, community, and small business websites. If your site does a lot of processing(like database transactions) or a lot of user traffic it may require a dedicated server. Otherwise a shared plan is fine.

Shared hosting plans can( and usually are) provided by all types of hosting companies. These are the most used and most available. The competition is high. Selecting a company for a shared plan depends on your preferences more then anything. There are literally thousands of quality companies that can provide you great shared hosting services. For Windows based website the selection is less and a little more expensive.

You can get shared Unix hosting plans for as little as a couple of dollars a month. But most companies offering these plans are small startups operating with a Reseller plan or in some cases an unmanaged server. This limits their initial investment, but also might leave you with a company that is out of business in a couple of months.

Reseller plans are used for 2 main reasons. First, people use them as a platform for their own hosting company. Many reseller plans amount to a "franchise" in the parent hosting company with everything included to run your own hosting company without all of the startup costs.

The other use is multi domain accounts. A lot of web business and web designers have more then 1 website. It gets hard to maintain several hosting plans even if they are from the same company. A reseller plan allows you to consolidate all of your sites under one plan with the ability to add more as you need them without adding to your costs(assuming the reseller plan has room left in it).

Next, are Dedicated Servers. These are most leased by small hosting companies who have out grown reseller plans. But some companies that run websites use a dedicated server instead of a shared hosting plan due to performance and security. These are mostly higher end sites with a lot of traffic and database interactions. If you have questions about your website start with a shared plan and if this does not have the speed you need then consider a dedicated server. Depending on your system admin skills and budget it can be managed or unmanaged. A managed server means the company provides support and maintenance such as troubleshooting downtime, OS upgrades, installing programs, monitoring system performance, etc.

Co-location is for the most part is a service bought by other hosting companies or medium size companies who do not want to invest in their own datacenter. It is really not a service that a website owner would need.

When a hosting company fills a 20-40 leased servers it usually makes sense to buy their own servers and co-locate them at a near by datacenter. The other market is medium size non internet companies who use a lot of servers to run their business but do not want to invest in a datacenter facility.

### **What Type of Hosting Company do you Want/Need?**

Now that you know weather you need a shared plan, a reseller plan, a dedicated server, or a place to co-locate your server, the next question is which company is right to provide this service? This is the second part of our discussion.

The first discussion is more technical and determines the right service for your internet needs. This discussion is about what makes you feel comfortable. I have composed a list of questions to ask a potential hosting company and yourself.

Do they provide Unix and/or Windows? Does your site run on Unix or Windows. Almost every host provides Unix platforms but

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fewer provide Windows.

Are they a large or small company? Some customers like the comfort of a large company for their stability. Others like the personal service of knowing the owner and having his direct phone number.

Do they provide phone support or just email? There are a lot of companies who only provide email support. If your business is mission critical this might not be a good option.

Is the datacenter housing their servers local? A hosting company might provide great support, but if their server goes down and its located in a datacenter in another city then they are dependent on their datacenter provider to fix it.

How long has the company been in business? In the hosting business there are over 15,000 hosting companies. Many are one man companies or web designers that get a few customers but never develop it into a real business and fade over time. The cost of entry to the hosting business is very low especially if you use a reseller plan. Make sure the company has a history or if it is a one person company you know the person.

How many domains do they host? This will give you an idea of their size. This gets to your preference for a smaller or larger hosting company.

Your Value Proposition for the hosting company? This is best explained with an example. If you are one of 100,000 people paying \$5/month then you provide 1/100,000 of their revenue, which is not much value for them. If your site requires a lot of work will they really help? After all losing your account will not impact them.

Do they provide their own server support or is it outsourced? This goes toward your preferences for support. Some do not want their hosting company relying on others to keep things running. Others prefer to let people who only do support do their support.

Is it a one person company? A lot of hosting companies are one person companies with a reseller plan or dedicated server and outsourced support. But if they lease a robust server, have an excellent support company, and provide you with personal service then they might be the right choice for you.

Are they local? A lot of small business owners who are not that web savy prefer a company that they can visit and know versus a company they order from over the internet. On the other hand a lot of programmers who are web savy just want the cheapest plan and do not care the location.

Go to a search engine or hosting directory and compile a list of companies that provide the service you need(shared, reseller, dedicated, co-location), ask them these questions, and then go with the company that matches best with your answers to the questions.