

If you want to publish your Web site for other Internet users to visit, you need to find a host. Hopefully, you'll be able to find a hosting company that offers reliable service, quality technical support and a simple interface.

You don't always have to pay for your hosting service. Some Web hosts give you free space. Should you choose the free option, or should you pay a few dollars per month in exchange for the service?

The answer: that depends on the host! No matter what, if anything, a particular Web host charges, your main concern is quality. You can pay a good chunk of money every month for a host that ignores your questions, offers inadequate technical support and crashes every few days. You can get free Web hosting with first-class service. Just because you buy the service does not mean that you will get what you deserve - and free is not always synonymous with terrible.

For every hosting package you consider, ask these questions. Typically, the answers are on the host's Web site, but don't hesitate to contact somebody at the company with questions that you can't answer on your own.

How much will this cost me every month? You need to know, before you make a commitment, how much you're expected to pay for the service.

Will there be forced advertising on my site? Some Web hosts stick ad banners on your pages. This is frequently an alternative to paid hosting. If you don't mind banner or pop-up ads on your site, you might seriously consider this type of package.

Do I have to participate in a community to earn hosting privileges? Some free Web hosts give you credit for posting in their discussion forums. If you have the time and energy to do this, it might be a good alternative to paying the host.

What is my bandwidth allotment? As your site grows and attracts more visitors, your bandwidth needs will increase. Be sure, before you commit to a host, that you can get access to more bandwidth if you need it.

How much storage space do I get? You don't want to sign up with a host, upload all of your files, then discover that you're about to run out of space. Be sure that whatever service you use offers you the storage that you need for all of your files.

How stable are the servers? You don't want a Web host that's plagued by crashes. This applies no matter what, if anything, you pay for the service. If people can't access your Web site, you can't sell them your products, share your opinions, promote yourself, or whatever else you intend to accomplish.

What sort of technical support can I expect? Some Web hosts do not offer telephone

support; others do. You might, for example, have to file a support ticket and wait for the support staff to respond. Know what sort of support you can expect so that you won't be surprised when things are going wrong and you desperately need the host's assistance.

Can I use my own domain name? If you have your own domain, you should consider Web hosts that actually allow you to use it. Some want nothing more than to offer you a free subdomain and a small amount of space. That's fine for some people, but if that isn't what you want, look elsewhere.

Is the interface easy to use? Your control panel should be easy to navigate. Uploading files and making changes to your account shouldn't be overly difficult or frustrating.

What are the content restrictions? Some hosts don't want you to upload any music files, for example — not even ones that you created and, therefore, have every legal right to distribute. Others don't want adult files, illegal software, or anything that breaks the laws in the host site's country. Be sure that you select a service that will let you upload your content.

Another important factor in your decision is user feedback. Find out what past and current customers are saying about the host that you're considering. If the feedback is overwhelmingly negative, you might consider a different provider.

After you answer these questions, you should have only a few Web hosts left on your list. This will help you choose the right host the first time, which means that you can enjoy making your site available to the entire Internet community.