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Web Hosting - Is it Really as Easy as \$14.95?

by **Ben Bauer** (Net Effect, Inc. <http://www.neinc.com>; Tel: 617-489-0656; Fax: 617-489-0763) <benbauer@neinc.com>. Copyright 1998 Net Effect, Inc.

When you're looking to avoid the demands of physically hosting your own Web site, outsourcing is an extremely efficient way to go. But, is outsourcing your Web site as easy as selecting the lowest price? Surely, that's what all the banner ads, unsolicited email, and good old fashioned junk mail would have you believe.

Is price the only determining characteristic? While it certainly appears to be easy enough to pick a hosting service based on price, you may end up dramatically short-changing yourself, your Web site, and your users. However, doing some up-front work may keep you from getting connected to a dubious firm and avoid going through the pain, expense, and delay of leaving that firm for a reliable partner.

A professional Web hosting firm can offer you many advantages, even over in-house resources. For one thing, these firms exist to serve you. Your in-house resources may have a long list of priorities and hosting your site might be low on that list. Letting someone else worry about the mechanical aspects of hosting allows you to concentrate on the primary element which makes your site attractive to users — Content. But how do you choose a hosting firm? After all, this is the Web—the options are endless! You don't have to go with the firm down the street.

Finding the right partner really starts with creating specifications in advance, then finding a service that matches your needs. I recommend to my clients the following five-point plan: • Purpose; • Competency; • Speed; • Support; • Features.

Purpose - This first item really has nothing to do with professional Web hosting firms. It's really all about you and your Web site. What's the purpose of your Web site? What do you want to accomplish with it? Write these points down. It sounds so elementary that most people jump right over this step. Taking some time at this point will help you answer questions about your targeted users and where they're located geographically. For instance, will your users be locally based or do you want to serve a national or global audience?

This will also help you think about other Internet services that you may want to include in your project such as listservs, public FTP, live chats, announcement mailing lists, etc. Who's going to provide these services? If you plan appropriately, it could be the same organization which is hosting your Web site and thus you'll only have to work with one provider.

Competency - Competency deals with all the issues around reliability. Users take for granted that the Web is there all the time. That's 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The Web isn't governed by the same norms which let businesses and retail establishments close at night. This is a totally new paradigm — a paradigm which is required to participate. Since your site is expected to be there every hour of the day, you should assess potential hosts

on parameters which are going to help you achieve this. The first such parameter is power loss protection. If the power fails due to storm or accident, are the lights at your site going to blink out? Or, does your provider have adequate power back-up to keep your site up and running while the rest of the neighborhood is dark?

Not that big an issue? Tell that to **Hiller Zobel**, the judge in the **Louise Woodward** trial, AKA the nanny trail. Last November, on the day that Judge Zobel was to announce his ruling, his provider was knocked off line. The culprit was a car accident which toppled the utility pole providing power to his Web hosting service. No back-up power protection — no ruling. Instead there was mass chaos back at the courthouse doing it the old-fashioned way with paper copies.

The next two inquiries which deal with competency are disaster recovery and protection from hackers. While it's unlikely that any host will tell you exactly how they protect their servers, they should be able to give you a general understanding. Even more telling is whether they've had any break-ins. If so, when? How quickly was the problem

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Adventures in Librarianship — Conventional Wisdom

by **Ned Kraft** (Smithsonian Institution Libraries) <nkraft@sil.si.edu>

"So, are you a librarian?" The taxi driver eyed me through the rear-view, somehow dodging traffic at the same time. I might have wondered to myself, "do I look like a librarian? Is my 'I-heart-Dewey' tattoo showing?" But I've been to these conventions before and I know the routine. My driver has probably been shuttling librarians from the airport downtown all day long.

"Yep, that's me. Mr. Librarian."

After seven hours of travel that should have been four, after suffering the airborne big-bag-o-food for lunch, after ten false-starts through a metal detector betrayed (apparently) by a tiny scrap of foil candy wrap ... I was feeling a mite punchy.

"You here for the convention?" he asked, watching me again, instead of watching the white Toyota trying to push us into the guard rail.

"No. I'm... I'm here for the hot springs, the cure."

I saw him squint in the mirror, deciding not to talk to me anymore.

Just as well.

A convention is a bit like a gathering storm. The flights converge toward the chosen town. You start hearing tell-tale phrases, magic words, from nearby conversations: a whispered "Blackwell's" from the two men ahead of you at the ticket counter, a booming "taskforce" from a woman maybe three seats behind on the plane, an ominous "serials control" from who-knows-where.

And as those clouds converge you begin to assume that everyone around you is a librarian. There's one for sure! That one, too! The Faxon tote-bag is a dead give-away, along with an expression of guarded enthusiasm.

Then the rain starts in earnest. The town is wet with librarians and you wonder, for just a moment, why you've voluntarily joined this downpour.

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corrected? And, what adjustments have they made to thwart future attempts?

Disaster recovery is similar to hacker protection on a more general scale. Whether it be something clumsy such as spilled coffee or something digital like a crashed hard drive, the result is the same — your data is gone. How is your provider going to get you back online? Just because you don't back-up your hard disk doesn't mean you want to accept the same behavior from them, especially if your site is of any reasonable size. It could take hours and hours for you to remotely rebuild your site. It would be much better and faster to leave disaster recovery restoration to your provider.

Speed - We all know the phrase "Speed Kills". Unfortunately, on the Internet, it is lack of speed that kills people's interest in your site. Most talk about speed issues center on modem speeds since the vast majority of users connect to the Internet via modem. Armed with this information, you've designed your site to make loading speeds as fast as possible so you've covered this issue right? Wrong!

Most of us swimming the Internet are connected to the side channels and tributaries instead of the main backbone flow. Thus, when a user requests a page from your site, that request action travels down ever faster channels to the backbone. Once in the backbone — the fastest of all channels — the request action gets delivered to the closest tributary to your site. The request action is then relayed upstream through ever slower channels until it reaches your site and delivers the request. The requested page then flows back to the user in reverse order.

To give your users the best possible service you want to select a host provider which is as close as possible to the Internet's backbone. How do you assess this? Ask them who provides their access. Also, ask them what type of connection speed they connect with and how many open lines they have running.

While the Internet allows you to work with a provider anywhere on the planet, the actual hosting location can be a speed factor. For example, if you only want to reach users in southern California, a host provider in that area would be better than an outfit with faster connections located in New York.

The last factor in speed is the number and types of sites which co-exist on the server with your site. Overcrowding a server with high usage sites will slow down those people trying to reach your site.

Support - Technical support is like insurance; it's not important until you need it. So make sure it's available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If it isn't, you can be sure your problems will start five minutes after the support line closes.

For a host provider, technical support is reactive, that is, they're responding to your request. You want this, but you also want to know that they have someone monitoring your server for system failures also on a 24 x 7 schedule. This will minimize your site's downtime even when it's not under your watchful eye.

Features - Now that you've covered the critical elements of purpose, competency, speed, and support, you're ready to talk features. And, you can stay focused on only those features which relate to the needs you identified as you defined the purpose of your Web site. You may want to know about issues such as the host's ability to support specialized software and databases. Then, too, you may be interested in advanced services like multimedia, announcement mailings, electronic commerce, live chats, push broadcasting, streaming video, listservs, usenet groups, etc. Whatever feature set you need, make that your deciding factor — after you're comfortable with all the other determination points.

Conclusion - When you approach Web hosting from this five-point plan — purpose, competency, speed, support, and features — you'll create a specification framework you can use to measure the services of several providers against one another. In the end, you'll select a partner who is truly compatible with your needs and who has the qualities that assure you and your users, to the highest degree possible, that your site will be there when the users come calling.

Ben Bauer is the Managing Principal of Net Effect, Inc., a consulting firm assisting organizations with the implementation of Computer Networks, Software, Internet Utilization, and Related Issues. Please email comments and questions to benbauer@neinc.com.

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