Roadmap Series

Issue 4

Website Hosting 101

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One of the often overlooked but most important aspects of having a successful website is the choice of where to host the site. While hosting is not a glamorous or hip topic like CSS, the choices that you make will have a direct impact on how effective your site is in fulfilling its purpose. There are many choices when it comes to hosting your site, but they can generally be grouped into four categories: simple, shared, dedicated, and advanced.

The categories of hosting are differentiated by their cost structures, features, and the expertise level you need in order to set them up and maintain them. Typically, the amount of features included in the hosting plan directly affects the cost and most providers give you a wide range of choices. The most common features that affect the cost are: scripting support (i.e. PHP), database support, monthly transfer volume or bandwidth fees, and technical support. The other feature to pay attention to is called the Service Level Agreement (or SLA). The SLA will let you know how much uptime the provider guarantees for that particular hosting package. If you are running a high traffic eCommerce site, you will want to pick a solution with a very good SLA and you will most likely end up paying more for that level of service.

Before you can decide on what type of hosting will work for your website, you must first decide what features your website will need to support. Is the website purely informational or does it need to support some kind of application? Will you be streaming a lot of video or other media? Will you need to support a scripting language such as PHP? Do you need to have a database? Do you need to support eCommerce?

Free Hosting

If your website is small and purely informational, you may want to look at hosting with a simple solution. This category of hosting is great for personal blogs, journals, or just putting up some pictures for everyone to enjoy. These solutions generally have limited customization options and offer small amounts of disk space for storing your website but the best thing about them is that they are often free. Some well known providers of simple hosting are Blogger (http://www.blogger.com) and Wordpress (http://www.wordpress.com). If you need more disk space to store media, you might also consider storing your pictures on Flickr (http://www.flickr.com) or Picasa (http://www.picasa.com) and your videos on Youtube (http://www.youtube.com). You can then easily create links to this media from your website.

Cost: Free

Disk space: ☒☒☒☒☒

Bandwidth: ☒☒☒☒☒

Expertise required: ☒☒☒☒☒

Pros: No cost, Simple setup

Cons: Limited customization, small disk space, your files are open to the world, no custom domain

Shared Hosting

Shared hosting is a solution where you are sharing computing resources for your website with other websites. This type of solution typically runs from $5-$50/month and requires a higher level of expertise to maintain and configure. If you are a small business running an application or small eCommerce site, then this is the right choice for you. Most of WebAssist's customers that have created websites with SiteAssist Professional, eCart or PowerStore choose this level of hosting. At WebAssist, we've been able to use this

type of hosting for most of the websites created with our products, see our PowerStore demo for an example.

Shared hosting gives you much better access to customize and control your site and typically include server-side scripting and database functionality as part of the monthly fee. Another bonus is that there is often support included for basic needs such as rebooting your server or installing security updates to the operating system. There are plenty of solutions out there: 1and1 (http://www.1and1.com), GoDaddy (http://www.godaddy.com) and Hostway (http://www.hostway.com) all offer a wide variety of plans and features.

Cost: 💲💲💲💲💲

Disk space: ❌❌❌❌❌

Bandwidth: ❌❌❌❌❌

Expertise required: ❌❌❌❌❌

Pros: Low-cost, Technical support, Works with databases and scripting languages

Cons: Sharing server resources with other customers, relatively small amount of disk space, low monthly transfer volume

Dedicated Hosting

Higher trafficked websites or websites running computing heavy applications will most likely need to use dedicated hosting solutions. These solutions usually cost hundreds of dollars per month but give you a great deal of opportunity for customization. You typically rent servers that you are responsible for configuring and maintaining. You do not share bandwidth or computing resources you typically get administrator access to install and configure any kind of software you want. However, with this freedom comes greater responsibility for supporting and maintaining the system. Some of the popular solutions out there are Media Temple (http://www.mediatemple.net), ServerBeach (http://www.serverbeach.com), and Verio (http://www.verio.com).

Cost: 💲💲💲💲💲

Disk space: ❌❌❌❌❌

Bandwidth: ❌❌❌❌❌

Expertise required: ❌❌❌❌❌

Pros: Dedicated computing resources just for you, Your data is not shared, Higher monthly transfer volume

Cons: Higher costs, Typically no support or you have to pay for support

Advanced Hosting and Cloud Computing

If you are running a mission critical application or a high traffic website, then you will most likely need to use an advanced hosting system. These systems usually cost much more according to the features but allow you to configure the most complex architecture to ensure that your website is running all of the time. Advanced solutions can be configured for failover, clustering, and load balancing so that your site can scale to any type of traffic burst. While very flexible, these advanced scenarios are difficult to implement and you will need a high level of expertise to be able to implement and support them. In the past, you would need to purchase your own servers and hardware and install your system into a data center. There has been a recent trend, however, towards cloud computing that allow you to create these advanced systems by

leveraging the infrastructure of a large brand such as Amazon (http://aws.amazon.com). As cloud computing becomes more mainstream, it will push the cost down and you will soon see that this type of system may end up being as cost effective as the shared or dedicated systems. You will still need the expertise to set them up and manage them but at least you won't have to pay thousands of dollars per month.

Cost: 💲💲💲💲💲

Disk space: ⊠⊠⊠⊠⊠

Bandwidth: ⊠⊠⊠⊠⊠

Expertise required: ⊠⊠⊠⊠⊠

Pros: Most robust solution, Can scale for heavily trafficked sites

Cons: Most complex setup, Can be cost prohibitive, must be very computer savvy

About WebAssist

WebAssist helps you build better websites faster by offering software, solutions, and training needed to succeed on the web. WebAssist.com hosts a thriving community of over 300,000 designers, developers, and business owners. WebAssist's partners include Adobe, Microsoft, and PayPal.