

Getting Started with Websites and Web Hosting

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You've honed in on a specific, qualified niche for your business. You've chosen a catchy name and tagline. When you introduce yourself at a networking function, you roll out your well-honed 30-second elevator speech, and people want to hear more. But then, you pull out your business card. You're a little embarrassed that the email address is from Comcast, and you don't even *have* a website. After all, websites are technology, and technology is *hard*. But creating a basic web presence that will enhance your brand doesn't have to be difficult or expensive.

Note: This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of available options; rather it's an overview of different kinds of websites and web hosting providers, intended to help you ask the right questions.

Types of Websites

Despite what lots of people say, both traditional websites and blog-based sites can be easy and successful. The question to answer is *what am I using this site for?*

Blog or Blog Site

Blogging platforms are designed to make it easy for real people to create and maintain websites. Once the site is up and running, you can add, change or remove content without knowing any HTML, CSS or Javascript. If you've used a word processor, you will be comfortable creating and editing content on a blog.

They also separate the *design* from the content - meaning you can completely replace the layout, colors and fonts with a few clicks, and the content will automatically *adapt* to the new design.

Look-and-feel (cosmetics) and functionality of blog sites are managed by:

- **Downloading *themes*** (pre-made bundles of web code that control formatting and layout). Scores of themes are available for free, and others for less than US\$100. They're also relatively cheap to have custom developed, if you want to coordinate your blog with an existing traditional site.
- **Installing *plugins*** (small pieces of add-on software that provide new functionality like easy site registration, contact forms on your site, or anti-spam software).

Blog sites can be hosted in two different ways:

- **Hosted** - **Blogger** and **Wordpress** offer free options to host a blog for you - just sign up, choose a theme, pick a URL and start writing content. The tradeoff is that hosted blog providers are pretty restrictive about how you can use and extend the software (for example, most don't allow you to install plugins, and most won't allow you to tweak any of the code, say, if you mostly like a theme, but want to play with the fonts and text sizes). When you hear people say "Wordpress.com," they mean a hosted blog.
- **Self-Hosted (also "Non-Hosted" or "Third-Party Hosted")** - these require you have access to a webserver, for which you need a web hosting company and your own domain name. If you have a traditional site and want to add a blog, this is usually the best way to go. Also, if you *need* to install plugins or customize themes, you will have to host your own blog. When you hear people say "Wordpress.org," they mean a self-hosted blog.

Many people start with a hosted solution (easy and free) - it's very easy to export your blog's content and import it into a self-hosted blog site later.

Traditional Website

Traditional websites are individually built using complicated programming languages and/or expensive graphical programming tools. Until recently, I would have said that they're only the best choice for very complex sites or cases where the design prioritizes flexibility over development time or cost.

These sites can be time-consuming and *very* expensive, but are *extremely* flexible in terms of both cosmetics and functionality. If you prefer a traditional site, though, most web hosts now include software to build a relatively simple one yourself, using simple point-and-click tools.

Choosing a Web Host (Self-Hosted Blogs and Traditional Sites)

There are a number of factors to consider when choosing a web host. Sales websites for web hosts have huge lists of features you may or may not need. Keep an eye out for:

- **Uptime** - 99% uptime sounds pretty impressive, but this still works out to 3 1/2 days per year that your site could be offline. Look for a *guarantee* of at least 99.9% or 99.95% *with financial penalties* if they let you down.
- **Support Options and Response Time** - make sure the company has telephone support, not just email, and that they have a real mailing address.
- **Hidden Costs** - there are two ways web hosts can hide costs: first, by selling you a cheap package with à la carte "extras" they know you'll need (selling you a car, but charging extra for wheels) and second, by convincing you to choose a more expensive package than you really need, so you pay for features you won't ever use.
- **Whether You Really Need One-Stop Shopping** - having your domain name, DNS, email and website all at one company is convenient *but makes it very hard to leave*, and hosts count on this. Consider buying your domain name through a separate company from your web host, even though it might cost you an extra fifteen bucks per year.

If possible, try to figure out what features you'll need *before* you shop, or you might end up overpaying. If you want a self-hosted blog, it's a *must* to use a host that will install the blogging software automatically with a few clicks (most do). If you're building a traditional site yourself, most hosts include site-building software with some kind of demo. *Try it out.*

Recommendations

I've encountered both good and bad providers over the years. My current favorites are below*:

- **Hosted Blogging Platform** - Wordpress.com, because it generally looks a bit more professional than Blogger. Typepad, though not free, is worth a look, too.
- **Self-Hosted Blog Software** - Wordpress.org, though there many others available.
- **Web Hosting** - HostGator. Good uptime, fantastic phone, chat and email support - all for a very reasonable price. Great web design software and one-click blog installation.
- **Email Hosting and Collaboration** - Google Apps. Your web host will offer email, but it won't be nearly as feature-rich and may not be free. Google Apps, though, offers best-in-class webmail (same as Gmail), and you get a ton of other collaboration services for free, too.
- **Domain Names** - NamesAreCheap (\$14/yr) or GoDaddy (\$12/yr). Also, your Web Host can do this for you, too. We recommend GoDaddy for registration, but *not* for hosting.

** As always, your mileage may vary - these recommendations are based on my experience (as well as the experiences of our clients) over the years, but that doesn't mean that they are all the "best" options for your site. Some of these decisions will depend heavily on your website's particular goals and requirements.*

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