

How to Select a Web Host

There are many considerations when looking for a web site hosting service. Of course, you can host your site with ITS – an easy decision as ITS has provided professional-quality hosting services to our clients since 1997. But if you wanted to compare our services to others, here is what to look for.

The Data Center

Almost no one has seen theirs in person, yet the data center and its staff are a critical part of providing hosting services. ITS intentionally does not host web sites from our office. This allows us to host sites at multimillion-dollar Verio data centers that provide features like 24x7x365 on-site staff and server monitoring. Multiple, redundant high speed connections virtually guarantee sites will be both accessible and fast for visitors (for instance, our OC-48, OC-12, OC-3 and T3 connections are up to 1,600 times faster than a standard T1 connection). With today's high speed cable and DSL connections, even inexperienced users can tell the difference between a fast site and a slow one.

What to Ask

In addition to basics like the number of e-mail boxes and the disk space that comes with a hosting plan, examine the extras.

How many days can the center's backup generator last if building power is cut? Do they have redundant power connections? Does the host back up your server to tape and/or disk on a daily basis? How easy is it

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Upgrade Your Productivity

If you are thinking about upgrading your IT systems, you are not alone. While there is not yet a stampede, many ITS clients have discovered that it has become more cost effective to buy new computer equipment than to hang on to older PCs. **The good news is that ITS can help you plan your IT upgrades** to ensure the equipment and software you buy best match your needs, and help you fit the upgrade into your IT budget.

Even so, making the decision to upgrade can be surprisingly difficult. But with economic data finally looking better, and companies seeing that begin to translate into actual results, it has become easier for many companies to benefit from new IT equipment. The resulting efficiencies justify the upgrade expense.

Three factors generally lead ITS clients to upgrade: new software and technology, raw speed increases, and replacing depreciated hardware.

New Technology

Many managers look longingly at new programs that help small- and mid-size businesses operate more efficiently. Most, however, need new PCs:

CRM (Customer Relationship Management) software. Technology allows us to instantly bring your customer's data to the computer screen when a rep takes a phone call...along with that customer's history, data, and previous correspondence. The virtually instant availability of key information will impress customers with your professionalism and efficiency – a decided benefit in competitive markets.

VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol). Properly designed next-generation voice systems can provide essentially free telephone hookups between branch

offices, to remote staff, or even sales reps. A VoIP phone, or for convenience a software phone utilizing a laptop's microphone and speakers, can be connected to any Internet connection and still dial back to the office, from anywhere in the world.

Wireless connections can be especially useful for sales staff, as they complete calls and enter orders or other data directly into the company system from a remote location. The ability to connect over wide areas via the coming WiMax standard makes sales staff and traveling managers more efficient, rather than relying on "hot spots" at the neighborhood McDonald's. Companies now can also use wireless to connect nearby offices (up to several miles apart) or in lieu of installing permanent wiring when expanding, especially into temporary offices.

Anti-spam systems. New software can learn to automatically sort out incoming spam by content and other flags rather than simply the sender's e-mail address. Over time, ITS has achieved up to 99.9% accuracy (that's one mis-classification per 1,000 e-mails). This approach lets employees focus on reading e-mail rather than sorting out the spam. In addition, anti-spyware programs that eliminate electronic pests (like the ones that display those adult

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The Buzz About ITS

Did you know that ITS was listed as a business IT resource in the *Daily Herald's* Business Tech section Monday, August 2? We were in the paper's new e-buzz column, written by Anna Marie Kukec. Publicity isn't our goal – serving our clients is #1 – but it's nice to be recognized!

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popup ads, and web search hijackers) are becoming popular – and necessary.

Faster Hardware

Sometimes, older PCs just do not have the memory or speed to run newer software. Consequently, employees are forced to waste too much time waiting for spreadsheets to calculate, databases to load, or simply switching between open programs. New PCs are at least two to three times faster than PCs from even a few years ago. The increased speed boosts employee efficiency and morale.

For example, ITS recently replaced the CAD workstations at a suburban custom home builder. The speed and graphics capabilities dwarfed the firm's existing four-year old PCs. We also replaced six PCs and a server at a home appraisal coordinator one recent Saturday, and upgraded the server to a Gigabit connection. Within a few days they called to comment on how pleased they were with the extra speed operating their database programs.

Tax Deductions

Your accountant will tell you that your older computers have likely outlasted their economic life. Most were purchased in the 1999-2000 run-up to Y2K, and have already been depreciated. Recent tax law changes increase the deductibility of hardware and software, so it may make sense to replace the older hardware with newer, faster, more capable PCs and take the increased write-off. Talk to your accountant about your specific situation, however.

Calculating ROI

The return on investment for these types of solutions is typically measured in increased productivity. Saving just 1 minute every hour results in 32 hours saved per year! The higher paid an employee is the more sense it makes to maximize their productivity.

Whether you are ready to upgrade or just in the planning stages, give ITS a call at 630-420-2550 and we will be happy to lend our skills and knowledge to your planning and budgeting.

Microsoft and AOL Fight Spam, Validate E-Mail

Microsoft and AOL both recently announced their intention to implement new anti-spam initiatives within the next few months at their online services HotMail, MSN, and America On-Line. Both have embraced the proposed "SPF" standard for validating incoming e-mail. Microsoft has incorporated SPF into its proposed "Caller ID" standard, resulting in the newer "Sender ID" proposal. Why? Since a significant amount of spam and "phishing" e-mail uses forged "from" addresses, SPF is seen as a quick way to flag such messages yet allow valid e-mails to pass into the system. SPF also appears to be easier to implement than other suggested solutions.

The way SPF works is to use the existing Internet DNS system to tell the world that, for instance, mail arriving "from" teamITS.com is valid only if it arrives from one out of a list of four servers. Any mail arriving from a server not on the "valid" list is considered

suspect and probably forged.

The down side? Owners of each domain name will have to come up with a list of valid servers. Since some organizations send mail through an internal mail server, or have remote users send through their dial-up ISP's mail server, that is harder than it might sound. Plus, e-mail hosting providers are faced with the task of updating and maintaining SPF records for anywhere from dozens to thousands of domains.

AOL says it intends to use SPF to help maintain its e-mail "whitelist" of valid mail servers. Microsoft says it will initially use Sender ID to filter out non-compliant messages for further anti-spam processing. Overall, setting up SPF for your domain should help prevent others from using your domain name to send spam or other forged e-mails, so we think it is a good idea, and intend to set up SPF for all domains hosted with ITS Web Hosting.

Trends

Humor

The Computer Expert's Glossary

by unknown

Bug: An elusive creature living in a program that makes it incorrect. The activity of "debugging," or removing bugs from a program, ends when people get tired of doing it, not when the bugs are removed.

Design: What you regret not doing later on.

Hardware: The parts of a computer system that can be kicked.

Information Center: A room staffed by professional computer people whose job it is to tell you why you cannot have the information you require.

Meeting: An assembly of computer experts coming together to decide what person or department not represented in the room must solve the problem.

Minicomputer: A computer that can be afforded on the budget of a

mid-level manager.

On-line: The idea that a human being should always be accessible to a computer.

Performance: A statement of the speed at which a computer system works. Or rather, might work under certain circumstances. Or was rumored to be working a month ago.

Quality control: Assuring that the quality of a product does not get out of hand and add to the cost of its manufacture or design.

Regression analysis: Mathematical techniques for trying to understand why things are getting worse.

Strategy: A long-range plan whose merit cannot be evaluated until sometime after those creating it have left the organization.

Tips

Access Your E-mail From the Web

Why wait to get back to the office to check for that important e-mail message? It is possible to read and reply to your e-mail today using any web browser...at a friend's house, at a hotel, or even while on vacation. ITS provides WebMail services for web sites hosted with us, however one can also check any other standard mailbox as well (visit teamITS.com/start and click "Check e-mail from the road" for instructions).

A web interface will typically only show new mail still waiting in the online mailbox. If an e-mail program is left running at the office and it automatically retrieves mail, the online box will usually be empty. To counter this, users can set their e-mail client to leave old messages on the server for, say, seven days. Do not let your mailbox fill up though! Many providers have a fixed amount of space per mailbox, and once it is full, new mail cannot arrive. Remember to clean out the "trash" or

"deleted items" folder before exiting, or that folder will gradually fill up too.

Check to see if you can import or create entries in an online address book, which beats trying to remember important addresses. Many systems let users set up auto-reply messages to let senders know they are on vacation. Often one can predefine a "signature" block that gets appended to every e-mail sent via WebMail. Fancier systems might let users change colors, icons, save appointments, spell check outgoing messages, and the like. Messages in the inbox can be sorted by sender, date, subject, and so on to group messages together so you can follow a "conversation" more easily. When sending a message, you can either "bcc" yourself or save a copy of the sent message in a Sent folder stored online.

We trust this gives you a good idea of the capabilities and convenience of web-based e-mail services.

Q & A

What is "open source" software?

Traditionally software developers keep program code secret so no one else can copy their hard work. Open source software turns that model upside down, and makes the source code available for anyone to see. The idea is that the more people that get involved in the development of a program, the better it will be. Open source technically does not mean "free" but the vast majority of open software is licensed so anyone may use it for free, and modify the software if desired. The Mozilla web browsers and e-mail clients, the OpenOffice application suite, the MySQL database server, and Linux are some common examples.

What is the best way to clean my dusty monitor screen?

First, do not spray any liquid on the screen. Gently dust the screen with a clean lint-free cloth or a moistened cloth

to remove dust particles that may scratch the screen if rubbed. Avoid using ammonia-based cleaners, as these can damage the non-reflective coating on the screen. Avoid touching the screen with fingers or a pen, since both leave marks on the surface. Plus Samsung, for instance, says that touching an LCD screen may damage the crystals.

If the outside of the monitor case is dusty, turn the monitor off for a time and then dust or vacuum. Dust acts as an insulator, trapping heat inside the unit, and heat is an enemy of all electronic devices.

If your screen is still blurry or hard to read after a good cleaning, it may be time to replace it. A new monitor should have a sharp, well-defined image that does not cause eyestrain over time. LCD monitors consume less power, while any larger size monitor can allow more information to appear onscreen.

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to reach technical support? Does the host provide an upgrade path if your site suddenly takes off? Do they provide features such as secure server (SSL) capability, databases, web-based e-mail, web site usage statistics, FrontPage support, and a money-back guarantee? How about an uptime guarantee? For dedicated servers, is the hosting provider or the customer responsible for security on the server? Namely, what is their policy on implementing software upgrades?

Gotchas

Look for an uptime guarantee as high as possible. A 99.5% uptime guarantee still allows over three and a half hours of unscheduled downtime per month! Also check to see if the provider will work with you to minimize downtime for e-mail and web content when moving to their service.

A hosting service that advertises "unlimited bandwidth" may be a red flag, since your site may end up fighting for bandwidth with other accounts. Some "ultra-cheap" providers make their money on high-volume, low-margin operations. That means they tend to pack as many accounts onto existing equipment as possible, rather than upgrading their infrastructure to grow with their customers. Low-cost hosting providers often will only provide support via e-mail.

In Conclusion

Selecting a hosting provider for your web site can be a confusing task. However, many customers and prospective customers today first view your company via your web site. In this light, should you be primarily concerned with price or with reliability, service, and quality?

If you are looking to host a new web site or are unhappy with your current provider, give ITS a call and we can discuss our services in detail. Or, visit us online at www.teamITS.com. Our local touch combined with our professional-class hosting services may be the answer for you.

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Please give us a call to arrange a free initial consultation!



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