



The beginner's guide to web hosting

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Got a domain name with no place to go? Confused by jargon-filled chatter about hosting and bandwidth? Just want to know enough to get your business online? Jonathan Crossfield takes the mystery out of web hosting.

Without web hosting, your website can never reach the outside world. Hosting is the essential link between your website and the internet, but can often become a baffling and confusing annoyance.

If you're like me, being forced to read a list of technical specifications and jargon is a better cure for insomnia than a mallet to the skull. But sometimes, choosing the right hosting package can involve making important business decisions based on information it seems you need a year at night school to fully understand.

Wouldn't it be nice to understand what it was you were paying for? Wouldn't you feel more confident knowing how each figure and each impenetrable word benefited your business? This guide may not answer all your questions, but should at least provide a window into the world of web hosting.

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What is web hosting?

Here is a simple analogy for you. If your computer was a television, the domain name would be the channel button on your remote, the hosting provider would be the television station and the host server would be the video bank at the television station broadcasting the recorded programs you watch. Therefore, the server stores your website and 'broadcasts' it to any internet browser that enters the domain name.

But servers can be configured to provide a number of different website types.

To clearly understand how a particular hosting package can benefit you, the goals and needs of the website should be planned in advance.

How do I choose the best hosting company?

When choosing a hosting company, there are certain ingredients that can make the difference between online success and an internet disaster.

Do you want to be able to contact your hosting company at 10pm if your site and email develop problems? Do you know how secure and stable the provider's hosting setup is? Do you want to deal with someone who speaks English instead of technical jargon?

There are a number of small hosting businesses set up in garages and basements or with limited staff resources. They may be cheaper, but the smaller the company, the fewer resources they have available to provide adequate customer support or servicing when

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you need it. It is not unknown for websites to go down only to discover that the person responsible for fixing the server is on holiday or otherwise unavailable. Every time your website is down, your business loses money, so compromises on hosting prices can cost you in other ways.

The most reliable hosting companies provide dedicated customer support and technical services, capable of dealing with your issues day and night. If your website goes offline, you don't want to wait a couple of days before discovering the problem – you want to be sure your provider will identify and correct the issue before you even know about it.

Also, although it is possible to host your website anywhere in the world, choosing a local hosting company can have greater advantages. Dealing with a hosting company in the United States can be frustrating. Long distance calls are expensive and email support can often be slow and unhelpful outside of US business hours. If your website is suffering costly delays during Australian business hours, you don't want to wait for New York to wake up before it can be fixed.

A reputable hosting provider should have enough back-up safeguards to ensure your website never goes down (well, at least 99.99% of the time).

The last thing you want is the server with your website on it floating through a flooded building with no appropriate back-up stored high-and-dry elsewhere. The same goes for the connections to the web. If the local road works chop through a Telstra cable, wouldn't you feel better knowing your server was also linked to the net through at least one or two other connections, providing uninterrupted service? Make sure you know how your provider can guarantee your online store will remain open for business 24x7.

Netregistry houses servers in the largest data centre in the southern hemisphere, Global Switch in Pymont, as well as the E3 data centre in Alexandria, providing reliable, secure, and above all, local hosting.

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How much uptime is good enough?

The last thing your website needs is downtime, which is why many hosting providers offer uptime guarantees. But how much is good enough?

The difference between 99.5% and 99.9% uptime might not seem very much, but actually equates to 42.9 hours of your website being unavailable to customers each year. That's nearly two days of forced closure with no sales and no money coming in. Therefore, 0.4% of difference can cost your business a lot more than you may think.

What do I need to consider when choosing a hosting package?

There are a number of factors to consider when deciding on the best value hosting solution for your website. It is important to not only understand your current goals, but have an idea for how the website is likely to evolve.

In choosing a hosting plan, there are a few key considerations. Data storage, data transfer, bandwidth, databases and scripting technology.

Most hosting accounts come equipped with features such as email. Even so, there are some that consider email an added extra for a fee. Check for the features you need beforehand so you have a clear idea of the total cost of the package.

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How much data storage is necessary?

Most hosting plans contain more than enough data storage for the majority of websites. But certain files take up more space than others. Lots of image, video or audio files can chew up storage space quickly. It is possible to reduce the size of many large files, so it is worth working with someone with the technical ability to compress the amount of data without compromising quality.

If your website is likely to grow over time, this needs to be accounted for. An extreme example would be a site like YouTube, needing to find storage for thousands of large video files every day. You will probably never be faced with that kind of growth, but even a few large files added regularly over time can soon eat up your storage space.

Alternatively, simple text pages with only a few small images take relatively little storage space. You may be able to add hundreds of these pages before filling the space taken by a handful of audio or video files.

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Where in the world is your web server?

Do you know where your hosting company is storing your data? Most Australian hosting is actually stored offshore, although you wouldn't know it. Storing your website overseas can also impact your website by being slower and being less responsive.

Netregistry is 100% Australian owned and run, with the entire hosting infrastructure located and maintained in Sydney.

What is bandwidth?

Bandwidth is the 'pipe' that connects your website to the internet. It is a measure of the amount of digital information that can be accessed within a given time period. For example, if your main webpage is 300 kilobytes in size, then every time a web browser accesses it, 300kb of data travels down the 'pipe'. How fast this data is transferred depends on how many people are accessing data down the pipe at the same time and how large your pipe is.

Larger files, such as audio and video, eat up bandwidth just as they eat up data storage. Putting a lot of large files in your website can clog the flow of data through the 'pipe' and make your website much slower to load in a visitor's browser if a lot of people access that content at once.

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Even with small files, your bandwidth can still become bottle-necked. If your data connection can cope with a certain amount of data transfer per second, but the number of people trying to access your website exceeds this, it can also cause a traffic jam. With the data not getting through fast enough, website visitors can receive 'timed out' error messages instead of your wonderful webpage.

If too much traffic tries to access data through this connection at the same time, it is possible to crash the server, putting your website offline until the problem can be fixed. This can make some websites a victim of their own success, with their website becoming inaccessible when they are at their most popular.

If you are expecting a large spike in traffic or an increase in large files, it is worth talking to your web host about bandwidth solutions. This could mean a transfer to a different plan or short term strategies such as website mirrors (a duplicate of the website on a separate hosting server).

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What is clustered hosting?

Hosting usually requires websites to share server space on the one unit, but imagine how upset you would be if the actions of one website impacted on the performance of your business because it shares the same server. If a website receives too much traffic or overloads (crashes) the server through increased activity, it affects everything stored in the same place.

Clustered hosting spreads the load across multiple machines so that no one website can affect any other. This allows for a far more secure and stable hosting environment with fewer risks.

Always choose a hosting provider that offers clustered hosting to be sure that your website remains operating at its best.

Should I worry about data transfer limits?

Hosting accounts usually have a data transfer limit. This is the amount of data the hosting package can provide to the internet within the given time period (usually a month). This is similar to your home internet account, for example, where you pay so much for your connection with a fixed download limit. If you go over your monthly limit, depending on your provider, you may find your internet speed throttled to a crawl or be charged extra for every additional megabyte of data.

If either of these outcomes happened to your website, it is not an ideal outcome. Your website could become slow to load or you could receive a larger bill to pay for the extra data transfer.

Thankfully, you don't need to worry. All Netregistry hosting accounts have unlimited data transfer, no throttling and no additional data fees.

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What is database technology?

More and more websites now allow visitors to interact and manipulate information on the webpage. This may be by entering and registering their information, performing searches to be presented with a page of specific results, or entering comments into a blog or forum, to mention just three examples.

These websites are called 'dynamic', and use database technology to store information in sections that can be reassembled into fresh webpages in answer to the visitor request. Classic examples of dynamic websites are blogs, eBay or any site that allows a user to sign in and create a profile. Also, any website that uses a content management system or shopping cart works in the same way.

If you plan to include any of these features on your website, you will need to check for database technology on your hosting server. An example is Netregistry's Business Hosting, providing the most commonly used database features for small business.

The database is also bounded by storage limits, and it is worth knowing what these are before planning a complex website.

If you don't plan to use any dynamic features, you may only need basic 'static' hosting, such as Netregistry's Economy Hosting package, saving you money. Of course, if at any time you decide to develop the features on your website, it is possible to upgrade your hosting plan to the correct configuration.

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What is Scripting?

The most common language used to code web pages is called HyperText Markup Language (HTML). This code tells a web browser how to display the webpage. But when creating dynamic webpages, some additional scripting languages are needed to tell the web browser where to access the information needed to construct the elements on the page. Because your hosting server will need to interpret these scripts to provide the correct responses from the database, you need to be sure it has been configured with the relevant languages.

Common scripting languages are PHP, Perl, ASP, etc. Unless you are building the website yourself, it is unlikely you will need to know anything about these languages.

Your web designer will be able to tell you which particular scripts to look for when choosing a hosting package, but most hosting servers with database technology support the majority of commonly used scripts.

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Where can I get more advice?

You may now understand some of the basics, but relating them to your specific situation can sometimes require experience and further knowledge. If you are still unsure how to choose the best hosting plan for your website, the Netregistry sales team is trained in determining your specific needs.

The best hosting plan is one that doesn't require regular attention or additional monthly fees, but can cope with the daily demands of your website without complaint. By addressing the key principles, you can ask the right questions of your hosting provider and give your website the best platform to reach your audience.

Netregistry has been providing strong hosting advice and solutions to Australian businesses since 1997. With static, dynamic and ecommerce hosting solutions available, Netregistry can provide the reliability and features you need to form the foundations for your new online empire.

Call **1800 788 082** or visit [netregistry.com.au](https://www.netregistry.com.au)



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Simple and effective hosting plans with Netregistry

Economy Hosting - \$15.95 per month

- 10GB data storage (enough to store over 100,000 standard webpages)
- UNLIMITED data transfer per month
- UNLIMITED email accounts
- Free website builder application

Business Hosting - \$29.95 per month

- 20GB data storage (enough to store over 200,000 standard webpages)
- UNLIMITED data transfer per month
- UNLIMITED email accounts
- Free website builder application

Netregistry.com.au has everything you need for every stage of your online business. With lower prices and easy services, your website can start paying for itself sooner. Call 1300 788 082 to let your ideas loose.

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