

Element 2 Developing Your Own Farm Web Site

Whether you develop a Web site yourself, or hire an expert, there are important tasks and details to consider. The priority of the tasks may be unclear at first, so remember that tasks may be intermingled, and may need attention simultaneously. The domain name is chosen first, and will not change, but the development and design of the site (how you build it, how it looks, and how it's set up for the customer) may evolve over time. Marketing your site (getting it seen by customers) is part of the development/design process, so think this through to identify your intentions early on.

Web design experts can be hired for a fee to build the entire site for you, if you don't want to, or can't do the work yourself. They work with you to gather all the information they need, develop a mock-up, review it with you, and then fine-tune the final product. Ask for references of other farmers they have served, and check these references. Use the phone book as a last resort.

Remember to save versions of your Web site, using a naming system that includes date revised, before uploading to the Web. Store in a safe place on your computer, for future revisions, or in case you move to another host.

Here are some basics on farm Web site development.

(For a more in-depth look, see Element 6 below, for a presentation on the subject.)

Free Web Hosts

Many ISPs will offer some limited Web hosting as part of your subscription, and there are other free Web hosting options available. The obvious advantage of a free Web host is that it is free. However, most free Web hosts impose advertising on your Web site, which can take the form of a banner on your page, a window that pops up every time a page on your site loads, or an advertising frame imposed on your site. Be aware that most people hate these pop-ups and frames, and they can discourage visits to your site. In general, free Web hosts are not recommended for a commercial Web site.

Commercial Web Hosts

There are many hosts that offer one-stop shopping for on-line Web site building, domain name, and hosting. They usually include site builder software with templates that you can customize, on-line guides to walk you through Web page development, technical support, and e-commerce capabilities.

While site builder software is useful for beginners, find out if you will have the option to expand later if their on-line page builder does not have the facility you



need. Even if you have no interest in learning more advanced Web authoring skills, you may want to hire someone else to improve and expand your site later, and the lack of flexibility with site builder templates could be a problem.

Make sure that you choose a host that allows or offers the option to upgrade to FTP access, or at the very least, the ability to upload your pages by e-mail or browser.

[Homestead](#) and [Yahoo!](#) are good examples.

Considerations for Choosing a Commercial Web Host

Not only should the Web host be reliable and fast, it should guarantee its uptime (the time when it is functional). Look for a minimum uptime of 99%. In fact, even 99% is actually too low – it really should be 99.5% or higher. The host should provide some sort of refund (e.g., prorated refund or discount) if it falls below that figure. Note, though, that guarantees are often hard to enforce from your end – the host usually requires all sorts of documentation. However, without that guarantee, the Web host will have little incentive to ensure that its servers are running all the time.

Data transfer (sometimes loosely referred to as "traffic" or "bandwidth") is the amount of bytes transferred from your site to visitors when they browse your site. Don't believe any commercial Web host that advertises "unlimited bandwidth." Always look for details on how much traffic the package allows. Usually you will find that they redefine "unlimited" to be limited in some way.

To give you an estimate of the typical traffic requirements of a Web site, most new sites that are not software archives, or the like, use less than 3 gigabytes (GB) of bandwidth per month. Your traffic requirements will grow over time, as your site becomes more well-known (and well-linked), so you will also need to check their policy for overages: is there a published charge per GB over the allowed bandwidth? Is the charge made according to actual usage, or are you expected to pre-pay for a potential overage? It is better not to go for hosts that expect you to prepay for overages, since it is very hard to foresee when your site will exceed its bandwidth and by how much.

Similarly, watch out also for those "unlimited disk space" schemes. Most sites need less than 5 megabytes (MB) of Web space, so even if you are provided with a host that tempts you with 200MB or 500MB (or "unlimited space"), be aware that you are unlikely to use that space, so don't let the 500MB space be too big a factor in your consideration when comparing with other Web hosts.

Does the commercial Web host have technical support that functions 24 hours a day, 7 days a week (often-abbreviated 24/7), and 356 days a year? You will be surprised at how often things go wrong at the most inconvenient of times. Incidentally, just



because a host advertises that it has 24/7 support does not necessarily mean that it really has that kind of support. Test them out by e-mailing at midnight and on Saturday nights, Sunday mornings, etc. Check out how long they take to respond. Besides speed of responses, see whether they are technically competent. You wouldn't want to sign up for a host run by salespersons who don't know how to fix problems.

If you are planning to do any sort of business through your Web site, you might want to see whether the host provides SSL (secure server), MySQL, and Shopping Cart facilities. These facilities normally involve a higher priced package or additional charges. The main thing is to see whether they are available at all before you commit to the host. You will definitely need SSL if you plan to collect credit card information on your site.

You will need some kind of "control panel." This is called different names by different hosts, but essentially, it allows you to manage different aspects of your Web account yourself. Typically, and at the very minimum, it should allow you to do things like add, delete, and manage your e-mail addresses, and change passwords for your account. You should not have to go through their technical support each time you want to change a password or add/delete an e-mail account. Such chores are common maintenance chores that every Webmaster performs repeatedly, and it would be a great hassle if you had to wait for their technical support to make the changes for you.

Most Web hosts allow you to select an annual payment plan that gives you a cheaper rate than if you were to pay monthly. However, it is often best to pay monthly with all new Web hosts, until you're assured of their reliability and honesty. Paying monthly allows you to switch Web hosts quickly when you find that the current host does not meet your needs. You can always switch to cheaper annual plans later when you are satisfied with the host.

You should make it a point to check out what others have to say about the Web host.

Go to these sites for other users' opinions:

www.thesitewizard.com/archive/Webhosting.shtml

www.epinions.com/inet-Web_Hosting-All

<http://reviews.cnet.com/>

