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Stake out your own little corner of the Web

James Turner, Special to The Christian Science Monitor

A personal or small-business Web site is no longer a luxury reserved for the financially or technologically elite.

A wave of new services offering low cost (or free) "Web hosting" means that anyone with Internet access can make their opinions and interests known on the World Wide Web.

It is easy to confuse a Web-hosting service with an Internet service provider. An ISP is a company that gives you basic access to the Internet, including e-mail (see story, bottom right). A Web-hosting service provides you with a Web site that other users of the Internet can visit.

To confuse things a bit more, some ISPs (such as AOL or cable company MediaOne) also offer Web hosting as a free benefit to their members.

While it's important that your ISP have facilities geographically close to you (a local phone call away), it makes little difference where a Web-hosting service is based. A user in Boston can upload and maintain his Web content using a company in Seattle as easily as one located across the street.

This has made Web hosting a wide-open market, where features and price are the only deciding factors.

What's in a domain?

Web-hosting services are divided broadly into two categories: those that offer domains and those that do not.

A domain is basically the Internet equivalent of a business address. The domain for this newspaper, for example, is www.csmonitor.com

Companies or individuals must pay Network Solutions Inc. \$70 every two years to register a given domain. They must also pay about \$20 or more a month to the Web-hosting service. This system translates a domain name into an Internet address that any computer can read.

If you want free hosting, the only alternative is to use the domain of the hosting company. For example, if you ask GeoCities to set up a Web page, you would end up with an address that might look like: www.geocities.com/you/ Such an address is a bit more complicated, and more likely to be forgotten or mistyped by others.

Also, if you use a GeoCities page, you can't move your Web site to another provider without changing your Web address. If you maintain your own domain, you are free to move to a different provider whenever you desire.

In addition, using a free service can create a negative impression on the part of potential visitors to a small business site, according to Dmitri Eroshenko, editor and publisher of Web Hosting Magazine. "Having a Web page hosted by a free service marks you as an amateur. It says you can't afford \$70 for your own domain

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and \$20 a month. It would be like not having a business card, people would just raise their eyebrows."

The next factor to consider is the amount of file storage space you will be given. Any content (text, graphics, sound, video) you offer on your Web site must be uploaded to the hosting service and stored on their Web server.

While a simple Web site won't consume much space, a complex site with lots of graphics and sound may turn into a disk glutton. Most free services offer 5 to 10 megabytes of storage; commercial services anything from 10 MB to 350 MB.

One megabyte is equal to about 1,000 typewritten pages worth of space.

In addition, many services limit the amount of data your Web site can transmit. Every time someone visits your Web site, they download information from your hosting service to their computer. For example, if your entry page has 100 kilobytes of text and graphics (about the amount on the entry page of the Monitor's Web site), and 1,000 people look at your entry page, you have transmitted 100 megabytes of data.

For most consumers, this will not be a factor, but if your site suddenly becomes very popular, you may find yourself bumping against this limit.

Consider the conditions

Mr. Eroshenko cautions that even sites that claim to offer unlimited bandwidth will shut you down if you become enormously popular. "It's like American Express," he says. "There's no limit until you hit the limit."

There are also some aesthetic considerations. Some of the free services require that a banner ad be shown somewhere on your Web pages. As a result, you may end up advertising products you disapprove of. Some sites go a step further and pop up a second window with an ad when you first arrive at a site.

Then there are technical considerations. Most sites offer a set of basic scripts that will allow visitors to fill out a form and have the results e-mailed to you. But if you wish to develop something more advanced like e-commerce "shopping carts," or streaming audio or video, you will need to select a provider that supports them.

E-mail, too

Finally, if you have your own domain, your Web hosting service usually hosts your e-mail. In other words, they will store e-mail directed to someone@yourdomain.com.

Two things to look for are the number of mailboxes (sometimes called "pop mailboxes") you are given. This is the number of different "someones" you can receive mail for (so that you can, for example, have separate mailboxes for you, your wife, and your children).

For new users, customer support may also be a major factor. A service that can't respond to simple questions via e-mail within five to 10 minutes should ring warning bells, according to Eroshenko.

Choosing a service with a 30-day trial period can allow you to discover these kinds of problems before you commit too much money.

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