

# Hosting Provider Checklist for Your Small-to-Medium Sized Business

## CONTENTS

Introduction .....	1
Hosting Terms .....	2
Setting Goals for Your Business .....	3
Tip #1 .....	3
Tip #2 .....	4
Tip #3 .....	4
Tip #4 .....	5
Tip #5 .....	5
About Verio .....	6

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Finding the right web hosting provider for your business is a critical, yet often overlooked aspect to online success. With a little bit of planning you can find the perfect provider who will help grow your online business.

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## INTRODUCTION

With so many hosting providers in the market, it's an easy mistake to assume they are all the same. "I just need somewhere to put my website," you might think. But the success of your business isn't just about being online. Performance is a critical aspect to consider, and one that could make or break the success of your website.

This paper will discuss the top factors to consider when evaluating web hosting providers for a new business. Additionally, this paper provides five questions you should consider, and a checklist of things to look for, if you already have a website and are considering switching web hosts.

## TERMS USED TO DESCRIBE DIFFERENT HOSTING PLANS/FEATURES

**Disk Space** – This is the amount of space available to store your website pages, image files, email, flash or multimedia files, and other resources that are needed for your website to function and for you to access email. This content is saved to a hard disk on a web hosting server. The amount of space allotted for your content is usually listed in megabytes (MB), or millions of bytes. For perspective, a single letter of text takes up one byte. HTML files are usually rather small, around 5KB (1,000 KB = 1 MB). Images, videos and applications can be quite large (from 20 KB to 10 MB or more). Web scripts, emails and statistics also take up disk space.

**Bandwidth / Data Transfer** – This is the maximum amount of data transfer included with each account. Data transfer includes the communication between your visitor’s browser and the server where your website files are stored. Each time a visitor accesses your web page, requests are made to the server for images, the web page itself, JavaScript, style sheets, flash or multimedia, and any other files that are needed to compile your web page. This information is then transferred to the visitor’s browser. The more visitors you have, the more data transfer you will need to load pages quickly and display all the files related to your web page.

Data transfer is usually provided in increments of gigabytes (GB) – that’s billions of bytes – and allotted monthly. For example, if an average visitor to your site views 3 HTML pages of 20 KB (thousands of bytes) each and 8 small embedded pictures of 10 KB each, and you get 500 visitors per day, you will require at least  $(3 * 20 + 8 * 10) * 500 * 30 = 2,100,000 \text{ KB} = 2.1 \text{ GB}$  of transfer per month. If your hosting provider has put a limit on how much you can transfer each month, after the limit is reached you will be billed extra for the additional data transfer, often at higher rates.

**CPU (Central Processing Unit or Processor)** – This is the “brains” of the hosting server that processes the requests for transferring data and files to your visitor’s browser. It also carries out the instructions of the applications associated with your website. The more robust the CPU, the faster web pages will display for a visitor and the more traffic you can sustain without loss of performance. The amount of CPU processing power available for your website to use typically increases with more expensive hosting plans. So a shared hosting solution will have the least amount of CPU and will process web pages more slowly than a virtual server. A virtual server will be slower than a dedicated server, which may have multiple CPUs.

**Memory / RAM (Random Access Memory)** – Memory is the web server’s ability to hold data and support the access of this data by users. It’s where the system stores applications and data that is being used. Memory is measured in Megabytes (MB) and Gigabytes (GB). The higher the memory resources, the more programs and applications you can run at the same time, and the more visitors to your website you can sustain. The amount of RAM available to your website can often be increased on virtual or dedicated servers.

**Support** – While you may think that every web hosting provider offers free support, there are many providers who charge extra for support, or only offer email support for free and then charge for phone support. Premium providers deliver 24x7x365 U.S.-based support.

**IP Address (Internet Protocol Address)** – An IP address is a numeric address that identifies a specific device on a network or the Internet. Having a static, or dedicated, IP address can be advantageous for several reasons.

- If you want to add e-commerce to your website, you will need a dedicated IP address if you wish to have a private SSL certificate to process credit cards.
- If you plan to change web servers, you can point your users to a new IP address instead of waiting for the new domain name to start directing them there. It is easy to upload and test your site before making it live by transferring or pointing a domain name to the new server.
- Many hosting providers use a shared, or dynamic, IP address for all the websites on a server. This means that a different IP is assigned each time your website connects to the Internet, and this IP is shared by other sites on the server. If any of those other sites are banned by search engines or spam lists, your site will be affected and included as one of the offenders.

**SLA (Service Level Agreement)** – An SLA, or Service Level Agreement, is a guarantee of availability, uptime and performance for your website. An uptime guarantee offers compensation should the uptime of a service not meet a predefined percentage of time to be available, in a specific timeframe (usually on a per month basis). Uptime guarantees of 99.9% per month are the most common within the hosting industry.

**Data Backup** – A backup is a copy of your website files that is stored in a safe location. The data backup can be used to restore your website to its previous state if there is a data loss event, such as a virus attack, accidentally deleted files or natural disaster.

**Shared Hosting** – Using one web server to host multiple websites for multiple customers. CPU, memory and other server resources are shared by every website.

**Virtual Hosting** – Using one web server to host multiple websites for multiple customers, but with virtualization technology installed on the server to create separate “private” resources for CPU, memory, etc. for each website.

**Dedicated Server** – Using a single web server for one customer and that customer’s website(s). CPU, memory and other server resources are used by that customer alone.

## IDENTIFY THE GOALS OF YOUR BUSINESS FIRST

Before you begin searching for a web hosting provider, it’s important to evaluate the plans for your business. This will enable you to identify your needs today as well as tomorrow. It is also helpful in determining key milestones for your business’ growth, and when you will need to upgrade your web hosting solution. If you haven’t already done so, you should put together a business plan. A business plan will help you set milestones for your business overall, and help you define the criteria you need in a web hosting provider.

At a minimum your business plan should include your vision, mission, executive summary, estimated costs and financial projections, as well as plans on how to reach your goals. Other key elements include product overviews and pricing, key differentiators between you and your competition, competitive analysis of the market, your break-even point, as well as your sales and marketing strategies and sales forecast – meaning, what it will take for your business to become profitable.

## TIP #1: CAN THE HOST GROW WITH YOUR BUSINESS?

For most businesses it's unrealistic to think that when you launch your website, it will immediately produce sales and attract thousands of visitors (traffic hits) – unless you've done some serious pre-launch marketing! Instead, you'll need to consider what tactics you'll be using to drive traffic to your website, and how over time these steps will lead to increased traffic and sales. How many visitors do you expect in the first month, the first year, five years down the road? That's where your business plan comes in, and knowing the answer to these questions will help you choose a hosting provider that can grow with you.

You may start out with a basic shared hosting account that will be more than enough to handle your initial website launch. But as you ramp up your online business, it's important to consider an upgrade path with your web hosting provider. You may very quickly outgrow a shared hosting solution and need to move to a virtual or dedicated server, or even multiple servers, to support the technology demands of your online business. Simple questions to ask include:

- How much traffic should my hosting plan support? Example: 1,000 visitors a day.
- What sort of functionality do I need?
  - Database to capture and store information
  - Flash animation video or other multimedia files
  - Shopping cart
  - Content management system like WordPress, Joomla or Drupal to make site editing and maintenance easier
- If I need more disk space or server resources, do I need to migrate to a new account or can I add resources directly to an existing account?
- Will I have to update any of my web pages, scripts or supporting files if I add more resources or upgrade?
- What would migrating my site to a new account entail? Would my website still be available during the migration?

Your hosting provider should simplify the process of expanding your hosting solution as you grow. Ideally you will identify a provider that makes upgrading simple by allowing you to add resources as you need them, as opposed to migrating your site to a new account each time you need to expand. Migration may not be completely avoidable if your business keeps growing, but you shouldn't have to migrate each time.

## TIP #2: GOING GLOBAL? THINK ABOUT PERFORMANCE FOR ALL WEBSITE VISITORS

The Internet allows even small businesses to receive global website traffic. Consider whether you are planning to service customers only in your area, across the country, or around the world. Geographic location of your website and its visitors will impact how your website performs.

The Western world has long been offered high internet connection speeds. In many countries, however, dial-up (56K) connections are still the norm. If you have a complex shopping cart or your website contains a lot of graphics or

multimedia, it will take longer to load. If your focus is reserved to customers in your local area or your country, this may not be a concern. But if you intend to do business internationally, you need to consider a few options:

- Choose a web hosting provider with a global footprint in multiple countries. This will allow you to set up one hosting account to serve multiple regions around the world.
- Select a web host that will grow with your business. You may only need a small amount of resources initially, but be sure your provider can easily scale your solution when it's time to add more hosting resources as demands and traffic increase.

**Just suppose** . . . that a small business owner has a new idea for noise makers that fans might use at sporting events. He is about to launch a new marketing campaign that includes an appearance on a morning talk show. After his product is featured on television, his business becomes inundated with demands for noise makers from customers around the world. His website cannot handle the increased traffic of so many visitors, and performance begins to slow. His hosting provider cannot offer him more resources or any way to expand his hosting resources quickly, without having to set up a new hosting account that could cause downtime. In one moment this entrepreneur goes from being busy and successful, to frantic and worried as he receives angry emails and phone calls from potential customers who are unable to buy or preview the product on his site, or even reach his website home page.

You could easily find yourself in this predicament, where your very livelihood is jeopardized, if you don't factor high growth needs into your planning for a web hosting solution. In the end, choosing a low cost hosting solution or less reputable provider may not be the most cost-effective option. Poor website performance directly affects your business and brand. Potential customers and clients will be positively influenced by your business if your site runs smoothly. In turn, this creates trust in your products and services. If images download quickly, and links are functional and accessible, your business will benefit exponentially. You need reliability, speed and the peace of mind that comes with your website and email being available at any time, and on a global scale.

### TIP #3: WHAT ONLINE TOOLS ARE AVAILABLE TO HELP YOU?

Larger businesses may have an in-house team that focuses on website design, development, maintenance and performance tracking. Small-to-medium businesses must either outsource these tasks or try to do it themselves. If you fall into the latter category, it's important to consider what tools are offered by your web hosting provider. Tools can help you with many aspects of managing your own website including:

- Simple website design and updating capabilities
- Search engine optimization and online marketing
- Email marketing
- Blogging and podcasting capabilities
- E-commerce
- Traffic monitoring

If you need a simplified way to build and market your online presence, confirm whether any of these tools are available

and what fees, if any, are associated with adding them to your service. Some providers also offer custom design or maintenance services where their team performs these tasks on your behalf, for an additional fee.

#### TIP # 4: WILL YOUR PROVIDER GUARANTEE SERVICE?

How will your online business be affected if your website is down? To be clear: if your site is not available, that means no visitors, no traffic, no sales. If the primary function of your website is to drive leads or sell products and services, downtime is a serious issue and could cause a loss of revenue. Even if your website is a simple information resource, downtime will negatively affect the perception that people have about your business.

Many providers will offer an SLA, or Service Level Agreement, to guarantee availability, uptime and performance. An uptime guarantee is usually expressed as a percentage (the higher, the better). Use this formula to calculate the **maximum** amount of downtime your site *could* experience based on the uptime percentage listed in the SLA:

$$\text{Total Number of Minutes in a Month} \times (100 - \text{guaranteed \%}) / 100 = \text{Maximum Amount of Downtime}$$

$$\text{Example: } 30 \text{ days in a month} \times 24 \text{ hours in day} \times 60 \text{ minutes in a hour} \times (100 - 99.9\%) / 100 = 43.2 \text{ minutes}$$

The resulting number does not represent how much your site will be down during a given month; rather it's a gauge of how confident your provider is in their level of service.

Should downtime occur, look for a provider that will return at least a portion of your hosting fees. Some providers may also offer a money-back guarantee, which means that if you are not completely satisfied with the service, you can usually cancel within 30 or 60 days of purchase and receive a portion, if not all, of your investment back.

#### TIP # 5: WHAT ARE YOUR OPTIONS IF SOMETHING GOES WRONG?

No one likes to spend a lot of time worrying about what “could” happen. But it is important to consider how your hosting provider can help you avoid negative events like downtime or slow performance, and how they will support you if they do happen.

##### **Technical Support**

It is important to know what kind of support you will receive from your hosting provider, especially if you are not a web hosting guru. How knowledgeable is the technical support staff? Is phone and email support included, or is there a fee to talk to someone? Where is the support staff located geographically? What hours are they available? The answers to these questions are very important – especially when something goes wrong.

##### **Security and Monitoring**

Security has become increasingly important as more and more businesses rely on their website for sales and customer relations. Choose a hosting provider who performs regular monitoring for network and security threats that can be prevented or eliminated before they reach your website.

Selecting a hosting plan that features private resources can also be an important decision. This added level of security is common in virtual and dedicated server solutions, but not all shared hosting solutions include this level of protection from other users/websites on the server. Be sure to confirm with your provider what types of security are included as part of your plan – be it private resources, system and/or security monitoring.

**Data Backup**

You can't predict a virus attack, denial of service attack, or an act of nature. Should a disaster occur that disables or affects your website, you may need a backup copy of the site to revert back to. Choose a hosting provider that offers data backup as part of your hosting service. Be sure to ask how often backups are performed, and if more than one level of backup is offered to minimize data loss.

**HOSTING PROVIDER CHECKLIST**

<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Large amounts of disk space</b> - for displaying graphics, photos and multimedia.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Ability to scale and add resources as your business grows</b>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>High bandwidth / data transfer capabilities</b>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Security and monitoring services included</b>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Free website building and marketing tools</b>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Service and satisfaction guarantees (SLA)</b>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>24x7x365 phone and email support included</b> - versus email and chat for free and extra charges for phone support.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Automatic data/website back-ups</b>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Dedicated IP address</b>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Sophisticated data center facility or facilities around the world</b>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Control panel</b> – for self managing your account
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Network owned by the provider</b> – versus rented from someone else
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Domain name assistance</b> – to help you find and claim a domain name
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Built-in network redundancy</b>

**ABOUT VERIO**

Verio is the premier provider of Web Hosting, Application Hosting, and SaaS applications for the small-to-medium business (SMB) market. And we combine our expertise with the financial backing of NTT Communications Company, one of the world's largest telecommunications companies. This financial strength, and the business hosting solutions we provide in nearly 200 countries, makes Verio uniquely positioned to service the needs of SMBs worldwide. We also own

our own data centers and IP network, which enables us to consistently provide our customers and channel partners with award-winning service and free 24x7x365 technical support via phone and email. Our services are guaranteed to provide the highest performance available and are backed by our industry-leading Service Level Agreements (SLAs) with uptime guarantees of 99.99%.

Verio delivers a variety of hosted solutions - from shared hosting with pre-loaded, web-based applications for easy deployment, to Virtual and Managed Private Servers with root access for a completely flexible server environment that supports large graphics files, complex designs, temporary campaigns or custom development. Plans include:

- **Large amounts of disk space** - for displaying graphics, photos and multimedia.
- **Graduate from one plan level to the next as your business needs grow.**
- **High bandwidth / data transfer capabilities** - to ensure customers can simultaneously visit, download and engage with your site without ever slowing it down or costing extra.
- **Guaranteed server resources** - with dedicated CPU/RAM on each account, ensuring your site loads fast and consistently with every visit. This service is truly unique to Verio!
- **Network and Security Monitoring Included!** To protect your site from malicious threats.
- **FREE Website Building & Marketing Tools** - for creating unique designs in an instant without ever needing to learn HTML programming.
- **Service & Satisfaction Guarantees** - with 99.9% server uptime Service Level Agreement through Verio's global IP network and a 30-day money back satisfaction guarantee.
- **24x7x365 phone and email support** - from highly trained technical staff, plus online tutorials, a video library and robust online knowledge base.
- **Power-Packed Business Tools** - for maximizing the value of your website. Includes content management software, blogging and podcasting tools, web traffic monitoring software, dedicated IP addresses, and multiple database options within each single hosting plan.
- **Automatic data back-ups** - both nightly and weekly so a copy of your site is always available to revert back to.
- **Flexible Windows and Unix web hosting options** - for complete choice and flexibility.
- **Dedicated IP address** - so you never share IP with another customer and can add SSL security any time.
- **State-of-the-Art Data Centers and Facilities** - climate controlled with secured access and protection
- **Easy-to-Use Control Panel** - with access to everything you need to set up and manage your hosting solution.
- **Verio has Complete Ownership of its Data Centers and IP Network** - To ensure the highest network capacity and avoid downtime and issues that can arise from subletting bandwidth from another provider.
- **Domain Name Assistance** - we can help you search for the perfect domain and then register it. Plus you can look up who already owns a domain name with our WhoIS lookup tool.
- **Built-In Network Redundancy** - should a device failure occur, traffic can be re-routed to other areas of the network to avoid downtime.