

Would you share office space, personnel, equipment, or even customer leads with your competitors? Of course not. Why then do so many business owners share their web servers with companies all over the world? While we may have been taught to share things all our lives, when it comes to your company's web hosting, sharing is not your best option. In fact, it could cost you thousands of dollars in lost e-commerce business. In the world of e-commerce, consistent accessibility is one of the most important features. If your site goes down due to a server error, it can devastate your business. This is why more and more companies are implementing dedicated servers as a better way to host and manage their sites. After all, why share when you can have your own?

As your business grows, the rules of web hosting significantly change. When you started your e-commerce business, shared hosting was the right choice for you then. Orders may have come in sporadically as customers realized you were online. As your business grew, though, more orders started coming in. Customers may even have begun complaining that your site takes too long to load or to process requests. Because of the increased traffic, you now need large amounts of bandwidth and data transfer capacity to keep up with your business growth. The problem with the traditional shared server is that it hosts several clients at a time. Any service interruption for one client affects all other customers on that server. So if one company has a system failure, a bug in their script, or a sudden jump in their web traffic, all the other clients on that server suffer as a result. When you share, your site can significantly slow or even go down all because another company is having problems. Having a whole server dedicated to your business is the answer. With a dedicated server you have full control over your server and have root access to make changes. You get the latest hardware and software, and your host constantly monitors your server. Think of it in terms of driving. Dedicated hosting is like driving your own car and having all the upkeep and repairs taken care of by someone else. Shared hosting is like riding a bus with other passengers. Which one would you choose?

Are you ready to go solo?

While dedicated servers are beneficial to many businesses, they aren't for everyone. Before you invest in a dedicated server, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Do you have a lot of web sites that need hosting or require a lot of bandwidth?
2. Is the data on your web site very sensitive, such as peoples' social security or credit card numbers?
3. Are you running large e-commerce applications that require more memory and bandwidth?
4. Are you running a mission critical website?

If you have answered, "yes" to one or more of the above questions, then you are ready to take the plunge. The question now becomes which company should you employ as your host. With more and more web hosting companies jumping on the bandwagon of dedicated hosting, the options can be overwhelming. What do you look for in a host? What's a fair price for the service? Do you need to invest in additional technology? These and other options should be your priority. The following are some suggestions to keep in mind while shopping for a dedicated server host.

Can your web host deliver?

With more and more web hosting companies going out of business, you need to pick a web hosting company that has stood the test of time. Ask your prospective host how long they have been in business. Also, find out where the dedicated servers are located. This is important to know, as your host may be a reseller for someone else and may not have control over the server if something goes wrong. You need to have a host that maintains their own servers in-house. Finally, ask if there is a direct Internet connection to the servers and find out who the major carriers are. This will determine the speed of your server. All these factors are imperative if you want your host to deliver the kind of service you need to succeed.

Learn the technical aspects.

A host is only as good as its technical capabilities. How is your prospective host's load balanced? Ask your host if they have Border Gateway Protocol 4 (BGP4). This balances the load among different carriers and enables the load to be switched seamlessly and instantly. If your network experiences a backlog or if one provider's network goes down, your web traffic can be re-routed so you don't experience any lost sales. A good web host will also offer all available platforms, namely UNIX, NT, and Cobalt RaQ. Certain applications demand certain platforms. Be sure your host can accommodate your needs and can make appropriate suggestions to help your server run smoothly. To minimize technical difficulties, also find out how your server will be stored. Ideally, your server should be placed in an environmentally controlled rack space. The room should be a climate-controlled computer room with back up generator(s). If your server overheats, it could malfunction and cause your site to go down. Additionally, the room should have 24-hour a day security with closed-circuit monitoring and on-site security patrol. Anything less could put your client's information in jeopardy.

How knowledgeable is the staff?

The technical staff should be trained AND qualified to answer your questions efficiently so you can get your problems resolved and get on with your business. Another point to consider is whether or not support is provided toll free. If it's not, you may incur high long distance charges on your phone bill, as some problems can take hours to rectify by phone. Most reputable companies will offer toll free support 24-hours a day, and they'll stand behind their service with a money back guarantee on hosting.

Price matters.

Last but not least is the price. The last thing you want to do is stretch your resources so far that you can't continue to invest money into your business. A good web host can customize a server just for you that's within your budget. Scalability is important too, for as your business grows, you'll want your server to keep up with the increase.

As your site starts to generate more business and provide more services, a dedicated web server can help you maintain your growth. But before you ink a deal with any dedicated hosting company, be sure to consider all the points above. After all, in the volatile world of e-business, contracting with a host for your dedicated server may well be one of the most important business decisions you ever make.

Editor's Note: A. Michael Salim is founder and president of American Data Technology, Inc.(www.adtithosting.com) a web hosting company based in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina with e-commerce clients worldwide. Prior to starting ADTI, Michael Salim worked as an engineer and consultant on the original Internet backbone while working at IBM on the National Science Foundation (NSFNET) project in the early 90's. While there he helped to revamp and upgrade the Internet infrastructure and assisted in laying the foundation for the Internet, as we know it today. Michael Salim can be reached at 800.525.0031 or via email at msalim@localweb.com.