How to make one of your biggest marketing decisions

Do we agree that your website is one of your largest (if not *the* largest) marketing properties? If so, then read on.

When you are a solo business owner like me, you don't have an IT department or a webmaster. And so it's up to you to deal with your website. Last week I changed web hosts for the fourth time in the more than 15 years that I've had this website. It's something I've been wanting to do for a while for many reasons (perhaps the subject of an upcoming post) and I am glad I did. Going through the process showcased exactly why it's so important to choose the right host.

Choosing a website host is a crucial business decision

Since your website is your front office on the Internet and it needs to remain open and accessible at all times, choosing your web host is a critical business decision. There are dozens if not hundreds of website hosts (do a search and you will see), many offering dirt cheap hosting packages. The host you choose can have a tremendous impact on your business, and your decision should not involve price alone.

Here's what you want from a website host:

Near perfect reliability. In hosting parlance, this is called "uptime" and you want to make sure it is as close to 100% as possible. If your host's servers go down frequently, that means your website goes down frequently, which basically means lost business for you. And when servers are down, you won't get email either, which also means lost business.

Fast website loading times. Website loading is partially due to your host's servers (capacity, whether they are shared or dedicated) and partially due to factors on your website

(number of plug-ins, design). According to my current host, the closer the servers are to your customers, the faster the website loading times. Website loading times may even affect your SEO ranking (read more about it here).

Good if not great customer service. If there's a problem, you want to be able to speak to someone who can (and wants) to help you. You are looking for customer service that is available 365/24/7, and if you are in the U.S., preferably based here. You may also want to look for an employee-owned company, because the people you talk to will have a real interest in solving any problems you may have.

Clean record. Some hosts, due to their cheap rates, attract a lot of spammy businesses, which in turn get the host blacklisted by some ISPs. This is big. Your host's standing can affect whether your emails get delivered (my previous host was blacklisted by Yahoo and my emails to Yahoo addresses would all bounce back) and even your SEO standing.

Ability to deal with your website specifications. You want to make sure tech support understands your platform. For example, if you run a WordPress site, you want a host that works with WordPress; and if you run ecommerce on your website, you want a host that can handle secure transactions.

Ease of use. My last hosting provider had two different accounts for me. One was a billing account, with a separate user name and password, and a "cPanel" account, for handling website administration. If I needed to update credit card information, I had to log in to billing, and to change website parameters, to cPanel. To make it worse, you couldn't access cPanel from the the main hosting website, but rather through an obscure URL you had received when you signed up. Needless to say, this was not easy or simple. It wasted a lot of my time too.

Here are three other important tips:

1. **Don’t rely on your developer/designer’s recommendation.** Many website developers have reseller accounts with a website host, so it’s in their own interest to sell you that. Do your own research. There are several resources to help you identify a good host. I like SiteGeek. Check out reviews and see what people are saying. Are many people having the same issue? What is the main complaint? Are more people leaving a host than transferring in?
2. **NEVER register your domain with your website hosting company.** If there’s a problem, they will be able to hold your website hostage. Instead, choose a separate registrar. It may not be the cheapest option, but it will save you hassle in the long run, and let you maintain control of your website.
3. **Have a separate email account on Gmail or something similar**. Use this for the administrative emails that you get from your website hosting company and domain registrar. If your website and email are down you will still be able to access your stuff, particularly if you forgot your user name and/or password, or need to respond to a work ticket.

Remember your website is an integral part of your business and marketing efforts. Money you spend on your website—whether it be on design and development, hosting, listing—is a business/marketing expense that I can assure you will provide you a return on your investment. Cheaper, especially in website hosting, is just cheaper, not better.