



Building Out Your Digital Agency With Managed Hosting

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Executive Summary

Year over year, the design field has grown exponentially more competitive. To differentiate themselves from their competition, agencies must seek advantages wherever they can be found. Managed hosting - where the agency hands off responsibility for maintenance, management, and security of their website or server to their host - offers a multitude of benefits in this regard.

However, choosing the right managed host can be challenging. When it is time to make a hosting decision, many turn to friends for referrals or carry out cursory research online. Unfortunately, there are so many hosting companies - and so many factors in choosing one - that it is easy to become overwhelmed.

This guide is intended to walk agency owners, decision-makers, and agency clients through the entire process involved in choosing a managed hosting provider, and to foster a better understanding of what managed hosting is and entails.

Introduction:

A New Era of Web Hosting

The days when an organization could simply toss a website online and hope for the best are well behind us. Today, hosting is more complicated than it's ever been thanks to rich media, mobility, and the sophisticated array of tools available to businesses. And with the current pace at which technology both online and offline is evolving, that complexity is likely to increase further.

Consider how different the web was only a decade ago. Mobile technology was still in its infancy. "Social media" still meant sites like MySpace and Friendster, and Responsive Web Design¹ was still a new, relatively known concept.

Now flash-forward to the modern day. Dynamic websites, which adapt and evolve based on their visitors, provide a user experience so personalized and unique² that many might have called it impossible years ago. Responsive, secure, mobile-friendly websites are not just advantageous, but necessary.³ Social media is one of the most powerful marketing tools we have ever seen.⁴

Keeping up with all of these trends - and doing so while also fostering the growth of your agency - is a herculean task, especially if you lack an IT department, as most small agencies do. It isn't just the evolving state of the web that you need to keep track of, after all. You also need to see to domain management, server load management, software updates, website security, and disaster recovery.

If that list makes your head spin, you are not alone. Running websites for your clients and your agency is time-consuming, complicated, and expensive. It's also arguably a waste of resources.

Every man-hour spent installing a patch or handling a security update, is an hour not spent on marketing. Every dollar spent on infrastructure is a dollar not spent on business growth. Every line of code a developer writes for a website's backend is one line of code that doesn't go into innovative new software.

With that in mind, it is not surprising that some agencies simply choose to cut corners. But this is not a suitable response to the challenges of hosting, either. And in some cases, it can be more dangerous than a bit of lost potential or a competitive disadvantage.

If, for example, you ignore the issue of website security - or worse, approach it with an inexperienced hand - you are putting both your data and the data of your clients at risk. 60% of businesses that suffer a cyber attack fail within six months.⁵ Even the businesses which somehow manage to survive still underperform for years afterwards.⁶

1 <https://www.smashingmagazine.com/2011/01/guidelines-for-responsive-web-design/>

2 <https://www.mirabeau.nl/en/news/article/2014/content-first-from-responsive-design-to-a-dynamic-website>

3 <https://venturebeat.com/2016/03/16/google-will-start-ranking-mobile-friendly-sites-even-higher-in-may/>

4 <http://www.socialmediatoday.com/social-business/3-awesome-reasons-why-businesses-need-social-media>

5 <http://www.denverpost.com/2016/10/23/small-companies-cyber-attack-out-of-business/>

6 <http://www.information-age.com/average-hacked-companies-underperform-42-three-years-123467270/>



In short, this is a risk you cannot afford to take.

Further, the design industry is now more competitive than it has ever been. Every wasted resource puts you one step behind your competition. Every point at which you fail to realize the full potential of your website is an opportunity for a competitor to move past you.

“With so many people becoming graphic designers, it’s not surprising that there is increased competition - and even oversaturation - in the market,” writes How Design’s Roberto Blake.⁷ “There is a silver lining: in any market, oversaturation usually means that the majority of what is available is only of average quality at best. Cream tends to rise to the top, and so if you can outperform your competition, then you tend not to worry about how many people you’re competing against.”

To promote business growth, enhance security, stay current with the fast-changing hosting industry, and reduce your hosting overhead, managed hosting is the best option available. By putting the technical elements of your site into the hands of a trusted expert, you’ll free yourself up to focus on what you’re truly good at. Because people don’t hire your agency for your hosting expertise - they hire you to build responsive, well thought-out, aesthetically pleasing websites and web applications.

The more freedom you have to do that, the better.

⁷ <http://www.howdesign.com/design-career/5-challenges-designers-face-in-todays-creative-economy/>

Chapter One:

Intro to Managed Hosting

Historically, developers, designers, and agencies had to possess a great deal of familiarity with server and site management, as it was the only way to maintain a web presence. However, as the web developed and evolved, we saw the emergence of tools like cPanel/WHM and Plesk. In a way, managed hosting is another step forward from these tools - a way for agencies to bring themselves onto the web without having to work through the technical challenges of doing so.

If it helps you better conceptualize it, imagine you're looking to rent office space, and you've narrowed it down to two separate landlords. The first one allows you to change the space however you see fit, with the stipulation that they will be completely 'hands-off.' You need to handle construction, installation, maintenance, and management on your own.

The second, meanwhile, offers to do all the work for you. You can still customize your office space, but they'll do all the heavy lifting, and ensure everything is kept up and running, even handling stuff like your plumbing, electrical bill, and access control. You can focus entirely on what you're using the space for, without having to worry about how it's maintained.

The first landlord is analogous to unmanaged hosting, while the second is analogous to managed. A managed hosting provider provides the necessary infrastructure for a client's website or business services, then actively maintains that infrastructure. The client is free to focus on their core business, and the host deals with everything an organization's IT department would ordinarily handle.

A managed host also typically provides a wide range of managed IT services. These will be discussed at length later in the guide. It is also important to note that there is a third type of hosting, but it does not slot especially well into the above analogy.

We will discuss it more below, along with a deeper look at both managed and unmanaged hosting.



Unmanaged, Managed and Platform: What's The Difference?

In the web world, things have largely evolved into three major hosting categories.



UNMANAGED

With unmanaged hosting, you have a server or website, and maybe a control panel or development tools. Beyond that, you're essentially on your own. This is ideal for companies with their own dedicated IT department, or for agencies that know a great deal about servers or the underlying web technologies.

With unmanaged hosting, you essentially do everything from scratch, from control panel installation to coding - the only thing the host provides is the infrastructure. This is both its greatest strength and largest drawback. Because everything is left up to the client, and because there's very little or no support, unmanaged hosting is much less attractive for smaller agencies or agencies without IT staff.

Going back to our landlord analogy, the first landlord would be much more attractive for someone with experience in construction - less so for someone who would have to bring in several different contractors to handle things.



MANAGED

The broadest category of hosting and our focus in this eBook, managed hosting is just what it sounds like - a hosting solution where the host manages patching, server management, backups, maintenance, security, and more. It tends to be most prevalent among small to mid-sized businesses, primarily because these organizations don't usually have on-site resources to manage their own servers.

In addition to handling the day-to-day of server maintenance and management, managed hosts also offer a wealth of additional services, including (but not limited to) network connectivity, DDoS and malware protection, firewalls/access controls, backups and disaster recovery, automatic load balancing, and server/website migration.



APPLICATION/PLATFORM

The newest form of hosting, and one that's entirely on the cloud. Application/platform hosting is meant for clients who don't require access to their server's underlying infrastructure. You can think of it as something like an Uber - you only use the service and pay for it when you need it, and you can call as many Ubers as you want at a given time. You still use the service, but maintenance doesn't really matter to you, and you don't need to understand how everything works below the hood.

There are three types of solutions in this hosting category.

Platform as a Service solutions basically provide a cloud development environment that can be spun up at any time to create, run, and manage applications. Depending on how intensive a client's needs, they may require anything from a single cloud instance to a veritable army of servers.

Managed Application solutions, meanwhile, function similarly to PaaS offerings, but also adds a level of support and management for a particular software suite such as WordPress. The host supports both the application layer and the hardware layer, and the client is free to focus on what they're using both for.

Software as a Service solutions differ only slightly from managed applications. With SaaS, a host provides a single, cloud-based application to their clients - one of the most prevalent examples of an SaaS app is Salesforce.

Be Wary of Unmanaged Hosting

Here's the thing, while inexpensive, unmanaged hosting is still more of a DIY platform for tech-savvy developers and webmasters. Since they don't need a ton of help on the technical end, a managed platform isn't strictly necessary. For agencies without extensive technical expertise, however, the time and money spent on training and support would be far better spent on a managed host.

A managed host such as Liquid Web, for example, ensures you've 24/7 access to an on-site support team if you need them. They keep your server always patched and up to date, and handle all security issues so that you don't have to. They also handle system administration - essentially, all you need to worry about is your business.

A managed host also gives you access to a sales team straight from the beginning of the hosting

process, a group of professionals who can analyze your unique business needs and challenges and recommend the best solution for you.

HOSTING TECHNOLOGIES

Shared Hosting

This plan is sort of like living in a frat house ... many people living in tight quarters.

If one client uses an overlarge amount of server resources, everyone else on the shared plan may lag behind.

VPS Hosting

VPS hosting is like having a condo which you can access and customize on the fly - again, with all the maintenance work handled by your landlord.

The space is guaranteed to be yours.

Dedicated Hosting

With dedicated hosting, you have an entire server to yourself, sort of like if you rented out an entire house from your landlord instead of just a single room.

Cloud Hosting

Cloud hosting typically describes a network of many servers where your website resides (rather than on a single server), which allows features like auto-scalability and instant deployments.

Chapter Two: The Business Benefits of Managed Hosting for Your Agency Managed Hosting

As we have already mentioned, digital marketing and web design are increasingly competitive fields. New agencies open their doors every day, amidst ever-increasing demand for sites offering engaging content and a positive user experience. Keeping up with these demands while also managing your own business can be an exercise in frustration, especially without a dedicated IT department.

That's where managed hosting comes in. By partnering with a trusted provider, you can lighten the load on your own staff. You and your workers can free yourselves up to focus on more important matters, relying on your host's dedicated team of IT experts to do all the heavy lifting.

There are several major advantages to this approach.

COST SAVINGS

Navigating the ever-changing world of hosting technology can be both expensive and time-consuming, and a DIY-approach to hosting isn't as cost-effective as you might expect. Running your own server involves a lot more than simply purchasing the hardware, after all - there are many additional costs you might not have factored in:

CLIMATE CONTROL FOR YOUR SERVER ROOM

You can't just store your server in a closet.⁸ You need to find a place for it that's kept both cool and relatively dry, otherwise you'll likely damage the hardware.

POWER COSTS

If you leave a standard PC running 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, it would cost you about \$225 per year in electrical costs.⁹ That doesn't sound so bad, right? Here's the thing - servers are basically superpowered PCs.

Which mean they require more electricity - a lot more. About \$505 more.¹⁰ That's a pretty big expense to absorb, especially given the rest of the spending you'll be doing.

PURCHASING SOFTWARE AND MANAGING ONGOING UPDATES

A server is nothing without software - and unless you're using exclusively open-source solutions, you're going to need to both purchase and manage yours. The cost of that varies, but either way, it won't be cheap - and there are often plenty of 'hidden' costs, too.¹¹

8 <http://www.seguetech.com/properly-store-server/>

9 <https://www.pcmech.com/article/much-pc-cost-electricity/>

10 <http://www.zdnet.com/article/toolkit-calculate-datacenter-server-power-usage/>

11 <http://www.techradar.com/news/software/what-are-the-hidden-costs-of-software-licensing-1280832>

HIRING, TRAINING, AND EMPLOYING IT PROFESSIONALS

Experts don't work for free, and even if you have an IT department, server management might not be a core competency of theirs. According to Payscale.com,¹² the median salary for an IT team member in the US today is just over \$71,800. The national median for an IT manager's salary is more than \$80,000.

Not only that, you also need to factor in employee benefits, office space, and recruitment costs. Once everything is said and done, the monthly total cost for an in-house IT department of just three people adds up to a staggering \$61,702 per month.



Small in-house IT team: 1 manager, 2 support techs

(Average figures suggest ³ you should expect to add 40% for recruitment costs, \$65 per employee per month in perks, \$46 per square foot in monthly office space costs, plus an additional 44% for employee benefits and vacation pay)

Let's add that all up for a second, shall we?



Salary for two IT consultants, one manager

$$\text{Icon 1} + \text{Icon 2} + \text{Icon 3} = \$222,000 \text{ or } \$18,500$$



Recruitment costs (40% of manager's salary)

$$\text{Icon 1} = \$2,667 \text{ per month}$$



Employee perks

$$\text{Icon 1} + \text{Icon 2} = \$195 \text{ per month}$$



Office space (150 sq. feet per consultant, 400 per manager)

$$\text{Icon 1} = \$32,200 \text{ per month}$$



Health benefits and vacation pay

$$\text{Icon 1} + \text{Icon 2} = \$8,140 \text{ per month}$$



The monthly total for an in-house IT team adds up to a staggering

$$\text{Icon 1} + \text{Icon 2} + \text{Icon 3} = \$61,702 \text{ per month}$$



In contrast, a fully managed dedicated servers, complete with 24-hour support start as low as

\$199 per month

1 Information Technology (IT) Consultant Salary (2016, May 5). Retrieved from Payscale.com

2 Information Technology (IT) Manager Salary (2016, May 5). Retrieved from Payscale.com

3 Bryce Maddock (2013, March 29). 5 Employee Costs Founders Often Forget. Retrieved from <http://huff.to/1SRBLNk>

DATA REPAIR AND RECOVERY

If your server crashes or is hacked, you'll need to ensure you've some recourse - automated backups and a disaster recovery solution, for example. While the cost of managing and maintaining your backups might not be as significant as the other items on the list, it's still more money out of your budget.

HARDWARE UPGRADES

Systems and servers eventually become obsolete, and thanks to how fast technology's been moving, that's happening more quickly than ever. How quickly? Every three years or so. According to IDC,¹³ after the third year, support costs for server hardware increase by 40%, then by 200% in the fifth year and 400% in the seventh. In other words, your choice is to either sink money into upgrading your server every few years, or sink money into supporting old, outdated hardware. Not exactly an attractive decision, is it?

Once everything is said and done, deploying your own server can cost thousands of dollars in hardware and software alone. Initial expenses on average only account for about 25% of the cost of installing, maintaining, and supporting your own server.

Not only that, every time you stop what you're doing to address a technical issue with your site or your hosting, that's time you aren't spending on the tasks you **want** to be focusing on. According to research, it takes an average of 23 minutes and 5 seconds to get back on task each time you're interrupted.¹⁴ In short, by battling technical issues, you aren't just wasting time.

You're wasting money, too. Every minute you spend figuring out why something on your server isn't working is a minute you aren't spending on your clients. A minute you aren't spending on building relationships that will win their loyalty.

By outsourcing to a reliable hosting provider, you won't have to worry about any of the costs we've detailed here - your host will handle everything for you. More importantly, your monthly costs will be predictable. You won't have to worry about any hidden prices, or unexpected expenses.

In short, managed hosting saves you money on hardware, software, and staffing - and can even help you **make** more by fostering better client relationships.

BETTER SECURITY

The overall cost of cybercrime is projected to reach \$2 trillion annually by 2019.¹⁵ That's a massive number, and a bit difficult to conceptualize, so we'll put it into terms that are easier to understand. For a small business, the average cost of a cyber attack is \$86,500.¹⁶

With criminals getting craftier and cyber attacks growing both more complex¹⁷ and more personalized,¹⁸ it's never been more important to place your security - and that of your

¹³ <https://www.storagecraft.com/blog/when-should-you-replace-your-server/>

¹⁴ <https://www.fastcompany.com/944128/worker-interrupted-cost-task-switching>

¹⁵ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stevemorgan/2016/01/17/cyber-crime-costs-projected-to-reach-2-trillion-by-2019/#1072caaf3a91>

¹⁶ <http://www.pymnts.com/news/security-and-risk/2016/how-much-cyber-attacks-cost-businesses/>

¹⁷ <https://blog.eiqnetworks.com/blog/understanding-the-increased-complexity-of-cyber-threats>

¹⁸ <https://www.scmagazineuk.com/cyber-attacks-are-becoming-more-made-to-order-for-chosen-victims/article/656337/>

clients - into the hands of an experienced professional.

Let's pose another question - when vital or sensitive data belonging to your clients is compromised by an attack, are you prepared to take responsibility? More importantly, do you have the capacity and expertise to not only put things right, but to say you did everything you possibly could have to prevent the attack? Imagine if, instead of a design agency, you were a property owner arranging leases for your clients in an office building. Would you personally patrol the grounds with a flashlight each night to prevent theft and vandalism? Probably not - you'd hire a professional security company.

The truth is, as vigilant and security-conscious as you might be, you simply cannot provide the same service as a team of security experts, such as you'd get with a good managed hosting provider. That's because those providers are as much professional security organizations as they are web hosts. They know their way around the security space, and understand the different types of attacks that might target their clients.

As an added benefit, that makes it easier to comply with regulations such as PCI DSS. No need to worry about regulatory fines or reputational damage from noncompliance. Your host has it covered.

THE ABILITY TO STAY CURRENT AND COMPETITIVE

The hosting industry is experiencing a period of unprecedented growth, and businesses both great and small are having trouble keeping pace. But in order to stay competitive, keeping pace is something you **need** to do. If you don't have a finger on the pulse of the hosting industry, you cannot feasibly stay competitive.

At the same time, expending your resources on constant training and upgrades isn't an ideal solution, either.

That's where your host comes in. Managed hosting providers know they need to make it their business to understand the market. They know how to deal with vendors to get their clients the best deals possible, and stay aware of when new innovations are available.

And they're constantly considering how to apply those innovations to their business - how those innovations can benefit their clients.

It's sort of like having a superpowered mechanic taking care of your car. They're always on-call and immediately available whenever you have a problem. Better yet, they provide you with an automatic vehicle upgrade every time a new model comes out - meanwhile, all **you** have to do is drive.





FASTER RESOLUTION FOR TECHNICAL ISSUES

Imagine you encounter an issue with one of your products - a website that isn't loading as quickly as it should, for example. Unfortunately for you, your deadline is at the end of the week, and it's already Wednesday. Resigning yourself to a series of sleepless nights, you begin wracking your brain for a way to solve the problem

With a managed host, that scenario isn't something you need to deal with. Hosting providers generally have a large team of dedicated support professionals on-hand, able to answer a wide array of questions about your service. They're there for you 24/7, ready to answer any technical questions you might have in a timely fashion. And that includes questions not directly related to your server.

At the end of the day, the support team has one purpose: to help you.

THE FREEDOM TO FOCUS ON YOUR BUSINESS

Ultimately, you want your business to grow. In order for it to do so, it's best to focus on marketing, design, and customer relationships - not server management. And with a managed host, you're free to do so.

You can leave your hosting provider to handle your IT needs, ensuring reliability and efficiency.

Even if you have your own IT department, this is incredibly beneficial. You can put your IT staff towards more innovative pursuits, like optimizing workflows or developing innovative new apps for your workers. And the money you save on infrastructure and IT costs can be directed elsewhere, towards growing your business.

Chapter Three:

What Services Should Your Business Outsource?

There's a lot more to managed hosting than general server management, monitoring, and maintenance. Most hosts offer a wide range of additional services. Let's zero in on the specifics of each service you might utilize, and the business benefits you can gain from them.

Each of these services can generally be used in addition to a managed hosting plan - or even independently from it. If you don't need a website, for example, you could simply spring for managed email and data backups.

EMAIL/MESSAGING

Putting something like an email server into the hands of an experienced host nets you many of the same benefits you'd gain from outsourcing your website server. You don't have to worry about maintenance, storage, or email upgrades, and you don't need to engage in the hair-pulling exercise of managing your own email server.

Additionally, you'll enjoy faster upgrades, easier scaling, and better overall email security - especially valuable if you want to protect communiques with your clients.

DNS HOSTING

Your website's Domain Name Server is basically the equivalent of an online phone book, translating the IP address of your website into an easier-to-remember domain name/URL. Without it, people can't find your website. You might as well not be online at all.

Outsourcing your DNS means you don't need to worry about downtime - any performance issues or potential roadblocks will be handled in short order by your host. Not only that, you'll likely enjoy better overall performance, as the host will know exactly what needs to be done to keep your DNS running at peak efficiency.

SOFTWARE UPDATES, PATCHING, AND INSTALLATION

The more software your website runs, the harder it becomes to stay totally up to date. Every application has a different update cycle. Every developer unveils and eliminates security vulnerabilities at their own pace.

And every piece of software has its own net of compatibility issues and technical challenges, both during the installation process and afterwards. Keeping track of everything is a full-time job in and of itself. That's why it's so valuable to outsource. You can leave the task of keeping all your software running smoothly to the experts, and focus on actually using it.

SECURITY

Phishing emails. Brute force attacks. Intrusions via software vulnerabilities. Malware and ransomware. DDoS attacks.

The range of threats facing your business and its website is vast, and defending against them is more than even some large enterprises can handle. Given that small businesses are the target of those threats with increasing frequency,¹⁹ the argument in favor of outsourcing security to managed hosting provider is a strong one. Rather than struggling to keep up with a complex landscape of threats on your own, you're giving over responsibility to a provider whose full-time job is security.

They can scan for and eliminate vulnerabilities in your software. They can keep your email secure and encrypt your site traffic. They can handle intrusion detection, prevent against DDoS attacks, and prevent malware and ransomware infections.

And ultimately, they can ensure that your server remains secure, and your business complies with every applicable regulation - there's a reason that, according to Gartner, managed security represents one of the fastest growing market segments in the security landscape, reaching \$9.4 billion in revenue in 2016.²⁰

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DATA BACKUPS, STORAGE, AND DISASTER RECOVERY

Imagine this: you're working on a new website for a client, and you've already mapped the entire layout. Then the unthinkable happens. Your system dies, and when you check your backups, you come to a sickening realization - the last time you backed up your data was a month ago.

Not only have you lost the project you're working on, but you've lost countless hours of other work, too.

By bringing in a managed host to take care of your backups, you can ensure that you're never left high and dry by data loss - and that your data is always recoverable. And by relying on a host for disaster recovery on your website, you can ensure total reliability and full resilience.

And that's something you can't put a price tag on.

¹⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/small-business-network/2016/feb/08/huge-rise-hack-attacks-cyber-criminals-target-small-businesses>
²⁰ <https://www.gartner.com/doc/3698217/market-share-managed-security-services>



LOAD BALANCING

Picture the network that connects visitors to your website as a highway. When too many cars are on that highway, it gets congested - traffic slows to a crawl, and people start having trouble getting where they want to go.

When you use a load balancer, it's akin to adding extra lanes or roads to a highway in periods of especially high traffic. Load balancers spread traffic across multiple servers and systems, reducing the strain on each one that's involved. And most managed hosts as a rule offer some form of load balancing service.

CONTENT DELIVERY NETWORKS

It's a fairly obvious concept - the closer someone is geographically to a server on which a website is hosted, the faster they can access that website. A content delivery network ensures that no matter where a user is, they're at least reasonably close to one of your servers. This reduces page load time across the board, drastically improving your site's PageRank and conversions.²¹

Consider carefully what services you want to keep under your control, and which services you're okay with handing over to your host.

²¹ <https://blog.kissmetrics.com/speed-is-a-killer/>

Chapter Four:

Choosing A Managed Hosting Provider - How To Get The Most Bang For Your Buck

Choosing a managed hosting provider is about more than cost - and you can't solely go by what they say on their website. Everyone guarantees great service, high availability, and no issues. But what they promise doesn't always happen.

If you want to truly evaluate whether or not a managed hosting provider suits your needs, you need to look deeper. The following criteria will help you evaluate whether or not a host is the right fit for your agency - and whether or not they can actually back up the claims they've made about themselves.

PRICE

Typically, this is closely correlated with the features provided and the level of support offered. A shared hosting plan, for example, will be far less expensive than a fully-managed dedicated server. Unfortunately, it's difficult to do a straight 'apples to apples' comparison between different hosts because of how much variation exists in managed hosting products and services.

That some providers use usage models and other rely on fixed pricing only further complicates matters.

For these reasons, you shouldn't make a hosting decision based on price alone. It should be the last factor you consider, if at all. On the surface, two hosts might look like apples-to-apples, but they might differ in some key way - one of them might have lower-grade hardware, for example, or not offer as many managed services.

Ask your host about the age of the equipment that your site or app will be posted on. Ask them about what services the plan you're considering includes from the start. Ask them about overage fees and other contractual obligations.

To give an example, a provider will often offer a lower price, but further discovery might reveal they over-subscribe their customers. This means you'll probably pay less, but you'll also suffer from worse performance. In short, you can't just look at the price a host is charging. You need to look into **why** they can offer that price.



SERVICES & FEATURES

The next question you should address is what you're getting from a host, and how well a host's services and features meet your agency's specific needs. Talk to others in your agency about what sort of functionality you need in a website, and what elements are "must-haves" for your hosting plan. For instance...

- Does your host provide ongoing monitoring of site performance and activity?
- Do they provide scaling for traffic spikes to keep load times optimal?
- Do they provide automated backups and disaster recovery?
- What specific managed services do you need? Do they provide all of those?
- Do they offer migration from your current hosting plan if you have one?
- Will your host work to prevent network problems, hardware failures, and power issues?

SECURITY & CERTIFICATIONS

You need a host that prioritizes the security of its clients' data. If you caught wind that a plumber destroyed their piping while doing repairs on their own home, you probably wouldn't trust them with yours. In the same way, you shouldn't expect a host that doesn't take their own security seriously to protect your data.

As for how you can tell, there are a few questions you can ask. Note that a host that's either completely unwilling to answer is just as much a red flag as one that goes into too much detail.

- What security certifications do you possess?
- How do you control access to your physical site?
- How do you keep your networks and systems safe? What software controls do you have in place?
- How do they approach regulatory compliance?
- How do they train their support staff? What certifications and qualifications do their engineers hold?
- How proactive will they be with security patches and updates?
- How knowledgeable are they about the latest cyber attacks and malware outbreaks?

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

Another key criterion - what are people saying about the host? Avoid solely looking at review sites, if possible. There's an entire industry that exists for paid reviews, and sites like Yelp aren't always the best at sifting them out.

That isn't to say you shouldn't trust them at all. Just take what you read with a grain of salt, and know that a host who has nothing but five-star reviews might be just as bad as one with all one-star reviews. Additionally, don't just look at a single review site.

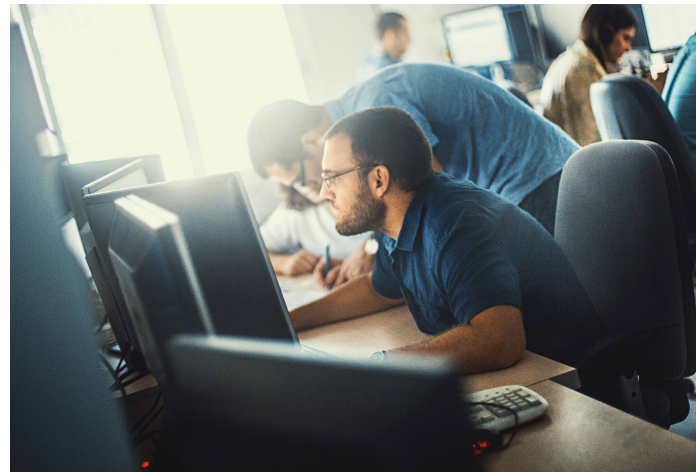
Perhaps most importantly, ask your prospective provider for their customer satisfaction data - if they're willing to provide it, that's usually a good sign.

SUPPORT STAFF

This one's a bit difficult to evaluate without actually being a client - but there are still certain key qualifiers you can look out for. First, look at your host's knowledge base. Does it look like it's well-maintained and regularly updated, or is it essentially nonexistent?

You can also ask a host's sales team some of the following questions (or find information to answer them on the host's website):

- Do you offer a self-service portal that lets me take care of certain problems on my own?
- Can you help me with issues not directly related to my hosting plan?
- Will you recommend ways I can optimize my website?
- Do you offer dedicated, 24/7 support?
- What certifications do your staff hold?
- Can I reach out to you in the way that best suits me?
- How large is your support team?
- What is your average response time?



MIGRATION


Migrating from one host to another can be a nerve-wracking experience. There are so many questions, and so many things that can go wrong. How do you carry out the migration? What happens to your website? How do you ensure you don't lose any data? How long will all this take?

A good managed hosting provider will help you make the switch from another provider to them - and they'll do so without trying to lock you into a contract or trap you with hidden, surprise fees. Some, such as Liquid Web, even provide complimentary migrations for new server orders.

FLEXIBILITY

How flexible are the different plans offered by the host? Is it indicated anywhere on the host's site that you can choose a custom plan? More importantly, how does the sales team respond if you bring up the prospect of customization?

Let's say, for example, you want a managed dedicated server, but you want a different processor from those the host offers. Are they willing to work with you to build a custom rig, or do they simply apologize and say what you want isn't feasible or viable? At its core, what you're evaluating here is whether or not the host cares about meeting the needs of its clients.



Here's another example. Let's say your design agency has a site that starts off using WordPress on a shared server. As the site grows and gains clients, you decide to start offering them Shared Hosting through your site - but that means you'll need to expand and move onto a dedicated server, likely with cloud functionality to handle traffic spikes.

You might even need separate servers for your website, database, and firewall. With complex requirements like this, it's easy to get trapped - to find yourself drowning in hidden fees. A good host won't subject you to that.

They'll understand that there is no one-size-fits-all solution in the hosting space. Everyone's requirements are different. Sometimes, that means tweaking an existing plan so it's a better fit, or helping a client set up a project that runs across multiple types of infrastructure (for example, a site that runs on both a dedicated server and the cloud).

If a host's plans are all set in stone, then there's also a good chance they won't let you schedule reboots, upgrades, and other maintenance for convenience. They'll just perform all those tasks whenever it suits **them**, not you.

CONTRACT


Look closely at the contract a host wants you to sign. Every SLA promises greater than 99% uptime. Only the good ones provide compensation to customers if they fail to meet that promise.

Pay close attention to any clauses that imply hidden fees, and don't be afraid to ask about them. Account setup charges, domain transferring and ownership, and customer service fees are frequent with hosts that are trying to nickle-and-dime their clients. Other hosts may hit their clients with massive charges for even a minor overage.

Be wary of any host that wants you to sign a long-term contract. They may be looking to lock you into a plan or anchor you to a product that won't be a great fit for you in the long haul. Mandated vendor lock-ins represent another red flag - you should be free to choose for yourself.

Again, like customizability, a host's contract is an indicator of how much it cares about its clients. A managed hosting provider that takes the needs of its customer seriously won't force them into a restrictive, long-term contract. They'll find something that works for both parties.

Contracts are often one-sided, and designed to protect the host, not the customer. A good host will create a contract that's made to protect both. Because a good host isn't interested in fleecing customers - it's interested in helping them.



Be wary of any host that wants you to sign a long-term contract. They may be looking to lock you into a plan or anchor you to a product that won't be a great fit for you in the long haul. Mandated vendor lock-ins represent another red flag - you should be free to choose for yourself.

HARDWARE

How powerful and reliable is your host's hardware? How new is that hardware, and how often do they upgrade? Are their services only cheaper because they run on outdated systems?

Is their equipment enterprise-grade? Have they fully disaster-proofed their data center? During the sales process, don't be afraid to ask about what hardware the host uses - both in its network and in its servers.

And don't be afraid to do a few quick Google searches for reviews of that hardware. Most hosts will provide at least some information about what type of hardware they use.

TARGET DEMOGRAPHIC

Ideally, you want to pick a provider that focuses on you as a customer. For example, RackSpace and SoftLayer are focused on large enterprises, while GoDaddy and Web.com are focused on very small customers - usually individuals. Do a bit of research on what sort of customer a host generally gravitates towards.

This is usually evident from a few things:

- If they have a blog, what topics do they write on? What industries do they generally seem to focus on?
- What sort of social media presence do they maintain? Do you find the language they use and the way they conduct themselves online appealing to you as a customer?
- Look at the people leaving reviews on Facebook and other sites - what industry do they work in? Are they in the same field as you, or one that's similar?

PRODUCT PORTFOLIO

Look at the products your host offers. What new products have they recently delivered, and how have they acted to keep the products that are currently in their portfolio fresh and appealing? How large is their product portfolio - do they seem to have a wide range of diverse offerings, or do they provide only a narrow set of solutions?

GROWTH OUTLOOK

Last but not least, take a look at how your host has developed over the past few years. Check press releases and news articles for details on growth. Look at past reviews, and how they differ from current ones. And don't be afraid to ask the host's sales reps about details like how well they're doing, how many clients they've signed on, how many recurring clients they have, and so on.

You want to choose a host that has a positive growth outlook and a bright future - not one that might vanish in a few years.

YOUR NEEDS AS A CLIENT

Last but certainly not least, think about what you're looking for in a hosting solution. What do you **absolutely** need in order for your website to be a good fit for both you and your clients? Here are a few questions you can ask to determine your needs:

- What kind of website am I building?
- What applications do I need?
- What tools (ie. WordPress, Magento, etc.) am I using to build the website?
- Is there any special software my website needs?
- What sort of traffic volume am I expecting?
- Where are my clients primarily located?
- Will my site have a blog?
- Do I need a storefront of some kind? Will I sell any products and services?
- How much file storage do I need?
- What extra features (ie. email, SSL Certificates, multiple domains, etc.) do I need?

Chapter Five:

Why Liquid Web Is The Best Hosting Option For Your Business

Choosing a managed host can be difficult and overwhelming. It doesn't need to be, though. By bearing in mind the criteria laid out in this guide, you can make an informed choice. You can find a host that's a perfect fit for your agency. A host like Liquid Web. Now that you understand how managed hosting works - and understand what your needs are as a client - here's how we can meet them.

PRODUCTS BUILT FOR YOUR NEEDS

Whether you need the raw power of a managed dedicated server or the inherent flexibility of the managed cloud, we have a hosting solution for your project. Our dedicated servers are single-tenant hosting solutions that provide the highest level of performance and security. Our team can build a custom solution to ensure your site or app runs at peak performance, even if you need a multi-server setup.

If your project requires flexibility such as instant deployments, the ability to resize on the fly, or automatic scaling, consider managed cloud hosting. We offer both single-tenant cloud plans, like Cloud Dedicated, and multi-tenant options, like Cloud VPS. The most recent addition to our cloud line-up, Cloud Sites, provides a true managed Platform-as-a-Service (PaaS) cloud experience, including automatic scaling for when traffic spikes and you need extra resources.

If your site runs WordPress, we can manage not only your servers, but also WordPress itself. Our Managed WordPress plans free you from having to perform routine tasks like updating WordPress and Plugins. Our solution does it automatically, and checks our site to ensure nothing broke in the process.

PARTNER PROGRAMS TO HELP YOU GROW

We work with thousands of agencies around the world. Our partner programs empower agencies to build their business with Liquid Web.

Agency Program

For agencies that offer hosting as a service to their client, our agency program provides special discounts on infrastructure that help increase your margins while offering a best-in-class hosting solution for your clients.

Referral Program

If you'd rather refer clients and have us handle the hosting relationship with your client, take advantage of our referral program. Your agency will earn a generous commission for referring new business to Liquid Web. It's easy.

INCREDIBLE SUPPORT

At Liquid Web, we call ourselves the most Helpful Humans in Hosting™ for a very good reason. We and our infrastructure are available whenever you need us, hassle-free and easy to work with. Our Heroic Support team²² ensures you're never alone when you need assistance, and when it comes to managed hosting, there's nothing we take more seriously.²³ We know you need technological expertise, and we provide it with 24x7x365 support.

Our team includes certified professionals in RedHat Linux, Microsoft, and Cisco. More importantly, they're friendly, easy to access, and eager to help. Because technical expertise gets you nowhere if you don't care about the client you're helping.

And because so many of our clients are design agencies, we also possess a unique understanding of your needs, requirements, and demand - more so than any of our competitors. That's why over 10,000 agencies rely on us today.

Better yet, we provide a transparent, informative pricing list that comprehensively outlines what's offered at every level. No hidden fees, no surprise clauses, and no forced lock-in.

Finally, we have an entire team dedicated to migrating your data and onboarding your account. We provide complimentary migrations for new server orders from cPanel to cPanel or Plesk to Plesk. We are always available for free advice and can also offer customer migrations from nearly all other types of hosting and CMS systems. Don't let migrations scare you from making a move to the right hosting provider.

A RICH SELECTION OF SERVICES

We provide a comprehensive selection of services,²⁴ available as hosting add-ons for our clients. Through these offerings, we can help address any pain points you might have. That includes anything you might want to manage, from databases to load balancers to availability.

Need to maintain an offsite backup or store your access logs? We can help you.²⁵ Need a powerful firewall or a secure VPN? We've got you covered.²⁶ Want to make sure your server doesn't have any security vulnerabilities? We can help with that.²⁷

We're also ready and able to assist you even if your hosting needs are highly complex - as a matter of fact, that's our specialty.²⁸ Our organization specializes in PCI and HIPAA compliant hosting, and our high-performance solutions ensure that you won't have to worry about a slow cart if you're running an eCommerce platform. And even if you want to do something really complicated, like host an SaaS app or run extensive enterprise architecture, we can help.

Whatever your needs as a client - however great or small they are - we're here to meet them. That's a promise.

²² <https://www.liquidweb.com/support/>

²³ <https://www.liquidweb.com/support/managed-experience/>

²⁴ <https://www.liquidweb.com/products/add-ons/>

²⁵ <https://www.liquidweb.com/products/add-ons/storage-backups/>

²⁶ <https://www.liquidweb.com/products/add-ons/firewalls-vpn/>

²⁷ <https://www.liquidweb.com/products/add-ons/security/>

²⁸ <https://www.liquidweb.com/advanced-solutions/>



Conclusion

The hosting industry is rapidly evolving, and the design field is more competitive than it's ever been. To differentiate yourself from the competition, you need to seek advantages wherever you can, and managed hosting provides those in spades. By handing off the responsibility for maintenance, management, and security to a host, you leave yourself free to focus on what's important - growing your business.

More importantly, you'll have peace of mind for your customers. They'll know that your host is secure and reliable - and that by association, any data they entrust with you will be safe. That's something you can't put a price on.

Finally, by choosing Liquid Web - by partnering with the most Helpful Humans in Hosting™ - you'll ensure you have a strong, reliable provider who understands the needs and demands of design agencies, and stands beside you all the way, no matter what that entails.



Liquid Web™