Web Hosting Made Simple

Picking a Web provider can be tricky. Here's a guide to simplify the search.

BY MIKE ROUFA AND LESLIE HOFFMAN

In a previous column, we described how your nonprofit can access the Web by establishing an account with an Internet service provider.[1] Once you have your account, you can use your computer, modem, and phone line to dial up a connection and access information on the Web.

When you're surfing the Web looking for information, you are, in computer speak, "a client." You're also what marketing types call a "Web browser." The information you're viewing and down-loading might be text-based, or it could consist of pictures, other graph-ics, charts, sound, or video files.

But that's only half the benefit of being on the Web. The other value comes when you switch from functioning as a client to what computer people call a "server." That's a fancy way of saying that you're no longer consuming information that others create; you're actually pub-lishing your own information which other people can access in their Web browsing.

In order for your organization to serve information on the Web, you need to establish a Web presence on a server. This requires that you first create your content, produce that content in HTML,[2] and then load that content onto a Web server.

Web servers are like any other com-puters, although they're sometimes a lit-tle faster and tend to have much bigger hard drives. Web servers have special software installed on them so that when they're connected to a network they can process information requests and serve them to the machines that made those requests. For example, the server is con-nected to the Internet, and it sends files (such as HTML files with pictures, etc.)

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to those clients (for example, you) that request them. Servers are indeed power-ful machines, and connecting them to the Internet on a full-time basis (after all, the Web never sleeps) can be costly.

When it comes to establishing a Web site for your nonprofit, you have two options. You can either go it alone and do it all yourself, or you can work with a specialized type of Internet service provider to host your site for you.

For most nonprofits, going it alone is simply not a realistic option. Setting up a Web site on your own server requires, at the very minimum, a Web server (which can cost as much as $4,000 to $5,000), a dedicated, high-speed Internet connec-tion (ranging in price from $250 to $1,000 a month, depending on its capacity), and what you will quickly realize is a never-ending need to purchase software. Not to mention the cost of hiring a technical person to set up and administer your Web server, commonly referred to as a "Web master." Presently, there is a short-age of Web masters, and you'll be shocked to learn that a good one can command a salary far higher than many executives. Given the expense, time, and technical expertise needed to set up a Web server, it's no wonder so many organizations have opted to host their sites on a server that is owned, operated, and managed by an Internet service provider. Indeed, renting space on a Web server is so affordable that only the largest organizations—both nonprofit and for-profit—would find it cost-effective to do everything them-selves.

Hosting with an Internet Provider

The good news is that there are liter-ally hundreds of companies that offer Web hosting services. These include Internet service providers (ISPs), which we discussed in our September-October column, and Internet presence providers

(IPPs). The difference between an IPP and an ISP is the difference between server and client. The ISP provides a cost-effective way for any individual to become a client on the World Wide Web, while the IPP makes it reasonably affordable for anybody to be a server of information on the Web. IPPs are also known as "Web hosts" because they host other people's pages on their servers.

What Are the Benefits of IPPs?

An IPP buys all the equipment, access lines, and software needed to run one or more Web servers and then rents space on these servers. It's the equivalent of a landowner buying a large building, dividing it into units, and renting those units to individuals. By charging a monthly or yearly fee, the IPP hopes to reclaim the cost of the equipment and eventually turn a profit.

IPPs offer two significant advantages:

1. IPPs Don't Require Much Technical Expertise. All you need is the ability to place your content onto the IPP's server—and that's made simple by software you can download free from the Internet. You never have to touch a single wire or know what "T1" means.[3] It's the IPP's responsibility to maintain the server and fix it if something goes wrong.

2. IPPs Are Cost-Effective. Even the largest, most complex Web site hosted on the most expensive IPP will cost only a few hundred dollars a month. Most nonprofits can expect to pay somewhere in the range of $25 to $50 per month.

Because the business of being an IPP is new, a wide variety of companies offer many different services at very different prices. On the cheap side, dial-up ISPs often offer a small amount of Web server space—say, five to 10 megabytes of disk space—as a free service to their customers. If you have an Internet access account with America On-Line, for example, you may be entitled to free space on the America On-Line Web server. The space might be small, but it could serve your purpose if your needs (and your organization) are small.

A few companies, such as Geocities and Tripod, offer free Web hosting space on their servers. These companies are supported entirely by ads placed on these sites. If you host your Web site at Tripod, for example, anyone visiting your site will encounter a hodgepodge of mass-market advertising. While the price is indeed right, such Web sites are probably not appropriate for a professional organization.

Chances are, the best option for your organization is to find a reliable and reputable IPP that will offer you space on its server and the flexibility to grow. As part of the price, you should receive full technical support to help you every step of the way. Better still, no one on the Web will ever know that you don't own your own server.

How to Shop for an IPP

Finding a good IPP can be tricky. Here are some guidelines:

1. Remember: "Virtual" Is Better than "Symbolic."
Your site is "virtually hosted" if your Web page address (URL) looks like this:

http://www.yournonprofit.org

Your site is "symbolically hosted" when the address looks like this:

http://www.internetserviceprovider.com/your-organization

Virtual hosting is superior to symbolic hosting. For one thing, it's more professional: www.earthpledge.org says our

organization has focused enough to establish our own identity on the Internet; www.companyinnewyorkcity.com/theearthpledgefoundation tells everyone we rented a space on a server somewhere in New York. The difference may seem trivial, but it's not. Just consider how crucial a positive image is to your organization. It's the foundation of all your reputation-building and fundraising efforts. On the Web it's even more critical because your name and Web site are all the casual observer might ever see.

Second, your Web address is much easier to remember with virtual than symbolic hosting. It's easy to recall the address of the Sony Corporation: www.sony.com. But how would you ever recollect www.webhostingcompany.com/user/ members/directory/sony?

To host your Web site virtually, you need to purchase the right to use your name (www.your-organization.org) from a domain registration service (DRS) such as InterNic. It costs $50 to register and $50 per year after that. Many IPPs will go through the trouble of registering your domain name for you.

2. Get Enough Disk Space to Grow.

It's easy to fill up a few megabytes of disk space when you have a Web site with more than one page and a few pictures. The average IPP account comes with 50 megabytes of space included in the regular monthly fee, and that should be enough for most nonprofits. If you plan to offer lots of photos or video clips, however, you'll need more megabytes. Most IPPs will let you use more disk space than you're allotted, then hit you at the end of the month for the cost of the extra space you used.

3. Know How Much Your Bandwidth Costs.

The word "bandwidth" can refer to many different things. With regard to IPPs, your bandwidth is the amount of data transferred from your site to clients

on the Web, per month. Usually the IPP will include a certain amount of bandwidth, such as 1.5 gigabytes per month, with your account, and then charge a few cents per megabyte that exceeds this amount. For most small sites, 1.5 gigabytes of data transfer will never be breached, but if you have a large site with many large files, such as movie clips, and you attract many Web surfers, you could incur a significant fee at the end of the month. In general, when an IPP offers more than one Web hosting plan, more expensive plans will include more bandwidth as well as more disk space.

4. Even If You Don't Know What They Are, You'll Probably Want the Ability to Run CGI Scripts.

The Common Gateway Interface (CGI) is a mini-language that lets HTML pages communicate with other programs and lets those programs return information to the browser. Say that you want to let surfers search your Web site for any string of words they want. You can create the proper form in HTML and then add a search engine to your site. Don't worry, search engines are free and fairly easy to install. CGI scripts make it possible to pass information from the form to the search engine and back to the user as a list of files that met the search criteria.

Most IPPs will give you this ability from the start. Usually, they'll also give you access to an entire library of CGIs that you can freely use with your site. The point is that not all IPPs let you run CGI scripts on basic accounts. Be sure yours does.

5. Decide If You Need E-Mail Too.

As an added incentive, many IPPs will host e-mail addresses for you. All you need is a client e-mail-reading program, such as Eudora or Windows Messaging, and your IPP should be able to set up the rest. The number of e-mail addresses you can have varies from host to host.

6. Be Sure They Help You Set Up Your FTP.

The file transfer protocol (FTP) is the method you'll use to move the Web pages you create on your computer to your IPP.[4] Your IPP should set up an FTP directory for you to use for site uploading. Note that in order to use FTP you'll need special software. The good news is that the software is free and easy to find on the Web. Windows users should download "FTP Explorer" from http://www.ftpx.com, while Mac users will want a copy of "Fetch" from http://www.dartmouth.edu/pages/softdev/fetch.html. To use FTP, you'll need to set up the "host address" in these programs to be the same as your Web site address, and enter the user name and password you receive from your IPP. You'll only have to do this once: Next time you dial onto the Internet, the program will be ready to go.

7. Look for Good Support.

There are enough IPPs out there so that you can freely pick and choose. Ask about everything mentioned in this article when you call a potential Web host, and see how they answer. If the salesperson seems knowledgeable or readily forwards you to a technical specialist, the company will probably work well with you. Also peruse the IPP's Web site to see how much information it provides online.

8. Know How Much You're Paying.

Many IPPs will offer an incredibly small charge per month but then make you pay for several months up front. Some will have one-time start-up fees. Make sure you understand every single payment involved in setting up your site. Remember: there are many IPPs to choose from, so you don't need to stay with one that seems to have a lot of "hidden" costs.

9. Shop Around.

For more information about good IPPs, check out "The Ultimate Web Host List" at http://www.webhostlist.com. This site has already gone through the dirty work of finding IPPs and ranking them accordingly.

With a little bit of research and a good IPP, you'll be well on your way to not only accessing the Web but being a publisher on it as well. ■

Footnotes

[1]See Hoffman & Frenza, "Getting Connected," in "References."

[2]HTML (Hypertext Markup Language) is the method used to code files so that they can be viewed on the Web. For details, see Hoffman and Frenza, "Building Your Web Site: HTML Basics" and "Choosing an HTML Editor: Software Reviews from the Experts" in "References."

[3]In case you're interested, a T1 is a high-bandwidth communication line that enables Web servers to rapidly move multiple amounts of data around the Web.

[4]For more on FTP, plus a glossary of Internet terms, see Landskroner in "References."

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