

Web Hosting Providers: Get answers on languages, companies, and platforms

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When I was first looking for website hosting, it seemed that nowhere on the Web could I find a definitive chart of what coding languages belonged where and what tools I would need from a server—statistics programs, FTP access, and all those other necessary technical details I felt I needed to be familiar with. Granted, I wasn't running a business, so I had a little more time to ponder these things. But even if you're not interested in the “geek talk”—all those acronyms like FTP, PHP, ASP, and MySQL—you as a manager need to be at least somewhat familiar with these terms, what they do and why your web developer needs them.

Unfortunately, hosting is not hosting is not hosting. Several variables apply when determining which Web Hosting Provider you should choose for your site. Some of these variables depend on your progress in determining what kind of website you will need—mostly dynamic, with searchable and interactive content, or mostly static, with set page content—and what kind of programming languages you might be using, if any. This article is a quick primer to help you know which Web Hosting Provider you should choose, and why.

First, talk to your developers. Get their input regarding what database types are right for your project, what programming languages they are using, and other concerns they have. If you're outsourcing the work, make sure you know which language your contractor will be using and that all necessary elements will be available on your hosting server: programming language APIs, database access and necessary storage space, statistics, etc. Any competent contractor should be able to help you with these details as well.

Choose a platform and programming language. Two operating systems (OS) dominate the world of hosting: Windows and Linux. These operating systems are much like the one you use on your own computer: they provide a base on which all other programs on the server run. While most home and office computers use Windows, Linux runs about 65 to 70 percent of the servers on the Internet. For all intents and purposes, [Linux](#) is the best choice because of its unsurpassed stability and security. If a cracker (“hacker”) does happen to compromise a Linux server, he will have access only to a limited number of files, and these most likely will not be core operating system files which he could use to do real damage. Windows, however, acts as both the OS and the server, so it harbors more vulnerabilities.

Security and stability are almost paramount in determining a server type, but other factors play in, such as which language you or your team will use to build your website. These languages are like HTML (and often are used to create it), but special in that the server itself interprets them and displays dynamic content to the user based on how the site is coded. The user never sees this “server-side” code. Here is a quick chart showing which sever-side languages are at home on Linux or Windows:

= available on server; = available and ideal on this server

Programming Language

Windows

Linux

PHP

(Hypertext Preprocessor)

ASP

(Active Server Pages)

ColdFusion

(from Macromedia)

MSSQL

(Microsoft Structured Query Language)

MySQL

("My" Structured Query Language)

Perl

(Practical Extraction and Reporting Language)

Client-side and other languages

JavaScript

A client-side language that exists in the user's browser. JavaScript varies depending on the browser used.

XML

(eXtensible Markup Language)

XML is a special kind of language that allows for uniform transfer of data, such as in RSS feeds and syndication.

Which language? Your team will most likely have a coding language they are already familiar with, which will dictate the answer to this question. If you're running a small business and outsourcing this work, though, the question will dictate how and where you can migrate your site if you ever want to switch hosting providers, so it's good to familiarize yourself with the strengths, weaknesses and common uses of these languages.

PHP coupled with a MySQL database is a great way to build small or large dynamic sites that pull from databases. You can build polls, surveys, tracking software, and lots more with PHP: it is very versatile and powerful, and is most at home on Linux.

ASP is normally used with MSSQL databases and helps build product inventories and large searchable websites. Microsoft has included some features with Windows hosting that allow for fast and easy website development. If you have existing elements of your site that run better with Windows, you will want to consider Windows hosting.

Perl and ColdFusion are both platform-independent, meaning they will run on all types of servers. Perl is great for statistics reporting, and can also build whole websites and interact with each database type. ColdFusion requires a special installation that many servers do not have, but it is a popular way to build dynamic websites and interacts with programs like Macromedia Dreamweaver and Flash.

JavaScript exists in the end user's browser—be it Netscape, Internet Explorer, or another—which means its effects will vary depending on the user. Good web developers take this into consideration, which is important, because JavaScript usually validates forms and controls user behavior so that invalid content is not inserted into your database.

XML is great if you want to syndicate your content. It is usually created by PHP or another server-side language in order to provide constantly updated content in a uniform format that can be read by RSS programs. This is by far not the only use for XML, but it is a common one.

Choosing a company. Once you have a language nailed down, you can find the best hosting provider for your site. Here we encounter the ever-present questions of how much **storage** the site needs (measured in megabytes, "MB", or gigabytes, "GB"), how much **transfer** (or "**bandwidth**") you require, and which peripherals are included, like **statistical reporting** and **unique IP addresses**.

Storage is usually the first detail that comes to mind. It's not uncommon for many hosting providers to offer gigabytes of space, but does your site really need so much storage? Usually **for a small to medium-sized website, 25 to 100 megabytes of space is enough.**

You must also consider how the storage capacity figures into your monthly bandwidth. Bandwidth, or “transfer” as it is interchangeably called, is how much information goes to and from your website on a monthly basis. The “pipes” that move information around the Internet are only so large, so information transfer has to be regulated to avoid clogging those pipes. If your site includes heavy multimedia content—images, video, Flash movies, downloadable files—you may find that not only your storage, but also your bandwidth requirements will be quite high. **Small sites require about one to two gigabytes of storage per month, larger ones 10 to 15 gigabytes.**

In order to know who visits your site and how often, you need **statistical reporting**. One of the best reporting programs out there is Advanced Web Stats, or **AWStats**. Look for a hosting package that includes this program, which will give you specifics on unique visits, total hits, search engine phrases visitors come in on, visitor locations, and a lot more. [AWS Web Hosting](#) includes AWStats with all its hosting packages.

When choosing a Web Hosting Provider, keep all these features in mind, ask lots of questions, and always make sure you are comfortable with the answers given. If you compromise on one necessity, you may find yourself regretting it when the time for upgrades or extensions comes. Stick to your guns, talk to your contractor or your team, and don't be afraid to spend a little more if it means your website will be better equipped to perform. Happy hunting!

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