

Web Site Moving Day

Fed up with your hosting company? Stuck in a bad relationship? You shouldn't feel trapped: moving your Web site to a new location is easier than you think. Read on.

Change of Address - How to Move Your Web Site

If you host your Web site at a hosting company, there's a chance that sooner or later you'll want to move it somewhere else.

Maybe your hosting company isn't giving you the uptime they promised. Shared hosting accounts often suffer from down time caused by your hosting neighbors. Or perhaps you've just outgrown what your hosting company can provide and you need to move to a dedicated server.

Don't worry. Moving your Web site is easier than you think, and it doesn't involve changing your domain name or site downtime if you do it correctly.

The process of moving your Web site is straightforward; but there are several key steps you need to be familiar with before you start.

1. Find a New Home

Logically enough, the first step is to find a new hosting company. Research your alternatives carefully to make sure you're getting the services you need at a good price. When you create your account with this company, tell them that you'll be transferring an existing Web site. They'll need that information to set up your account correctly.

Moving your Web site means changing its IP address. Since IP addresses are issued in blocks to Web hosting companies, moving to a new company means getting a new address - but that doesn't mean changing your top level domain name.

That's important, because even though we humans don't pay much attention to it, the IP address is what the underlying technology of the Internet uses to find your site. The routers and DNS servers that navigate your browser through cyberspace pay attention to IP addresses.

While you may know your site as "www.mysite.com," DNS servers across the Internet tie that name to a specific IP address, which might be something like 208.51.75.132. The routers that act as the Internet's roadmap then direct traffic to that address.

That matters, because most of the work required moving your Web site involves telling DNS servers across the Internet that you've changed your address.

Once your new hosting company activates your account, you can start uploading your Web pages to your new site.

You can look at these pages at their new home, but initially you'll have to use your new IP address. If you just type in your domain name, your browser will be directed to your old site.

2. Start the Domain Transfer

Once you're satisfied that everything is working well at your new home, it's time start transfer your domain to your new IP address.

Tell your new hosting company that you're ready to begin the transfer process. They will then notify the official registrar for your site, which may be Network Solutions, Register.com, or one of several other domain registration companies.

3. Confirm the Transfer

Within a day of your request, you'll get an email message from the domain registrar asking you to confirm that, yes indeed; you really do want to transfer your domain.

This message is a security mechanism designed to keep someone from hijacking your domain with a phony transfer request (yes, this does happen!).

You must reply to this message or your domain won't be moved!

4. Notify Your Old Hosting Company

After you the confirmation message, you should send a message to your old hosting company telling them that you're transferring your domain to a new location. Their system administrator needs to know that to smooth the domain transfer process.

This doesn't mean that you're canceling your account with them immediately. In fact, we strongly recommend that you keep your account with the old hosting company alive for just one more month. Even if you're angry and frustrated with them, stay a few more weeks.

Don't overlook this very important step; it can save you trouble down the road.

5. Wait Patiently

Once you confirm the domain transfer request, DNS servers around the world will start mapping www.mysite.com to your new IP address, and traffic will begin moving from the old site to the new site.

However, for some period of time after the transfer starts, your Web site will get hits at both its new and old locations. For the first 48 hours most of the traffic will go to your old site. After that traffic will quickly shift to your new site, though the old site will still get some traffic for the next week. In fact, a tiny amount of traffic will still go to your old site for as long as a month.

That's why you don't want to cancel your account with your old company right away. Doing so means that some DNS servers will direct your traffic into a black hole. To these unlucky visitors it will look like your site is down.

To understand why this happens, you may need a little background on how the DNS system really works.

The DNS, or Domain Name System, is one of the most elegant and under appreciated parts of the Internet. It functions smoothly enough that you rarely encounter problems.

Think of it like the rumor mill at a large corporation. Only at this company, all the participants are all scrupulously honest and admit that their information may be old and inaccurate.

When you surf the Internet, your browser interacts with a DNS server run by your local ISP. That DNS server checks its records to see that www.mysite.com has the IP address 208.51.75.132. But your server's records include an expiration date, which is typically set to 48 hours. After that time the DNS server says, "Gee, I don't know where to find mysite.com. Give me a second and I'll ask around."

Your DNS server then asks other DNS servers above it in the hierarchy whether they know where mysite.com is located. If those servers aren't sure because their records have also expired, they in turn ask their superiors. That process may continue all the way until someone asks the root-level DNS servers, the very top of the DNS hierarchy.

Now here's a subtle but important point. The root-level DNS servers don't maintain one big catalogue of all the domain names and IP addresses on the Internet - they would quickly be swamped with requests. Instead, they maintain a directory telling them who knows for sure what IP address is tied to a given domain name.

In other words, the root level DNS servers don't say with authority that mysite.com resides at your new IP address. Instead they say, "I don't know where mysite.com lives, but I can tell you who knows for sure." And they then direct other DNS servers to what's known as the authoritative DNS server for mysite.com, which happens to be the DNS server for your new hosting company. That server replies with your new address, and all the servers involved in the rumor mill finally get things straight.

This process sounds complicated, but it takes only a few seconds. Since fresh information spreads quickly through the rumor mill, DNS servers rarely have to query all the way to the root-level servers to get accurate information.

But there are two ways this process can go wrong. First, if you forget to tell your old hosting company that you're moving your Web site, they won't change their DNS server. That's important, because their DNS server will also claim to be the authority on where your site is located, and it may continue giving out your old IP address for a long time!

Fortunately, most DNS servers will get the word from the root-level servers that this guy is no longer the authority. But some DNS servers may not and so continue sending people to your old site indefinitely. Yikes!

Fortunately, once you cancel your account, your old hosting company will delete you from its DNS server, and this problem will go away. But sending a message to your old company's system administrator will make this happen before you cancel your account.

So why not be safe and cancel your old account right away? Because there's something else that could go wrong: not all DNS servers around the world use the same expiration time. While the majority of DNS servers expire their records after 48 hours, the server's administrator sets this expiration period. And some of these guys set their expiration times to a week or more.

So if you take down your Web site right way, some portion of your traffic will again be sent into a black hole. How much? Probably 99% of your traffic will be sent to the new site with a week of the transfer.

Does this still sound frightening? You don't need to be scared, so long as you follow a simple rule of thumb: wait a week before taking down your old site if you can accept a small amount of lost traffic; wait a month if you want to be sure no one gets burned.

And if you want to be absolutely, totally sure no one gets burned, keep an eye on the log files at your old Web site. Once you see traffic at that site drop to a few hits a day, you can safely pull the plug.

Compliments of Tom Dahm,
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[Contact](#) Damalak Associates to help you with moving your web site.