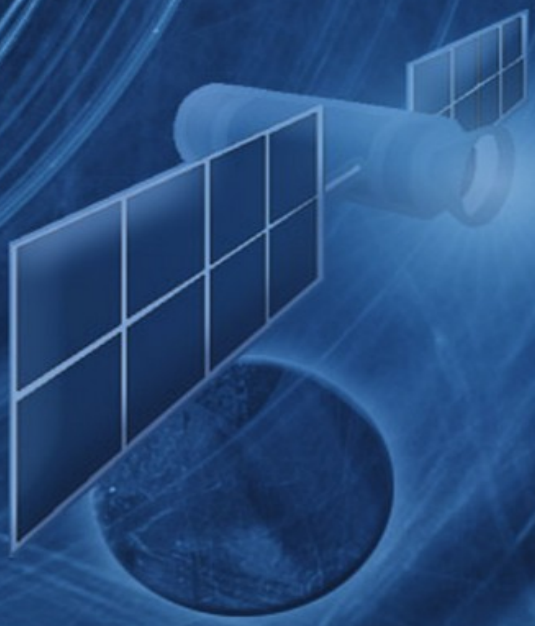
Essential Technology for New Solopreneurs



Dan Hersam

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Introduction

When you're just starting out as a solo entrepreneur (or solopreneur), you don't have a lot of money to spend. I get that. But you also don't want to use a service you'll hate, that doesn't work well or won't grow with you. You need to strike a balance between cost and features.

This guide is my way of helping you find that balance. It includes the best services I've been able to find (often free) for the budding solopreneur. It doesn't include expensive services if I found a sufficient one that was less expensive, and it also doesn't include just free services when I felt they wouldn't serve you in the long run.

I'm always open to a dialog about why I chose particular services. I intentionally didn't include all the details in order to keep this ebook as short as possible. You can be the judge of how well I did at that. ◡̈

1

Buying a Domain

A domain is the address of your web site, such as google.com or facebook.com. Buying a domain is like staking a claim on a plot of land on the internet. You can use it to host your web site and to have an email address like dan@techmadeplain.com. (That's a real address. Feel free to email me with questions.)

Features to consider

- Price
- Renewal price
- Ease of transfers
- Privacy
- Customer service

Recommended: NameSilo

I have used numerous registrars, most recently Dynadot but I switched to NameSilo because of the price. At $8.99/year, it's the lowest price I've found and it includes domain privacy and doesn't go up after the first year.

A lot of domain registrars advertise extremely low prices, but it's usually just for the first year. And when the price goes up the next year they make it painful to transfer your domain somewhere else.

I recommend not using GoDaddy. I dislike how they try to upsell you at every turn, they're more expensive, their pricing can be misleading and their advertising is offensive, to say nothing of their support for SOPA. In short, they don't have your best interests at heart.

2

Web Hosting

Web hosting is the service that delivers your web site on the internet. When a person opens your site in their browser, the web browser is talking to your web host. If your web host is down, your web site won't load.

If you have an online business, setting up a web site is a great way to create a place for your potential customers to find out more about you. It's also a location you control, unlike social media sites that can change underneath you without your consent.

Features to consider

The single most important feature of a web hosting service is **uptime**. Nothing else matters if your web host is down and potential customers can't reach your web site. The trouble is it's impossible to tell who will have great uptime in the

future. Even if you find one with 100% uptime for the last year, they might have a severe outage next month.

So while it's important, the best you could do is look at their history. You can also check for a status page, or on Twitter for complaints of downtime.

The importance of these features will differ depending on your needs.

- Customer service
- Price
- How many domains are allowed
- Control panel
- Bandwidth[1]
- Disk space
- Contract (monthly, yearly, etc)
- Trial period

Recommended: Hostgator

Hostgator's Hatchling program is great if you have one domain. Otherwise, the Baby plan is a good choice. Hostgator has good customer support, they've been around for a long time and their hosting service works well.

There are plenty of good services out there. The important thing is to choose one to move forward with building your web site. If you already have a web host or have heard good things about another service, go for it. You can always switch to another one if you run into problems.

[1] Most web hosts offer unlimited bandwidth, but it's not entirely accurate. They *will* limit your bandwidth if you use too much. However, if you're running a standard web site it's very unlikely you'll be affected by this.

3

Managing your content

Once you have a [domain][buying-a-domain] and a [web hosting service][web-hosting], your next step is to add content to your web site. This used to be an expensive and possibly arduous process, but Wordpress has made it much easier. If you know how to write an email, you will be able to manage the content on your site.

Recommended: Wordpress

Most web hosting services (including [Hostgator][recommendation-hostgator]) have a 1-click Wordpress install. This means you can install Wordpress your-self. Once it's installed, you can change how the entire site looks in one click by using free Wordpress themes. You can also buy Wordpress themes or pay a designer to make one. The choice is yours.

4

Web Stats

Web stats tell you how many people are visiting your site, what pages they're looking at, how they're finding your site and a whole lot more. This helps you understand how your business is growing or what areas of your site are useful.

I use two services and they're complimentary.

Recommended: Google Analytics and AWStats

Google Analytics

To use this service you need a Google account. You already have one if you have a Gmail, YouTube or Google+ account. In order to set it up, you need to

add some text to the bottom of each page. This can be done by placing it in the header or footer of your Wordpress theme.

Once it's set up, you can view the information at the Google Analytics site. There is a wealth of information. In some ways, it's too much information and can be hard to make sense of it, but you'll understand it more in time. That's one reason why I like to use AWStats.

AWStats

AWStats looks at your log files to determine who has visited, so it's extremely accurate. With Google Analytics, a visitor might not be counted if they quickly leave the page before it's finished loading. AWStats will still count them.

AWStats is easy to read. It shows you how many monthly, daily and hourly visitors you've had, your top 10 most visited pages, the operating systems and browsers your visitors are using and where your visitors are coming from.

To get to AWStats, go to your web hosting control panel and it will typically be shown under the **Logs** section.

5

Email list services

An email list service lets you send out emails to a large list of people. If you're trying to send email to a large group of people, you know how difficult it can be to keep track them all. And what if someone wants to be added or removed from the list?

An email list service automates all of this so you can focus on the content of your email instead.

Features to consider

- Delivery rate
- Autoresponders
- Restrictions on the types of email you can send
- Analytics (whether the email was read or not)

- Email templates
- Embeddable sign-up forms
- Single or double opt-in

Recommended: MailChimp

The primary reason I recommend Mailchimp is because it's free for up to 2,000 subscribers. You don't even need to enter a credit card when you sign up. It's the only email service provider I know of that has a free tier.

AWeber is a popular service that offers a $1 trial, but that only lasts for 30 days, then goes up to $19/month. MailChimp's offer lasts until you break the 2,000 subscribers mark.

You should be aware that the free service doesn't have all of the features that the paid service does. A big one is the lack of autoresponders, but other features like Email Client Testing and Delivery by Time Zone are only available to paying customers. Autoresponders can be a really useful way to provide value to your customers automatically so it may be worth paying for the lowest paid tier to get it. You can read more on their pricing page.

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Selling digital products

Many businesses have digital products for sale, like ebooks, audio and video recordings or screencasts. A lot of sites use Paypal, but I prefer being able to take credit cards directly. It makes you come across as more professional and it can be less expensive.

There have been lots of changes in ecommerce services in the past few years. StandToMake is a useful tool to see how the fees will add up based on your product's price and how many you expect to sell each month.

Features to consider

- Security
- Fees (monthly or per transaction)
- Coupon codes

- Affiliate tracking
- Subscriptions
- How often you're paid
- International support
- Fraud protection
- PCI Certification

Recommended: Gumroad

Gumroad lets you sell virtually any kind of digital product to your visitors, including ebooks, artwork, streaming video, audio files and software. And your charged a fixed fee per transaction, even if your streaming videos take up a lot of bandwidth. Behind the scenes,

Gumroad uses Stripe, a relatively new service that is enabling businesses to accept credit card payments easily. I love Stripe and Gumroad takes care of the rest of the work, like limiting access to your products.

When I first set up an account with Gumroad, I was able to put an item up for sale within 5 minutes. That's impressive.

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Invoices

If you provide a service where you need to send out invoices, you know how much of a hassle it can be. There are literally hundreds of services out there to help you keep track of payments and invoicing. The one I like most is Blinksale.

Recommended: Blinksale

Blinksale costs $15/month for unlimited customers and invoices. Most of the other invoicing services limit the number of customers or invoices and charge more than $15. The other thing I love about Blinksale is that they use Stripe to let you take credit card payments.

This lets you send out an invoice and your client can click on the pay button in the email. Blinksale also lets you set up recurring invoices, which works great for a coaching service where your charge a monthly fee.

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Extras

Recording audio: Audacity

Audacity is a free piece of software that works on Windows, Mac and Linux. You can use it to record anything and then export it as an MP3.

Recording your screen: Jing

Jing is made by TechSmith, the company that makes Camtasia, a well-respected and full-featured screencasting suite. Jing is simple and easy to use, but it limits your screencasts to 5 minutes. It runs on Windows and Macs.

Office Suite: LibreOffice

Microsoft Office is the king of the hill, but it can be costly. LibreOffice is free and while it doesn't have all of the features, it's a solid replacement for creating documents, spreadsheets and presentations.

9

Conclusion

I hope this ebook has been useful for you. As you know, the world of technology is constantly changing. It's possible some details have changed. If you come across something that's no longer accurate, or if I made a mistake, please let me know. If you have any questions at all, please email me at dan@techmadeplain.com.

My Services

I would love to help you one on one to answer questions or help you get past a problem you're having. If you're interested in talking, sign up for a free 30-minute chat to see how I can help. I've been told the 30-minute call alone was worth paying for.

This is at no-cost or obligation to you. And I’m not the kind of guy to pressure you or try a hard sell approach. I’m here to help you.

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Appendix

A note about affiliate links

This isn't the typical note about affiliate links that you often see, assuring you that I would have recommended these services anyway even though I'll make money if you sign up. I've thought long and hard about whether to use affiliate links and I just don't feel good about it.

In case you're not familiar with how they work, affiliate links are a way for a company to reward people for referring customers to them. There's absolutely nothing wrong with the idea on principle. But what often happens, especially with web hosting because the referral fees are so generous, is that people promote certain companies based on how much they'll be paid rather than the merits of the service.

Let me give you an example. Hostgator pays $50 per referral, and Bluehost

pays $65. I've used both services and if I could only recommend one, I would choose Hostgator. That's just how I feel. But you can imagine how easy it would be, even with good intentions, to recommend Bluehost. It's still a good service, and I'd make an extra $15. But what if the service isn't that good, but the payout is quite large? Rather than focusing on the quality of the service, it's easy to let the size of the payout decide a recommendation. Please don't get me wrong, both web hosting services are good and just because someone is using affiliate links doesn't mean they're doing anything shady. The issue is I want to be completely transparent and not have any ulterior motives behind my recommendations.

Just to be abundantly clear, I'm not suggesting that someone who uses affiliate links is trying to trick you in any way. I'm just saying it would be easy to go down the path of recommending a service more readily if it pays well. People may not even consciously realize they're doing it. They appeal of the service may increase subconsciously once they learn of the higher payout, making them more likely to recommend it.

That's why I've decided not to use affiliate links. I realize I'm giving up a potential source of income, but I don't want to deal with the potential conflict of interest. Plus, it's a relief not to have to manage all the affiliate logins and links. They can be a real hassle.

What I love most is that I don't have to reassure you of my intentions. I have no reason to recommend anything other than what I feel is best for your business and that's a great feeling.