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Aplus.Net Solo XR

Editors' Choice

Full review

From the outset, Aplus.Net's Solo XR hosting plan has been a reasonably priced hosting service for small business types. It offers shared hosting on reliable servers and a strong focus on customer service, with round-the-clock toll-free technical support. A year after we first reviewed it, the service is still all that. Only $9.95 a month buys you 200MB of Web server space, with no site traffic limits, 10 e-mail addresses, and a year's free domain registration. Plus, in recent months, Aplus.Net has revamped its look and packed on a considerable number of features, such as graphical site-building tools and wizards, support for FrontPage extensions, and high-end utilities such as cross-platform HTML-validation and code-optimization tools. All that for less than 10 bucks a month? Aplus.Net gets our nod.

Installation and interface: 7

Many small-business hosts hand you an off-the-shelf site administration program called CPanel to help run your site. CPanel looks a bit like the classic Windows Control Panel--lots of icons dropped almost at random on the screen. Aplus.Net, however, uses its own administration interface that's tidier and, we think, much easier to navigate and use. Divided into tabbed sections with clear labels such as Account Administration, Webspace Setup, and E-Mail Management, the sections are well organized and easy to follow.

Aplus.Net's interface is cleaner than the CPanel program that many low-cost hosting plans use.

The smooth administration makes it a shame, then, that Aplus's sign-up process is so counterintuitive. Before you get to the outstanding site-administration tools, you have to wade through several steps to set up hosting and register or transfer a domain name to

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Aplus's domain registration arm. (The latter is not required, but they'll give you an extra year's registration free and charge less than $8 a year to keep your domain registered--cheaper than some of the lowest-cost registrars.)

The problem is that Aplus's registration division, the ICANN-accredited Names4ever, isn't fully integrated with the hosting part of the company; you can type in a domain name when you set up your hosting account, but if it's not available for any reason, you have to hit the back button after a few screens to sort it out. Somehow during our sign-up, we managed to set up a nonfunctioning hosting account for someone else's domain--and had to phone tech support to straighten the issue out. Luckily, Aplus's tech support is excellent.

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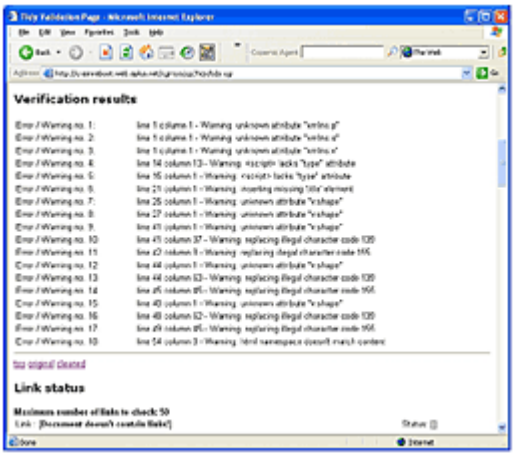
Features: 9

Since CNET last reviewed Aplus's Solo XR hosting last year, the company has seriously beefed up the features it offers, while keeping the monthly fee at a steady $9.95 (with discounts for quarterly and annual payment).

Aplus Solo XR offers an impressive set of basic hosting features for the price: 200MB of disk space, unlimited data transfer, 10 POP3 e-mail addresses with a Web mail reader, too. (By contrast, $11.95 a month at Yahoo Web Hosting gets you just 50MB of shared server space, 20GB of data transfer, and 10 e-mail forwarding accounts). What's more, you get a dizzying array of extras. In addition to classic hosting features such as autoresponders, unlimited subdomains, FrontPage and MySQL database support, and basic site-traffic analysis tools, there are more beginner-friendly tools, too, divided into sections such as Web Site Marketing and Web Site Design.



Aplus's HTML Validation Tool roots out problems with nonstandard HTML code (which would look awful on, say, Netscape browsers).

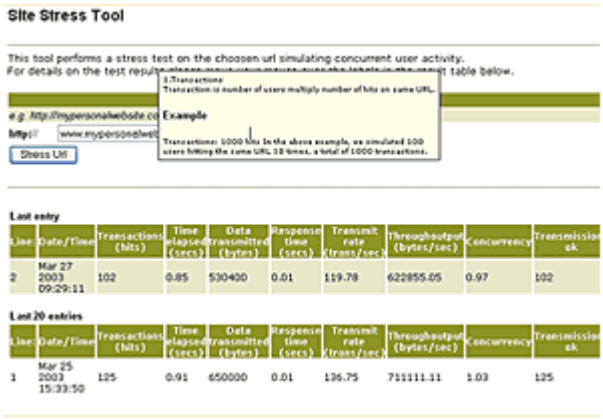
For actually building your Web site, Aplus provides off-the-shelf tools such as a guest book, counters, and Trellix's ultraeasy Web Builder app for constructing whole sites, plus a series of HTML-jock tools for *validating* HTML (that is, making sure your pages won't look screwy on Netscape or other browsers), optimizing Web pages to load faster, and adding keywords and descriptions to pages to make them more friendly to search engines. Though the Trellix templates and the rudimentary Web-based file-management tool aren't likely to lure serious site developers, they're handy for quick one-off tasks, and much more advanced than those offered by Catalog.com. We can't think of another hosting service that offers as many extras for a similar price.

One other nice feature: you can add other domains to your hosting account at a big discount: $4.95 a month. Hosting two domains for less than $15 a month is not a bad deal. True, Aplus charges a $20 setup fee--a rarity for basic hosting these days--but the company does throw in a free year's domain registration, which reduces the net setup cost to about $12. Besides, with only 10 bucks a month in recurring costs, it's easy to overlook the up-front expense.

Performance: 8

In Web hosts, performance means two things--server uptime and server responsiveness--and both are moving targets that are tough to quantify. However, judging from NetMechanic's ongoing tests of major hosting companies, Aplus gives no cause for alarm. The company's been on the NetMechanic charts for 72 weeks as of this writing and currently stands in the Bronze section, with a measured uptime of 99.998 and 99.98 percent.

During our two-week trials, we ran separate tests to compare our Aplus-hosted site to three other low-cost hosts. In response and download times, Aplus was squarely in the NetMechanic-defined zone, sometimes a little faster at downloading than, say, ValueWeb or Catalog.com, sometimes a little slower. Aplus.net even provides its own tool that lets you test your site's performance. When we used this tool, its results were the same good news we'd gotten from other resources.



If you're curious about how sites hosted under the Solo XR plan perform under pressure, Aplus.net provides a stress tester.

Service and support: 9

The first level of service from any Web-based service is the help available on the company's Web site. Aplus offers a good volume of feature tours, FAQs, and tutorial screens to guide you through the process. However, for the one or two stumbling blocks we found en route, the company's toll-free phone support proved a godsend. As we found in last year's review of the site, wait times are minimal and the service is excellent--whether we called on Monday morning, Saturday evening, or Wednesday night. We do wish Aplus offered a trouble-ticket system with an audit trail of problems--but when you get free, reliable phone and e-mail support, that's a minor quibble indeed.

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