

Web Hosting for

# Small & Medium Businesses

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## A Consultant's Handbook

Comparing Every Major Hosting Option — From Shared Hosting to Enterprise Platforms

*A business owner asks you: "Where should I host my website?"*

There's no single right answer. The best choice depends on what they sell, how much traffic they get, what technical skills they have, and how fast they plan to grow. This handbook gives you the knowledge to ask the right questions and recommend the right platform — with confidence.

*GMBA 612: Database Design & SQL — Spring 2026*

## The Decision Framework

Before recommending a hosting solution, a good consultant asks five questions:

- 1. What does the business sell?** A brochure site, an e-commerce store, and a SaaS product have very different needs.
- 2. How much traffic do they expect?** 100 visitors/month vs. 100,000/month changes everything.
- 3. What technical skills does the team have?** A solo owner with no coding experience needs a different solution than a team with a developer.
- 4. What's the budget?** Some businesses can invest \$3/month. Others need \$3,000/month in infrastructure.
- 5. How fast will they grow?** A platform that works today but can't scale tomorrow is a bad recommendation.

**U0001F4A1 Consultant's Rule of Thumb:** Start with the simplest solution that meets the client's current needs, with a clear upgrade path for when they grow. Over-engineering costs money and creates complexity that small teams can't maintain.

## Category 1: Shared Hosting

Shared hosting is the entry point for most small businesses. Your website lives on a server alongside hundreds of other websites, sharing CPU, RAM, and storage. It’s affordable and requires almost no technical knowledge.

<b>\$2-\$15/mo</b> Typical Cost	<b>Beginner</b> Skill Level	<b>Low-Medium</b> Traffic Capacity	<b>Limited</b> Customization
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### Major Providers

Provider	Starting Price	Includes	Best For
<b>Hostinger</b>	\$2.99/mo	PHP, MySQL, free SSL, email, 100 GB storage	Students, freelancers, small business brochure sites
<b>Bluehost</b>	\$2.95/mo	PHP, MySQL, free domain (1yr), WordPress auto-install	WordPress sites, bloggers, small e-commerce
<b>SiteGround</b>	\$3.99/mo	PHP, MySQL, free SSL, daily backups, staging	Small businesses wanting reliability + support
<b>A2 Hosting</b>	\$2.99/mo	PHP, MySQL, free SSL, Turbo speeds on higher plans	Developers wanting faster shared hosting
<b>GoDaddy</b>	\$5.99/mo	PHP, MySQL, free domain, email, 25 GB storage	Non-technical owners who want name recognition

#### ✓ Pros

- Cheapest option available
- No server management needed
- cPanel/phpMyAdmin included
- Free SSL certificates
- One-click WordPress installs

#### ✗ Cons

- Performance affected by other sites on the server
- Limited control over server configuration
- Can’t handle traffic spikes well
- Often slow for database-heavy applications
- Security depends on the hosting company

**When to Recommend:** The client has a simple business website, blog, or small online store with < 10,000 monthly visitors, has no developer on staff, and needs to

spend < \$15/month.

## Category 2: Managed WordPress Hosting

Managed WordPress hosting is shared hosting’s sophisticated older sibling. The server is pre-optimized specifically for WordPress, and the host handles updates, security, backups, and caching. You focus on content and design — they handle the infrastructure.

<b>\$10-\$60/mo</b> Typical Cost	<b>Beginner</b> Skill Level	<b>Medium-High</b> Traffic Capacity	<b>WordPress Only</b> Platform Lock
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Provider	Starting Price	Key Feature	Best For
<b>WP Engine</b>	\$20/mo	Automated backups, staging, CDN, Genesis themes	Agencies, growing businesses wanting premium WP
<b>Kinsta</b>	\$35/mo	Google Cloud infrastructure, 37 data centers	High-performance WordPress sites
<b>Flywheel</b>	\$13/mo	Beautiful dashboard, collaboration tools	Designers and freelancers building client sites
<b>Cloudways</b>	\$14/mo	Choose your cloud (AWS, GCP, DigitalOcean)	Developers who want managed cloud flexibility
<b>Bluehost WP Pro</b>	\$19.95/mo	Jetpack, free domain, marketing tools	Small businesses already on Bluehost

<p><b>✓ Pros</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Optimized for WordPress performance</li> <li>• Automatic updates and security patches</li> <li>• Daily backups (often with one-click restore)</li> <li>• Built-in caching and CDN</li> <li>• Expert WordPress support staff</li> </ul>	<p><b>✗ Cons</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More expensive than shared hosting</li> <li>• Locked to WordPress only</li> <li>• Plugin restrictions on some hosts</li> <li>• Overkill if you don’t use WordPress</li> <li>• Migrating away can be complex</li> </ul>
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**When to Recommend:** The client uses (or will use) WordPress, wants to focus on content rather than server management, gets 5,000–100,000 monthly visitors, and values reliability and speed.

## Category 3: Website Builders (All-in-One)

Website builders combine hosting, design, and often e-commerce into one package. No coding required — everything is drag-and-drop. You trade customization for simplicity. Think of them as pre-built homes where you can change the paint and furniture, but not the floor plan.

<b>\$0-\$65/mo</b> Typical Cost	<b>None Required</b> Skill Level	<b>Medium</b> Traffic Capacity	<b>Drag-and-Drop</b> Customization
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Provider	Starting Price	Strength	Best For
<b>Wix</b>	Free (ads) / \$17/mo	Easiest drag-and-drop editor, 900+ templates	Solo businesses, restaurants, portfolios
<b>Squarespace</b>	\$16/mo	Beautiful design templates, best visual quality	Creatives, photographers, boutique brands
<b>Weebly</b>	Free / \$10/mo	Simple editor, basic e-commerce built in	Very small stores, hobby businesses
<b>Google Sites</b>	Free (with Google account)	Zero learning curve, integrates with Google Workspace	Internal pages, simple informational sites

<p><b>✓ Pros</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No coding or technical skills needed at all</li> <li>• Hosting, SSL, and domain are included</li> <li>• Beautiful templates out of the box</li> <li>• Built-in SEO, analytics, forms</li> <li>• Quick to launch (hours, not weeks)</li> </ul>	<p><b>✗ Cons</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited customization beyond templates</li> <li>• Difficult to migrate to another platform</li> <li>• E-commerce features are basic compared to Shopify</li> <li>• Performance can lag on complex pages</li> <li>• No database access or custom server-side code</li> </ul>
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**When to Recommend:** The client has zero technical skills, needs a site quickly (days not months), doesn’t need a custom database or complex e-commerce, and values design quality over flexibility.

## Category 4: Dedicated E-Commerce Platforms

These are purpose-built for selling online. Unlike generic website builders, every feature — payments, inventory, shipping, tax, analytics — is designed around the sales process. If the client’s primary goal is selling products, this is usually the best category to recommend.

<b>\$5-\$399/mo</b> Typical Cost	<b>Low-Medium</b> Skill Level	<b>High</b> Traffic Capacity	<b>E-Commerce Focus</b> Specialization
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Platform	Starting Price	Transaction Fee	Best For
<b>Shopify</b>	\$39/mo (Basic)	2.9% + 30¢ (Shopify Payments)	Most e-commerce businesses — the industry standard
<b>BigCommerce</b>	\$29/mo	0% (built-in payments)	Mid-size stores wanting zero transaction fees
<b>WooCommerce</b>	Free (plugin) + hosting	Depends on gateway (Stripe: 2.9% + 30¢)	WordPress users who want full control
<b>Square Online</b>	Free (with Square)	2.9% + 30¢	Brick-and-mortar stores adding online sales
<b>Etsy</b>	Free listing + \$0.20/item	6.5% transaction fee	Handmade, vintage, and craft sellers

<p><b>✓ Pros</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purpose-built for selling products online</li> <li>• Payment processing, tax, shipping included</li> <li>• Inventory management built in</li> <li>• App ecosystems for marketing, fulfillment, CRM</li> <li>• PCI-compliant security (they handle credit card safety)</li> </ul>	<p><b>✗ Cons</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monthly fees + transaction fees add up</li> <li>• Customization requires paid themes or developers</li> <li>• Shopify lock-in (hard to migrate to another platform)</li> <li>• Apps and plugins can significantly increase monthly cost</li> <li>• WooCommerce requires separate hosting and maintenance</li> </ul>
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**When to Recommend:** Selling products is the client’s primary business purpose, they need payment processing, inventory tracking, and shipping, and they want something that works out of the box without hiring a developer.

## Category 5: Cloud Hosting & VPS

Cloud hosting gives you your own virtual server (or cluster of servers) in someone else’s data center. You get root access, full control, and the ability to scale resources on demand. This is where things get serious — and where you need a developer on the team.

<b>\$5-\$500+/mo</b> Typical Cost	<b>Developer Required</b> Skill Level	<b>Unlimited (scales)</b> Traffic Capacity	<b>Total Control</b> Customization
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Provider	Starting Price	Model	Best For
<b>Amazon AWS</b>	\$0 (free tier) / pay-per-use	IaaS — EC2 (compute), RDS (database), S3 (storage)	Startups scaling to enterprise, custom architectures
<b>Google Cloud (GCP)</b>	\$0 (free tier) / pay-per-use	IaaS — Compute Engine, Cloud SQL, BigQuery	Data-heavy apps, machine learning workloads
<b>Microsoft Azure</b>	\$0 (free tier) / pay-per-use	IaaS — VMs, SQL Database, Active Directory	Businesses in the Microsoft ecosystem
<b>DigitalOcean</b>	\$4/mo (Droplet)	Simple VPS — straightforward pricing	Developers wanting simple, affordable cloud servers
<b>Linode (Akamai)</b>	\$5/mo	Simple VPS + managed databases	Small teams wanting cloud without AWS complexity
<b>Vultr</b>	\$2.50/mo	Bare metal + cloud VPS, global data centers	Budget-friendly cloud for developers

<p><b>✓ Pros</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete control over server environment</li> <li>• Scales from small to massive traffic</li> <li>• Choose any database, language, or framework</li> <li>• Pay only for what you use (variable pricing)</li> <li>• Deploy globally across data centers</li> </ul>	<p><b>✗ Cons</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires a developer to set up and maintain</li> <li>• Security is your responsibility (patching, firewalls)</li> <li>• AWS pricing is notoriously complex and unpredictable</li> <li>• No built-in website builder or CMS</li> <li>• Misconfiguration can cause downtime or security breaches</li> </ul>
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**When to Recommend:** The client has a developer (in-house or hired), needs custom software that doesn't fit pre-built platforms, expects high or variable traffic, or needs to meet specific compliance or performance requirements.

## Category 6: Managed Database Services (DBaaS)

Sometimes the bottleneck isn’t the web server — it’s the database. Managed database services handle the database part for you: backups, scaling, updates, and security. You pair them with a cloud server or app platform for the web layer. Think of it as hiring a specialist for just the kitchen in your restaurant.

<b>\$15-\$200+/mo</b> Typical Cost	<b>Intermediate</b> Skill Level	<b>High</b> Database Performance	<b>Database Only</b> What It Covers
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Provider	Starting Price	Database Engine	Best For
<b>Aiven</b>	\$19/mo	PostgreSQL, MySQL, Redis, Kafka, and more	Teams wanting one platform for multiple database engines
<b>Amazon RDS</b>	Pay-per-use (~\$15/mo min)	MySQL, PostgreSQL, SQL Server, Oracle	AWS users who want a managed relational DB
<b>PlanetScale</b>	Free tier / \$39/mo	MySQL (Vitess-based, serverless)	Developers wanting branching workflows like Git for databases
<b>Supabase</b>	Free tier / \$25/mo	PostgreSQL + auth + APIs + real-time	Full-stack developers wanting a Firebase alternative
<b>Neon</b>	Free tier / \$19/mo	PostgreSQL (serverless, auto-scales)	Serverless apps with variable database load

<p><b>✓ Pros</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Professional database management without a DBA</li> <li>Automated backups, failover, and scaling</li> <li>Better security than self-managed databases</li> <li>Support for enterprise database engines</li> <li>Frees your developer to focus on the app, not the DB</li> </ul>	<p><b>✗ Cons</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adds cost on top of web hosting</li> <li>Still need to host the web app layer separately</li> <li>Can create vendor lock-in for specific features</li> <li>Learning curve for connection configuration</li> <li>Overkill for simple sites with small databases</li> </ul>
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**When to Recommend:** The client’s app is database-intensive (analytics, real-time data, large datasets), the team doesn’t want to manage database backups and scaling themselves, or they need PostgreSQL features that MySQL on shared hosting can’t provide.



## Category 7: Platform as a Service (PaaS)

PaaS sits between managed hosting and raw cloud. You write your code, push it to the platform, and it handles deployment, scaling, SSL, and runtime environment. No server configuration. Think of it as a cloud service that acts like a really smart hosting provider.

<b>\$0-\$250+/mo</b> Typical Cost	<b>Developer</b> Skill Level	<b>High (auto-scales)</b> Traffic Capacity	<b>Code Only</b> You Manage
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Platform	Starting Price	Languages/Frameworks	Best For
<b>Heroku</b>	\$5/mo (Eco dyno)	Node.js, Python, PHP, Ruby, Java, Go	Startups prototyping fast, hobby projects
<b>Vercel</b>	Free / \$20/mo (Pro)	Next.js, React, static sites	Frontend apps and serverless functions
<b>Netlify</b>	Free / \$19/mo (Pro)	Static sites, JAMstack, serverless functions	Marketing sites, blogs, static-generated stores
<b>Railway</b>	Usage-based (~\$5/mo)	Any Docker container, PostgreSQL, Redis	Full-stack developers wanting simple deployment
<b>Render</b>	Free / \$7/mo	Node.js, Python, Docker, PostgreSQL, Redis	Teams migrating from Heroku

<p><b>✓ Pros</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deploy by pushing code (git push = live site)</li> <li>• No server management or configuration</li> <li>• Auto-scaling for traffic spikes</li> <li>• Built-in CI/CD pipelines</li> <li>• Free tiers great for prototyping and learning</li> </ul>	<p><b>✗ Cons</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can get expensive at scale (usage-based pricing)</li> <li>• Less control than raw cloud hosting</li> <li>• Heroku has limited free tier compared to past</li> <li>• Not suited for traditional PHP/MySQL setups</li> <li>• Cold starts on serverless can affect performance</li> </ul>
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## Category 8: Enterprise Platforms

Enterprise platforms are complete ecosystems — not just hosting, but an entire way of building, managing, and running business applications. You don’t write PHP or SQL directly. Instead, you work within their tools, workflows, and proprietary scripting environments. The tradeoff: enormous power and reliability, but you play by their rules.

<b>\$\$\$-\$\$\$\$</b> Typical Cost	<b>Platform-Specific</b> Skill Level	<b>Enterprise Scale</b> Traffic Capacity	<b>Their Ecosystem</b> Customization
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Platform	Starting Price	What It Is	Used By
<b>ServiceNow</b>	Enterprise contract	IT service management, HR workflows, customer service — with RaptorDB as the high-performance database engine	Fortune 500, government, healthcare systems
<b>Salesforce</b>	\$25/user/mo	CRM platform with custom app builder (Lightning), Apex code, and SOQL query language	Sales teams, enterprise marketing, B2B companies
<b>SAP</b>	Enterprise contract	ERP (enterprise resource planning) — finance, supply chain, manufacturing, HR, all integrated	Large manufacturing, retail, and global enterprises
<b>Oracle Cloud</b>	\$300+/mo	Cloud infrastructure + enterprise database + ERP + HCM applications	Enterprise IT, financial services, telecom
<b>Microsoft Dynamics</b>	\$65/user/mo	CRM + ERP integrated with Microsoft 365, Azure, and Power Platform	Mid-size businesses in the Microsoft ecosystem

<p><b>✓ Pros</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Built for massive scale and reliability</li> <li>• Compliance, security, and audit trails built in</li> <li>• Pre-built workflows for common business processes</li> <li>• Dedicated support teams and SLAs</li> <li>• Integrates with enterprise identity management</li> </ul>	<p><b>✗ Cons</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extremely expensive (enterprise contracts)</li> <li>• Steep learning curves for each platform</li> <li>• Vendor lock-in is severe — hard to switch</li> <li>• Customization happens in proprietary tools, not standard code</li> <li>• Overkill for small and most mid-size businesses</li> </ul>
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**When to Recommend:** Only for larger enterprises with complex workflows, compliance requirements, and budgets to match. If the client has < 100 employees and isn't in a regulated industry, this is almost certainly overkill.

## The Master Comparison

This table is your cheat sheet. When a client asks “what should I use?”, start here and narrow down based on their answers to the five framework questions.

Category	Cost/mo	Tech Skill	Scale	Control	Speed	Best For
<b>Shared Hosting</b>	\$3-\$15	None	Low	Low	Fastest	Simple sites, beginners
<b>Managed WP</b>	\$13-\$60	Low	Medium	Medium	Fast	WordPress businesses
<b>Website Builder</b>	\$0-\$65	None	Medium	Low	Fastest	Non-technical owners
<b>E-Commerce</b>	\$29-\$399	Low	High	Medium	Fast	Online stores
<b>Cloud / VPS</b>	\$4-\$500+	High	Unlimited	Total	Slow	Custom apps, scaling
<b>Managed DB</b>	\$15-\$200+	Medium	High	DB Only	Medium	Data-heavy apps
<b>PaaS</b>	\$0-\$250+	Medium	High	Code	Fast	Developer teams
<b>Enterprise</b>	\$\$\$\$	Specialized	Massive	Platform	Slow	Fortune 500, regulated

Speed = how quickly the client goes from signing up to having a live site. “Total” control means root server access. “Code” means you deploy app code but don’t configure the OS.

## The Consultant’s Decision Path

Walk through these questions in order. Each answer narrows the recommendation.

**“Do you sell products online?”** YES and it’s the primary business → E-Commerce Platform (Shopify for most, WooCommerce if they’re already on WordPress). NO or just a side feature → Continue below.

**“Do you have a developer or want custom code?”** YES → Cloud / VPS (DigitalOcean or AWS), or PaaS (Railway, Render) if they want simpler deployment. NO → Continue below.

**“Do you use or want WordPress?”** YES → Managed WordPress (WP Engine or Kinsta for premium, Bluehost for budget). NO → Continue below.

**“Do you need anything beyond a basic website?”** YES (forms, booking, member areas) → Website Builder (Squarespace or Wix). NO (just information + contact) → Shared Hosting or Google Sites (free).

## Interview Prep: What Would You Say on the Job?

If you're interviewing for a business analyst, consultant, or technical PM role, you might be asked to recommend a hosting solution. Here are sample questions and strong answers.

### **Q: “A local bakery wants to sell cakes online. What do you recommend?”**

Strong answer: “For a local bakery with limited technical resources, I'd recommend Shopify's Basic plan at \$39/month. It includes payment processing, inventory management, and shipping — everything they need out of the box. They can have their store live in a weekend without hiring a developer. If budget is tighter, Square Online is free with their existing point-of-sale system.”

### **Q: “A SaaS startup needs to host a custom web application. What infrastructure would you suggest?”**

Strong answer: “I'd suggest starting with a PaaS like Railway or Render for fast deployment, paired with a managed database like Aiven or Neon for PostgreSQL. This lets the development team focus on building features rather than managing servers. As they scale, they can migrate to AWS or GCP for more control. The key principle is: don't over-engineer early — optimize when you have real traffic data.”

### **Q: “What's the difference between hosting on Hostinger and hosting on AWS?”**

Strong answer: “Hostinger is like renting a furnished apartment — everything is set up, you just move in. AWS is like buying raw land and building your own house. With Hostinger, you get cPanel, phpMyAdmin, and PHP ready to go for \$3/month. With AWS, you configure your own server, install your own software, manage your own security — but you can build anything at any scale. Most small businesses start with shared hosting and graduate to cloud when they outgrow it.”

## The Bottom Line

There is no single “best” hosting platform. There’s only the best platform for this client, at this stage, with this budget, and these skills. A great consultant doesn’t sell a product — they diagnose a situation and prescribe the right solution. Now you have the knowledge to do exactly that.