

GROUP TEST

We test and compare the latest products

Online website builders



Andy Shaw looks at eight online services that help you create professional-looking websites with ease



Creating your own website is no longer the complex task it once was. For just a few pounds a month you can rent some space, set up your own corner of the web and share your hobbies, opinions, tastes and family photos.

Many companies offer online web-building tools to add value to their standard hosting or as a service in its own right. These template-driven site-building tools are the quickest and simplest way to get a great-looking site on the web. No web-building experience is necessary, and you don't need to know anything about how websites are put together. We've looked at eight products from a selection of the UK's top site-building services to see what they've got to offer.

HOW WE TESTED

We registered with each service and looked at how simple it was to create a basic site. We then experimented with all the tools on offer, grading the service on its features, performance and ease of use. We also carefully scrutinised the pricing of each service. Most offer tiered upgrades, so we tested the cheapest, but also looked at what you get if you pay extra.

You'll find that some hosts include VAT in their advertised prices, while others don't. This can be confusing so, as with all prices quoted in *Web User*, we've ensured that every price listed here includes VAT, even where the supplier's websites don't show this in their headline prices. All prices quoted are monthly charges.

WEB USER AWARDS

Webuser GOLD AWARD

The best product/service in its category

Webuser SILVER AWARD

Good, but just misses out on top billing

Webuser BRONZE AWARD

Pretty good, but with some shortcomings

MOONFRUIT | From £4 | www.moonfruit.com

FEATURES ★★★★★ PERFORMANCE ★★★★★ EASE OF USE ★★★★★ VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★

If you're looking for a simple way to put together a website that looks like it's been designed by a professional, Moonfruit leads the way. Its attractive website isn't just a shallow bid to get you interested, but a genuine indication of the kind of site you'll be able to create.

Considering the calibre of website it aims to produce, Moonfruit is amazingly easy to get started with. To begin the 15-day free trial, just register a username, email address, and a password. Click one of the eye-catching templates (there are 100, and every one of them looks great) and your website appears in front of your eyes, ready and waiting for your content. Click a text box to enter new text, or click an image to change it.

There are some elements, however, that you can't immediately change. Moonfruit uses a master page, which acts as the base layer of your website. This holds the elements that appear on every page, such as the title and navigation. It's a neat system, once you get your head around it, since it ensures key elements are identical on every page. This makes your website look coherent and well-designed.

The basic package costs £4 per month, for which you get 500MB of storage space for a single

website. The number of pages is unlimited, and you get 10GB per month of bandwidth. This is actually not a huge amount of space, but it ought to be enough to hold a modest website with plenty of content, and you won't be restricted by the page count.

If you double your payments to £8 per month, you can have a domain, PayPal integration, twice the storage and bandwidth, and the ability to create five websites. If you're feeling really ambitious, there are also £15- and £35-per-month packages available. The first offers 2.5GB of storage, 15 websites and unlimited bandwidth, while the 'full-throttle' package gets you 5GB of storage and a whopping 50 websites.



**Webuser
GOLD
AWARD**

VERDICT

★★★★★

Moonfruit has led the pack in offering attractively designed websites that are easy to set up. This latest incarnation is no different, and offers a collection of gorgeous templates to choose from and a good smattering of features to play around with. The site is split into two layers, so you can't muck up the overall design by changing things on your various pages. If you find that adapting the templates is a bit tricky, there are blank ones available that let you start from scratch.

WEBEDEN | From £4 | www.webeden.co.uk

FEATURES ★★★★★ PERFORMANCE ★★★★★ EASE OF USE ★★★★★ VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★

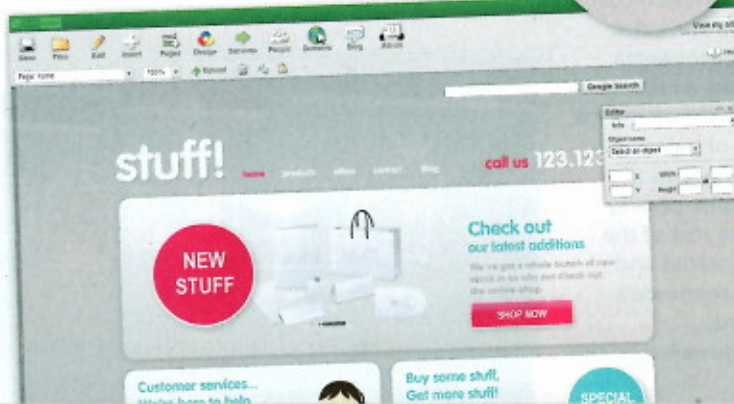
WebEden's web-design tool is identical to Moonfruit's - you just log into it via a different site. There are, however, a few subtle differences between the top two sites in this test that helped make Moonfruit the overall winner.

Most importantly, WebEden's main website simply isn't as attractive. Instead of Moonfruit's swish template chooser, which can be accessed the minute you set foot on its website, WebEden requires you to choose the template from a comparatively static and boring set of thumbnails.

The other difference lies in the pricing structure. WebEden's 15-day trial and basic £4- and £8-per-month packages are identical to Moonfruit's, but WebEden has added another option with a £12-per-month deal. This provides you with a domain name, 30GB of bandwidth and

1.5GB of webspace to use across 10 sites with unlimited pages.

If you're expecting your web-building hobby to develop rapidly into a number of sites, but you want to stagger the price increases as much as possible, then there's certainly something worth considering here.



**Webuser
SILVER
AWARD**

VERDICT

★★★★★

Using a rebranded version of Moonfruit's service gives WebEden a high-quality online web-design tool, but it fails to make itself significantly different from Moonfruit's offering. There's an extra pricing tier, which is good, but the initial web experience of signing up and getting started is slightly inferior. This made it a close call for giving out two Gold Awards this issue, but Moonfruit's first steps are just a little bit flashier than WebEden's, which nudged it ahead in the awards.

123-REG SITEFUSION | From £5.99 | www.123-reg.co.uk

FEATURES ★★★★★ PERFORMANCE ★★★★★ EASE OF USE ★★★★★ VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★

Like Moonfruit, 123-reg's SiteFusion has some fabulous templates to choose from. There are only around 50, but quality has clearly taken precedence over quantity.

Unlike Moonfruit, it doesn't use a master template to keep the design essentials in place. Instead, it uses a lock system, which stops you from making changes to individual pages that may impact on the background template, though you can temporarily unlock it when you need to.

The rest of the interface looks great, but finding your way around is more complicated. A collapsible list of options in the left-hand column can be dragged directly onto the site. Elements such as Google Maps are a doddle to add and configure in this way, and they work really well, but most of the options need to be configured separately.

At first glance, SiteFusion seems to be charging way over the odds, 50 per cent more than Moonfruit and WebEden. However, it's worth looking beyond the price at what you actually get. With 5GB of web space and 50GB per month bandwidth, that's a lot more web for your money. But despite the

acres of space, you can only build a site of up to 50 pages in size, which makes for a bit of an odd balance. To use all the space offered, each page of your site would need to be 100MB in size.

That's a ridiculous proposition for a web page, unless you're going to put a video on every one.

In this respect, upgrading to the SiteFusion Designer (£11.99 per month) makes more sense. It offers the same 50GB of web space but with unlimited pages and bandwidth. It also lets you add a shopping basket and Google Checkout features, in case you want to sell items.

Web User
BRONZE
AWARD



VERDICT

★★★★★

123-reg has the same kind of design ethic as Moonfruit, offering a fixed number of attractive templates, rather than going over the top and providing hundreds of rubbish ones. However, it's a little bit more expensive than its rival.

While it does come with more web space, it restricts your website to 50 pages, which leaves the generous 5GB of web space feeling like a moot point. An unlimited page package is available, but it's quite a bit more expensive again.

NAMESCO SITEMAKER | From £5.50 | www.names.co.uk

FEATURES ★★★★★ PERFORMANCE ★★★★★ EASE OF USE ★★★★★ VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★

Like WebEden, Namesco has opted to license the Moonfruit software and present it under its own banner. The key difference between Namesco and its two rivals, however, is that it offers a broader range of web-hosting options that add some extra features. As well as the standard template-based website, Namesco also provides five POP3 email accounts with their own 500MB of storage space, and 25 email addresses.

This bonus isn't free though, as reflected by Namesco's prices. So, for a service that's comparable to Moonfruit's £4-per-month offer, with 500MB of web space, 10GB of bandwidth and unlimited pages, a Namesco customer would have to pay £5.50. The extra £1.50 per month for a decent email service may not sound like a bad option, but it's questionable whether a typical user of this level of package is really going to need as many as 25 email addresses. The higher pricing continues up through the rest of the upgrades, with both Moonfruit and WebEden undercutting Namesco's services across the board.

Because Namesco is powered by the

same software as the Gold Award-winning Moonfruit, you're getting the same top-quality site building with identical templates and interface.

As we were going to press, Namesco launched a summer promotion on SiteBuilder and a range of its other services, offering 25 per cent off the standard 12-month price until 22 August. However, Moonfruit and WebEden are also offering 15 per cent off annual subscriptions until 31 August and while their prices are inclusive of VAT, Namesco's aren't. Ultimately, even with the various discounts, Namesco still costs around £1.50 per month more than Moonfruit.



VERDICT

★★★★★

While Namesco's SiteMaker puts Moonfruit's excellent web-building software to good use, its prices are significantly higher. Some POP3 email services are thrown in for good measure, but it isn't enough to make it worth paying the extra. Even slashing its prices in a summer sale is deflated by the small print – Namesco doesn't include VAT on its listed prices.

1&1 WEBSITEBUILDER

From £2.99 | www.1and1.co.uk

FEATURES ★★☆☆☆ PERFORMANCE ★★☆☆☆

EASE OF USE ★★☆☆☆ VALUE FOR MONEY ★★☆☆☆

If you have only modest site-building dreams, you don't even need to spend as much as £4 per month for a Moonfruit-style site. For just £2.99 per month, you could hook yourself up with 1&1's Dual Basic web-hosting package and get its WebsiteBuilder as part of the deal.



The scant eight pages you get may be just enough to start you off, but if you grow out of it, you can select more generous and sophisticated options down the line.

The WebsiteBuilder doesn't look like much, but it's relatively simple to use. Creating the basics of a site is a bit like filling out a form. There is a huge range of templates on offer, but they're functional rather than particularly noteworthy. They're fairly inflexible, too, so you might end up growing out of your site sooner than you think.

VERDICT



1&1's web-hosting is well priced, but it isn't ideal for creating a quick and easy site. Its WebsiteBuilder templates look outdated compared to Moonfruit's. A cheap route to greater things, but the site-building element leaves you wanting more.

DAILY INSTANT WEBSITE

From £2.39 | www.daily.co.uk

FEATURES ★★☆☆☆ PERFORMANCE ★★☆☆☆

EASE OF USE ★★☆☆☆ VALUE FOR MONEY ★★☆☆☆

The Daily Instant Website offers a huge number of templates, but they're less attractive than those at Moonfruit or 123-reg. Setting up the initial site is rather like filling in a multi-page form. This helpfully breaks the steps down, but is boring to do. Because you can go back and forth through the process, and get a preview of what any changes you've made will look like before you start, it's fairly easy to get experimental. But compared to Moonfruit's slick interface, it feels clunky and outdated.



There are some elements you can change by typing directly onto the screen, though you can't alter the layout of pages this way. You can add elements such as photo albums to your site but, again, these are only available as fairly rigid templates. During our tests, we came across a photo album add-on that broke the template we were using.

VERDICT



While Daily Instant Website offers some handy add-ons, it's not as slick as Moonfruit or 123-reg. It's a cheap option and feels like it, but it's not cheap enough to make it a viable alternative to its superior rivals.

STRATO WEBSTARTER

£4.68 | www.strato-hosting.co.uk

FEATURES ★★☆☆☆ PERFORMANCE ★★☆☆☆

EASE OF USE ★★☆☆☆ VALUE FOR MONEY ★★☆☆☆

Strato has helpfully provided a virtual video assistant to guide you through each step of the process as you design your website. This animated lady is thorough in her explanations, but her rather overlong and slow description of each step may end up frustrating rather than inspiring you.



You can configure the templates on offer, but the structure is quite rigid. While other web-building services let you move a window around an image if it's not the right shape, Strato demands that logos and other key images must be a specific size and ratio. That said, Strato leaves you with quite a lot more blank space than other services, which you can use how you like. So if you'd like to design a website that looks less formulaic, or one uncluttered by too much design, then this is an attractive option. A rather daunting prospect for beginners, though.

VERDICT



Strato isn't as sophisticated as Moonfruit or 123-reg, but it has some interesting elements. The video tutorials are handy, if slow, but the interface and templates aren't up to Moonfruit's standard.

FASTHOSTS SITEBUILDER

From £2.99 | www.fasthosts.co.uk

FEATURES ★★☆☆☆ PERFORMANCE ★★☆☆☆

EASE OF USE ★★☆☆☆ VALUE FOR MONEY ★★☆☆☆

Like the 1&1 WebsiteBuilder service, Fasthosts' SiteBuilder is more of a bonus feature added to a full web-hosting package than a service in its own right. It's a good job too, as Fasthosts' service is easily the weakest of those we tested.



Choosing a template is tricky, not because there aren't a lot of options (there are hundreds to choose from) but because it's a struggle to find one that looks good, especially when compared to those available from the award-winners in this test.

The interface is similarly disappointing in appearance and isn't particularly easy or pleasant to work with. Unlike some of the other tools in our test, you can't update the site in a live environment. Instead, you have to click on an 'Add text here' button, which then takes you to a text input box on a different page. It's all a bit clunky.

VERDICT



Fasthosts' SiteBuilder tool seems to simply add a little value to an otherwise decent web-hosting package. To this end, it's the weakest of the site builders on test, with the worst interface and the least appealing site templates.