
Module 16, Lesson 1 Handout:

Choosing the Best Website Platform

Do you even really need a website? Most people who say you DON'T need a website are software companies hoping to sell you their services and pioneer a new way forward. But in my opinion, unless you are a stellar marketer with a very specific strategy who can build an audience and sales pipeline in a unique way, you need a website.

3 Reasons You Need to Build a Website:

- 1. Your website is the place to tell the world who you are 24/7.** If someone finds out about you in the middle of the night and wants to learn more about you, your doors are always open on your website. Websites don't have closing hours, so you have a place where you can sell to your customers at all times. You can also answer simple questions for them right on the site, such as how do I contact you? Where are you located? What is your program all about? Who are you? What's in it for me?
- 2. You own your website. You don't own your social media profile.** Think about it. You've been building your social media following for years. You've carefully chosen the photos you share, the captions that speak for you, and the conversations you have with your audience. And with the flip of a switch, someone behind a desk, somewhere in the world, can take it all away from you. Yikes is right!
- 3. Your credibility depends on it.** Let's face it, having a website elevates your ability to be seen as a brand instead of just another person on Instagram. It makes you easier to find in a digital world and allows you to engage differently than on social platforms or in person. Customer purchases are frequently influenced by digital content. To win the game, you need to be in the game.

A few things you need to consider when thinking about your website:

- What you ultimately want it to accomplish: What purpose will your website serve? What is the user experience you want to create? What do you want a user to do when they visit your site?
- What will your website look like on mobile? Is it responsive? Is the user experience as easy to navigate on mobile as it is on desktop?
- Do you want to build your website by yourself, or would you prefer to have someone build it for you? How will you maintain it? Who will fix it if something breaks?
- What is your budget to build your website? Do you have more time to spend than money, or more money to spend than time?

| MY WEBSITE PLAN | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| I want to build a website because: | |
| When a user visits my website I want them to feel: | |
| The action I want a user to take the FIRST TIME they visit my website is: | |
| The action I ULTIMATELY want a user to ultimately take when they visit my website is: | |
| Some basic needs for my website include (shopping cart, blog, course, photography gallery, ability to take credit cards...): | |
| I think most people will visit my site on: (desktop or mobile) | |

| | |
|----------------------------------------------------------|--|
| I want to build my website (by myself or by hiring help) | |
| If my site breaks, this is what I will do: | |
| The budget I have to build my website is: | |

So, now that we've established the reasons you need a website, let's move on to the best way to build one.

Now that you're (hopefully) convinced you need a website, you're probably wondering where to even begin. Let's start with choosing the best website platform for your needs.

Now, new website builders are popping up everyday, but to keep things simple, we will focus on just a few of the most common:

- Wordpress
- Squarespace
- Wix
- Shopify

Wordpress

Wordpress Pros:

Plugins: There are over 50k mostly free and paid plugins available on Wordpress. These plugins allow you to customize your site. If you need your site to do something specific (show social icons, compress your images to smaller sizes, connect your email platform to your website, etc.) chances are there's a plugin to do just that. Not all plugins are created equal, but they make it easy to customize your site to perform almost any way you want.

SEO: The importance of SEO continues to increase, and WordPress does a good job of promoting SEO best practices. There are many SEO plugins available to help optimize content, meta tags, keywords, and more. Yoast SEO is one of the most well-known and widely-used SEO plugins.

Responsiveness: Having a responsive website means it is optimized for any device a user may visit from. Have you ever gone to a website on your phone and had trouble reading anything because it was so small, or off-center, or basically didn't work? That's an example of a site that wasn't responsive. WordPress has thousands of themes available, and most are very reliable when it comes to being responsive. Pro tip: do your homework before choosing a wordpress theme, and considering staying away from "free themes" - they typically have very little support and over time they break, causing you a giant headache of having to either pay someone to fix what's broken, or redo your website on a new theme altogether.

Open Source: Using an open source platform is ideal when you're hiring someone to build your website. WordPress programmers are able to openly share code online, which can save them a lot of time and you a lot of money because they can often use existing code. You won't be stuck working with software that only one person can work on, which is ideal if you ever need to change developers.

Wordpress Cons:

Updates: All WordPress sites require installing periodic updates to maintain the health of the website. This can be tricky. On the one hand, you can only go so long until you NEED to update. On the other hand, if you update something, it may break something else. Think of it like updating the software on your smartphone. You can use an old software version for a while, but eventually it prevents things from working the way they are supposed to. However, you may find that by updating, new bugs arise, which will need to be fixed with yet another software update. The same goes for your website, and the same domino effect happens. If you have a lot of plugins on your website, updating one might break another, so you need to be aware of what you're doing each time, or have a developer who can maintain these updates for you to ensure all aspects of your website run smoothly, all the time.

Security: Being an open-source platform, WordPress is attractive to potential hackers. To mitigate this risk, again, it is always good to be knowledgeable in choosing plugins and themes for your WordPress site; always assess the quality of a WordPress plugin and install with caution.

Speed: Some premium themes are built to be “light” - this is a good thing when it comes to SEO, because the lighter the coding, the faster the speed, and the more Google likes it. This example belongs in the “Pros” section! BUT, certain themes contain a lot of unnecessary generic code, which can decrease the speed of the site and cause slow load times. If you aren’t a developer, it can be hard to understand what code you need and what code you can do without. This is another reason you need to do your homework before choosing a theme, and the reason we put this in the “Cons” section.

Expense: The pro of Wordpress is that you can customize it to do basically whatever you want. But, this may come at a price. Between buying plugins, paying a developer or designer for customization, and budgeting for someone to maintain the site and update or fix it as needed, you need to be prepared to spend a little more on your customized site.

Learning Curve. Help and tutorials for Wordpress are abundant on the internet, but some prior website knowledge does help. It’s best if you already have a little experience in all things digital before diving into your own Wordpress site if you’re planning to DIY it. But, you CAN do it! If you have the time to devote to learning it, then you certainly can be successful. Overall, you don’t need to be totally proficient in it, but some prior knowledge will help make things much easier.

Wordpress Summary

Overall, we recommend WordPress for anyone who wants a simple, beautiful website with a little customization and the ability for your website to grow with your business. You do need at least a small budget to devote to your site because templates, extensions, plugins, and a developer for small customizations to get you off the ground, tackle ongoing maintenance, or take on bigger tech projects will be necessary. If you just want a blog, then perhaps there might be a simpler option than Wordpress. But, in summary, the pros and cons of WordPress make it a great choice for a small business, blogger or entrepreneur who wants to grow an online business.

Squarespace

Squarespace Pros:

All-in-one: Squarespace was created with the intention of making building a website a cinch, and they've done a great job. You don't have to worry as much about finding plugins, widgets, or apps since everything is already built in, including your website analytics. This means not having to update things or experience a site break as a result of an outdated plugin.

Easy to use: Squarespace prides itself on being easy to use. The admin section is built in such a way where navigation is easy to figure out, even if you've never used the builder before. Every builder has a learning curve to it, but just about anyone can figure out Squarespace in just a few minutes. Some all-in-one builders tend to be easier than others, so do your homework and weigh your experience and comfort level with each platform's options. It's fair to say all all-in-one options are easier to use than Wordpress, however.

Beautiful, responsive templates. Squarespace provides a large selection of templates available for use that will make your site look professional in no time at all. Even just by switching out the photographs already in the template with your own creates a beautiful, professional looking site. You can customize colors, fonts, and other details that will make it look on brand in no time. Some all-in-one options tend to have more beautiful templates than others, so be sure you can find one you like before committing to the platform.

One stop shop: Your monthly subscription price includes your site, hosting, customer service, security, and maintenance so you don't have to worry about extra fees or unexpected emergencies. And if you run into trouble, you have access to plenty of tutorials or live chat help. Some other all-in-one builders include phone support, so factor that into your decision when weighing all-in-one options.

Pricing: With an all-in-one, it's very transparent what you'll need to spend on a site, and overall you will most likely spend much less than you would with WordPress. However, it's worth noting that Squarespace tends to be on the pricier side of most of the all-in-ones. And, you get what you pay for. If you just want the basics, easy! But if you want a hefty blog site, or you want to run a proper ecommerce site, or sell subscriptions, or integrate with Google Suite, you need to pay attention to which plan you choose. Some will increase your monthly fee, or take a percentage of each transaction, so do your homework.

Squarespace Cons:

Marketing tools: Squarespace gives you all of the basics for marketing, including share buttons, email capture and campaigns, and more, but more advanced tools like A/B testing and SEO tend to be lacking compared to options with Wordpress. However, they are improving all the time!

Customization: The whole point of an all-in-one builder is to keep things simple, so it makes sense that the world isn't necessarily your oyster when it comes to customizing your website. It's not that it can't be done, it's just that it will involve hiring a developer who may or may not be able to get you exactly what you envision. This puts it more on par with the Wordpress route.

Membership and Courses: If you're looking to build a membership site or sell online courses, it can absolutely be done with Squarespace or all-in-one platforms. However, it can be a bit clunky to build them, you will most likely need third-party software, and overall it may not be the best option. Be sure to do your homework on exactly what you will need, and think ahead if you know you might want to launch a course in the near future.

Squarespace Summary

Overall, we recommend Squarespace for anyone who wants a simple, beautiful website with not much customization or fuss. You don't need as much budget as for a Wordpress site, but you will need more than for some of the other all-in-one builders. If you're looking to build courses and leave yourself room to grow in the future without having to change sites, then you may be limited here. But, all-in-one builders are always improving and they may have more capabilities down the line. If you just want a blog, then this could be a great option for you. In summary, the pros and cons of Squarespace make it a great choice for a small business, blogger or entrepreneur who wants to start an online business.

Other Platforms

Shopify, Wix, Weebly, ShowIt are 4 other alternatives you may want to consider. If your main business is ecommerce, definitely check out Shopify as they were the first to corner the market there and rightfully so. Wix is positioned more as a Squarespace competitor, and it has its pros and cons when you position it next to Squarespace. Weebly is another one to check out, and ShowIt is gaining traction.

Now that you've read some pros and cons of various choices, revisit the exercise you completed above. You'll likely have more clarity on which option - Wordpress or an all-in-one builder - might be the best choice for you. If you ask 10 people what their favorite option is, you will most likely get 10 different answers. This is actually a good thing! It shows that no matter which route you choose, they can all be great options, and we are lucky that building a website can be as simple or customized as you want, and as inexpensive as you need it to be. We encourage you to ask your fellow TNS Alums what they think of various platforms and feel free to start conversations in the TNS Facebook page on this topic. Good luck!