

Choosing a Website Platform: Where to Start

You need a new website, but there are so many platforms to choose from. There are several factors to consider including ease of use, level of functionality, design flexibility, hosting, and cost (of course!). We'll cover the basics in this blog to get you started.

Website platforms can be broken down into 3 types:

- All-in-one: Wix, Shopify, Squarespace, Weebly, etc.
- Open Source: WordPress, Drupal, Joomla, and Magento
- Proprietary

All websites consist of a functional set of code that makes the website work and defines how things are displayed, and a content management system (CMS) that allows the addition of content. Types of content include things like page copy, images, PDF files, products (and all the fields associated with them), blogs, employee profiles, etc. A CMS can also have display editing options included. Differences between the types of platforms include:

- How easy they are for a non-technical person to use
- How many features or add-ons are available
- Their ability to handle complex functionality and/or large data sets
- How easy making changes to the website is once it has been developed
- How quickly they can be developed
- Cost

Let's take a look at some strengths and weaknesses of different platform types.

Strengths and Weaknesses

1. All-in-one: Wix, Shopify, Squarespace, Weebly...

All-in-one platforms offer you the ability to claim a domain, host, and build a website, as well as sell online. Essentially, they offer Software as a Service (SaaS) for your website needs.

Strengths:

- Easy setup
- Built-in tools for editing
- CMS is easy to learn
- Domain and hosting included
- eCommerce is ready to go out of the box



Weaknesses:

- Limited design options
- Editing tools are very basic
- Does not scale very well
- Simplified eCommerce
- Not very feature-rich

When it comes to cost, all-in-one platforms are the least expensive. They are great for individuals, start-ups, solopreneurs, or organizations that don't have access to or the budget for coding skills. Their relatively limited design options and simple functionality work best for simple "brochure" sites and/or small e-commerce sites.

If you are a beginner, all-in-one website platforms make it very easy for you to get started. They are designed to make it easy to create and edit your website with no technical skills. There are pre-designed themes to choose from that provide you with a look and feel as well as page layouts.

While they are generally lower cost than other options, you get what you pay for. Your choices of design are limited compared to other types of websites. You also have somewhat limited ways to edit that design to fit your content. While these platforms offer e-commerce and blogging functionality, those functions are limited in terms of size and extra features.

2. Open-Source: WordPress, Drupal, Joomla, and Magento

Open-Source software is code that is designed to be publicly accessible. Anyone can use it, modify it, and share it as they see fit. Web platforms built using open-source code have a community of code builders who create and offer their additional code either for free or for a fee. So, while the base code is available to everyone at no charge, individuals can use it to build themes, layouts, and functionality that they can sell to users like you and me.

Strengths:

- Strong tools for editing
- Flexible design options
- eCommerce is feature-rich
- Functionality relies on plug and play modules
- Scales well with growth
- Moderate setup time



Weaknesses:

- Vet add-ons
- Hosting and domain are usually not included
- Manual security and site updates (plugins, themes, etc.)

Open source platforms offer a wide choice of layouts, features, and functionality that most people can take advantage of without a great deal of technical know-how. They also can offer very powerful online editing tools in their Content Management Systems (CMS). For example, many WordPress themes include Builders that allow you to drag and drop design elements and configure those elements to look and function in endless ways.

You also have the option with these platforms to really limit editing. That comes in handy when you have a site with complicated functionality (live streams, data calculations, product sorting, etc) or want to maintain strict design and/or brand integrity. Too many cooks with access to editing can end up creating a fruit salad of a website vs something cohesive and powerful.

With open-source platforms, it is important to carefully vet the software you choose to use. Not every provider creates great code or supports it over the long term. Add-ons (plugins and modules) can also compete for resources or break other add-ons. Having a professional developer involved in your website creation can help you avoid these problems.

If you are looking for flexibility in editing and functionality and the ability to scale and update your site so that it grows with your business, open-source websites are worth looking into. Cost can vary widely depending on how much design, added features, and functionality you need as well as how much of the development you are willing and able to handle versus paying a professional.

3. Proprietary

Proprietary website software is the legal property of the group or person that created it. The code is not released to the public. Users are permitted or licensed to use the software under predefined conditions and usually for a fee.

Strengths:

- Feature-rich
- Custom design
- Scales well with growth
- Is molded to you and your business
- Updates and maintenance handled by the developer



Weaknesses:

- Editing is often very limited - many changes need to go to a development team
- High Investment
- Long development time
- Non-transferable

If you choose to have your site developed using proprietary software, you will be able to define exactly what you want your site to be able to do and how it looks. Many website developers have an existing CMS that they will use to build your site, but it will be customized for your business.

The downside to the custom-coded option is that you are locked into using that developer for any changes that are not built into your CMS.

Proprietary code is a great choice for sites that need a great deal of complicated functionality and/ or large databases of information (lots of products, members, records...). Because every part is custom-coded for your needs, projects tend to take longer and cost more than development using the other platforms.

One size does not fit all when it comes to choosing a website platform. They each have their strengths and weaknesses. Choose one that fits your business needs, technical ability, and comfort level, and budget.