WordPress:
FREE, CHEAP, or PROFESSIONAL?

The Case for Partnering With a Professional
Firm for WordPress Design and Development

maven

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Introduction

If we were to poll a diverse group of small business owners and ask them to describe their specific website needs, the majority would have the exact same responses: they need a solution that is easy to manage, reasonably inexpensive to develop, scalable with their business, and search engine friendly. A huge part of being a successful small business owner is about managing finite resources of time and money to achieve business goals. When it comes to delivering on the critical website needs of small business owners without taxing the vital resources small businesses must maximize to be successful in today's economy, WordPress is the solution to which many turn.

Is WordPress the right solution for all small businesses? In short, no. But after delivering several hundred websites over many years, we've determined that WordPress is a great solution for about 95% of small businesses. For the other 5%—those with highly specialized needs—it's better to deliver a fully custom, ground-up built website.

WordPress Is...

Mention the term WordPress to small business owners and most of the time you'll hear about it being a "blogging software" that offers a lot of free and great-looking templates (themes). While those few facts are certainly true, it's not a completely accurate description. Referring to WordPress as just a blogging solution is similar to calling the Grand Canyon a big hole. It just doesn't tell the whole story. Since its inception in 2003, WordPress has evolved into much, much more.

WordPress is not just a blogging tool. It has become the most-used Content Management System (CMS) and website platform in the world. WordPress powers two-thirds of the top million websites and it's now the platform of more than 66 million websites worldwide. From your NaNa's travel blog to internet titans like CNN, Forbes, The New York Times, TechCrunch, People, CBS and Ebay, Inc., WordPress is the foundation for them all, both big and small. WordPress supports sites from 10 to 10,000 pages in size, and those with daily readership in the millions.

WordPress powers 26% of the internet

WordPress powers two-thirds of the top 1 million websites

The Benefits of WordPress

WordPress was originally developed as a personal publishing system based on PHP and MySQL, and has always been open-source software, and completely free to users. In addition to the "out-of-the-box" features that WordPress offers users, there is a library of more than 20,000 free plug-ins and themes available. Most importantly, WordPress as a CMS tool is second-to-none in allowing web neophytes to add content and reconfigure their websites with minimal training and programming knowledge.

What is a WordPress Theme?

Those unfamiliar with the specifics of WordPress often refer to themes as templates. In truth, this is quite incorrect however, because unlike the templates available for many website platforms, WordPress themes dictate much more than simply the design and layout of the site. Themes also drive much of the site's functionality. A WordPress theme is group of files responsible for the styling and configuration of the front-end of your WordPress site. This group of files usually consists of PHP files, Cascading Style Sheets (CSS), image files, and JavaScript files. A WordPress theme displays the content and data (pages, blog posts, navigation menus, images) stored in your MySQL database. It controls the layout of pages through PHP files and templates, the styling of fonts, and the images and colors through CSS. It also specifies widget locations. The beauty of a WordPress theme is the ability to fully customize the look and feel of a website, and change that entire look and feel by activating a different WordPress theme.
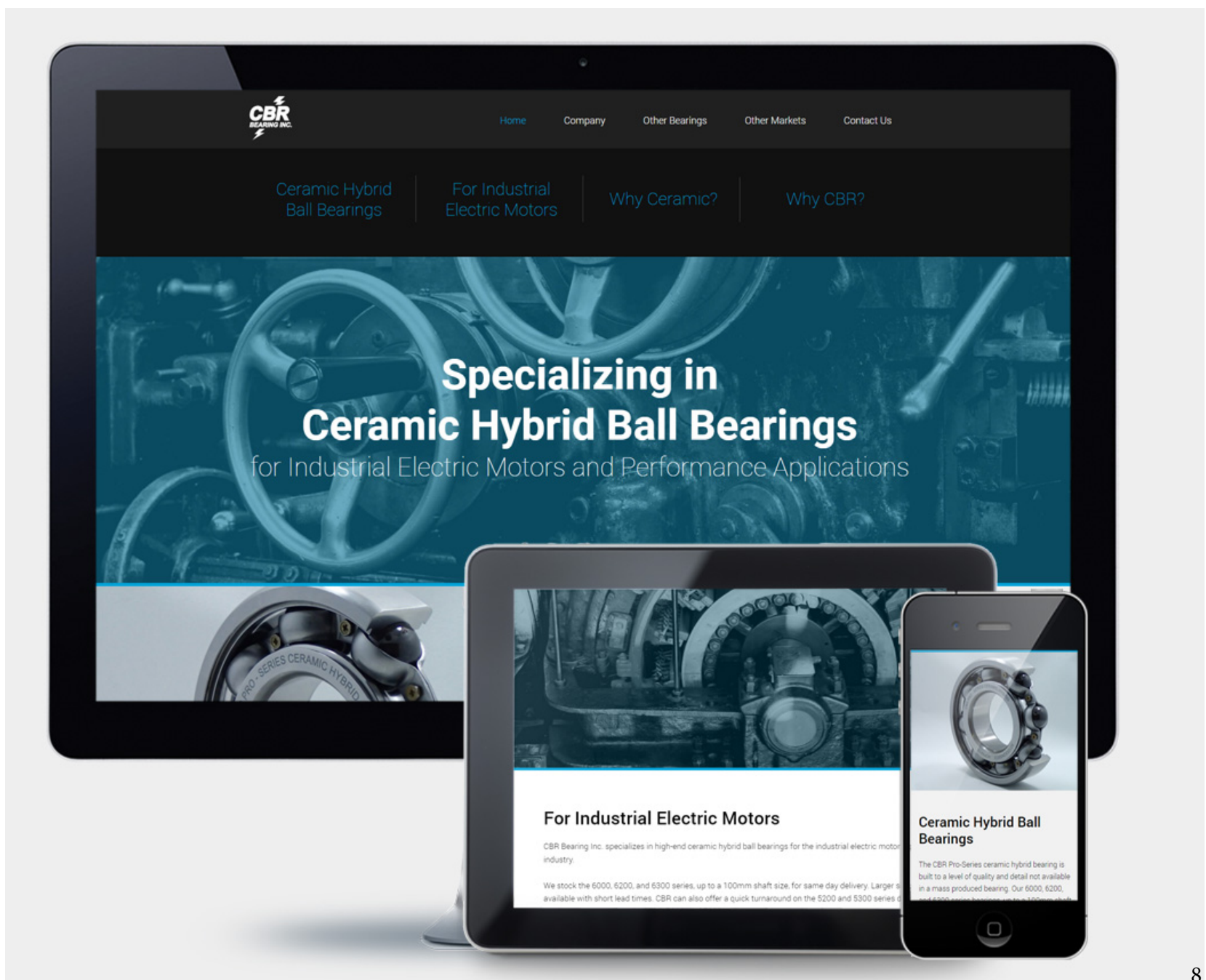
Unfortunately for a segment of WordPress users, some themes are built to control critical functionality, so if the user activates a different theme, that critical functionality is lost. An example of this problem can be seen with themes that offer unique "portfolio" building functionality. If the user chooses to try a different theme, that portfolio is typically gone, or best case scenario, seriously screwed up. Some WordPress themes are also not built to be responsive to fluidly display across all device types, like tablets and mobile phones. This is especially true of free WordPress themes.

The Wordpress.org Theme Directory boasts a library of more than 3,000 free themes for download, but only around half of those are mobile-responsive. Secondary markets for WordPress themes offer users more features, and layout options, and typically cost around $40-$100. Sellers such as Theme Forest, TemplateMonster, and Themify.Me offer users thousands of WordPress themes for download, with different styles and layouts to cover many different website possibilities.

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Use a Free Theme or Hire a Developer to Design/Build a Custom One?

Downloading and installing a free theme is a cost-saving solution for users with no programming experience. For $50, you can buy and install a theme that possibly has all the features, style and color elements that you desire. However, if the specific features you're looking for aren't offered, you're out of luck. Some people with limited coding experience find a WordPress theme that provides the majority of the features and options they are looking for and then modify those theme files to suit their preferences. But what happens when the original theme developer decides to update their theme files, which can happen often, for any number of reasons? Your custom modifications are often either lost, or the theme becomes outdated and could be incompatible with the later versions of the WordPress core. There are serious security risks associated with ignoring WordPress core updates to preserve theme modifications: your website could be infected with malware, your database could become corrupted, and SPAM is a prevalent issue.

If your organization or business is planning to develop a website on the WordPress platform, finding an experienced and talented developer to create a custom WordPress theme is the way to go. For those who are operating a serious business, investing a mere $50 in a WordPress theme and expecting it to act as a successful representation of your online presence really isn't a recipe for success. Nor is paying your sister-in-law's cousin's neighbor, who dabbles in web design on the side, a couple hundred dollars to change a few lines of code on a free WordPress theme. The old axiom "You get what you pay for" rings true in this case. After all, is it reasonable to invest so little and expect a professional, secure, long-lasting resource that will act of the face of your company on the world stage in return?

Investing a mere $50 in a WordPress theme isn't a recipe for success.

Choosing the Professional Route

Must every small business invest in the development of a custom WordPress theme? Certainly not. But keep in mind, building a custom theme is the only way to obtain a WordPress website that supports your specific business goals, includes a design that's both professional looking and appropriate to your industry, and also provides a foundation for future marketing and SEO efforts.

Hiring an established and experienced web design firm will ensure that your custom WordPress theme is created with your unique business needs as the foundation. Not all websites are the same—they often serve unique and diverse purposes. Some websites serve as the PR face of the company, others as a store front.

Some sites are a portal for sharing, in great detail, the services or products a company offers and the processes the company executes to bring those things to market. And some websites serve all of these purposes effectively, at the same time.

At Modmacro, our initial conversation with a new client consists of getting a feel for their business goals, how their website could help them achieve those goals, and what type of budget is needed to achieve their objectives. We have valuable experience from developing and marketing hundreds of websites for a diverse group of clients across the U.S. We know which components should be included in a website to make it successful, as well as to achieve our clients' business needs.

Working with a professional web developer or web development firm to develop a custom WordPress theme will also ensure that your website looks and feels exactly the way you want it to. Many of our clients already have a good idea what they want their website to look like, before they even reach out to us. The challenge is in meeting those expectations, particularly with a website redesign project, as there are stylistic elements and aesthetic themes that need to be maintained. An "off-the-rack" WordPress theme isn't able to provide the type of design that most clients are looking for. Talented designers spend hours upon hours sweating the small stuff like images, color schemes, color blocking, and how it all works with your company colors and logo (branding) — important details that help the site achieve the established business goals.
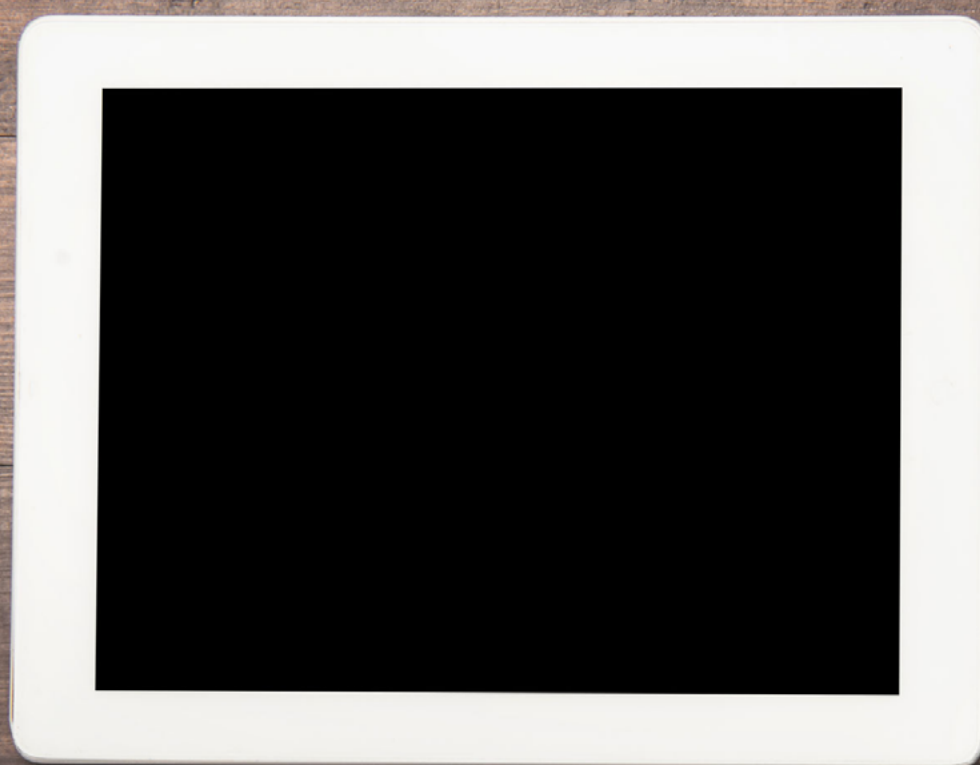
A critical piece of WordPress theme development, so often overlooked by even talented designers and developers, is the digital marketing and SEO foundation that a WordPress theme can provide. Custom WordPress theme development from Modmacro always includes a heavy dose of digital marketing, Google best practices for Search Engine Friendliness (SEF), and SEO techniques that we've developed through years of experience and research. The WordPress platform was designed to be an effective CMS system when it comes to natively supporting SEO and digital marketing. But only experienced developers know how to take full advantage of those opportunities.

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With an experienced and talented team of WordPress developers, UX designers, copywriters, SEO specialists, and project managers, Modmacro has developed hundreds of successful web site projects and won international awards for both design and content. We focus on content-heavy inbound marketing and our proven process for developing successful websites, all while delivering the boutique experience that small business owners value in a marketing partner. If Modmacro looks like a good fit for your organization, we'd love to talk.

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Award-Winning
Web Design, Marketing & PR
for Select Small Business

An award-winning web design and marketing firm, Modmacro partners with select small businesses to strategically grow their companies. Our integrated marketing approach is based on a healthy mix of original creativity (design), visual appeal (branding), authentic story sharing (PR), driving targeted traffic (SEO), original content creation, user experience design considerations (UX), and practical data insights (analytics).

 If Modmacro looks like a good fit for your organization we'd love to talk. We develop lasting relationships with select small businesses and non-profits by providing partnership-level service.