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Show Up Useful:

How to Choose a WordPress Theme That Does What You Need It To

and Looks Fantastic Doing It.

Step away from the computer

Very first thing's first – step away from your computer. Far far away. (Or, metaphorically, away. If you're reading this on your computer that's fine)

One of the easiest pitfalls to stumble headfirst into is getting a vague idea that you need a theme and going straight online to look for one. This fails for a couple reasons.

It's overwhelming. There are literally thousands of themes online, most of which look good at a glance and a vast number of them would do just fine for most of your needs. How can you possibly narrow it down?

Even if you do find one you like, are you confident in your choice? Does it fit your needs? Is it a high quality theme?

Hard to know without your purchase criteria (which you need even if you're looking for a free theme, by the by).

Are you sure I can't just jump in?

No. No no no no no no no. Nooooooo.

We need to know what on earth you actually need your site to do, what your goals for it are, which features you're going to need rather than what looks shiny and pretty, and we need to make sure it's built for the right people (ie YOUR CUSTOMERS/CLIENTS/VISITORS not YOU).

=Ahem=

To that end, here are the answers we need to work through and discover first:

– What is your website about?
– What does your company do?
– What is your process for taking people from dot to customer?
– Which parts of that process are you hoping your website will make easier?
– How will it do that?
– What else do you want your site to handle?
– How will it do those things?
– What is not your website's job?

Let's break these down a bit (because I know it's intimidating at first glance)

The first few answers I usually grab from this question;

Who are you and what is your company? What do you do? (Rambling, totally fine)

As an example, here's what I would write. Keeping in mind I've had a bit of practice and yours can have way more dead ends and back tracking, it's all absolutely fine.

> *Over at Designmancy I design, build, repair, upgrade, maintain, and train people in how to use WordPress. Basically, I'm your WordPress Wizard – if it's relating to WP I am All Over It. I have a couple of services that are for a few different types of people (absolute beginners, people that have been DIYing their site for a while, people that hire everything out, whatever) all of whom need either repairs or a whole new site. Then I also have some training videos on WordPress, Woocommerce, and I'm building more eventually. Oh and I have a newsletter, some freebies, a*

blog. Plus this really ridiculously long page of wordpress jargon explained. But basically, I'm a WordPress designer.

From this answer alone we can start to see some things our theme is going to need; we know that it'll need a blog page that makes sense, that it'll need some way of displaying products/courses, that it's going to need a newsletter subscription form, and that we offer services so there might need to be a portfolio of some sort.

Walk me through it, how do people become customers/clients at the moment?

With this question I'm hoping to identify the different moving parts in your sales process (or lack of) so that I can then figure out how to make life easier for you. And in this case, that means choosing a theme that will support you, not fight against you / make it harder for people to buy.

Almost always when you ask this you'll get some information on what you don't like about the process too, and what you're secretly (or openly) hoping your site will make easier. It's probably one of my favourite questions to ask people for this reason.

Again, I'll show you my example answer;

Ok so normally people find me through Facebook groups or through other people, we'll likely talk before they ever see my site in messenger or email depending where they find me. Then I'll point them to the relevant service or product and they'll either read the page and purchase (sometimes) or they'll set up a free call with me. So we'll jump on that for 30 minutes and I'll do my best to help within that time and answer any questions, and where it's appropriate I'll recommend why x service is the right

one for them. They get sent a follow up email with all the great

stuff we covered and a reminder of next steps, then honestly it's

on to either signing up through my site or following up now and

then. It works ok, but it's pretty hands on at the moment you

know? It'd be amazing if people started finding me on their own

or needed less initial input (I love talking to people but it does

take time).

From this answer we can see some thought has been put into how things are structured (I DID just redesign my site, so this is almost cheating, but you get the idea) but there are some significant areas where things could be improved. Looking in particular at how talk-intensive it is. SO, what does that tell us about the theme requirements?

It hints that we're going to need a way of scheduling calls, a way of purchasing directly so potential ecommerce applications or a 3rd party service, integration with a system that can send follow up emails automatically would be a huge benefit though that's unlikely to be something the theme itself will do. And, reading between the lines, we want something that inspires confidence and trust in the target audience.

What do you love about your current site? What would you rather stuff in a closet where no one can see it?

The phrasing on this is specific, playful and slightly sneaky; It's easy to talk about the parts of your site you love or like, it's much less easy to talk about the parts you hate. That make you squirm. Especially if you've put time into making it yourself, you know?

Practical reasons for having these questions answered are fairly straightforward; when you're choosing a theme you want the things you love and you don't want the things you hate. Writing those out clearly makes it easier to pinpoint during your search.

Here's my example for right this second;

> *I LOVE my About page. Spent a bunch of time and money finding the right copywriter for my site and she did a fantastic job on the written content, then the layout is just fun to play with! That little bit where I use a voice clip to pronounce Designmancy? Just fun. Lots of fun. I also like that I have FAQ as part of my contact page and I'm partial to the fancy quote boxes and square brackets.*

> *What I would hide... well. It's not quite that extreme but it bugs me that the illustrations are still black and white (I was making those, they're meant to be in colour but I didn't fit it in yet), the HeyGirlHey page is just sort of hanging there on its own as a dropdown and I'm not a fan of that, and I'm not at all convinced about the way the opt in section looks. Also there's something about the products on the Services page I just don't like that much, I think the layout needs tweaked a bit or something.*

Unpacking that a bit there's not really much needing changed there theme-wise (which is what you'd expect given I've just done all that) but definitely some updates I'd want to make in future. When you answer that question you'll find different bits and pieces that will help inform your choice and possibly highlight some changes you want to make to your site in general and not just the theme.

And obviously, if you don't have a site of your own yet this question is a bit tricker but what you COULD do is pick a site you like the look of and run through the exercise as if that was yours.

With those questions we've discovered what you need from your site as a business, now it's time to flip focus and look at the people actually using your site.

Your Potential Customers.

Now, I know, I know, everyone asks you about your potential customers, who you serve, your target audience. It seems to be the favourite old, tired question that everyone trots out – and then **~gasp~** we don't accept "I dunno, everyone!" as an answer!

Painful. Right?

Here's the deal though, it's asked so often because it IS important. Let's imagine you're running a conference and you have speakers that are going to be talking about something specific. Let's say it's about Blogging and Content Strategy.

Who would you want to attend? Pretty sure, as a conference organiser, you'd want people that are actually interested in your topic. So in this case that would mean extending the invitation to people with blogs, or who post for blogs, or who have a website and are interested in starting a blog. It could be even more specific; if your speakers are pitching their talks for beginners then that attracts a different set of people than if they were addressing more advanced concepts.

Imagine, though, you filled it up with just anyone and everyone. You'd have a lot of very confused people; primary school teachers that aren't sure why they're there exactly, neuroscientists sitting in the back rolling their eyes, mechanics getting stuck and people asking questions ranging from "What on earth is a blog?" to "Yea, ok, so you need to do x, y, z, have you considered advanced topic B?" - your speakers are unhappy and have a tough time getting through their material, the audience is unhappy and frankly bored, and no one is really making any money in this scenario.

Your website has the same problem. When you try to reach everyone under the sun, it's impossible to please any of them. And if you go generic? Nothing sets you apart from any of the other thousands upon thousands of websites.

Now, for choosing a theme you're not starting with something unique. That's not the point. The theme is a small piece of your overall 'feel' – and it needs to be in alignment with the rest of your site; the content, the goals, who you're talking to,

what you're trying to convey. If not the effect is jarring at worst and generic at best. If so? It ties perfectly into your content and branding and no one else has quite the same presence as you, and for your people that's incredibly appealing.

So. Potential Client = Important to Know.

On we go.

Who do you love helping the most?

Reasons for this question are covered, just give it your best. Go beyond surface attributes because you'll find the parts that matter most are what goes on inside the head of your potential client, not what demographic category they fit into.

I gravitate towards people with a passion beyond just making money – their business has to mean something to them and be something they really care about. Doesn't much matter to me how that manifests so long as it's there; I work equally happily with authors and renewable energy companies.

Age-wise there isn't a neat category they fit into though typically they're mid twenties up to about 70ish. When they're open to talking and joking a little as part of the process I'm a happier camper, I like to actually like the people I work with.

Watching these people grow their business and change their website from 'eh, its ok' to 'OMG THIS IS PERFECT AND I CAN EVEN USE IT MYSELF' is far and away my favourite progression.

Who would you rather not work with?

This can be answered in any way you please and it'll still give us clues and cues, so go with your gut here.

I can't stand working with people who are money-first. I love money but life is about so much more than that to me so when it's the main focus I'm turned off. Also this idea of looking at the worst side of everything is just gross to me; lack, negativity, cost, faking, no thank you. Beyond that? I'm happy to work with whoever. Hope and aspiration are vital to me, and if they're missing that's a clear no.

How do the people you love helping feel before they work with you? What are they thinking?

All right, for this question either use information from clients / customers you already have or get as far into your ideal's head and write your best guess. The main thing is to focus on feelings, on uncertainties, on what prompted them to look for you in the first place. Where are their shoes, right before they find you? What do they need from you?

When people find me they're almost always in a state of confusion, discomfort or panic. Something just isn't working with their site or maybe they don't even have one yet, but they know it can be better with a good site designed for them. Or perhaps they just need a little bit fixed and they'll be happy. Either way, it's an uncertain space where they don't have a clue who to turn to or

sometimes even what they need. Quite often they believe that

using a website themselves is too complicated, and they're not

confident they won't break anything if they try. Or on the flip side

they've been doing it for themselves for so long that they can see

there's something wrong but don't know what to do to fix it.

So when they come to me they're looking for reassurance and

hoping that it can be better, that someone knows what to do.

They need answers, sometimes quickly. They need their problems

solved so they can continue doing what they do best. They need.

They hope. They fear.

How would they like to feel instead? What do they feel when they start working with you?

Using the same client/customer you used for the last question, get inside their head and write out what they wish they felt instead of all that icky stuff from the last question. What would make them happier, how would not having their problem affect how they felt about their business and about themselves?

After they sign up with me, they feel So Excited! Finally, the

problem is going to be solved, things are going to be better, they

don't have to worry any more. They're reassured and relieved

that someone knows what they're doing and knows how to help

them. It's off their plate and they feel lighter.

Now that we've answered those questions you should have a clear picture of who you're trying to reach in your head and (much more importantly) in your heart. You can feel for them, you've spent time feeling AS them, and that means we have everything we need to go theme hunting.

Where to look

There are lots of places to find themes online. Lots. It's so easy to get overwhelmed or get hung up on trying to figure out the best place to start looking.

Truthfully, it doesn't matter where you start or if you check all the platforms. Most of the time if I have some idea of what I need I'll head over to [Themeforest](#) and start an advanced search, if I'm not sure and want inspiration I'll go to Pinterest and search for websites. If you have a specific framework you want to use (like, for example, you've been using [Divi](#) or you have a [Genesis theme](#)) then you'll want to go to their marketplaces to search.

These steps will work however you decide to begin your hunt, and what you look for throughout remains the same.

How to look with specs

Remember that list we made in the first phase of different features the theme should have? Those are your criteria. When you're looking for a theme keep those in list form next to you and (especially if you're using something like Themeforest to look) add as many as possible to filters. If the themes you're drawn to don't have these features (or aren't able to integrate with a plugin to plug that gap) then they aren't the theme for you.

The other components to check for are reviews, documentation, and how recently (and regularly) it's been updated. In a marketplace setting those are right up there in plain sight so you can directly compare and make sure it's something you're comfortable with. For frameworks you might need to go to google and search in this format; "Name of Theme" +review (or complaints or critique or problems).

That's going to give you a real-world view of what's going on. Do pay attention to

when the reviews etc were written as well though, a glowing review from 5 years ago is about as useful as a damning review from the first version of the theme (not very).

Keep going until you have between 5-15 themes you like and check out with your initial criteria. Don't angst too much over it, this is just a first pass and it's useful to have a selection to choose from for our next step.

Gut checking as your audience

Now you're going to do something simple but not easy.

You're going to take what you know of your potential customer, how they feel, what they're looking for, and you're going to look through their eyes at each of the theme choices you identified.

That's right, we're talking feelings and using empathy in a technical course. The benefits you'll see from not skipping this step are profound, though. So humour me, give it a shot, and rule out another couple sites with me.

The way I do it is I read the summary of what your client is feeling right before they find you and start working with you. Then I do my best to feel that way too, thinking of situations where I've felt like that in the past (empathy, this part here is about empathy). Next step is to look at each site, in that headspace, and ask "What would make me feel x" where x is your answer to "What do they feel after they start working with you".

This isn't a place to overthink it, if you get a negative sort of twinge, or your lip curls, you draw back, your eyes shift away, you feel like you're shrinking into yourself (even subtly) – that theme is a no.

However if you feel yourself smile, or take a deep breath, or relax your shoulders, that theme goes into the yes pile.

By the time you're done with this step you will likely have less than 5 themes to choose from (and chances are you also know which is your favourite). At this point, any of the themes left would do the job. It's worth keeping a note of them

for later just in case you want to re-brand down the line or you need to start a site for a similar audience.

Final choice?

You could almost eenie-meanie-miney-mo it. By this point you have a short list of themes that have good reviews, do what you need them to do, appear to be well coded, and feel right to your audience. This is the part where you can use your own preferences again, confidently, knowing that your bases are covered.

Pick whichever one you like from this smaller list, it'll serve you well.

Don't look back at this point – your foundation is solid. Go ahead and install your chosen theme, finish customizing it with your branding, and enjoy your new site.

Need more help? You can find me at https://designmancy.com along with more useful articles and pointers on using and creating your site.