

Business & Careers

Part 2 of 2

A world of extras available to make your site better



Luigi Benetton
Hi-Tech

If you build your law firm website using WordPress, you might find it doesn't do everything you want it to out of the box. Fortunately, plug-ins and themes abound to fill in the gaps.

Before you add features, heed this word of warning: websites accommodate many moving parts. If you need to add plug-ins, start with one and test it to make sure it doesn't cause any problems before you add the next plug-in on your list.

That said, WordPress offers many possibilities for improving your website that you shouldn't pass up. "Don't be afraid to play," Toronto lawyer Omar Ha-Redeye says.

Backing up your site

"Firms need to back up both 'pieces' of WordPress," advises Steve Matthews, president and founder of Stem Legal Web Enterprises. "The template files are modified 'live' on the server, so those changes need to be backed up whenever those changes take place. And the database needs to be backed up regularly. Nightly would be best; weekly at a minimum."

Matthews notes that site owners can schedule their own backups. He advises against relying on a website-hosting company for backups.

Jennifer Johannesen once avoided backup plug-ins. "I used to think of backing up as a means of safeguarding yourself against plug-ins that break. But the stability of plug-ins is much better now," says the Toronto-based WordPress developer (who built a site for this article's author). For customers who ask, she recommends the BackWPup plug-in (<http://wordpress.org/plugins/backwpup/>), which can push backups to a variety of places, including several cloud-based services.

Mobile-friendly sites

Clients will visit your website using different web browsers on different-size devices that support different screen resolutions. Your site has to look good regardless of the tools used to view it.

Fortunately, newer themes tend to be built with "responsive design" in mind. In essence, the site's theme adapts depending on the device and browser used to visit that site.

"No matter what your browser dimensions are, if you scale down

pixel by pixel, the screen will adjust with you," Johannesen says. "You will never have a random toolbar go sideways."

Older sites can update their themes or use plug-ins like WPtouch (<http://wordpress.org/plugins/wptouch/>).

Creating effective navigational tools for small smartphone screens calls for a different design approach. "Clients ask me for Facebook-style slide-out navigation on mobile sites," Johannesen notes. "You see a little menu symbol, you touch it and the whole site slides over and reveals the navigation underneath."

Regardless of the theme you choose, check your site using a variety of devices. "The iPhone isn't the only standard anymore," Johannesen says.

Monitor your efforts

Regardless of what you use to build your site, monitor its activity using a web analytics service like Google Analytics. Ha-Redeye recommends the plug-ins WPStats (<http://wordpress.org/plugins/wp-stats/>) and StatPress Reloaded (<http://wordpress.org/plugins/statpress-reloaded/>).

Keep your site secure

Updates to WordPress go a long way to protecting sites from hackers, but many site owners go farther. Ha-Redeye uses the security plug-ins Wordfence Security (<http://wordpress.org/plugins/wordfence/>) and BulletProof Security (<http://wordpress.org/plugins/bulletproof-security/>). Matthews adds a recommendation for Exploit Scanner (<http://wordpress.org/plugins/exploit-scanner/>).

Block comment spam

Letting site visitors comment on your firm's blog posts can boost your firm's marketing. Unfortunately, this also leaves a site open to comment spam.

Much comment spam gets placed by search engine optimization (SEO) "experts" who "guarantee" better search engine rankings for their customers. One method of improving a site's rankings involves having many other sites link to that site. Getting legitimate links takes time, so many "experts" deploy spambots to place bogus comments on blog posts that include links back to their customers' sites.

Lawyers need to protect their sites against spambots. Some site owners simply disable comments. Others have all comments held for moderation, but that can cause a backlog of comments to review. The popular Akismet plug-in (<http://wordpress.org/plugins/akismet/>), which

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[org/plugins/akismet/](http://wordpress.org/plugins/akismet/)), which catches most comment spam, minimizes the time it takes to handle blog comments.

Boost SEO for your site

"Even though WordPress is pretty optimized out of the box, you still need an extra SEO plug-in," Johannesen says, adding that she recommends the free plug-in Yoast (<http://wordpress.org/plugins/wordpress-seo/>).

Speed up your site

Before you can make your site's pages load faster, you need to understand how WordPress works behind the scenes.

When a person visits your website, WordPress finds the content, puts it into the right template, and then displays the page. The first two steps delay the third, which is what the visitor waits for.

Matthews reduces the need for the first two steps using the caching abilities of WP Super Cache (<http://wordpress.org/plugins/wp-super-cache/>). "Caching takes the most commonly downloaded pages on your site—the home page, maybe a news area, practice pages, lawyer profiles—and caches those pages, creating 'pictures' of the templates and the data combined, so it can push out copies of your most popular web pages back to the user almost instantaneously," he says.

Create better navigation aids

"Fat menus" typically sit at the end of a page. To bring their functionality to the top of a page, Johannesen recommends the Mega Menu plug-in (<http://wordpress.org/plugins/jquery-mega-menu/>), which animates menus running across the top of a page when visitors hover the mouse pointer over them. These top menus can reveal site maps, pictures and other navigational aids.

Offer social media sharing

Many sites offer buttons that visitors can use to share pages via Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and

own tools, like the Hootlet that's part of Vancouver-based social media dashboard Hootsuite.

Free or 'premium' plug-ins

WordPress appeals to people who want great stuff for free, but Johannesen looks beyond price. "I sometimes choose premium plug-ins over free plug-ins," she says. "You can find great, well-supported, well-documented plug-ins for 10 or 12 dollars. The free ones sometimes fall short. If it's something important, I'll pay for it. I've even had refunds on plug-ins."

so forth. Plug-ins that pace these buttons on web pages abound.

Ha-Redeye avoids such plug-ins since he finds people use their



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