

A group of people are sitting on wooden steps. The person in the center is holding a tablet. The person to the right is using a laptop. The person on the far right is wearing black boots. The background is a blurred outdoor setting.

ECOMMERCE ON WORDPRESS: A GETTING STARTED GUIDE

BY JEFF REIFMAN, LOOKAHEAD CONSULTING

WordPress, has become the platform of choice for those wanting to sell physical (and digital) goods on the web.

WHY WORDPRESS?

If you're contemplating launching a new store on the web, there are an array of options available to you. One of them, WordPress, has become the platform of choice for those wanting to sell physical (and digital) goods on the web.

Now more than a decade old, WordPress has matured as a platform.

Once seen as a tool for bloggers, WordPress is now used to power mission-critical enterprise websites. It now runs 28 percent of the web.

Certainly, there are Commerce as a Service (CaaS) solutions for enterprises that allow you to build a store with different levels of flexibility and functionality. But, they can be expensive. For example, [Magento Enterprise](#) starts at \$18,000. And, there are lower priced cloud-hosted solutions such as [Prestashop](#) and [Shopify](#) but their customization is often limited unless you shift to self-hosting. And, you can always develop an ecommerce site from scratch. But, building an ecommerce platform yourself is a major undertaking with significant cost and requires lifetime maintenance. All of these approaches create a certain level of lock-in, making it difficult to move your store to future platforms.

WordPress is the most widely used CMS in the world. Its ease of use, long term viability and fantastic ecommerce plugins make it an excellent platform for launching an ecommerce venture. You can start small at low cost and extend, customize and scale as needed. If you can't find what you need within its array of ecommerce plugins and extensions, you can build on its open source codebase to create exactly what you need. With a good managed host, running your store on WordPress can be efficient and affordable and provide the features you need indefinitely. Finding developers who know WordPress to enhance and extend your efforts is always easy.

WordPress is the most widely used CMS in the world.



WHAT ARE PEOPLE USING TODAY?

A few years back, digital experience platform WP Engine published this [infographic analyzing which ecommerce services entrepreneurs on the reality show Shark Tank used](#). WordPress was chosen most and Shopify, then an independent CaaS solution, was second:



Keep your customers happy and interested in returning.

To transform WordPress’ basic open source content management system into a sophisticated storefront, you’ll need an ecommerce plugin that provides all the enhancements you’ll need to keep your customers happy and interested in returning.

On that front, WooCommerce, which began as an ecommerce WordPress plugin, was growing the fastest. WooCommerce now powers **41 percent** of all online stores:

4

Smart eCommerce Solutions



Choosing the right eCommerce plugin or platform ensures your products can be purchased safely and efficiently. **Newer platforms like WooCommerce are starting to outperform some of the old standbys.**

- Magento
- WooCommerce
- BigCommerce
- Shopify
- Magento Enterprise





EXAMPLE

For season 3 contestants **Villy Customs**, WooCommerce allows customers to build custom bikes quickly and easily, visualizing their creation each step of the way.



Recently, Shopify released its first WordPress plugin placing the two solutions on equal footing in WordPress to compete more directly against each other. Both options make starting an ecommerce store with WordPress easier and your path to success more certain.

Before you launch your WordPress-powered ecommerce store, there are myriad factors to consider.

What theme or plugin do you use? What features should you implement? What should you look for in a managed WordPress host? This ebook answers those questions and more to help ensure your ecommerce site is a success.

A hand holding a smartphone in front of a laptop keyboard, with a teal overlay and the text "Making it all work together".

Making
it all work
together

THREE WORDPRESS ECOMMERCE PLUGINS

Plugins are an integral component to building and operating an ecommerce store on WordPress. Let's take a closer look.

1. WOOCOMMERCE



WooCommerce is designed and built specifically for WordPress. In May, [WordPress creator Automattic acquired WooCommerce](#), giving it an additional credibility boost. With the WooCommerce plugin and its extensions, you host your site and control all of your data. The full checkout and store management features are integrated into your WordPress system, not hosted externally. More than 22 million people have downloaded WooCommerce.

With WooCommerce, you perform all the product and catalog management for your store within your WordPress dashboard. It supports many product types and variations, such as grouped products, real or virtual products, product variables, sizes, and more. It also can track inventory for you and notify you when stock levels run low.

The WooCommerce core system offers a [vast array of features](#), including:

- Fully integrated checkout service
- Payment gateways: five pre-installed including direct bank transfer, check payment, cash on delivery, credit card payments with PayPal or credit card payment with Simplify Commerce (US only)
- Extensive currency, shipping and tax options
- Geo-location support to simplify shipping and tax calculations
- Optional AJAX support to speed and simplify the shopping experience for customers

And, WooCommerce has a huge library of free and paid extensions that help you extend and customize your store. For example, there are product types extensions such as [Sensei](#) for offering courses, [memberships](#), [subscriptions](#), and event [bookings](#).

**Control all
your data.**

You own all of your own data. You're responsible for security, performance, upgrades.



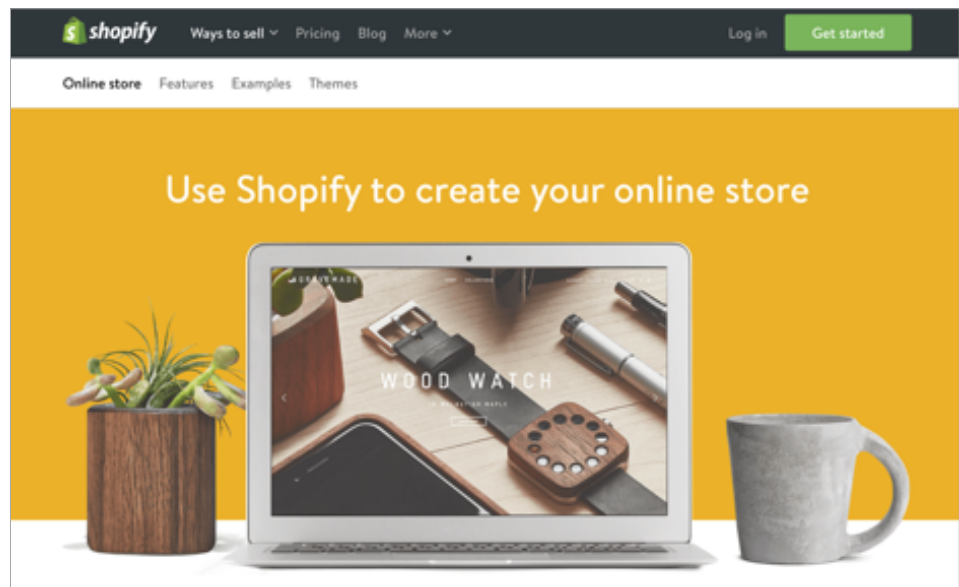
The foundational principles of WooCommerce are impressive.

Because you host and control everything yourself, you own all of your own data. Unfortunately, there are downsides to this. You're responsible for security, performance, upgrades, and more. I'll explain more of this later.

WooCommerce is also open source. This facilitates its wide use and helps it grow. And, it's audited by [Sucuri](#), the industry leader in plugin security, to ensure it adheres to WordPress best practices and coding standards, and is kept secure and up-to-date.

WooCommerce also includes a built-in REST API which gives your development team more flexibility to integrate with it and your data.

2. SHOPIFY



Founded in 2004, Shopify's been offering ecommerce as an all in one solution and just recently introduced a WordPress plugin, [Shopify Ecommerce Plugin for WordPress](#). The plugin is free and Shopify offers three new themes, free for a limited time. Selling with these tools requires a \$9 per month subscription which includes all the other services Shopify normally provides.

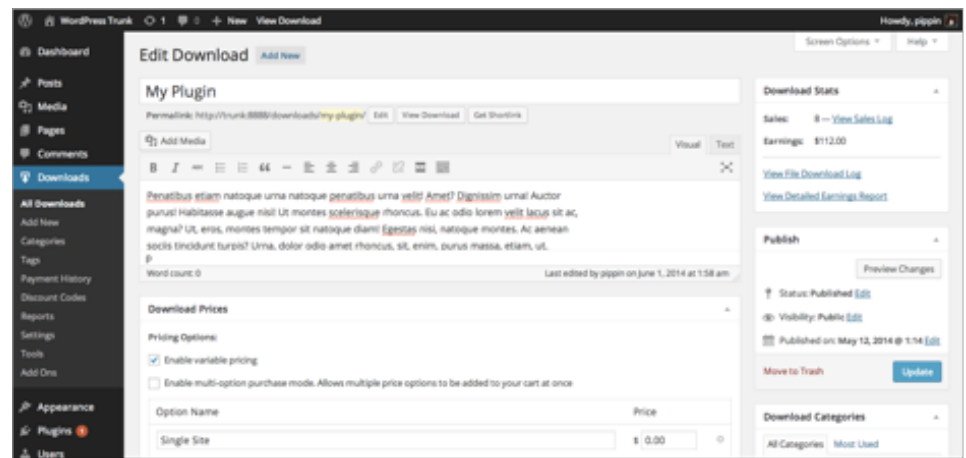
The Shopify plugin is a big step into the WordPress world.

While you'll manage your site and products with WordPress, you'll log in to Shopify to manage your payments, secure checkout, shipping and fulfillment, inventory, and taxes. This plugin is a big step into the WordPress world but it keeps much of the common ecommerce tasks under control in its cloud-based service.

The Shopify plugins makes any WordPress sidebar, post, or page easily capable of selling products. You can add products with buy buttons anywhere with a pop-out shopping cart for multi-product purchases. Your WordPress content quickly becomes a store catalog backed up by a successful sales system.


3. EASY DIGITAL DOWNLOADS

If you're primarily offering digital goods and content, the [Easy Digital Downloads plugin for WordPress](#) offers simple, straightforward ways to sell on your website. More than 60,000 sites have installed the plugin:



It provides a rich set of features and is straightforward to configure:



A close-up photograph of a person's hands interacting with technology. The person is wearing a red and blue plaid shirt and a gold watch. One hand is holding a white smartphone, while the other is typing on a silver laptop keyboard. The scene is set on a light-colored desk with a yellow sticky note. The overall lighting is warm and yellowish.

Beauty at your fingertips

Stores must look good and adapt to all devices!

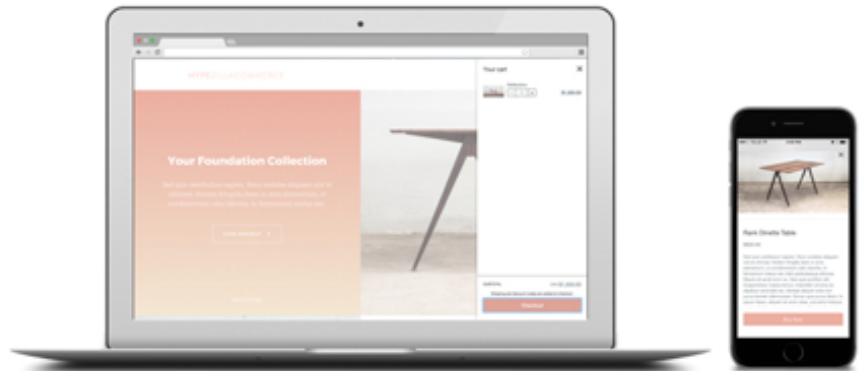
THEMES

With the advent of smartphones and tablets, the importance of themes that provide fully responsive support for browsing a product catalog, using a shopping cart, and completing purchases with payment and shipping are essential. Stores must look good and adapt smoothly to all devices.

SHOPIFY THEMES

Shopify is offering three mostly free themes (I read [you have to Tweet that you're using them](#)) to get you quickly started with their WordPress plugin.

- 1) **Hype by Themezilla**. Hype is a portfolio-style theme for showcasing a variety of products on your site:



- 2) **Simple by Themify**. Simple provides a variety of ways to present your products and sale them including a pop-out shopping cart:

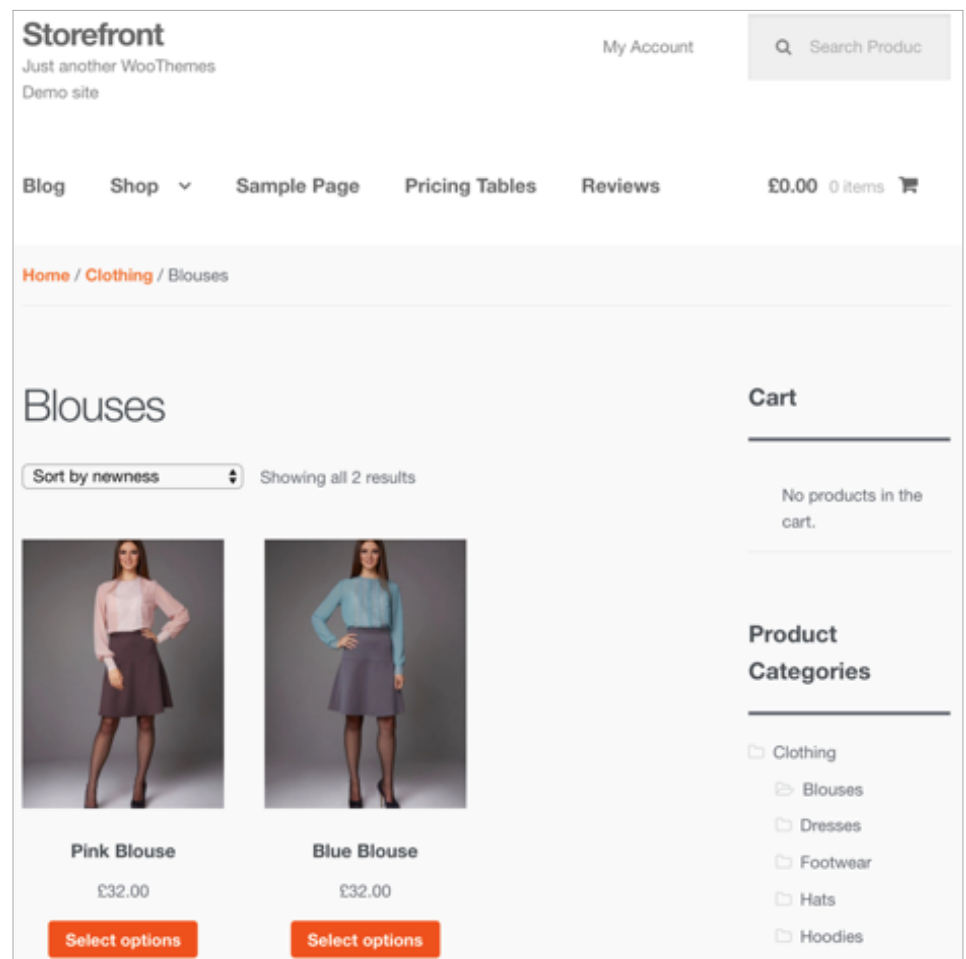


- 3) **Pulse by Ultralinx**. Pulse is a streamlined WordPress theme that integrates buy buttons. It's designed primarily for those looking to sell a single product:

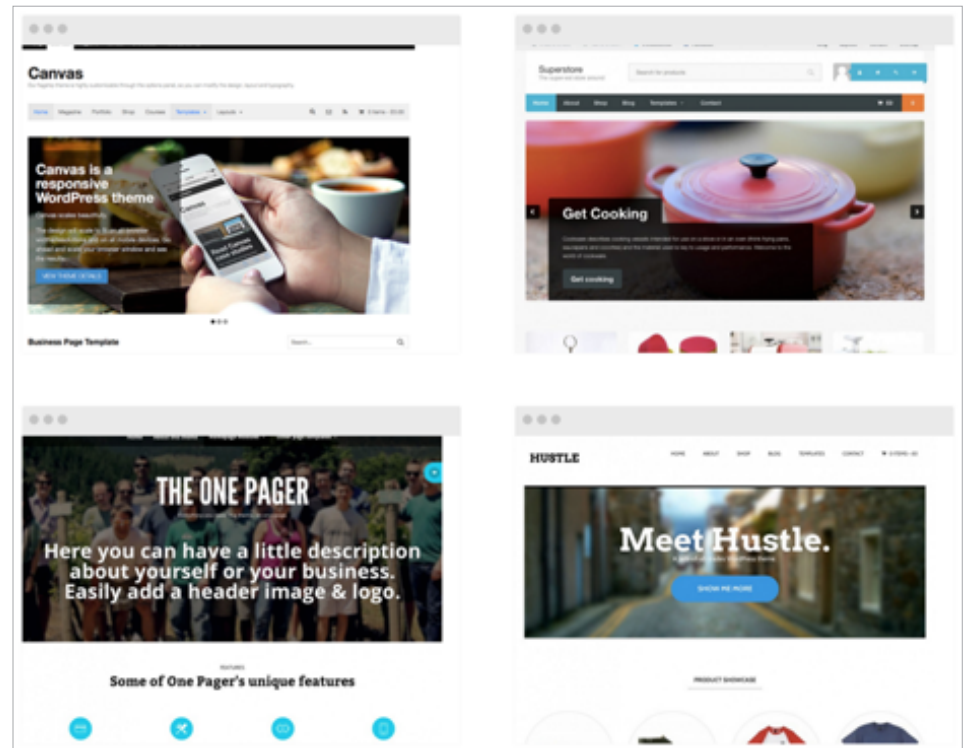


WOOCOMMERCE THEMES

WooCommerce offers a free basic theme called [Storefront](#):

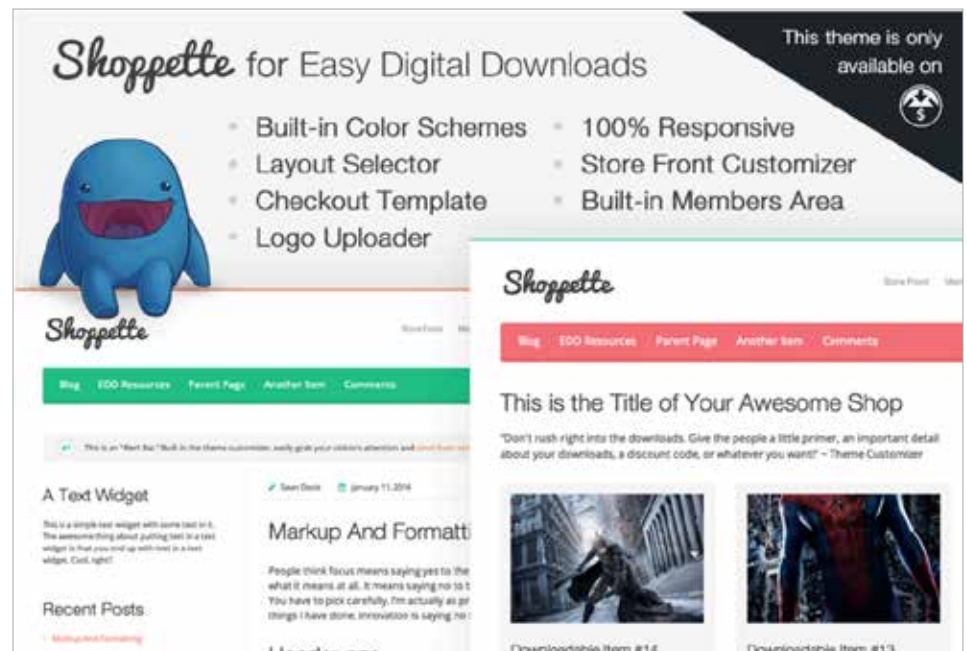


But they offer a [variety of themes](#) that work well with WooCommerce. You can buy them individually or purchase them all in a package for \$399. Here are a few examples:



EASY DIGITAL DOWNLOADS

Easy Digital Downloads recommends themes that provide implementation of the breadth of their feature set, like [Shoppette](#):





**Everything
you need**

Key features of your ecommerce store

Store Presentation and Responsiveness

Product Catalog

SEO

Geo-Localization

Shopping Cart

Payment Gateways

Shipping

Taxes

Currency

Coupons and Discounts

Email Marketing

Store Management and Reporting

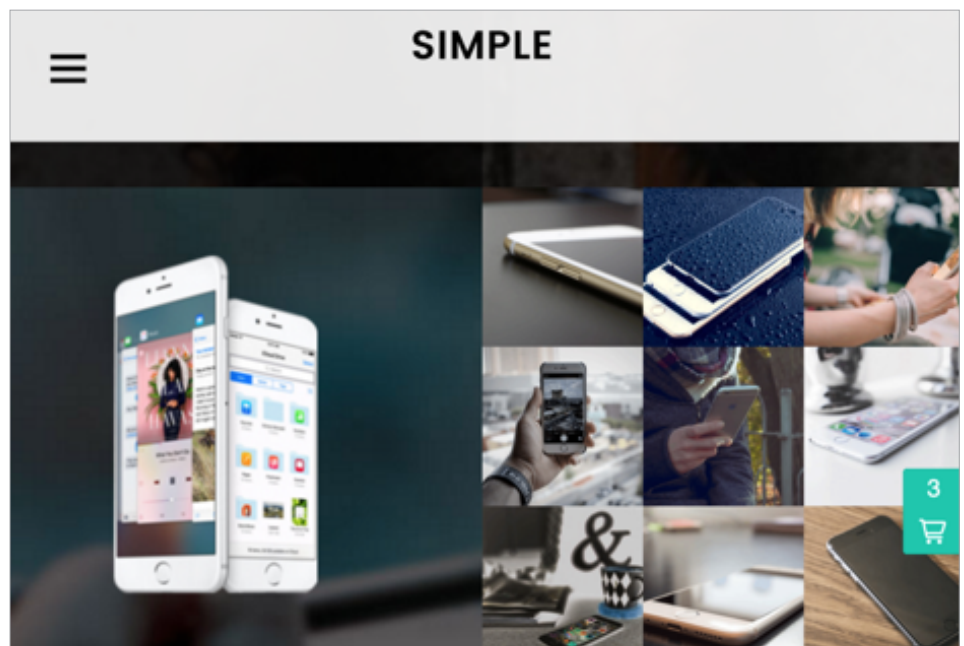
ECOMMERCE FEATURES

Now that we've highlighted the more popular plugins and themes to help you get an ecommerce store started on WordPress, let's review some of the important features you should look for in any ecommerce solution.

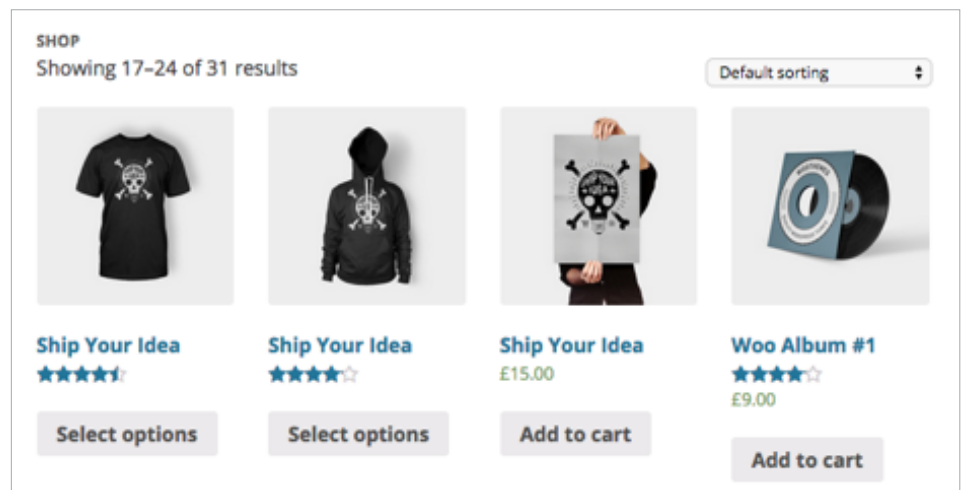
Store Presentation and Responsiveness

Themes are critical for helping you find or customize a rich look and feel for your website and catalog. Since your site visitors may arrive on smartphones, tablets or desktops, themes must be responsive. This can often require a lot of nuance for shopping. You may want an AJAX shopping cart that's viewable and usable on any size screen.

Here's an example of a product element on a Shopify-powered storefront using Themify's Simple theme on a tablet sized viewport:



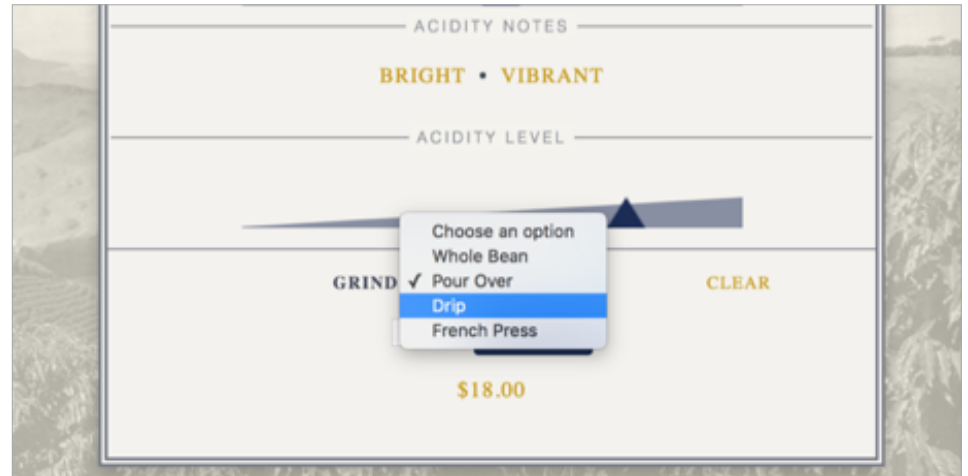
Here's an example of a shopping grid powered by WooCommerce on a desktop viewport:



Since your site visitors may arrive on smartphones, tablets or desktops, themes must be responsive.

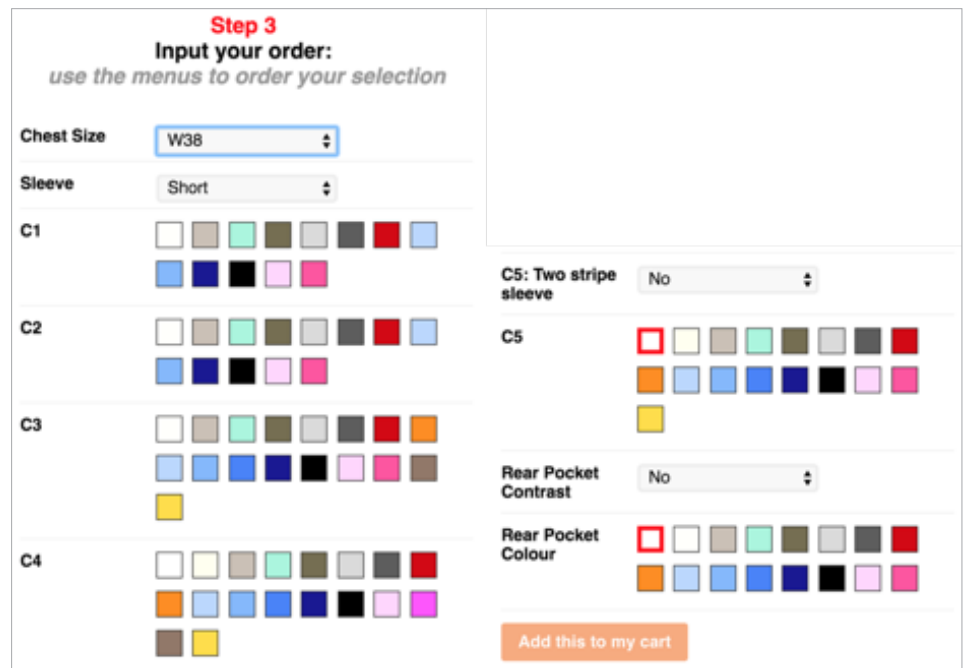
Product Catalog

Since you're hosting products for sale, maybe one or possibly hundreds, you need a fully capable product catalog with a variety of features. For example, you might have a product with various colors and/or different sizes. The Noble Tree Coffee site, which runs on WooCommerce, offers shoppers a choice of their favorite coffee grind:

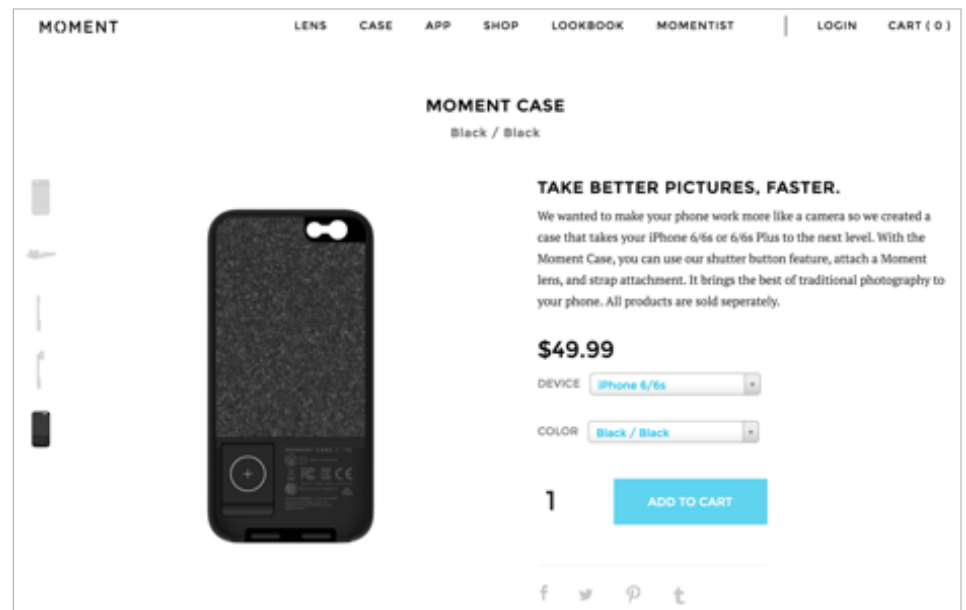


A good product catalog system is customizable and extensible.

Eleven's cycling shop offers a [more extreme example of product customization](#), allowing customers to customize every element of their selected jersey (it's also powered by WooCommerce):



Here's the [Moment store](#) powered by WooCommerce on WordPress with product image browsing on the left side and product customization on the right:



Is your product catalog SEO aware?

SEO

The product catalog also needs to be SEO aware and collect data from you that will help your product pages rank well in search engines.

If shoppers can't find it, they can't buy it.

Yoast, which makes one of the most popular SEO plugins for WordPress, offers a [premium SEO plugin just for WooCommerce](#). Here's an example they show of search results from Pinterest improved by offering ecommerce aware data fields. Instead of presenting authors and date published, it shares availability, price, and currency:

Article rich pin See documentation	Product rich pin See documentation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Site name WooThemes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Site name WooCommerce Test Site
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Favicon 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Favicon
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Name* WooSlider - A WordPress Slider from 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Product Name* Yoast sticker
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Date Published -- 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Availability In Stock
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Authors -- 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Price* 5.0
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Description* WooSlider is the ultimate responsive slideshow WordPress slider plugin made by WooThemes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Currency* GBP

Geo-Localization

Geo-awareness is helpful for providing default information for languages and tax, price, payment currency, and shipping options.

As an example, the third-party [WooCommerce Currency Converter plugin](#) provides enhanced control over currency selection and even automated calculation of exchange rates for pricing:

General | Currencies | Exchange rates | Currency switcher display | Advanced

Currency exchange rates

Configure exchange rates for your currencies.

Exchange rates update Automatically update exchange rates once a day using chosen services
 Do not automatically update exchange rates - use fixed exchange rates specified below

Your currencies

Currency code	Currency name	Currency symbol	Currency exchange rate API	Currency exchange rate	Update using API
GBP	Pounds Sterling	£	—	1	—
USD	US Dollars	\$	Yahoo Finance		Update now
CAD	Canadian Dollars	\$	Yahoo Finance	1.8996	Update now
EUR	Euros	€	Fixer.io	1.3801	Update now
RUB	Russian Ruble	py6.	Yahoo Finance	76.9470	Update now

Update all exchange rates

Save changes

Update exchange rates every 24 hours

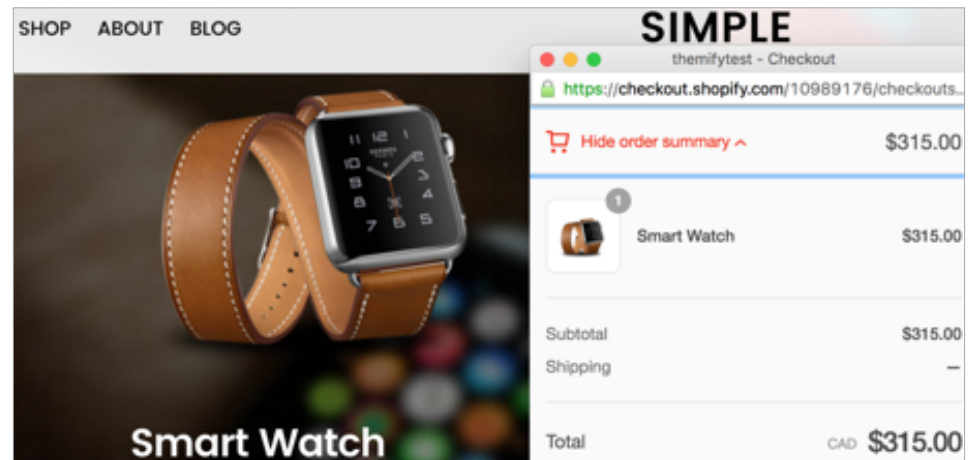
Use multiple methods to update exchange rates

Shopping Cart

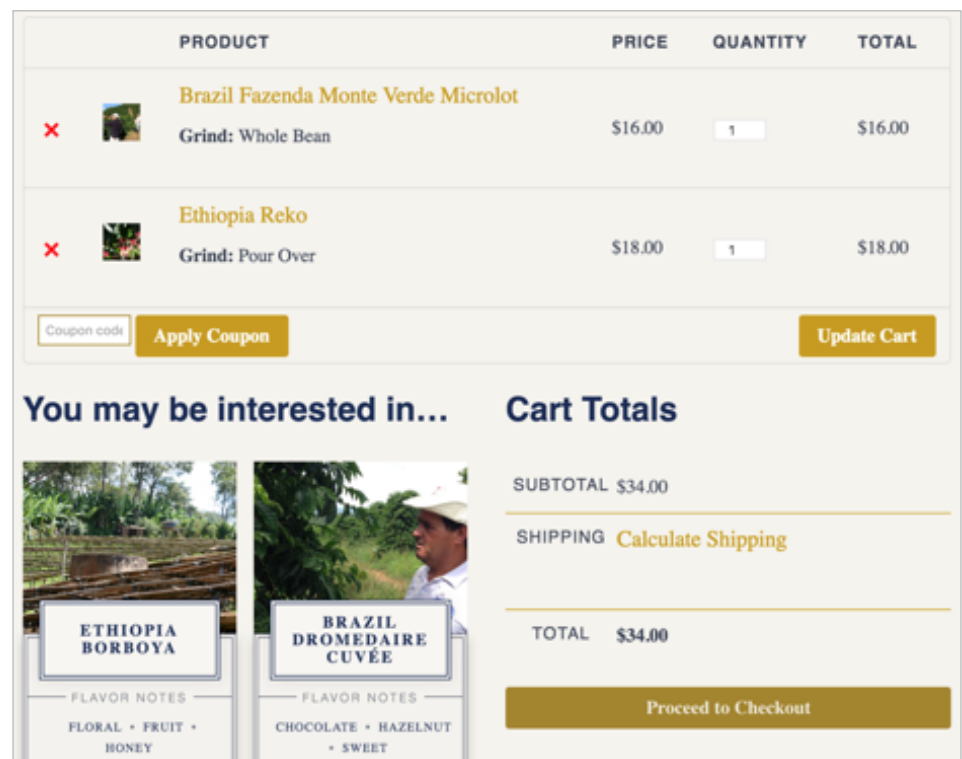
The presentation, usability, and customizability of an ecommerce system's shopping cart is essential. It's important to think about many of its aspects:

How do you want your cart to work? Do you require AJAX vs. repetitive page refreshes? How seamless do you want checkout to be? What would you like to display to the user as they complete their transaction?

Here's an example of a popup cart and checkout hosted by Shopify with the [new Simple theme](#) by Themify:



And, here's an example of Noble Coffee's checkout page in WooCommerce:



Payment Gateways

It's essential to make it easy for your customers to make payments. Most ecommerce solutions offer easy to use gateways for the common payment providers e.g. PayPal and a solution for credit card processing. For example, Shopify offers built-in credit card support and WooCommerce offers five pre-installed gateways including direct bank transfer, check payment, cash on delivery, credit cards and PayPal.

Shipping

You may also want to offer your customers several different shipping methods to allow them to select various delivery speeds from a range of costs. These might vary from flat rate to a variety of US Postal Service, UPS, or FedEx or International options.

Taxes

Depending on your store policy or the locale of your customer, your ecommerce system may need to customize the tax calculation for various possibilities.

Currency

Similarly, you may want to offer customers the option of seeing pricing and paying in their local currency.

Coupons and Discounts

Offering coupons and discounts can help attracting new customers and encourage existing customers to return regularly.

Shopify offers an excellent summary of [ways to use offers and coupons successfully](#). It highlights some of the most common kinds such as percentage based discounts, dollar value discounts, free shipping, and free gifts, and then explores how you can integrate these into your marketing and communication strategy.

Here's an example of discount awards for referring friends. Shopify highlights two of its third-party apps, [Forewards](#) and [ReferralCandy](#), for implementing campaigns like this:

* LIMITED TIME OFFER *

\$20 OFF

for you & your friends

Introduce your friends to the best in American made and give them 15% off their DODOcase purchase. For every friend that redeems your offer, you will receive a \$20 coupon back!

CREATE YOUR INVITE LIST:

From: buyer@example.com [IMPORT CONTACTS](#)

Enter email addresses separated by commas

Congratulations! You Get 15% off at DODOcase.

Add a personal message below to go in the email with the offer details:

I'm excited to share this great DODOcase deal with you. Enjoy shopping and supporting American craftsmanship!

Send my friend a reminder email in 3 days

[Send Email](#) [Share This](#)

STYLISH, HANDCRAFTED CASES & SLEEVES
DESIGNED TO MEET TODAY'S MODERN NEEDS.

Email Marketing

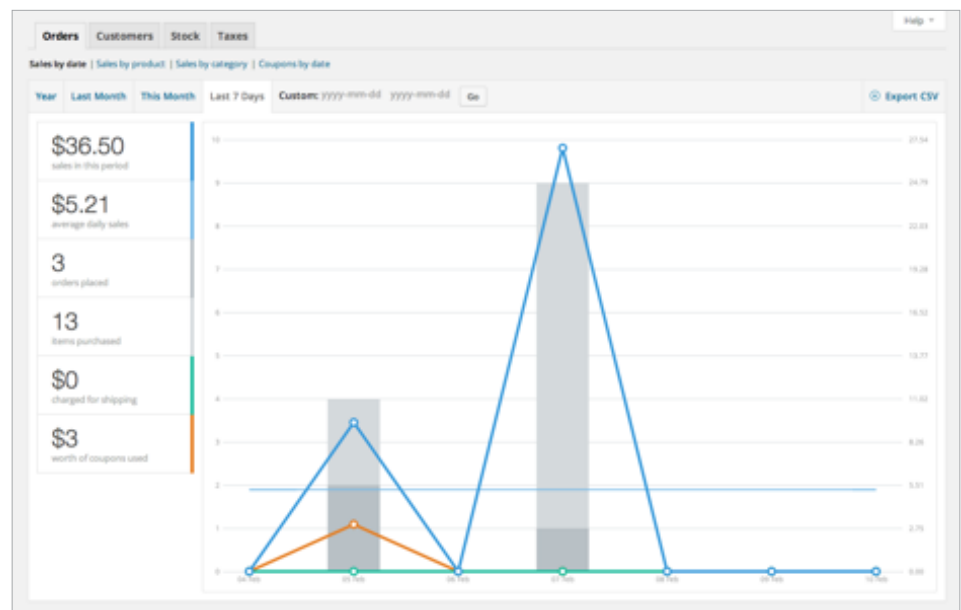
While some ecommerce solutions offer integrated email marketing, you may want to consider a dedicated email marketing solution as there are many high quality services out there ([MailChimp](#), [AWeber](#), [MadMimi](#), and [Emma](#) are just a few.)

However you choose to implement your email newsletter and marketing messages, it's a core part of building and growing your revenue.

Store Management and Reporting

It's also essential that your ecommerce solution provides a rich set of easy to use management features, product and user administration, and reporting. Many systems can help manage your inventory as sales deplete them, report product costs and profits as a result of completed sales, and make it easy to process customer refunds.

Here's an example of a WooCommerce Orders report:



A good foundation

HOSTING YOUR WORDPRESS ECOMMERCE SITE

There are a variety of essential factors to consider when deciding where and how to host your WordPress-powered ecommerce site:

- *Performance:* The shopping experience is fast and smooth with lots of imagery and video regardless of what device customers are using. Your hosting platform must be tuned for top performance.
- *Security:* Private customer information, money, and actual products must be safeguarded from all directions. Your host must deliver strong security to ensure your site and your customers are protected. Be sure to ask if they offer free SSL with Let's Encrypt.
- *Scalability:* As your site grows or receives occasional spikes in traffic, your site performance must remain strong. If your site crashes amid a rush of traffic, that's damaging to business. Look for a host whose platform can grow with your business and who offers the elasticity necessary to stand up to planned and unplanned traffic spikes.
- *Reliability:* To sell 24/7, your site needs to be always available for access. You'll need a host that delivers on several nines of uptime, guaranteed.
- *Cost:* Whether you're an individual entrepreneur or a mid to large sized business, running a fast, always-on, sophisticated ecommerce site needs to be affordable.

Let's explore a few of the related technologies that can support these goals.

1. PERFORMANCE AND SCALABILITY

Whether you self-host WordPress or use a managed WordPress platform like WP Engine, performance and scalability are vital.

Caching is a key element of WordPress performance. Pages shouldn't be built repeatedly for everyone, rather the static HTML can be immediately delivered as needed. However, ecommerce caching is more complicated. You can't deliver a product page with U.S. pricing to a visitor in Europe. And, certain areas of your store, such as the shopping cart and checkout, must be easily excluded from caching.

Regardless which ecommerce solution you choose, there are instances where caching adjustments are necessary. As WP Engine notes:

“The solution can often be as simple as implementing caching exclusions. By telling the caching system to not cache certain pages or file paths related to checkout, you can ensure appropriate functionality is maintained.”

The foundation of good security is having knowledgeable server management practices.

Caching plugins for WordPress such as [W3 Total Cache](#) also provide support for page and directory exclusion, however, WP Engine handles caching for its customers, so no additional plugins or tools are necessary.

Content Delivery Networks (CDN) are also important for performance and speed.

A CDN is a global network of servers that delivers content to site visitors from the server closest to them, cutting the time pages and content take to load. A CDN essentially optimizes and localizes the storage and delivery of images, video, and static files for your users.

Managed hosts like WP Engine generally provide these features by default making easier and often less expensive to build and maintain. Alternately, you can use independent CDN services such as [KeyCDN](#) or [CloudFlare](#).

2. SECURITY

When you run a blog, security isn't likely as critical as when you are running an ecommerce store that accepts private customer information and has financial transactions flowing in.

The foundation of good security is having knowledgeable server management practices. Depending on the scale of your site, this can require very sophisticated people to protect your assets.

If you want to self-host your store, you need to ensure that you know web security and regularly update and manage your servers. But, this is one area, especially with ecommerce, where using an affordable managed host is worth the money. Managed hosts stay up on the latest security news and keep their network and servers running smoothly. WP Engine, specifically, automatically upgrades and updates WordPress for its users to ensure they're using the most stable and secure version.

From a feature perspective, SSL is helpful for increasing your Google rank across your site, and it's essential for your checkout and payment process. It encrypts customer personal information such as address and credit cards as they submit it.

Two factor authentication (2FA) is also helpful for securing the back end systems of your website and store. There are plugins for WordPress that support [Google Two Factor Authentication for WordPress](#), most useful for controlling access to the administrative dashboard, and WP Engine just added support for 2FA to its User Portal, enabling customers to add a second layer of security for their accounts and websites.

3. COST

The pricing for hosting your web servers can be prohibitive especially when you're an entrepreneur getting started with a new storefront. Cost is one of the reasons people pursue self-hosting, at least at first. Clearly, running an ecommerce store on WordPress works well for many thousands of stores, large and small, and WordPress hosting plans offer a lot of functionality and affordable pricing.

Managed hosts can provide a lot of the services above for reasonable costs, backed up by real time support: performance and scalability, security, caching, content delivery networks, geo-localization, monitoring, and reliability. If you're launching your store for the long run, I encourage to take a close look at these kinds of solutions.

WP Engine provides reliable, high speed WordPress hosting with 24/7 support.



WP ENGINE'S DIGITAL EXPERIENCE PLATFORM

[WP Engine](#) is the industry leader in managed WordPress. All WP Engine thinks about is how to run WordPress in the best way possible. Its managed WordPress platform keeps sites fast, scalable, and secure. Its team has spent years perfecting its WordPress hosting platform. Every feature, from caching solutions, EverCache, and staging sites; to free SSL certificates with Let's Encrypt, is built specifically for WordPress users. WP Engine has the largest team of full time WordPress support experts in the industry who work around the clock to help customers tackle tough WordPress issues. If you hit any snags with your site, WP Engine is there to help you through it, by phone, email or live chat.

WP Engine provides the most robust platform for hosting WordPress.

It's especially designed around the needs of developers working with complex WordPress platforms.

WP Engine provides reliable, high speed WordPress hosting with 24/7 support available via tickets, phone calls, and live chat. And [WP Engine's Automated Migration plugin](#) offers one of the best automated site migration solutions I've experienced.

WP Engine powers thousands WordPress-based ecommerce sites for its customers, and many of those sites leverage WooCommerce plugin.

It also offers its powerful [EverCache for scaling](#) as well as integrated CDN support, SSL integration, daily backups, and integrated firewall, and additional security features. And free, unlimited staging sites for development and testing are available.

WP Engine's managed WordPress hosting is available in a variety of plans designed to give businesses of all sizes an amazing digital experience on an enterprise-grade platform. Plans start at \$29 per month.

WP Engine keeps the core WordPress engine up to date for you, but it's still important to update and test your themes and plugins. Missing even one upgrade from WooCommerce, for example, could mean your site isn't running as efficiently or securely as possible. And missing several updates guarantees you're missing out on new functionality or efficiency gains.

WP Engine's development staging and simple backup and one click restore features make evaluating updates possible without tremendous independent effort. For money making

Want to build a store online? WordPress is a great choice for ecommerce sites.

ecommerce sites with real traffic, this can be essential. Making major changes in your staging environment first ensures your site's ready when your customers come pouring in.

They're so sure of their security, they promise to fix your site for you if it ever did get hacked.

WP Engine also recommends regularly reviewing your product catalog, settings and configurations. Get rid of any old products you're not selling anymore, too. Keeping your site lean and clean, just like it was when you first created it, will give your customers the best possible experience, especially during the holidays.

CONCLUSION

Want to build a store online? There are many approaches you can take. Increasingly, WordPress is becoming the platform of choice for ecommerce sites.

WooCommerce may be the most robust and flexible solution to help you get started. It's developed purely for WordPress and as such, it offers the most complete solution of tools and a vast library of extensions. The only downside to WooCommerce is that you need to have the expertise to secure, host and scale your entire system.

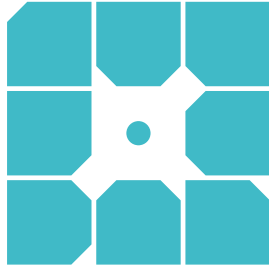
On that front, WP Engine WordPress hosting offers a time-tested, comprehensive solution for providing great performance, management and scalability and at economical prices.

***I hope you enjoy your ecommerce explorations.
Good luck!***



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: JEFF REIFMAN

Jeff Reifman provides technology expertise at [Lookahead Consulting](#). He's a former Microsoft Group Program Manager who helped lead the launch of MSNBC.com. He enjoys travel, photography and snowboarding in his free time.



About WP Engine

WP Engine powers amazing digital experiences for websites and applications built on WordPress. The company's premium managed hosting platform provides the performance, reliability and security required by the biggest brands in the world, while remaining affordable and intuitive enough for smaller businesses and individuals. Companies of all sizes rely on WP Engine's award-winning customer service team to quickly solve technical problems and create a world-class customer experience. Founded in 2010, WP Engine is headquartered in Austin, Texas and has offices in San Francisco, California, San Antonio, Texas, Limerick, Ireland, and London, England.

