



## Deciding on a Website Platform

The website is the hub of your marketing program. It will likely host your blog, your white papers, your promotional landing pages, the list of services you offer and your email address. All your marketing efforts will, or should, lead back to your website. So, it makes sense to choose your platform carefully.

What do I mean by platform? Think of the platform as the underlying structure of how you create and add content to your site. There are several options, ranging from hand-coding everything in markup language and script to simpler drop and drag platforms where you need zero coding experience to create a solid online presence.

We'll take a quick tour through the options and include some links to additional information. This is a step worth spending some time on since changing the platform after it's built out can be tedious and potentially expensive.

### Custom Site

This option offers the most flexibility and customization. The tools are free, but you have to know how to use them and some of the tools have a learning curve that is a bit steep. If you choose this option you will need to know, or be able to hire, the following technical skills:

**HTML:** Hypertext markup language is the tool used to create text on websites. HTML isn't a programming language, but a markup language. It's pretty close to just typing text but requires tags that tell your browser how to display the text. For example, a headline would be written `<h1>headline</h1>` the tags before and after the word "headline" tell the browser that this is a headline and should be displayed in larger text.

**CSS:** Cascading Style Sheets are what give the elements of your web page their design appearance. Things like text color, size, location, image block styling and nearly every other element are controlled by CSS. Still not a programming language, CSS is more complex than HTML. It's not difficult to learn, but it does take time.

**JavaScript:** JavaScript, or JS, is a programming language and is most frequently used to change the behavior of html elements on your website. For example, if you want to show today's date and time you can create a JS function to do that. You can also create popup windows, alerts, redirect the viewer to another page and a multitude of other functions.

JavaScript isn't particularly difficult to learn but is substantially more time-intensive to master than HTML or CSS.

**PHP or Python:** Suppose you want to connect a user to a database to let them log in to their profile, make a purchase, or maybe access a document you've restricted to enrolled members. You need a program to connect to the database, retrieve the data and then display it to your viewer. This is called "server-side" technology and the most popular types are PHP and Python.

These are programming languages that are nearly ubiquitous on the Internet. Facebook is powered by PHP, as are WordPress and Wikipedia, while Python powers Google, Instagram and Pinterest.

The experts will often describe Python and PHP as easy to learn, but I have found them more challenging. Whether you use PHP or Python you will need plenty of time to debug your code and make certain it works properly.

**Build or Buy:** Learning the code and scripts necessary to build a great website can be a challenge and require lots of time. You may find it helpful to get to understand the script and code well enough to understand how it works and use that knowledge to hire a developer to actually write the code and test the end product. Knowing how each tool works will position you to be an informed customer of the developer.

**Design vs. Develop:** Hiring website professionals brings up an important consideration. There are designers and developers. We like to use designers to create the aesthetics of our site: Colors, fonts, number of columns, image placement, menu locations, logos and user experience.

Developers are more often the people we hire to create the server-side programming, the databases and the functionality required to accept payments or deliver complex user experiences. Although not strictly accurate, think of the designer as the artist and the developer as the geek.

#### **Pros of Custom Designs:**

- You can get exactly what you believe you and your users will find most useful.
- You can edit the site code to add features without needing to worry about whether the template will allow it.
- Your site can stand out from other sites that are built on less flexible platforms.

#### **Cons of Custom Designs:**

- Your code will likely be unique, meaning editing will take some familiarity with the code and scripts.
- You may need to keep a developer on call to fix bugs or do re-designs. This adds expense.
- Initial site design can be very expensive, either in time spent or money (or both) depending on the complexity of the code.

## ABOUT COMPARISON SITES

If you're a smart consumer you will want to see some comparisons between the services available, not just for website construction but for any service you decide to purchase. Doing a quick Internet search may seem like a good place to start, but you need to be careful. Many of the platform promoters have proprietary websites that masquerade as comparison sites but are designed to give the best reviews to their own software.

One option I like is Capterra, which is free and is not sponsored by vendors. Here is a [list of website builder software from Capterra](#) that provides important information for each software option. You can filter the results to arrive at a few worth exploring further.

## Drop and Drag Platforms

There are a number of website platforms that require no knowledge of coding. Some of these are names you have probably heard, like [Wix](#), [Squarespace](#) and [Weebly](#), but that's not all. There are [dozens of these sites](#), and they share the same functionality of being able to create web pages that tell the world who you are and what you do. Many will include server-side technology that lets you create ecommerce sites so you can sell to customers directly from your site.

The list of these platforms is pretty long so I won't try to get into much detail here, but you should take a look at the options to determine which product has the features you need and want and how much it will cost to license, operate and maintain. There are some platforms that are free or at least offer a free trial. It would be worthwhile to be able to check out the free versions before committing to a longer-term relationship

### Pros of Drop and Drag:

- No need to learn code
- Most services have tech support available
- Many platforms will host your site so that maintenance is their responsibility and not yours.

### Cons of Drop and Drag:

- You lose some flexibility. Most of these platforms allow you some creativity but only within the templates they offer.
- Cost. The better versions aren't free and will cost you more to host and maintain than a custom site. In tech services you tend to get what you pay for.
- Since so many sites are built on these platforms, your site may not be easily distinguishable from other sites.

## Content Management Systems

Content Management Systems (CMS) offer some of the benefits of drop and drag platforms and the ability to create sites that can be managed by customers, employees and anyone you decide. CMS platforms you might be familiar with include [Drupal](#), [Joomla](#) and [WordPress](#).

Of these, WordPress is the most popular, not only among CMS platforms, but it is estimated that WordPress is the platform for 35 percent of all the websites on the Internet! Needless to say, when considering a platform for your site, you should at least consider a CMS.

CMS platforms combine some of the elements of drop and drag with robust server-side technology. The learning curve for CMS is steeper than for the drop and drag models and working with some of these platforms requires patience and a good design plan before you start.

The additional capability of CMS platforms is the ability to allow others to access the back end of the site (the end where design takes place) and give others, including your clients or employees, the ability to edit documents, create blog posts and respond to subscriber questions. This is a good choice for a professional website, but you may need some help to get it set up and running.

LTCPharmacy.net is built on WordPress.

### **Pros of CMS:**

- Very popular platform that doesn't require any coding skills.
- Hundreds of free templates to get you started
- Thousands of plug-ins to add more functionality to your site.
- There are many freelance consultants that can help you set up your site.

### **Cons of CMS:**

- Not as simple as drag and drop. You will probably need a little help or some tutoring to get you started.
- You should take some time to choose a site template, as not all templates are equally customizable.
- Need to stay on top of updates as the templates and plug-ins are frequently revised and improved.

## **Final Word**

Choosing a website platform requires planning and testing. Use a pencil and paper to sketch out what you believe you will need. Start with basics like a Home page, and About page that tells your visitors who you are, what you do and how you can help them. Perhaps a Contact page to allow visitors to send you a message or sign up to your newsletter. Also consider what kind of content you plan to share and how you will organize it. Time spent thinking will pay big dividends when you are ready to design.

Don't get intimidated if you're not a techie. There are thousands of good educational and training resources to help you get started with site design and working with individual platforms. If you've never done this before you may find some of the jargon a bit confusing but keep at it until you begin to understand. Learning new things takes time.