

Templates vs. Custom Built Websites

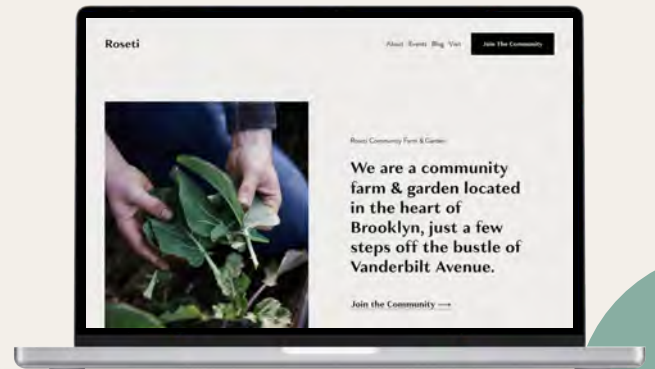
What web design solution is right for you?

Introduction & Concepts

If you're reading this, you probably need a website for the business you're about to launch or you'd like to give your existing site a face-lift. You want it to be perfect and maybe are feeling a little overwhelmed right now. I've put together this guide to try and answer all your questions and help you decide which web design solution will work best for you. Before we dive in, just know that both the options I explore here have their pros and cons, and that you could realistically make either of them work. It all comes down to what's important to you.

1. Templates

Simply put, website templates are pre-designed layouts that allow you to create a simple yet well-designed online space. By dragging and dropping elements onto a page, you can personalise the template relatively quickly with your own logo, colours, images, etc. It is therefore within everyone's ability to create a website using a pre-built template. Of course, if you have experience in design and coding, or if you choose to hire a professional to take care of the building, you can achieve a more complex and customised result. Some well-known website builders offering a wide variety of templates are Shopify, Squarespace, Wix, WordPress or Showit.



2. Custom-coded Websites

Custom-built websites, on the other hand, do not rely on any pre-built code or design. As their name indicates, they are designed and coded from scratch, to suit whatever your business is looking for in terms of aesthetics and functionality. No two custom sites will ever look the same, so it definitely sets you apart from competitors. If you have no knowledge in design or code, creating a site from the ground up is not a task you can undertake yourself though. Which is why you'll have to hire a designer and a developer to build such a site (they can be the same person). Custom websites do come with a number of advantages which we'll cover later in the guide.



Before we compare those two options in terms of experience, performance and cost, let me introduce a few concepts you need to wrap your head around before you start building a site.

Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)

Search Engine Optimisation is a set of practices that aim to improve the quality and trustability of your website. It plays a big role in the success of any website, because it will help search engines determine your position on results pages.

The various practices that fall under the term are *organic* practices, meaning it costs nothing to implement them - unlike Search Engine Advertising (SEA) for which you pay to have your site appear at the top of search pages. There are many things you (or your web developer) can do to organically improve your site's ranking: make it mobile-friendly, add metadata, include relevant keywords in your copy, get others to link to your content, optimise your images, etc.

Responsive Web Design

It is known that more than 80% of internet users browse the web on their mobile. Google itself has switched to mobile-first indexing, which means that Google algorithms predominantly use the mobile version of your site when ranking it on the results pages.

A responsive website design allows your content to automatically display in a pleasing and practical way across all devices: desktop, tablet and mobile. Providing mobile users with a great experience will keep them on your site and make it easy for them to take action. It will improve your short and long-term performances, and therefore ensure you a better ranking.

Page Load Time

The page load time is the average amount of time it takes for a page to fully appear on a user's screen. People will form an impression of your site in just a few seconds. If it is slow to load, many are likely to leave without even seeing your content.

A lot of things can be implemented for your pages to load as quickly as possible: compress your images, don't use too many plug-ins, choose a performance-focused hosting solution, use the latest coding technologies (for hand-coded websites), etc.

Content Management System (CMS)

Whether you work with a web designer or opt for a website template, you need to be able to make changes to your site once it's live. That can be done through a Content Management System: a software that allows you (& your team) to create, edit and optimise content on the website.

Website builders offering templates are inherently CMS, you personalise the site directly through the Content Management interface. Custom-built websites, on the other hand, are first developed then moved to a CMS. At the end of the day, the goal is the same, allowing you to manage and maintain your site content easily, regardless of your technical ability.

Let's Compare

pre-built templates

custom-coded websites

DESIGN

Tons of templates are available through website builders. Some are free, others, which are generally more complete, are paid. Before starting your research, make a list of essential features you need now and might need in the future. It will help you sort through the many options. Once you've found a pre-made theme, you can start personalising it easily with your own content.

Custom-built websites offer complete design freedom and therefore guarantee you with a unique result that will help your brand stand out. Having your website custom made also means that the user experience is strategically designed with your audience in mind. It gives you higher chance at impacting and converting them.

RESPONSIVENESS

Nowadays, lots of pre-built templates are made responsive. Considering that more than 50% of your website's visitors will come from mobile devices, you should definitely check out the mobile version of a template or theme before you go and buy it.

Any hand-coded website can and should be made responsive. It's the designer's task to create it so it looks good and behaves well on all devices. Again, you have full flexibility. Just like the desktop version, the mobile one can be anything you want it to be.

SCALABILITY

You are limited to what's included in your template. If somewhere down the road you want to upscale your online space, you will either have to add plugins (if you find some that suit your needs), pick a new theme or bring in a specialist to code new features.

Custom-coding allows for full flexibility and scalability. New functionalities can be added as your business grows; like a blog, a shop, or user accounts for example. You'll need to bring back your/a developer to make it happen though.

DEVELOPMENT TIME

Creating your website using a template will save you a considerable amount of time. If you only need a simple website with a basic structure, you could do it yourself in a few days. But more complex sites, like e-shops with big inventories for example, require more time and technique. Which is why many businesses hire a skilled web designer to help them personalise a template on the platform of their choice.

Custom websites take longer to build because everything is being catered to your business. Each of the main phases: strategy, design, development and testing & optimisation are themselves divided into several steps. You can expect the process to last a couple of months to half a year for more complex projects. It will likely save you time in the long run though, as a site built from the ground up is a lot easier to customize.

pre-built templates

custom-coded websites

PAGE LOAD TIME

Templates are usually packed with lots of unnecessary lines of code and plug-ins that will ultimately slow your site down. You don't have much control over it and therefore over the loading time. You can still make sure that everything you upload or add to your site is optimised to not slow it down further.

When coded with the latest technologies, those websites load incredibly fast. The developer can also use all the best practices to optimise every aspect of the site: minify the code files, optimise caching, implement CDNs, etc. Most custom websites load faster than template ones.

SEO

You'll be able to influence your site's ranking on search pages by implementing some of the SEO guidelines such as optimising your images or adding metadata. Yet some parameters will be outside of your control. Try to focus on 'off-page' SEO to increase your website traffic.

When creating a custom site, a developer can incorporate many good SEO practices to make it search engine friendly. Although the optimisation is a never-ending process that relies on off-site data as well, you'll be well-equipped to start showing up on the results pages as soon as your site launches.

MAINTENANCE & CONTENT MANAGEMENT

Website builders are inherently Content Management System (CMS). They allow you to build, update and maintain your site via an intuitive and user-friendly interface. It may take a little time to get used to the more elaborate templates with many features and functions, but you can get by without having to fiddle with the code.

Managing a custom website can be scary. Yet, if your developer integrates it with a user-friendly CMS tailored to your needs, you have nothing to fear. After a lesson on how to use it, you'll be able to update your site after its publication, by yourself, without even touching the code. Developers also offer monthly support in their packages.

SECURITY

Hackers love template-based sites because a single piece of malicious code can be used to hack thousands of sites at once. You must either make sure to choose a platform with high security compliance or you can install plugins to improve web security issues.

This option is definitely safer as the unique development of custom sites alone makes them less vulnerable to attacks. Using the latest technologies (like the static-site generator technology) also helps keep your website very secure.

COST

Costs to consider are (1) the domain name, (2) the template (3) the building cost, if done by a designer, (4) monthly platform fees. Paid templates start at around 150€ and monthly plans can go from 15€ to 70€.

Custom usually costs more. It breaks down like this (1) domain name, (2) planning & design, (3) development, (4) hosting & monthly maintenance/support. Depending on your site's complexity, steps 2 + 3 can vary from 1500€ to 10.000€ and way up.

Working with me

Thanks a lot for downloading this guide! I hope that you've found it useful and that you now feel ready to take the next step and start building your website! If more questions pop into your head, feel free to reach out using one of the options I've listed below.

Let me tell you a bit more about myself. My name is Morgane and I'm originally from Belgium. At 24, I launched **the web tailor**, driven by the desire to help businesses that put the planet and its conservation at the heart of their mission. I combine my knowledge in digital marketing and my passion for web design to create websites that provide value.

I hand-code them from scratch to ensure my clients the most unique and impactful result. I start with the strategy and answer these questions: Why do you need a website? Who do you want to reach? What will make you stand out? What are the essential information and features your site needs to convert? I then move on to designing an online space that tells your story, reflects your values and most importantly, that gets you the visibility you deserve.

I also create beautiful websites using templates or themes that I adapt and customise to suit businesses needs. Curious to know what all this looks like? You can scroll through my portfolio **here**.

I believe building a website is a human experience! Your best chance at getting the perfect site for you is to work with a designer that shares your values and takes the time to understand your motivations.

I'm always on the look out for inspiring people and businesses to work with. I'd love to have a chat and hear about your ideas!

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