SEO
Diet Pills

&

Theme
FRAMEWORKS

by Andy Stratton

W e can download thousands of WordPress themes online for free. We can even buy niche, feature rich themes from hundreds of WordPress marketplaces online. The same is true for plugins. These "products" tout sexy designs, plug-and-play functionality and even insane search engine performance enhancements.

"What a beautiful thing," your client says, "I can buy one of these, get a great design for my business, have you change the things I don't like, add the things I like and I'll be on top in the SERPs!"

Not true. These are common misconceptions regarding many of the theme and plugin products in the WordPress market place. There are a handful of myths about third-party themes and frameworks that need de-bunking:

1. they are easy to customize
2. they are compatible with your plugins
3. they are less risky than hiring a freelancer
4. they work SEO magic

First, let's talk about what constitutes a marketplace theme and/or a theme framework with regards to this article's scope. Third-party and marketplace themes refer to WordPress themes that were built by a designer or developer and placed online for free download or purchase. More often than not these themes are purchased with a base set of functionality, sometimes with accompanying Photoshop (.psd) design files.

A *theme framework* is a third-party theme that was built with a core set of functionality to provide a platform on top of WordPress for framework-specific developers, including: an extended API that sits on top of WordPress' core API, customizable or flexible default layout templates, and in many cases built-in functionality typically provided by plugins (like SEO canonicalization and metadata management).

Typically theme frameworks are implemented using child themes when any form of customization occurs (design or functionality).

Now, with those definitions in place, let's get back to myth busting.

Myth #1: Easy to Customize

Many users (including designers and developers) consider purchasing a pre-built theme before commissioning a custom theme from a contractor. The thought is simple, and as developers, we hear the following from new clients regularly: "It shouldn't be expensive, I already have the theme. I just want to change a few things."

This depends heavily on a handful of factors: a developer (this could be you, or the person making your changes) can't see the code until the theme is purchased. It could be an absolute nightmare: unreadable and hard to maintain code, an ignorance of core WordPress APIs, among other possibilities.

If the theme purchased is a framework it may completely override or rely on custom APIs for functions and template tags. This means, if you or your developer are unfamiliar, you incur a significant "learning curve" cost for the small changes you want to make. In most cases your developer is walking into the code blind.

The target customers for third-party/marketplace themes are users who have minimal budget, time or skills for customizations. It is unrealistic to purchase a solution and modify it quickly, particularly for a low cost. Diving into the dark could require many hours of auditing code and massaging existing code to work with new code.

It's very possible that a change to one aspect of the theme/framework could break another aspect. You may not even see this until after your "small change" has been implemented on your production website. Sometimes it's like quick sand: a fix could cause a bug, that bug's fix could cause another bug, and so forth. Without being familiar with 100% of the code, there's no guarantee new code isn't stepping on old code's toes.

This can often lead to small changes costing almost as much as a basic, custom WordPress theme with only the functionality you need.

Myth #2: Compatible with Plugins

Third-party, and especially marketplace themes, are feature rich. They want to give you functionality that persuades you to buy them, but sometimes they overreach. In some cases they achieve functionality by alienating WordPress' core API.

Themes built on a framework give you three layers of possibile optimization and security vulnerabilities [*Figure 1*]. The chain of possible issues increases during an upgrade
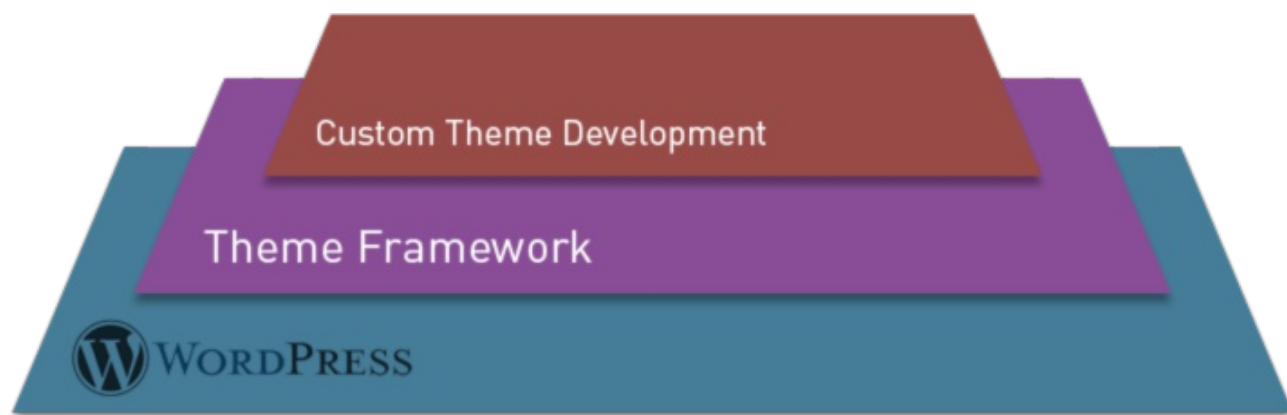
Figure 1: Using a theme framework means there are three layers of code to consider.

to WordPress core. If core breaks the theme framework and the broken theme framework breaks a customized child theme, you have to echo any changes up that chain and ensure all three pieces are working harmoniously. This means more work.

If a theme or framework from a marketplace is not using WordPress APIs properly (turning them off or overriding them unexpectedly) you will get unexpected plugin behavior.

Real Life Story: my_formatter() Reformats a Client's Budget

Recently a client was using a marketplace theme from a very popular theme and HTML template online marketplace. I was hired to build a custom plugin to add functionality for their paying customers. To make a long story short, it was a niche ticketing system/issue tracker with online checkout.

During the development process shortcode output was constantly unexpected. Line breaks were being inserted into unformatted values, HTML tables were being wrapped in paragraph tags, and I began to lose my mind. I spent days hunting through my code looking for the problem.

Upon finally investigating the theme, I found it was turning off `wpautop` and `wptexturize`, two content filters implemented by WordPress core code. It then added a filter later in the process that emulated these filters and allowed a faux shortcode to be used to enter raw HTML and Javascript into post content.

The problem? This filter ran after the original core filters

that were disabled. This means it ran after shortcodes were processed, unexpectedly adding paragraph tags, HTML entities and more to shortcode output. It tainted any and all shortcode output from any standard plugin.

For instance, if the client had a form plugin that output form HTML via shortcode, the HTML would be formatted and corrupted. The form would fail and the client would be confused.

The process of diagnosing and correcting this issue cost almost 50% of the project price, not to mention not meeting deadlines and mucking with everyone's existing tight deadlines.

Myth #3: Less Risky Than a Freelancer

Remember that (most likely) you have no idea who coded this thing. That's risky. Code is risky. Code is also contextual. Ask yourself: Was this theme built for the specific problem I have in mind or does it solve a generic problem?

In most cases the answer is the latter. Even if the theme is targeted at a niche, it's solving a generic set of problems faced by most of the users in that niche. The original developer may not have intended for the theme to be used how you used it. Ask yourself: Is my problem generic?

Many third-party themes also have glaring optimization and security holes. It's not just a WordPress theme, it's a website. At that, it's an appendage of a web application, a web application that feeds your users (and search engines like Google) content. You can quality check your freelancer's previous sites, get references and research their

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involvement in the WordPress community. It's very difficult to qualify the developer of a $35 marketplace theme.

Real Life Story: LAX Framework Optimization

One of my clients, a popular Lacrosse lifestyle blog, was running a theme I custom built based on their functional requirements. They worked with another partner to implement a redesign and built it on top of a theme framework from the WordPress.org Free Themes Directory. After a few weeks, they contacted me to troubleshoot "hosting issues."

The site was timing out. After 2 minutes of no response, the server would issue a 500 error or the browser would stop. After investigating deeper, we found the home page was attempting to make over 200 database queries to pull navigation, an image slider, recent posts and a widgetized sidebar.

This and a poorly optimized hosting platform was causing the site to rarely load for its users, which at the time was about 250,000 unique visitors a month. Something had to be done.

I surveyed the client about features and why they were working with the framework. I was ultimately given three buzzwords: free, flexible and slideshow.

After further investigation, the only flexibility being used was a widgetized sidebar. The design was very basic, so after re-writing the bloated markup into much lighter-

weight HTML and CSS, I re-coded the theme from scratch. It became a very basic WordPress theme with less functionality than Twenty Eleven. Then I implemented the image slideshow.

The site loaded. In fact, it loaded every time, going from 200+ queries to about 32 per page load. The free theme cost the client more than a thousand dollars. Worse, without the theme rewrite their users could not access the content they faithfully read each day.

Myth #4: Theme Frameworks are SEO Magic

Great rankings do not come because you're using a specific WordPress theme. They don't even come because you're using WordPress. Quality, relevant content gets quality, relevant back links, which tell search engines you are an authority. Being an authority commands rankings.

The misconception that all blogs on any specific WordPress theme or framework get rankings because of how well the theme or framework is coded is a confounding idea. Top notch content authors enjoy clean, flexible themes to help them manage their sites without a lot of cost or time involvement with contractors. These authors:

- write outstanding content,
- maintain relevant sites and social media conversations link to these sites,
- and subsequently have sites that rank well.

So, yes, many sites on content and SEO focused theme frameworks rank. But, they are also the top content producers on the Internet. If content is king, then backlinks are the emperor. These authors have both.

Without quality inbound links from other relevant sites, you're invisible. You can't polish a turd with "strategy."

But it's good stuff! And cheap!

What have you ever gotten that was amazing in quality, immediate and low in cost? Familiarize yourself with the project triangle:
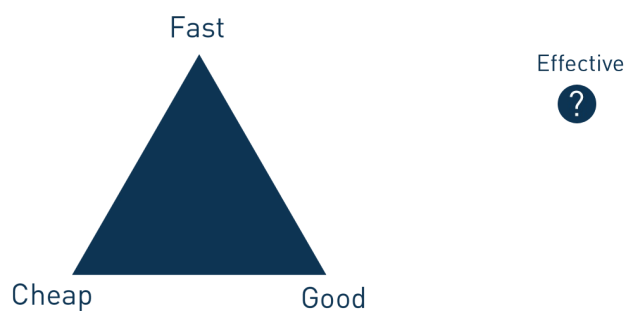

Figure 2: The project triangle, slightly modified.

Fast. Good. Cheap. Pick two, because that's the most you'll ever get from a project. Let's not forget that little outlier: Effective. You should remember that even if you're getting two, "good" just means accurate to your specifications and not that it's going to work.

Awesome is a process. There are no shortcuts to awesome; it takes a constant momentum.

In theory, these third-party products are of acceptable quality and cost-effective. But remember, unknown issues can pop up. Issues could involve:

- browser compatibility,
- optimization issues, and
- security vulnerabilities.

One change leads to another, and many expensive changes are not cost-effective.

Who is supporting your upgrades?

Just about every project I have worked on that started with a client assuming they'd save a lot of money by implementing something that was already built ended with a final cost of at least 200% of their expected budget.

Does it ever make sense?

If content is king, context is queen. This means, do things that make sense given the context of the problems you're facing. Use your best judgment. I have implemented marketplace themes and theme frameworks many times with context to the project in front of me:

1. short-lived microsites
2. businesses with small budgets
3. non-profits and small business with no budget, trying to get away from Comcast/Verizon/Intuit/Office Live websites

I tend to work with a fair amount of brands that need a unique web presence that supports very specific ongoing marketing efforts that evolve monthly (or even weekly). For clients concerned with security these themes do not make sense. When clients have security as a major concern or need highly customized functionality, I highly recommend rolling your own solution for them.

If you are going to customize a third-party theme, be sure to measure the project's need versus how well the theme you're choosing meets them. Prepare to make compromises, possibly many of them. Over-estimate your costs — both time and money — since the project will probably be more expensive than you or your client anticipate.

Ultimately, decide which path you want to take and become an expert. Stick to a strong theme that has regular upgrades and support. Participate in both the WordPress community and your theme's sub-community so you understand both the WordPress core and your theme in terms of upgrade, security and support.

There are no magic bullets

Remember: you are the community. What you do with WordPress, the themes and plugins you implement and the customizations you build all affect that community. Keep it healthy and alive with awesome work, whether you're getting down and dirty with WordPress core APIs and rolling your own custom solution or building child themes from popular and trusted theme frameworks.

No matter what you're doing, from weight loss to web development, remember that there are no magic bullets and there is never a substitute for kick-ass, hard work. •

Andy Stratton is a WordPress theme, plugin, and user interface developer, coworker @sizeablespaces, founder of Sizeable Interactive, and possible alien. Lover of animals, art, JFDI, music and film.