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Platform Selection Guide

A framework for choosing between Shopify, WordPress, and a custom build — based on what actually determines the right fit, not which platform is trendiest.

A free guide from The Nexa Solutions · thanexasolutions.com

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SECTION 1

Why This Decision Matters More Than It Seems

Picking a website platform feels like a technical decision, so it often gets delegated or decided quickly based on what a friend used or what's currently popular. In practice, it's closer to a business decision: it determines what your team can update themselves, how much ongoing cost to expect, how fast the site can grow with you, and how painful it is to change your mind later.

Getting it right the first time doesn't mean picking the "best" platform in the abstract — there isn't one. It means picking the one that fits your specific content, team, and growth plans for the next two to three years.

The honest starting point

All three options in this guide can produce a genuinely good website. The failures we see aren't caused by picking the "wrong" platform in some absolute sense — they're caused by picking a platform that doesn't match how the business actually needs to use its site day to day.

SECTION 2

The Three Options, Honestly Described

Shopify

A hosted, subscription-based e-commerce platform. You don't manage servers or security patches — Shopify handles the infrastructure, and you build the storefront using themes and apps on top of it.

WordPress

An open-source content management system that powers a large share of the web. Highly flexible through themes and plugins, can be self-hosted or hosted by a managed WordPress provider, and works for both content-heavy sites and, with the WooCommerce plugin, e-commerce.

Custom Build

A website built from scratch (commonly using a framework like Next.js) with no pre-built theme or plugin ecosystem underneath it. Every feature is purpose-built for your specific requirements, by a developer or development team.

SECTION 3

Platform Comparison at a Glance

Typical launch cost	\$	\$–\$\$	\$\$\$–\$\$\$\$
Time to launch	Days–weeks	Weeks	Weeks–months
Ongoing cost	Monthly subscription + apps	Hosting + plugin licenses	Hosting + maintenance retainer
Who can update content	Non-technical staff	Non-technical staff	Depends on what's built — often needs a developer for structural changes
Flexibility / customization ceiling	Moderate — limited by app/theme ecosystem	High — large plugin ecosystem	Unlimited — built to spec
Best suited for	Product-based e-commerce	Content-heavy sites, blogs, most small business sites	Complex, high-traffic, or highly specific requirements

SECTION 4

Shopify: Best For, and Watch Out For

Best for

- Businesses primarily selling physical (or simple digital) products online.
- Teams that want to launch quickly without hiring a developer for basic setup.
- Anyone who wants payments, shipping, tax, and inventory handled by a platform built specifically for it.

Watch out for

- Costs add up quickly once you add the apps most stores end up needing (reviews, upsells, email) — budget for this beyond the base subscription.
- Deep customization beyond what themes and apps support requires custom development within Shopify's constraints, which isn't always straightforward.
- Content-heavy sites (a large blog, extensive resource library) are a secondary use case for Shopify, not its core strength.

SECTION 5

WordPress: Best For, and Watch Out For

Best for

- Content-heavy sites — blogs, resource libraries, service businesses with a lot of pages.
- Teams that want a large ecosystem of themes and plugins to draw from for almost any feature.
- Businesses that want a genuinely low-cost entry point with room to grow in complexity later.

Watch out for

- Quality varies enormously across themes and plugins — a site built from mismatched, poorly maintained plugins becomes slow and fragile over time.
- Security requires ongoing attention (updates, backups) that either your team or a managed hosting provider needs to own — it doesn't take care of itself.
- E-commerce via WooCommerce is capable but generally requires more setup and maintenance than Shopify's purpose-built e-commerce experience.

SECTION 6

Custom Build: Best For, and Watch Out For

Best for

- Requirements that don't fit neatly into a theme or plugin — unusual functionality, tight performance requirements, or a highly specific user experience.
- Businesses expecting significant traffic or complexity growth where long-term performance and flexibility outweigh a higher upfront cost.
- Teams that want full control over every part of the technical stack, including where and how data is stored.

Watch out for

- Highest upfront cost and longest timeline of the three options — not the right choice for a simple site that a template could handle just as well.
- Ongoing changes typically require a developer, unless a content-management layer is deliberately built in for non-technical staff.
- The quality ceiling is highest, but so is the quality floor risk — a poorly built custom site is harder to fix than a poorly configured WordPress or Shopify site.

SECTION 7

The Decision Framework: Six Questions

Is the core purpose of this site to sell physical products?	A strong “yes” points toward Shopify. A strong “no” rules it out as the primary platform.
Will non-technical staff need to regularly add or edit content?	Both Shopify and WordPress handle this well. A custom build needs this explicitly planned for.
Do our requirements fit within what a good theme + a handful of plugins/apps can do?	If yes, Shopify or WordPress will get you there faster and cheaper than a custom build.
Is there a specific, unusual piece of functionality core to the business that no platform handles well out of the box?	This is the clearest signal that a custom build is worth its higher cost.
What's our realistic budget and timeline?	Be honest here — a custom build scoped for a Shopify budget usually ends in a disappointing result either way.
How much do we expect this site's complexity to grow over the next 2-3 years?	Significant expected growth in traffic or functionality is the main reason to lean toward more flexibility now, even at higher upfront cost.

SECTION 8

Common Mistakes When Choosing a Platform

X Choosing based on what a competitor uses

A platform that fits a competitor's team, budget, and requirements may not fit yours at all.

X Underestimating ongoing costs

The subscription or hosting price is rarely the full cost — apps, plugins, and maintenance add up on every platform.

X Over-engineering a simple site with a custom build

A five-page brochure site rarely needs a custom build — the extra cost and timeline buy flexibility you won't use.

X Under-engineering a complex product with a template platform

Forcing a genuinely unusual business model into Shopify or WordPress often costs more in workarounds than a custom build would have.

X Not planning who maintains the site after launch

The best platform choice still fails if no one owns updating it six months after launch.

SECTION 9

What Switching Platforms Later Actually Costs

Every platform choice can be changed later — but it's rarely free, and it's worth knowing the real cost before assuming you can “just switch” if you outgrow your first choice.

- **Content migration** — moving pages, blog posts, and product data to a new platform, which is rarely a clean, fully automated process.
- **SEO impact** — URL structures often change between platforms; done carelessly, this can cost months of search rankings that took years to build.
- **Design and development** — effectively a second website project, not a simple import.
- **Team retraining** — whoever updates the site day-to-day needs to learn a new system.

The practical takeaway

This isn't a reason to be paralyzed by the decision — it's a reason to spend a real afternoon on Section 7 before building, rather than treating the platform choice as an afterthought.

SECTION 10

Making the Final Call

If you're still torn after working through the framework, default to the simpler, cheaper option that meets today's actual requirements. It's far easier to grow from a well-built WordPress or Shopify site into a custom build later than to justify a custom build's cost and timeline for requirements you don't have yet.

How The Nexa Solutions can help

We build on all three of these platforms and have no default answer we push regardless of fit — our first conversation is usually about which one actually matches your goals, content, and budget. Visit thanexasolutions.com/contact to book a free consultation.