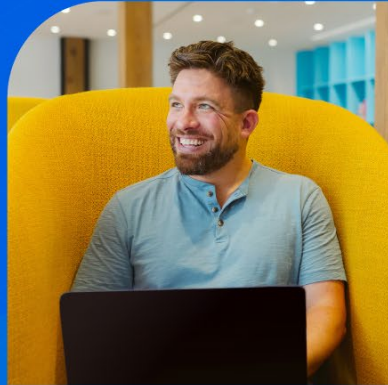# 2023 CMS Trends Report

Agility, Open Source, and the Role of WordPress
in Modern Web Innovation

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Introduction

In just a few short years, we've witnessed an unprecedented level of digital transformation.

Marked by near-complete digital integration into our everyday lives, this period has fundamentally reshaped consumer behavior and revolutionized everything from communication to eCommerce.

Between 2019 and 2022, the number of Internet users worldwide soared **by nearly 30%**, reaching 5.3 billion people, approximately 70% of the world's population. At the same time, global eCommerce sales **surged more than 70%**, echoing the rise in online activity with massive expansion in the digital marketplace.

This growth has presented opportunities and challenges for all businesses, and in an era where the marketplace is increasingly **multi-channel** and **multi-screen**, companies must find solutions that offer flexibility, speed to market, and a clear return on investment (ROI).

As business owners, marketers, and IT leaders search for these solutions, the role of the content management system (CMS) has become foundational. What began as a simple interface for creating content on the web, CMSs now power multimillion-dollar **eCommerce stores**, and serve as the foundational backend for a diverse range of **web applications** and **headless websites**.

The power of the CMS has indeed been enduring, and as a means to stay agile and competitive, businesses are increasingly using more than one CMS, harnessing open-source software and composable architecture to drive faster, more effective website development and end-user satisfaction.

This report, which is a follow-up to **similar research** published in 2020, explores the continued evolution of CMS trends among businesses of all sizes, specifically considering the way IT and marketing leaders view their current options, and what the future might hold for open-source innovation via the world's most popular CMS, **WordPress**.

In the following sections, we'll examine recent evolutions in CMS use, their impact on business agility, and the way businesses are using open-source software to drive modern web development.

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Key Findings

Amid economic pressures, respondents indicated a shift towards a more adaptive approach, embracing content management systems that allow for ease of use, new technology additions, and better ROI.

» The majority of those surveyed (82%), expressed their intent to switch their CMS in the future, with 39% anticipating to do so within the next 6-12 months.

» For nearly three-fifths (56%) this means expanding to use additional CMSs.

» Ease of use (34%), better ROI (32%), and access to multi-channel architecture (32%) were cited as top benefits of incorporating multiple CMS solutions within respondents' organizations.

The use of multiple CMSs has risen significantly (more than 40%) over the past four years—across businesses of all sizes.

» In 2023, the vast majority of businesses surveyed (85%) are using more than one CMS compared to 60% in 2020.

» The entrance of headless solutions and continued adoption of SaaS platforms has diluted the list of CMS preferences, which was previously dominated by Adobe Experience Manager and Sitecore.

Headless adoption continues to rise, with survey respondents increasingly favoring flexible, component-based methodologies for future-proofing their digital infrastructure.

» Almost six in ten businesses surveyed (57%) report currently using a headless approach with their websites.

» Nearly four in ten businesses (39%) plan to evaluate the use of headless within the next 12 months.

» Additionally, eight in ten (81%) of those surveyed agree that failure to adopt component-based headless approaches would mean falling behind their competitors—further emphasizing the growing value of headless, both perceived and in practice.

Shifting views on open source have opened up a new frontier in web innovation.

» For the first time, the majority of those surveyed (58%) report using open source software for their websites.

» More than half (56%) of survey respondents now cite security as a benefit of open-source software.

» Improved quality (52%), a greater ability to meet customer needs (50%), and owning customer data/relationships (48%) were also listed as top benefits of open-source software.

» While barriers to open source adopton remain, the perception of software built on free, open code has changed dramatically in just a few short years. 83% now agree that the benefits of open source software outweigh the benefits of proprietary software.

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Rapid Transformation:
The Constant Pursuit of Agility

The digital transformation of the last few years has accelerated at an astonishing pace, due in large part to the Covid-19 pandemic and the **massive shift** from in-person to online activity.

But even post-pandemic, a digital-first approach prevails, driven by consumer expectations for online experiences that are faster and 100% seamless, more personalized than ever, enabled by flexible web architecture, and enhanced by innovative technology that caters to individual preferences.

Websites must load rapidly, and at scale. The end-to-end digital experience users receive has to be engaging, personalized, and intelligent, and these experiences must be secure and reliable, across a growing variety of channels.

Audiences have little patience for one-dimensional content, and the transformation of potential buyers into engaged, loyal customers requires dynamic digital experiences, as well as a web framework to build them on that empowers teams to execute and go to market quickly.

But as web developers, designers, and digital marketers work to weave brand experiences through a growing maze of digital touchpoints, slow development cycles and developer-reliant proprietary software has proven too inflexible to keep up with the pace of today's digital change.

While this sentiment is commonly associated with enterprises and frustrations with large, monolithic systems, the pursuit of greater digital agility is now apparent across a much wider segment of businesses.

Accompanying the shift to digital-first, it's no longer just large companies that face a real dilemma in the market. Small and medium-sized businesses (SMBs) are also increasingly in need of solutions that expand upon their initial technology investments, with flexibility, speed to market, and ROI all top of mind.

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Enter open source and the bridge to a modern web.

While these two business segments often have different digital requirements, the pursuit of agility has led both SMB and enterprise organizations to evolve and often expand their CMS use.

In many cases, this is because **WordPress** has been identified as the best choice to bring digital agility to life—either as a primary CMS or as a complement to an existing system.

WordPress is open source, meaning it's free from the upfront licensing and closed codebase associated with proprietary software. It also means there's a vibrant community of WordPress users, developers, and entrepreneurs who make up the **massive ecosystem** that fuels WordPress support and innovation.

Every business seeks to tap into that type of energy and activity, whether they've been bogged down by complex legacy infrastructure or limited by an all-in-one page builder.

WordPress and the wide world of open-source software offer every type of business the opportunity to continue growing, without re-platforming or recreating the wheel.

Similar to other trends that begin among larger businesses and trickle down to SMBs, the pursuit of agility and the draw of open source has given rise to myriad use cases in which WordPress is used alongside another CMS, leading us into the current era of multi-CMS for all.

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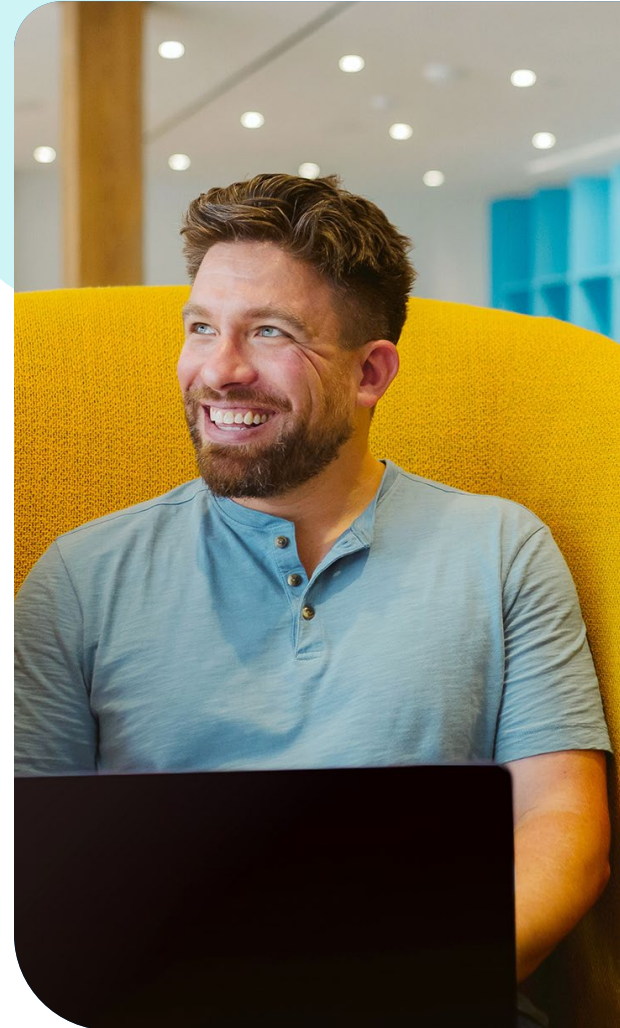
Multi-CMS for All

Up until a few years ago, businesses utilizing a CMS generally relied on a single solution to create and manage content on the web.

For larger organizations, this often meant closed, complex systems (i.e. Sitecore or Adobe Experience Manager), which require significant developer support—even when making minor changes to a website.

Over time, the sluggish development cycles and extensive IT involvement commonly associated with these systems was eclipsed by evolving digital trends and the need to go to market faster with seamless digital experiences.

In turn, an increasing number of businesses began exploring new ways of integrating multiple CMSs alongside one another, unlocking the agility required to capitalize on modern digital aspirations.

It's important to note that multi-CMS doesn't necessitate abandoning one CMS in favor of another; rather, in a multi-CMS model, legacy systems are typically left untouched, and supplementary solutions are adopted in unique ways, allowing organizations to be more intentional in how they use each CMS.

In more advanced scenarios, legacy systems may provide the overarching web architecture, while a more agile CMS is implemented for a complimentary site (or sites) that integrates seamlessly with the organization's wider brand (or brands).

Multi-CMS strategies have gained considerable traction due in part to the wider availability of diverse CMSs and the mounting need for speed in the market and new innovative approaches to multi-channel marketing.

In 2020, 60% of respondents said their organizations were using multiple CMSs (an increase of 13% from three years prior). Three years later, this number has grown by nearly 40%, with **85% of respondents now citing a multi-CMS approach within their organization**.

Multi-CMS approach
by percentage

2017   2019   2023

One CMS: 41, 40, 15

More than one CMS: 53, 60, 85

85%
of respondents now citing a multi-CMS approach within their organization.
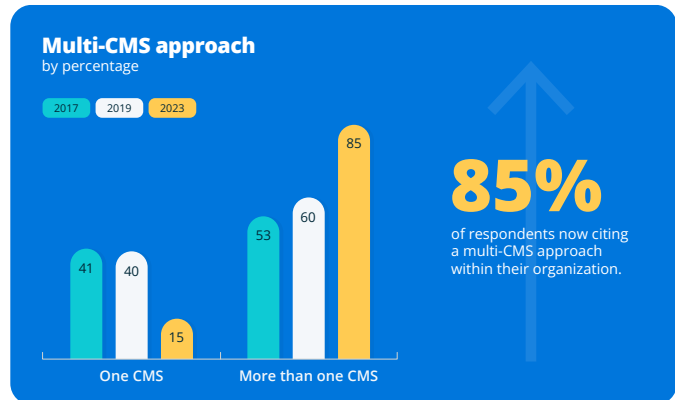
Additionally, after ease of use (34%), better ROI (32%), and access to multi-channel architecture (32%), survey respondents cite personalization and customization (31%) and better publishing capability (30%) as some of the biggest benefits gleaned from using multiple CMSs.

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Benefits of Multi-CMS
by percentage

Ease of use	
Better ROI (return on investment)	
Multi-channel architecture	
Customization/ personalization	
Better publishing capability	
Faster time to market	
Time bound campaign	
Maintenance $ too high on primary CMS	
Lower TCO (total cost of ownership)	
Complete ownership by one department	
Composable websites	
Headless applications	
Agility	
Experimentation	

0 5 10 15 20 25 30 35

32%

survey respondents cite return on investment as one of the biggest benefits gleaned from using multiple CMSs.

Benefits of this nature are certain to remain invaluable for organizations as they navigate the intricacies of evolving digital landscapes..

Multi-CMS use may have originated with enterprises, but it's now increasingly found among SMBs, especially eCommerce stores.

As noted, pain points associated with large, proprietary systems were some of the initial drivers of multi-CMS strategies. That said, frustrations with closed software and the growing need to differentiate online are not reserved for large businesses.
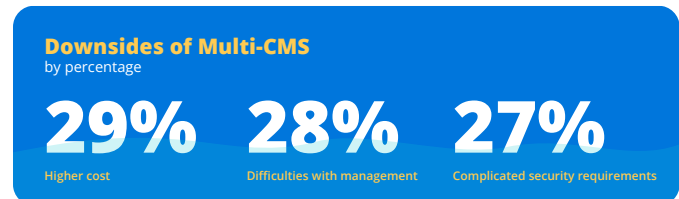
Today there is a wide range of businesses that have experienced success using eCommerce platforms such as Shopify or BigCommerce, and are now looking for a way to expand functionality, manage more content, and take digital

sales to the next level—all **without abandoning established online storefronts**.

Similarly, there are countless content publishers, brand marketers, and agency owners that have started websites using an all-in-one tools such as Squarespace or Wix, only to find these platforms limiting when it comes to customizations and integrations with third-party software or services.

Many of these stakeholders have augmented their digital strategies by pursuing a multi-CMS approach, building content hubs, experimenting with new campaign ideas, or testing fresh marketing initiatives through a new CMS that offers the flexibility and functionality they require.

WordPress is an obvious choice here, as its open-source license makes it easy to spin up new websites, while its ease of use and vast library of plugins and themes allow site builders the freedom to make those sites look and feel the way they want.

Downsides of Multi-CMS
by percentage

29%   28%   27%

Higher cost   Difficulties with management   Complicated security requirements

That said, the multi-CMS approach isn't free from potential downsides. Similar to 2020, higher cost (29%), difficulties with management (28%), and complicated security requirements (27%) were noted by respondents as potential multi-CMS risks.

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.Evolutions in CMS use

While the macro trend of multi-CMS use has seen wider adoption in recent years, more nuanced trends surrounding the different systems businesses are choosing have also evolved.

First, the list of solutions now in use has become more diluted, particularly with the entrance of headless solutions and the growing adoption of SaaS sitebuilders.

Interestingly, larger-scale proprietary solutions such as **Adobe Experience Manager** (AEM) and **Sitecore**, which were among the most widely used CMS platforms in 2020, have ceded some ground to eCommerce platform **Shopfiy***, which is being used in tandem with another CMS (often WordPress) by 36% of survey respondents.

WordPress, on the other hand, continues to stand out as one of the most-widely used multi-CMS solutions, with 29% of respondents citing its presence alongside open-source CMS solutions such as **Joomla**, **Bloomreach**, and **Drupal**.

The positioning of Shopify and WordPress next to one another at the top is no coincidence, rather the crossover between the two can offer a closer view of multi-CMS strategies in action.

A multi-CMS use case for a Shopify-WordPress configuration, for example, might include an eCommerce business that began with a Shopify storefront but quickly found a need for the rich content functionality WordPress provides.
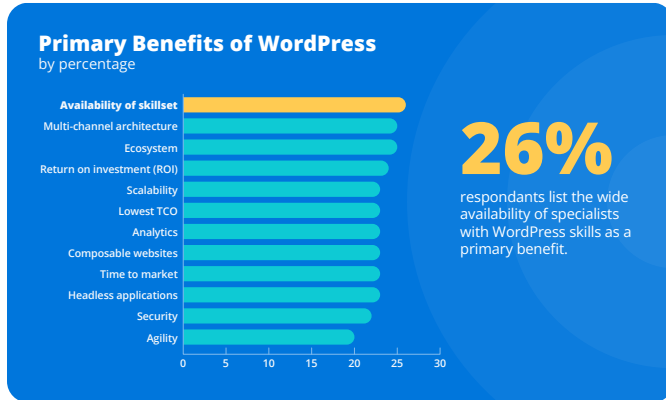
Using WordPress, that business can connect to its existing Shopify store, via **plugin** or **API**, and build an entire digital presence—blog, landing pages, case studies and more—without disrtupting the shopping experience.

But the benefits of using WordPress—as a standalone CMS or alongside others—go far beyond content management.

Multi-CMS Solutions
by percentage

29%

WordPress continues to stand out as one of the most-widely used multi-CMS solutions, with 29% of respondents citing its presence alongside other platforms.

According to survey respondents, some of the primary benefits they associated with WordPress include: the wide availability of specialists with WordPress skills, the ability to pursue multi-channel architecture, the wide ecosystem of WordPress solutions (i.e. plugins and themes), as well as the ROI WordPress enables them to achieve.

*While not technically a CMS, Shopify is a proprietary SaaS platform for eCommerce sellers that also includes content management functionality.

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Primary Benefits of WordPress
by percentage

- Availability of skillset
- Multi-channel architecture
- Ecosystem
- Return on investment (ROI)
- Scalability
- Lowest TCO
- Analytics
- Composable websites
- Time to market
- Headless applications
- Security
- Agility

0   5   10   15   20   25   30

26%

respondants list the wide
availability of specialists
with WordPress skills as a
primary benefit.

a website's front-end from its back-end, facilitating a modular approach that allows content creators to use the tools they love while providing developers with access to the modern frontend frameworks they prefer.

The composable nature of headless enables a more agile and adaptable web environment, accommodating evolving business needs and advancements in technology.
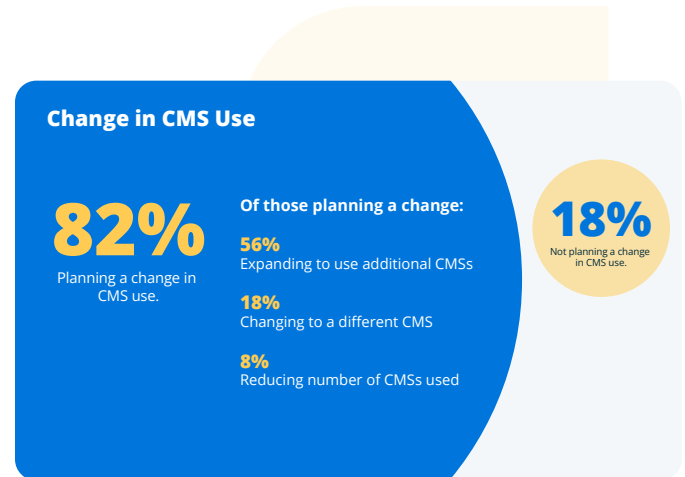
A growing appetite for change

In addition to the widening pool of potential CMS options, businesses also appear more open to changing the type of CMS they currently use.

In fact, CMS trends are more fluid than ever. What was until recently an "all-or-nothing" decision has now become far more modular.

82% of respondents said they already had plans to change their CMS, with 56% noting this would mean expanding to use additional CMSs in the future.

This new era of flexibility has also been enabled by the advent of innovative, composable website architecture such as headless architecture. "**Headless**" signifies the separation of

Change in CMS Use

82%

Planning a change in
CMS use.

Of those planning a change:

56%
Expanding to use additional CMSs

18%
Changing to a different CMS

8%
Reducing number of CMSs used

18%

Not planning a change
in CMS use.

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Headless WordPress:
The New CMS Trends Driver

Headless web architecture has come with its fair share of promises—faster site speed, easier omnichannel execution, and, as noted above, the long sought-after harmony between content creators, front-end designers, and developers.
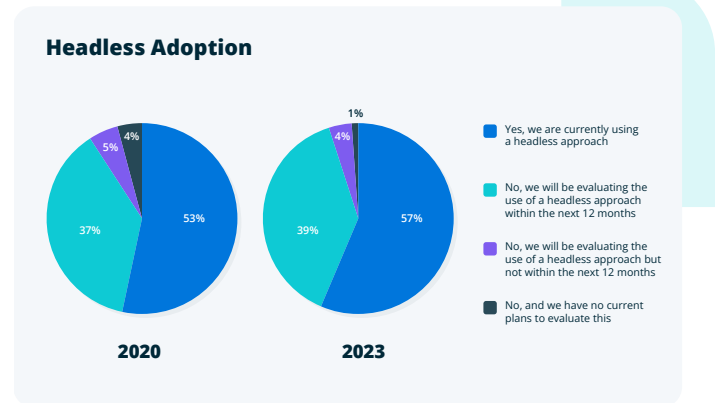
All of these outcomes can indeed be made possible by headless websites (when they're well-architected). As a result, headless adoption is soaring.

But another benefit of headless architecture is that it has proven highly effective for businesses hoping to channel the content agility WordPress is renowned for, while creating a front-end experience that mirrors an existing corporate site (built on a completely different CMS) or adopts the style and design of a specific brand.

The use of WordPress as a headless CMS, also called "headless WordPress," is another driver of evolving CMS trends, as it offers businesses the ability to harness the most widely used CMS (WordPress) while building with far more control over design, personalization, and integrations with third-party technologies.

What's also interesting, is the growing adoption of headless architecture, including headless WordPress configurations, across businesses of varying sizes.

Among businesses surveyed, which included enterprise and SMB organizations, almost six in ten (57%) now report using a headless approach with their websites. This robust adoption rate clearly illustrates that headless architecture has transcended its niche origins, becoming a mainstream choice not just for large-scale sites but across a diverse spectrum of businesses.

Headless Adoption

2020	**2023**

- Yes, we are currently using a headless approach
- No, we will be evaluating the use of a headless approach within the next 12 months
- No, we will be evaluating the use of a headless approach but not within the next 12 months
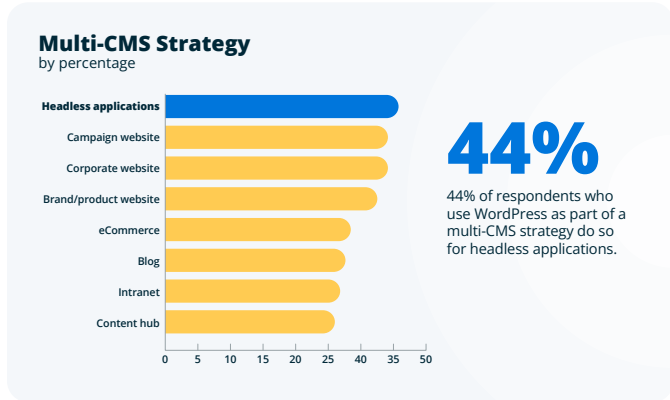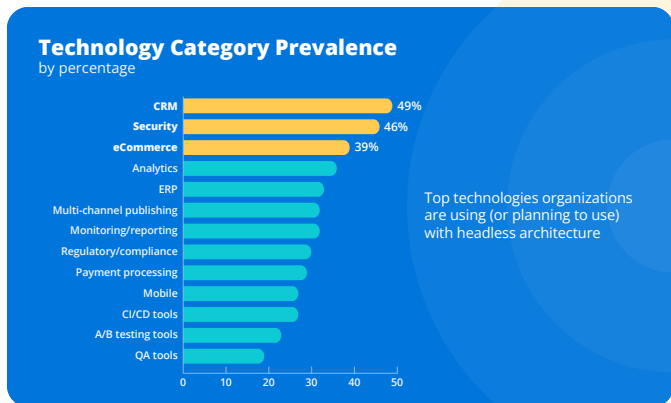- No, and we have no current plans to evaluate this

Additionally, nearly four in ten businesses (39%) plan to evaluate the use of headless within the next 12 months, while eight in ten (81%) of those surveyed agree that failure to adopt component-based headless approaches would mean falling behind their competitors—further emphasizing the growing value of headless, both perceived and in practice.

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"At its core, headless is about the flexibility of composable architecture, which allows for the use of best-in-breed solutions for different use cases to maximize performance and strengthen security," said WP Engine Director, Product Jason Konen.

"It's about harnessing the modern frameworks developers prefer, but it also enables, even accelerates, the use of preferred CMS solutions like WordPress. With the CMS decoupled from the front-end, headless offers businesses greater optionality in creating digital experiences for different audiences and use cases all while allowing those creating and managing content to use the CMS they prefer."

When asked about the types of technologies their organizations were using (or planing to use) with headless architecture, respondents noted CRM (49%), security (46%), and eCommerce (39%) as top use cases.

Multi-CMS Strategy
by percentage

- Headless applications
- Campaign website
- Corporate website
- Brand/product website
- eCommerce
- Blog
- Intranet
- Content hub

0 5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40 45 50

44%

44% of respondents who use WordPress as part of a multi-CMS strategy do so for headless applications.

Technology Category Prevalence
by percentage

Category	%
CRM	49%
Security	46%
eCommerce	39%
Analytics	
ERP	
Multi-channel publishing	
Monitoring/reporting	
Regulatory/compliance	
Payment processing	
Mobile	
CI/CD tools	
A/B testing tools	
QA tools	

0 10 20 30 40 50

Top technologies organizations are using (or planning to use) with headless architecture

Further driving home the role of WordPress as a key element in headless architecture and adoption, 44% of respondents who use WordPress as part of a multi-CMS strategy do so for headless applications, as seen in the chart above.

While "Blog" was the primary use case for WordPress more than a decade ago, campaign websites, corporate sites, and eCommerce have all gained prominence in recent years.

That headless is now atop them all as the primary multi-CMS use case for WordPress, speaks volumes about the trajectory of **headless WordPress** and more innovation to come.

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The Open Future is Here

The outsized presence of proprietary software among enterprise organizations is no coincidence. Not that long ago, large businesses typically shunned open-source software for the safety and security of proprietary SLAs.

But times have changed, and open-source software now enjoys wide enterprise support due to the associated cost savings and maturity of many open-source projects.

Today, open source has opened up a new frontier in web innovation for businesses of all sizes. For the first time, the majority of survey respondents (58%) report already using open-source software for their websites.

Additionally, nearly a third of businesses surveyed (31%) plan to evaluate open-source software over the next 12 months.
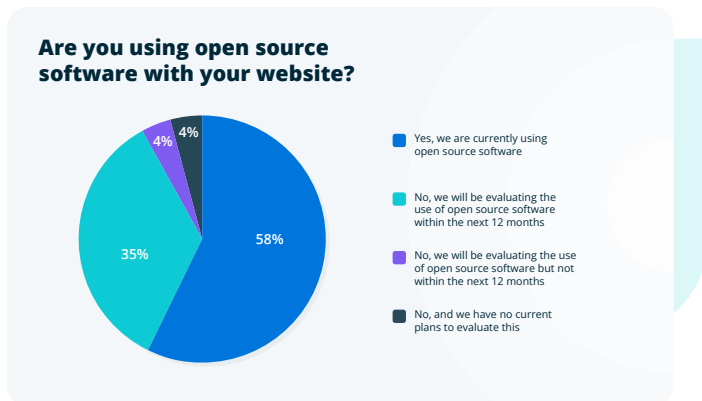
While barriers to adoption remain, the perception of software built on free, open code has changed dramatically in just a few short years. In what amounts to a sea change in sentiment, 83% of respondents now agree that the benefits of open-source software outweigh the benefits of proprietary software.

Benefits of Open Source

83%
of respondents now agree that benefits of open source software outweigh the benefits of proprietary software.
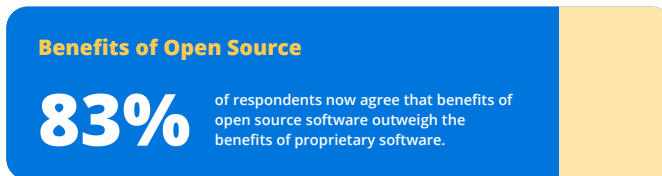
This shift is driven not only by the cost-effectiveness and growth of open-source projects but also by the desire for more adaptable web architectures and enhanced development agility.

Recognizing the limitations of rigid, proprietary systems, many organizations now look to open source as a key to unlocking greater flexibility and faster innovation.

This trend is evident in the growing percentage of businesses utilizing open-source software for their web platforms, and with the vast majority of respondents now stating their preference for open source over proprietary solutions, it's clear that the benefits—including proactive security, high quality, and the ability to better meet customer demands—are resonating across industries.

Are you using open source software with your website?

- 58% Yes, we are currently using open source software
- 35% No, we will be evaluating the use of open source software within the next 12 months
- 4% No, we will be evaluating the use of open source software but not within the next 12 months
- 4% No, and we have no current plans to evaluate this

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"There will always be concerns in the market, but the flexibility of open-source projects—backed by strong communities, superior documentation, and extensive reviews—will significantly shape future tech stacks, as they simply allow developers to expand, customize, and innovate more quickly than closed-source systems," said WP Engine SVP and Chief Technology Officer Ramadass Prabhakar.

"Look for those future tech stacks to be anything but monolithic, as flexibility, optionality, and the ability to build quickly will all be insisted upon, especially as open-source frameworks like WordPress lead the way."

The Next Frontier in Modern Web Innovation

Over the past few years, the world has grappled with a global pandemic, impending recessions, and intense economic fluctuations that have left no business untouched.

Resilient businesses have adapted to the rapid digital transformation that's occurred over the same period of time and emerged with a level of flexibility and fluidity unseen even a few short years ago.

Multi-CMS use will continue to evolve as organizations no longer work with CMSs in isolation, and employ frameworks such as WordPress alongside legacy architecture or new headless WordPress builds.

In tandem with the rise and evolution of CMS use, open-source software at large has experienced a dramatic shift in sentiment, across enterprises and SMBs, as the need for solutions that provide agility and deliver tangible, measurable ROI has come into sharp focus.

As emerging trends and technologies carve out the future of the web, it will be those businesses equipped with the adaptability to employ the most fitting systems for their teams that will not just survive, but thrive in the new digital era.

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Survey Demographics

600 IT and Marketing decision makers were interviewed in January and February 2023, split in the following ways...
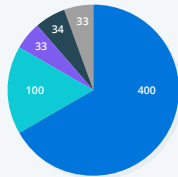
...by sample type
Respondent sample type [600]

- 200 • US only • 100-999 employees
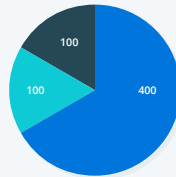- 400

■ Core ■ Boost

...by country
Respondent country [600]

- 34
- 33
- 33
- 100
- 400

■ US ■ UK ■ Australia
■ Singapore ■ Japan

...by region
Respondent region [600]

- 100
- 100
- 400

■ Americas ■ EMEA
■ APAC

...by sector
Within which sector is your organization? [600]

Sector	Value
Media	85
Entertainment	82
Business services/consulting	80
Retail	80
Technology	77
Hospitality (hotels)	73
Education - private	71
Healthcare - private	23
Wholesale	11
Other sector	18
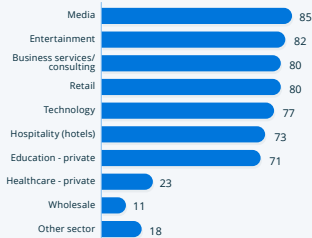
...by size
How many employees does your organization have globally? [600]

- 70
- 53
- 77
- 84
- 160
- 156
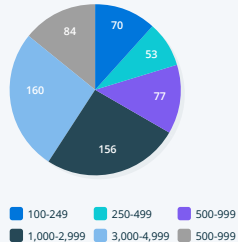
■ 100-249 ■ 250-499 ■ 500-999
■ 1,000-2,999 ■ 3,000-4,999 ■ 500-999

Methodology

This custom survey was designed collaboratively by WP Engine and Vanson Bourne. The study was administered to 600 IT and marketing decision-makers in the U.S., U.K., Australia, Singapore, and Japan at companies with at least 100 employees.

The survey explores the rise of multiple CMS use among businesses of all sizes, how IT and marketing decision-makers view their current options, and what the future might hold for the CMS market and the digital experiences of tomorrow.

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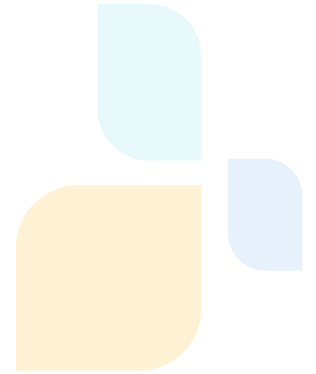
About Vanson Bourne

Vanson Bourne is an independent and trusted market research partner for the world's most innovative and influential technology companies. As specialists in market research for the technology sector, Vanson Bourne has the technology and industry knowledge to build upon clients' ideas, transforming concepts into research solutions.
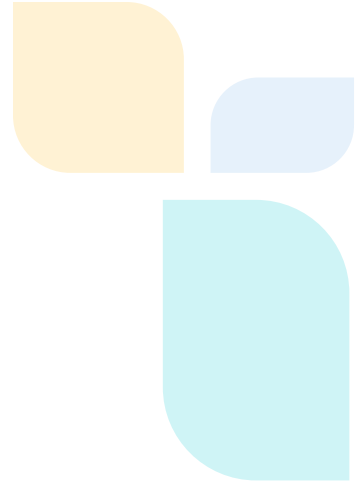
About WP Engine

WP Engine, the WordPress technology company, provides the most relied upon and trusted brands and developer-centric WordPress products for companies and agencies of all sizes, including **managed WordPress hosting**, **enterprise WordPress**, **headless WordPress**, **Flywheel**, **Local**, **Advanced Custom Fields**, and **Genesis**. WP Engine's tech innovation and award-winning WordPress experts help to power more than 1 million customers across 150 countries.