Why Your WordPress Search is Secretly Hurting Conversions, and How to Fix It

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Overview

WordPress is the world's most widely used content management system (CMS), due in large part to its versatility and user-friendly interface, which caters to both beginners and advanced users alike.

However, a notable limitation within WordPress is its basic search functionality, which can significantly impact user experience.

This limitation is the result of WordPress's default search algorithm, which prioritizes date over relevance, often leading to older content appearing before more pertinent recent posts.

Additionally, WordPress search isn't typo-tolerant, it lacks advanced filtering options, and does not index custom fields or post types, further restricting the depth and accuracy of search results.

While this may have sufficed for websites in the past, the ability to deliver efficient and relevant search results is crucial in today's digital landscape.

Users now expect instant and precise information at their fingertips, and any delay or inaccuracy can lead to a rapid decline in user engagement and satisfaction. However, the majority of solutions built to address the shortcomings of WordPress search are either plugin-based, and face scalability issues due to dependency on the MySQL WordPress database, or they're expensive custom solutions, which are often too complex or too costly for most WordPress users. That is, until now.
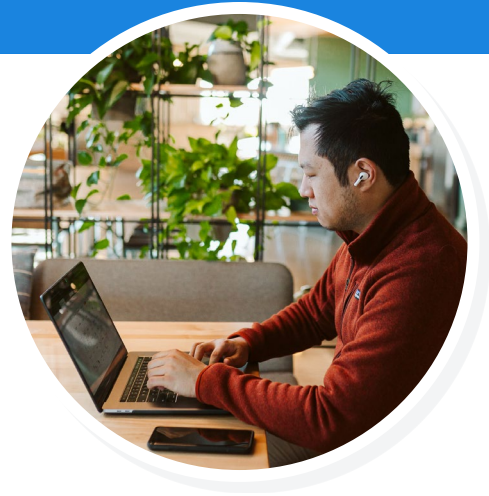
To enhance WordPress search without slowing down your website (or breaking the bank), WP Engine introduced Smart Search, an advanced search optimization tool specifically crafted for WordPress sites.

In this ebook, we'll examine how WordPress search works and why robust search functionality is so important for both improving user experiences **and** increasing conversions.

Focusing on Smart Search, we'll also explore how this innovative solution redefines WordPress search using AI and sophisticated algorithms.

From independent bloggers and small businesses to large eCommerce platforms, recognizing the impact of search functionality is key to online success.

Read on to learn how you can ensure your WordPress search experience converts more customers and increases user satisfaction across your website

Why Optimizing Search Matters

If a user were two times more likely to convert on your website, you'd want to focus on optimizing their experience, right?

That's why your website's search experience is one of the most important areas to focus on, for any type of website. Users that search are high-intent—they're 2-3x more likely to convert.

However, time and again we see search as the most overlooked area for those aiming to enhance engagement metrics and conversions on their sites.

Oftentimes, site owners and developers simply don't optimize their website's search experience, and it shows—$2 trillion is lost each year from search abandonment globally. That's the annual GDP of Canada!

Although search optimization is important for all websites, it's especially important for WordPress sites, where the default search functionality is notoriously antiquated.

Before we jump into optimizing your site search, let's take a look at how native search functionality works in WordPress.

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How WordPress Search Works

Native WordPress search functionality, while relatively basic, plays a pivotal role in how content is accessed on WordPress sites.

Breaking this process into its core components will provide a clear understanding of the entire search workflow in WordPress, from the creation of an index to the final display of search results based on relevance.

Indexing

When you create or update content on your WordPress site, the search system creates an index in the WordPress database. This index is like a catalog that lists all the words in your content and where they can be found. It's also the root cause of search-related speed and scalability issues when it comes to search.

Search Query

When a user enters a search query into the search bar, WordPress takes that query and compares it against the index. It looks for exact keyword matches (e.g. you must type an exact match of

"Wonderwall" to get results for "Wonderwall") in the words used in your content. WordPress search will search page titles, page content, image titles and captions, image alt text, and file names—so there's a lot that it doesn't search! We will get to that later.

Relevance Ranking

WordPress calculates a relevance score for each match, determining how closely the content matches the search query. This score helps in presenting the most relevant results first, although there is no way to change or customize this ranking.

Displaying Results

The search results page then displays a list of pages or posts ordered by their relevance scores. Clicking on a result takes the user directly to the relevant content.

While this all sounds straightforward, there are some significant issues with how this process works.

Why WordPress Search is Limited

WordPress search functionality was created many years ago, and as such, it suffers from outdated issues.

Initially designed for basic blog functionality, it lacks the sophistication needed for today's dynamic and content-rich websites. It also struggles with accurately sorting and presenting relevant results due to its rudimentary algorithm, which, as noted above, prioritizes older posts over newer, more relevant content.

Consequently, users and site owners face challenges in efficiently navigating and utilizing the vast array of information available on WordPress sites.

Here are a few specific areas where WordPress search is limited:

Keyword Matching

Native WordPress search relies on basic keyword matching. It looks for exact matches of the search query within the content, titles, and tags of posts and pages for standard WordPress data. This approach can result in limited accuracy, especially when users expect semantic understanding.

> *Initially designed for basic blog functionality, WordPress search lacks the sophistication needed for today's dynamic and content-rich websites.*

For example, if a user searches for "recent developments in space exploration," they don't want content with those exact terms necessarily, they'd simply like to know what SpaceX and NASA are up to.

No Full-Text Searching

WordPress native search does not perform full-text searching. It doesn't consider the context or relationship between words in a sentence or paragraph. This limitation can lead to less precise and irrelevant results, particularly when users search for phrases or sentences.

No Support for Synonyms or Stemming

Native WordPress search doesn't automatically consider synonyms or variations of If a user uses different words to express the same concept (e.g. "run" to refer words (stemming). to "running"), the search may not capture these semantic relationships. This limitation can result in missed opportunities to connect users with relevant content.

Inability to Prioritize Content

Native WordPress search does not inherently understand the importance or priority of content. It will prioritize the oldest entries with the search term in the title at the top of the results. This can lead to outdated or less relevant content being presented prominently in search results.

Limited Filtering and Sorting Options

The native search interface provides minimal options for users to filter or sort results based on specific criteria. If a search yields a lot of results, users are forced to navigate large volumes of content to find the most relevant information.

Performance Issues with Large Databases

As you add more and more content to your website, your database will grow, and search performance can degrade. Slower search response times will inevitably lead to higher bounce rates and a poor user experience.

Challenges with Custom Post Types and Taxonomies

If a website uses custom post types or taxonomies extensively through a plugin like Advanced Custom Fields, native search will skip over this data altogether, making it impossible to find all the custom data that you invested in creating!

WordPress' default search functionality plays a pivotal role in accessing content.

The 5 Aspects of Search You Need to Convert

While the above sections demonstrate why search is such a crucial part of your website and how native WordPress search is limited, the following examines key aspects of search that are essential for achieving higher engagement and conversions.

Here's what your search functionality needs in order to convert:

1. Your Search Needs to be Scalable and Performant.

For search to be truly scalable, search queries need to be offloaded from your server. Otherwise, any increase in content or searches will impact your core website performance.

Many search solutions in the WordPress ecosystem are plugin-based and run on your WordPress server, which means they won't solve for this (and may even make it worse).

With that in mind, it's important to find a solution that can offload search to a specialized search server that allows your traffic to scale with zero performance disruption or degradation.

2. Your Search Needs to be Typo-Tolerant.

For a search function to meet the modern requirements of its users, it needs to mimic searches they're used to.

Thanks to autocorrect features in iPhones and Google, we've grown accustomed to expecting that our search engines will interpret typos correctly.

It's also worth noting that almost 60 percent of all web traffic comes from mobile devices, where typing errors are more common due to the smaller keyboard. Therefore, it's crucial for your website's search function, particularly when dealing with technical terms, to be capable of correcting typos—a feature native WordPress search lacks.

3. Your Search Needs to Make Your Marketing Smarter.

Enhancing your search functionality isn't just about the user experience; it's also about gaining valuable insights into your customers' behaviors and needs.

Searchers are often your highest-intent, highest-converting users—wouldn't it be beneficial to understand their search queries? It's crucial to track not only what they're searching for, but also how often their searches yield no results.

A robust search tool should not only improve user experience but also aid in shaping a more targeted content strategy. It achieves this by providing essential data on search terms and instances of zero-result searches. Incorporating these insights ensures that your marketing team operates more effectively, armed with a deeper understanding of the content your audience seeks.

4. Your Search Needs to be Future-Proof.

It's important to understand how often your search tool is indexing your data. Many customers have come to us complaining that indexes only happen every thirty days, which means that new content won't surface for potentially a month after it's delivered!

A search solution should automatically index your data on a recurring basis—no manual indexing, no tasks for the user to run. Such a system guarantees that as your website expands and continuously updates its content, all new material is promptly and reliably included in search results, ensuring visibility and accessibility.

5. Your Search Needs to be Customizable.

Every site's content is unique and requires its own level of prioritization.

Let's say you have a piece of content that converts really well, so you invest in replicating it for other topics on your website. You'd want to funnel all traffic to those pieces of content—especially your high-intent users searching on your website.

The ability to weight your search results is a crucial tool in boosting conversions and engagement and ensuring your best content shines.

This is even more relevant for websites using Advanced Custom Fields (ACF). For anyone building out custom post types on their WordPress site, native search will totally omit that custom data in their search results! Smart Search is built with ACF users in mind by allowing for simple, automatic indexing of all your custom data.

Understanding Search Technologies in WordPress

A diverse range of search tools is available within the WordPress ecosystem, each designed to enhance search capabilities.

Plugin-based solutions like Relevanssi and SearchWP are popular among early adopters but may face scalability issues due to their reliance on the WordPress server for running search queries.

Conversely, options like Algolia, which offers a wealth of features, may be cost-prohibitive for many WordPress site owners.

A third option, custom-built search solutions, can also be employed, especially for websites with specific search needs. While these solutions can be robust, they are usually developed in-house or by hired developers and can come with added complexity and higher cost.

This range of options has, until now, offered little in the way of a balanced, middle-ground solution that combines scalability, affordability, and a rich set of features.

At WP Engine, we introduced Smart Search to fill this gap. Smart Search is designed to be scalable and efficient, catering to the growing needs of websites. It also allows for customized content weighting, tailoring search results to prioritize more relevant content, and automatically indexes all your data—even custom post types from ACF.

Furthermore, Smart Search offers marketers valuable insights, like understanding user search patterns on your site. This feature is instrumental in refining marketing strategies and improving overall user experience.

The future of Smart Search is even brighter as WP Engine prepares to introduce AI in 2024 to combine semantic and keyword search into a best-of-both-worlds solution.

Find out more about Smart Search here or check out this video for a deeper technical overview.

Level Up Your Search Experience With WP Engine

In today's evolving digital landscape, efficient search functionality is key to enhancing user engagement and increasing conversions.

Native WordPress search, however, often falls short due to its basic algorithm and limited scalability. This gap underscores the need for a solution that balances affordability with advanced capabilities.

WP Engine's Smart Search addresses these challenges by offering a scalable, efficient, and feature-rich search experience tailored for diverse WordPress sites.

It not only improves search accuracy and speed but also provides valuable insights for marketers, helping to refine content strategy and user experience—and it's already serving over ten million searches a month with zero performance degradation!

With Smart Search, WP Engine offers the search solution you've been looking for, bridging the divide between basic, limited plugins and costly, complex alternatives. This innovative tool is designed to elevate your website's search experience, meeting the high expectations of today's digital users and driving your site's success.

Ready to level up your search experience? Visit WP Engine **to find out more or** contact us **to speak to a representative today.**

About WP Engine

WP Engine is the most trusted WordPress technology company, powering more than 1.5M digital experiences in 150+ countries for businesses and agencies of all sizes. WP Engine's all-in-one platform and builder tools including Local, ACF, and Genesis enables customers to design, build, power, and manage extraordinary WordPress, WooCommerce, and headless sites—all thanks to a nonstop commitment to innovation, award-winning WordPress expertise, and a set of core values that guides us every day.

Find out more about WP Engine Smart Search here.