

WHERE SHOULD I HOST MY MEMBERSHIP? EXISTING SITE, NEW SITE OR SUBDOMAIN?



Mike Morrison:

What up, everybody, welcome to episode 116 of the Membership Guys podcast. I'm your host Mike Morrison, one half of the Membership Guys, and this is the show where we bring you proven and practical tips and advice for growing a successful membership website. Thanks so much for joining me for the show. If it is your first time listening to the Membership Guys podcast then welcome. Thank you so much for checking us out. Be sure to hit subscribe to make sure you don't miss any future episodes. You don't want that to happen. You finally found us. We are the place to be for helping you get where you want to go with your memberships, so make sure you are subscribed for future episodes. If you're an existing subscriber and you've been listening for a while then, as always, I appreciate you choosing to spend a part of your day with me, and I promise I shall try to make it worth your while.

In today's episode, we are talking about where your membership site should live. Now this is a topic that we have previously covered on our blog, but it's a question that we've seen coming up over and over and over again, more and more recently inside our Facebook group, inside Member Site Academy, and so I figured that we should take a little bit of time on the show to address it. Now when we talk about where your membership site should live, I'm not talking about which hosting company to use or whether you should use shared hosting or a dedicated server. What I'm talking about is whether you should have your membership site hosted as part of your main websites or whether the members area should just be part of the same site that you blog on, et cetera, or whether it should be on its own separate dedicated site or alternatively, whether it should be on a subdomain. We're going to talk about those options and we're going to run through the pros and cons of all those different choices to give you what you need to in terms of the intel to help you make a decision for your own membership if it's still something you're struggling with.

But before we get to that, I want to remind you that the Membership Guys podcast is brought to you by Member Site Academy, the number one training community for membership site owners. Not only do academy members get full access to our training library that includes in-depth practical courses and workshops, you also get special perks, discounts and



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tools as well as step by step guidance through the process of planning, building and growing your membership with our membership roadmap, and if that wasn't enough, you get to tap into the collective knowledge and experience of not only myself and Callie, but also hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of membership site owners inside our friendly and supportive community, and we've got your back every step of the way. So if you're serious about growing a successful membership website, you need to join Member Site Academy. Head on over to membersiteacademy.com to join today and I'll see you in the academy.

All right. So, let's get to it. Where should your membership site live? Should it be on your main site? Should it be on a subdomain or should it be on a separate website? Now when we talk about this, I'm assuming that in addition to your membership website, you also need a website that's open to the public at large for blogging, for company information, for your contact form, for lead generation and so on, and so the quandary that you're dealing with is whether all of that stuff should be in amongst your membership stuff. Should it all be under one roof or should they be separated out? So, there's three main things that you really need to take into consideration when deciding where your membership should live. There's the technical implications, so how much more complication does it add on the tech front, how much more is there to set up and to manage, and by extension with this, there's also the cost element as well. That kind of goes hand in hand with the tech. The more tech that's involved, the more time and the more money you usually have to throw into it.

There's also functionality implications. Whichever choice you make will affect and potentially limit what you can actually do and what options you have for structuring your membership site and making it pair up with your blog and with other stuff you're going on your main public site.

Then the final consideration is branding. So what effect and what implication does one choice over another have in terms of your company brand, in terms of the member experience and so on. So we're going to talk through the different options in terms of those implications, and I'm going to give you some pros and cons. Let's talk first about having your membership on your main site, so you have your site that has a blog. It's got an about section. Maybe there's some of the services, contact form and your membership is threaded in amongst all that stuff. It's all under one roof. Single site, single installation. If you're using Wordpress, one version of Wordpress and that's it, nothing separated. Now the pros of this is that when you have everything under one roof, it's only one site to manage.

You don't have to worry about juggling various different sites. There's only one hosting bill to pay. There's only one place you need to go to check that all of your plug-ins are up to date and all that sort of stuff. So there's a lot of simplicity that comes from having everything under one roof, and this is great if you are particularly tech averse or if you've got a lot of other things going on in your life. Or maybe, even if you've got other websites that you're managing and you want to minimise the additional work that's going to be involved by rolling out your membership.



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Another big pro is that having everything under one roof and one site provides a more consistent experience for your user because if you have your membership on your main site, then it's also going to use the same design, the same theme as your main site does. It's all going to be on the same URL, so it all makes sense to your visitor. There's no disconnect that can sometimes come where somebody clicks on a link to the members area and they're taken off to a different site that maybe has a different logo, perhaps there's a different look and feel, and in a lot of cases you can kind of preface this and you can position it in a way to minimise that disconnect so people know that if they go from site A to site B that it's all still part of the same business, but you can't always guarantee that that will be the case. Sometimes there will be people who are a little confused as to whether your members area is actually associated with your main site and your main brand. So that consistency of experience and making sure that there's no disconnect between one site and the other for the user, that's a big, big pro of having everything under one roof.

It's also worth keeping it all under one roof if you're selling other things on your site that someone might need an account for. So let's say that you have a e-commerce aspect to your site, maybe using one of the Wordpress e-commerce plug-ins like WooCommerce, and there's a store, there's products on sale and all of that sort of stuff. Then it makes a lot more sense if somebody can purchase stuff from your store as well as sign up to your membership all using the same account. If you're buying from one company, but you have to go to two separate websites and have two separate accounts on that, then that's not great from a member experience point of view. So if you are selling other things, if there's other reasons or other uses for someone to have an account on your site, then it provides a much better experience. It's just better all round to be able to give someone that single Wordpress account, that single user account that they can use to buy stuff from your e-commerce arm, to get into your membership, to comment on your blog and so on.

The same goes if you want to have a free community, so some people like to have a little free forum section on their main site as a way of building community, as a way of essentially ring fencing their audience and generating leads and generating sales. So again, that's going to mean that someone needs to have a user account, and if you're asking people to register for a free community on your main website but then to register on a completely different website if they choose to join your membership, again, there's a disconnect. Again, it's not great from a user experience point of view, and it's a little bit of a pain for you because you've got two separate user bases. So essentially, anything where it would be beneficial for someone to have one account to rule them all, you can kind of tell I've been watching Lord of the Rings recently, then have it all on the same website rather than making your users register in multiple different places for multiple different things.

Another big argument for having it all under one roof is if you plan to have a slightly more advanced membership model that makes use of things like paywalls where you allow people to perhaps read three or four blog articles or three or four tutorials before everything gets locked down and they need to pay, or if you want to give free snippets or free samples of your content where, let's say, the first hundred or two hundred words of an article or a



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report are available for people to read and then you have that big button that says "To read the rest of this, click here to upgrade to paid membership."

There's a lot of different membership models that would need that kind of blended approach between free content and paid content, and the only way to blend those two sides organically is to have everything under one roof. Otherwise, it means you have to copy content from one site onto another, and you're basically just duplicating work all the way. So again, if you've got that slightly more advanced model like a paywall, like providing snippets and samples of your content, or maybe you're membership content are bonuses or upgrades where, let's say, you've got video lessons on your blog and you want to provide the download for that video and maybe a worksheet and all that sort of stuff. So maybe in that case, the video is free to the public but only logged in members get the extras. Again, you'd want to have that all on one website, otherwise you're going to be duplicating posts across two different sites, and that's just going to double your work load.

Another big pro found it all on one site is it's much easier to track your marketing. It can become an absolute nightmare if you're trying to track leads and track user behaviour from one site to another. Google Analytics which is perhaps the most popular and most used web analytics platform out there doesn't do very well in tracking behaviour from one domain or one website over to another, and because of that you can't always get the best read on what's working in terms of traffic generation to lead generation to sales because at some point, people are going to go from one website to another website and you lose that tracking information. A lot of these analytics don't tie the behaviour on the two websites together. When you have everything under one roof, all on one website, it's so much easier to track which means it's easier to get a handle on what is and what isn't working from a marketing perspective for your membership.

So those are the pros of having everything under one roof on one website. So let's talk about some of the cons, some of the reasons against. First and foremost, if you have everything under one roof then you're putting all of your eggs in one basket. So if something goes wrong with your website, if your site goes down, if you get hacked then everything is offline, whereas if you have your main site and your membership on separate locations, then if one of those sites gets hacked or if one of them goes down or one of them breaks, then you still have the other one. So if your blog goes down for whatever reason, your members can still log in, they can still access everything and so on. If your membership goes down then your main site will still be up and you can at least put a notice up to let your members know what's going on.

So having everything under one roof gives you a single point of failure. If something goes wrong with that one website then everything is offline or everything is hacked or everything is deleted and so on. So again, that's definitely something to take into consideration when choosing where to put your membership site.

Another con is that your site is going to have more plug-ins active in order to make it run. You're going to have to have stuff in place for the public side, so



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usually if you've got a blog and so on, you'll usually have plug-ins for social sharing that you probably don't need for the membership side of things. You'll usually have plug-ins for comments on your posts which you probably won't need for the membership side of things, and likewise you'll have plug-ins active for the membership that you don't need for the blog, so this all just means that there's lots and lots of plug-ins that are active that you don't necessarily need for each of the two sides of your website. The more plug-ins you have active, usually the more your web performance is impacted, the slower your site loads and that just gets worse the more and more stuff you pile on top in terms of plug-ins and functionality and so on.

Now membership sites, the plug-ins that you typically use for memberships are usually a lot more resource intensive than the sort of plug-ins that you would use for a general blog website. Membership plug-ins, community plug-ins, things like bbPress and BuddyPress, all that sort of stuff, they pack a bit of a punch in terms of functionality and the result of that is they also pack a bit of a punch in terms of how hard they hit the load speeds and the performance of your website. When you throw in the fact that your main blog will usually have more traffic than your membership will, then all of this can add up to a potential problem, so again, definitely something worth taking into consideration.

Another thing to think about is that if you do have everything all under roof, all in one place, it's then harder to split off the membership if you decide that's something you need to do in the future. So you might decide at some point that you actually want to sell your membership. That's a lot harder to do when it's all one one site, it's all under one brand where splitting it off and turning it into a separate thing that you then sell on can impact things like brand loyalty, can be technically difficult and that doesn't just apply to if you were to sell your membership. It might be that you decide you want to run multiple memberships later on, and then you have that problem where okay, well do we have multiple memberships all running under one roof or do we have membership number two running as a separate thing in which case, does that cause confusion between that and membership number one? So it just limits your potential long term options when everything is under one roof.

I would definitely say though, that the main things to consider as cons for this approach are the fact that it gives you that single point of failure and the fact that it means you're putting more of a load on your website, and that's going to affect speed. It's going to affect website performance. So, those are the pros and cons of having your membership site all under one roof with your main website, whether that's a blog, a services page and all that sort of stuff.

So, let's talk about pros and cons of having it completely separate. So this would be where you buy a completely separate domain name and you set up your membership site on its own website. So that would be a domain and that is just separately branded. It might be things like, you might have abcblog.com and abcmembers.com where it shares that common brand, but essentially they are two different websites that are kept apart in terms of the domain, in terms of the tech, in terms of the hosting and all of that sort of stuff. The big upside to having it separate is that it helps keep your main



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website uncluttered and also makes sure that your membership is only using the plug-ins, et cetera, that it needs. You don't have that situation where you've got ten plug-ins active for your blog and ten plug-ins active for your membership and they're all under one roof causing problems with site speed, load times and all that sort of stuff.

So keeping the two sites uncluttered and making sure they're only using what they need is definitely a big, big upside, usually will lead to faster websites, better experience for you as an admin, for your team and ultimately for your users, too. It also means that you can probably use things like caching on your main site. Now caching is something that you typically do to speed your website up, and it does act by saving temporary copies of the pages that your visitors actually look at. Now that's great from a blog point of view but it can be problematic with memberships, especially where you have different versions of a single page that might show to a member and to a non-member. So quite often you either can't use caching on your membership or you have to use it in a very limited way that ends up not actually providing any benefit for the membership side of things whatsoever.

So the big pro of having things separate is that you can do more work with things like caching in order to speed up your main website. It also separates the risk that comes from having everything in one spot, so we talked about that single point of failure. So having them separate as we said, means if site one gets hacked at least site two is still going to be standing or it's way less likely that that site is also going to be hacked as well, so separating that risk again just means a potential impact of something going wrong on one website is limited to just that site.

And while we talked about one of the big pros of having everything under one roof being the fact that it could all be branded consistently and so on, not everyone wants the membership to share the exact same brand as the main website. If you know that you want to brand these things separately or if you potentially might want to sell your membership or expand into other products later on, then again having it on a separate site makes it a lot easier to do that. Overall, the big, big pro is that your decision making as relates to your membership is done in isolation. You don't have to think okay, well I want to do this thing with my membership. I want to instal this plug-in, or I want to make this switch over to HTTPS, but how will that affect my main site? You don't have to consider the main site when making decisions for your membership or the membership when making decisions for your main site, and that can greatly uncomplicate things when it comes to your decision making, and it's definitely a big, big pro of having them separate.

There are, of course, cons to having that separate website. First and foremost, you're going to have to buy another domain name. That's usually only going to be 10, 15, 20 dollars, but if you're going for high end premium domains, that could be hundreds or even thousands or even tens of thousands of dollars in getting a separate domain. You're also usually going to have to pay for additional hosting, so unless you're using a VPS or a dedicated server, you're going to have to buy another hosting account or upgrade to a hosting account that allows you to have multiple domains and



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multiple accounts on it. So again, there's a little bit more on the cost front there.

It also means there's two sites to manage. This is usually the main thing that sways people against having them separately. It's two sites to manage, two sites of plug-in updates, two hosting accounts to run, two sets of emails, all that sort of stuff. There's double the tech considerations, so while there are certain benefits on the tech front in terms of making decisions easier and making it a little simpler on each site, it still is two websites to think about, and that's definitely a hurdle for some people to get over if they are particularly tech averse.

Another con is the potentially inconsistent experience. We talked about it before. Somebody who's on websiteone.com clicking a link that takes them off to websitetwo.com, that can be a disconnect, especially if it is separately branded, especially if you know you have the link open up in a new window and it's clearly a different website and if that user's paying attention to the web address, it's a different web address. That can be a bit of a disconnect and that can affect buying decisions and so on, and it'll typically mean that you have to work a little bit harder on your sales pitch or in your marketing materials to make the connection between the two different websites clear. So there's definite pros and cons to having your site completely separate.

The third option to talk about is a little bit of a middle ground between the two we've discussed so far, and that is having everything on a subdomain. So a subdomain is essentially the little bit in the web address that goes before the main URL. So normally you'll go to www.yoursite.com. A subdomain would be something like members.yoursite.com, academy.yoursite.com, premium.yoursite.com, and so on and so on. So, the big, big pro there is the consistency. People are still seeing that core part of the URL and so they know the main site is www.yoursite.com and academy.yoursite.com is just another section of that same site. That can help avoid the sort of disconnect that we talked about which can better for you from a sales and from a marketing perspective.

Another big pro is that a subdomain is usually treated as a different site from a hosting perspective, and so those pros of having your site separate that we talked about, keeping things uncluttered, avoiding that single point of failure, separating the risk and all that sort of stuff, you still get that with a subdomain while also maintaining the consistency of using the same URL. It also avoids the need to buy a new domain name because a subdomain is simply spun off your main domain. You don't need to purchase a subdomain.

The cons, however, and there are some cons, is that it is then a little more difficult to split it off and to sell the membership later on if that's something you intend to do, and even though it's all under one roof, it's still two websites to control. A subdomain is usually treated as a completely different site from a hosting perspective. Now most hosting companies include subdomains in hosting accounts, so there's typically no need to then buy another hosting account or to upgrade your account, but from a technical setup point of view, it is still two websites. You'll still need to instal Wordpress or whatever system you're using twice. You'll still need to instal a



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membership plug-in on one and you won't be able to do things like paywalls and so on on your main site. So that's definitely something to take into consideration, but this can certainly be a happy medium if the main concern about having things separate is a branding concern.

There is one more option to mention and that's subfolders. Now subfolders and subdomains sometimes get confused. A subdomain is the bit that goes before the URL, so members.yoursite.com, academy.yoursite.com. A subfolder comes after the URL, so that would be yoursite.com/members, yoursite.com/academy. So in terms of using a subfolder for your membership, some of the pros and cons are similar to using a subdomain, but the main difference is that the files for your sites or where you actually install your website, that lives inside a folder that's part of your main site, all right? The biggest reason I'd go for a subdomain rather than a subfolder is that a subdomain is more separated, whereas a subfolder could be affected by what's going on in the main site. There's more potential for URL issues. There's more potential for complications with caching, more exposure if your website were to ever be hacked and all that sort of stuff. So typically, we take subfolders out of the equation completely when deciding where to house your membership site.

So those are the pros and cons of the three core options for where your membership site should live, on a main site, on a separate site, or on a subdomain. The most important thing to note with all of this is that there really is no right or wrong answer. As we've hopefully demonstrated in this episode, there are pros and cons to each option, so it's down to you to weigh up the tech implications, the functionality implications and the branding implications of each of those options and make a decision on what's most important to you. If you know that you absolutely plan to sell your membership further down the road, then having it on a separate domain is going to outweigh the added workload that comes from managing two websites. Similarly, if you want to have multiple different products that each have their own brand, kind of like we do with Member Site Academy, Membership Accelerator, Membership MasterClass and so on, then from a branding perspective again, it can be a little bit better to have them all separate rather than putting them all under one roof.

Or, if again, like us your main brand doesn't necessarily suit an everything under one roof approach, so for example with us, the Membership Guys Academy just didn't trip off the tongue well enough to put everything under one roof. If your brand is a little bit like that then again, that might be something that pushes you to have it on separate domains. If you know that you want to use paywalls or content snippets then you know, in order to do that, you have to have it on the same site as your main blog and your main content. Likewise, if you're extremely tech averse and you can't face the prospect of managing two websites and two sets of plug-in updates, again, you'll put it all under one roof. This is all about your own situation and your longer term vision for your site. So weigh up what we've talked about, think about your long term plans for your membership, think about the model you're going to use, what you actually need, balancing up the stuff that is absolutely crucial in terms of tech, in terms of functionality, in terms of branding with the stuff that's just kind of nice to have or that is a personal choice. Weigh that all up and make a decision.



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One thing worth mentioning is that if you're using a hosted platform like Kajabi or Thinkific, for example, for your membership, then you essentially have two options and not three. You wouldn't be able to run something like Thinkific on your main website. You would either need to use a separate domain name or a subdomain for this. So again, some of the pros and cons you need to split across those two options. Now subdomains can be tricky to set up for the purpose of using with a site like Thinkific or Kajabi. They can be trickier to set up than using a completely separate dedicated domain name, but in this situation the main thing that's going to weigh into your decision is on the branding front. That's going to be the main thing you're going to want to think about when it comes to using Kajabi, Thinkific and whether to go with a subdomain or a separately branded name.

So lots of info there. Hopefully this is helping you get some clarity or at least highlighting some of the things you need to think about. Again, there's no right or wrong answer. It really all comes down to what you need your membership to do, what your situation is, what branding considerations you have in your business, so have a think through some of the pros and cons, have a think about your requirements and utilise what we talked about in today's show to help you narrow down and make that decision on which option to go with.

I really do hope this has proven useful for you guys. If you do have any follow up questions or if you want to provide any feedback at all, as always you can join us in our free Facebook group. Go to talkmemberships.com, that'll redirect you to our group, or in Facebook just search for Membership Mastermind and we should pop up there. We've got over 5,000 membership site owners in there, and again, as we mentioned, this is a topic that's come up fairly frequently over the past couple of months, so a quick search will find other opinions, other insights into this subject, too, and of course you can just go ahead and post any follow up questions, or if you're in the academy then jump on the conversations in there where we're talking about this very subject.

Thanks again for joining me for this week. I hope it's been worth your while, and I'll be back again next week with another episode of the Membership Guys podcast.



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