

5 THINGS TO KNOW BEFORE SHOPPING FOR A MEMBERSHIP PLUGIN



Mike Morrison:

What's up, everybody? Welcome to Episode 120 of The Membership Guys Podcast. I'm your host Mike Morrison, one half of the Membership Guys, and on today's show we're talking about five things you need to know before you start shopping for a WordPress membership plugin.

Before we dive into 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 our academy members get full access to our comprehensive training library that includes in-depth practical courses and workshops, you also get special perks, tools, discounts, as well as step by step guidance throughout the whole journey of planning, building, and growing your membership with our membership roadmap. And if that wasn't enough, you can tap into the collective knowledge, experience, and expertise of myself, Callie, and hundreds of membership site owners inside our friendly and supportive community. We've got your back every step of the way, so if you're serious about growing your membership website, you need to join Member Site Academy. Head on over to MemberSiteAcademy.com today to join up, and I'll see you on the inside.

Okay, so today is really about a little bit of a sanity check. Before you go out there and shop for your WordPress membership plugin, there are five things that you need to know. Now, I understand that a lot of you guys who are listening to the show already have your membership site up and running, or maybe you're not using WordPress, but if you can indulge me a little, this should be a relatively short and to the point podcast episode, so I'm sure you're glad to hear that if you're already past the tech side of memberships. But also, this is worth listening to because some of the stuff we talk about may rear its head a little later on when you're looking at expanding the tech side of your membership, or maybe you look to bring in another membership, or even you have someone in your network or one of your clients or contacts who decide to build a membership, this sort of stuff can pre-arm you to pass on good advice to anyone else that will help them avoid frustration and avoid confusion later on.



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So we're not going to go into how to choose your membership plugin and all that sort of stuff. We've covered that in past episodes and if you want insight into that, go to TheMembershipGuys.com and you can download our plugin comparison chart and buyer's guide. That will help you out. What I want you to know are these five key facts, five key elements, before you start diving into the whats and wheres of the features and all that sort of stuff.

First thing you need to know, unicorns do not exist, and that sound you hear is the collective hearts breaking of a thousand unicorn fans out there. But in terms of tech, in terms of membership plugins, unicorns don't exist. What that means is you will not find an off the shelf solution that will 100% satisfy 100% of your requirements 100% of the way you want it to. Simply doesn't work like that when you're dealing with off the shelf solutions. Membership plugins do not take care of every conceivable possible setup for a membership site that you might have in mind, so don't get frustrated because it doesn't have this one feature or you wanted your membership plugin to also allow event booking, and you also allow people to fill in forms or to complete their journal, and also, and also, and also.

Unicorns don't exist. You shouldn't have an expectation of being able to pay \$100 for an off the shelf product that is designed and built to be suitable for as broad a range of people as possible. It's not going to meet your exacting bespoke needs, so having that in your head and knowing that from the get go is going to save you a lot of frustration later on. If you want real complex functionality, that's going to mean a variety of other plugins, or it's going to mean custom development so you need to really level your expectations of what a membership site plugin is going to do for you from the standard, default, off the shelf form that it comes in.

Second thing to know is that switching membership plugins later on, so down the road of running your membership, can be a massive, massive headache. Typically all these different plugins handle subscriptions. They handle user accounts. They handle all that stuff differently, so the way that plugin number one handles recurring subscription profiles will be different to how plugin number two handles it, and so if you want to move from plugin one to plugin two, you need to find a way of translating plugin one's methods to work with plugin two, and in some cases that can be actually impossible, as in it cannot be done.

We've seen a lot of situations where actually the simplest answer has been getting members to resubscribe, simply because trying to do it automatically in the backend, we're moving from one plugin to the other, is just a mountain that cannot be climbed, and even if it is possible in a lot of cases it's just not worth the hassle. Especially if you've only got maybe 40 or 50 members it can genuinely be easier and less hassle for you and less hassle for them to just get them to resubscribe and provide some sort of incentive to get them to do that. Changing horse midstream can be very complicated. It can be a big, big headache so it's worth making sure you do the research upfront.

Don't be swayed by any sort of false scarcity promotions that pressure you into buying plugins, or don't buy the latest \$5, all in one, does everything for



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you membership platform because it happens to be the deal of the week on AppSumo. Do your research. If that \$5, one time membership platform is right for you based on research, then get it, but make sure that any buying decisions or any decisions you make about your WordPress membership plugin are based on thorough research using resources like the ones we have available over at The Membership Guys that will help you figure out what you need and help you narrow down the options on the market.

The third thing you need to know before even starting shopping for a WordPress membership plugin is what it does. Membership plugins typically handle function, not form. They don't usually do anything on the design side of things. With WordPress you have themes, which are the look and the feel, and you typically have plugins which are the features and the functionality. A membership plugin takes care of the functionality. It protects content. It handles user registration. It handles payments, and it connects all that stuff together. It doesn't make the forms on your website look pretty. It doesn't necessarily come with course functionality or badges or gamification.

I've seen a lot of people getting very frustrated at the fact that they bought a membership plugin and it doesn't look very good out of the box. Usually it won't. Usually they come with very little in terms of styling and instead they simply inherit whatever style your WordPress theme already has. So usually if you find your registration or your checkout forms for your membership look like garbage, it's because your WordPress theme doesn't have builtin support for that membership plugin, which usually they won't. So quite often it is the sort of situation where you might need to pay a developer or you might need to do a little customization yourself, maybe using plugins like CSS Hero or something that enables you to spruce some of the basic functionality that your membership brings. Spruce it up a little bit and get it looking right.

That's not a flaw or a fault of the membership plugin. It's usually just that little bit, that extra 5 or 10% that you sometimes need to do to get the functionality and the form to play nicely together. To get the design and the features to all flow seamlessly. That's the third thing that is key. Remember membership plugins, they handle functionality. They don't typically handle design. Some of them do. Some of them maybe have some builtin styles, and quite often they'll have options where you can toggle on or toggle off whether you should be using their styles or your theme's styles, so refer to any documentation from your plugin developer about that.

Some plugins like AccessAlly for example, they will come with templates and with design elements that you can import to make them look nice, but that is not the norm. That's the exception from the norm. Plugins like AccessAlly have gone above and beyond in that regard in order to provide more on the design side than is typically expected from a membership plugin. So again, just understanding this will help you avoid frustration, and also help avoid you banging your head on the desk thinking you're doing something wrong when actually it's just the nature of how plugins work in tandem with things like website themes.

Fourth thing to take into consideration is that not all plugins are created equal. Some plugins are absolute rubbish. There's plenty out there and



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fortunately they don't usually gain enough market share or enough brand penetration for you to hear about them, but every now and then one of them slips through. Usually it's where there's a big marketing push or a big joint venture or affiliate push to try and get people to sign up to what is actually pretty poor standard software. In most cases, all the cream does rise to the top, but even then, what is a great plugin for one person might not be the best choice for you based on each of your individual needs, and so that's why it's important to compare the functionality, compare the features, to understand and decide on what is absolutely crucial for you in terms of the features and the way that your membership plugin all work.

So, not all plugins are created equal. Some are just objectively terrible. Some are generally better than others, but a lot of it does come down to your individual requirements, so that's why you would use something like our plugin comparison chart, which if you're listening to this on the show, head over to our show notes, TheMembershipGuys.com/120. You'll find a link to our plugin comparison chart, as well as some other pointers on how to actually pick a membership plugin to use to make sure that you get the best choice for you, because again, remember the second point we covered.

Switching plugins later can be a headache. So just keep that in mind. Not all plugins are created equal. Some are way better than others, and some are just junk.

The last thing is that it is not unusual to need additional plugins, complimentary plugins. Again, this ties in with the fact that unicorns don't exist. You will not find a membership plugin that will do absolutely everything you want, especially if you want all sorts of added bells and whistles that don't necessarily constitute membership site functionality, so it's not unusual if you for example want to offer an ecommerce side of your membership, or an ecommerce side of your website that sits alongside your membership, it's not uncommon that you'll need to get a separate ecommerce plugin. Even if you're using something like WooCommerce, which is the leading ecommerce plugin for WordPress, you will still need to get a separate add-on plugin for memberships and for subscriptions.

If you want to enable people to book into event or enable your members to book into member-only events, you will need a specific, purpose-built event management plugin. It's not something that will be included in your membership plugin. Things like contact forms. Again, membership plugins are for handling the membership side of things. They're not for handling the stuff that might be inside your membership in terms of badges, in terms of contact forms, in terms of all the actual content and deliverables. That's not what your membership plugin does, so don't be surprised or disheartened when if you're asking someone how you can add this certain feature to your website they say, "You'll need to go out there and get another plugin."

We have a full guide on TheMembershipGuys.com which again you'll see in the link in the show notes, which actually runs through the typical tools and the typical additional plugins you might need for a membership site, and it gives you options ranging from free or very low cost ones through to the more premium options, so even though you may need to use complimentary plugins for your membership, that doesn't mean that you



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have to break the bank in order to do so, so definitely check out the show notes, TheMembershipGuys.com/120 for links to those additional resources.

So, hopefully knowing those five things. Unicorns do not exist. No single off the shelf plugin will 100% meet 100% of your requirements 100% the way you want them to, so make sure you're levelling your expectations. Remember that switching plugins later can be a major headache, and in some cases it will be impossible to try and support members from one plugin system to another. Remember, membership plugins and plugins in general typically handle function. They don't handle form, so don't be surprised if you need to do some tweaking and tinkering with your theme in order to get some of the things that your membership plugin has to look in tune with the rest of your site. Remember not all plugins are created equal. Buyer beware. Do your research beforehand. Don't impulse buy a membership plugin, because chances are it's not going to be the right fit. And fifth and final is remembering that it's not unusual to need to use complimentary plugins for any additional features that you may need to add to your site that fall outside the typical remit of what a membership plugin will do.

Hopefully this better equips you when you're setting out to build your membership site, and again as we mentioned at the top, if you already have your site in place, if you're already well beyond this tech stage, at least knowing this stuff may better equip you for any further developments for your site, or even just help you better deal with any friends or connections you have who are going through the process right now of building a membership. Hopefully you guys have found this useful. As always I'd love to hear any feedback. Hit me up on Twitter @membershipguys, or join us in our free Facebook group. If you type in TalkMemberships.com to your browser, that will redirect you to our Facebook group that has over 5,000 membership site owners and it's completely free. Join us in there. Let us know what you thought of this episode, or of course, if you're an academy member give us a shout inside the member-only community too with any follow up questions or anything else you've got to say about this episode.

Hopefully this has been useful for you guys. Thanks once again for choosing to spend a bit of your day with me, and I'll be back again next week with another instalment of The Membership Guys Podcast.



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