Choosing the Right CMS for Your Business

Businesses spend weeks agonising over WordPress versus Shopify versus Squarespace, then spend ten minutes thinking about their content, their user journey, and what happens when they need to change something in two years. The platform decision matters — but less than most people think.

The CMS Decision Is Overrated

This is a counterintuitive thing to say in a guide about choosing a CMS, but it needs saying: most businesses would succeed on any of the major platforms. WordPress, Shopify, Squarespace — they all produce functioning websites. The difference between a website that works for a business and one that doesn't almost never comes down to which content management system is running behind the scenes.

What does determine success is the quality of the content, the logic of the structure, the clarity of the user journey, and whether anyone maintains the thing after it's built. These are all decisions that happen before, during, and after the platform choice — and they're the decisions that get the least attention because arguing about WordPress versus Shopify is more fun than writing a proper services page.

This guide will compare platforms honestly. But it starts with the decisions that actually matter, because choosing the perfect CMS for a website with poor content, no maintenance plan, and a confusing structure is like choosing the best engine for a car with no wheels.

What Actually Determines Whether Your Website Works

Before opening a single comparison tab, answer these questions. They're more important than any platform feature list.

What content will you publish, and how often? A restaurant that updates menus weekly has different needs from a solicitor whose services page changes once a year. If you'll be updating the site regularly, the editing experience matters enormously. If a developer handles all changes, the admin interface matters far less than flexibility and performance.

Who will maintain it? This is the question that separates realistic plans from wishful thinking. Every CMS needs some level of ongoing attention — security updates, content refreshes, performance monitoring. If the honest answer is "nobody," you need either a managed platform

that handles maintenance automatically or a care plan with someone who does it for you.

What does your website need to connect to? Booking systems, payment processors, CRM tools, accounting software, email marketing platforms — the integrations your business relies on constrain which platforms are realistic options. A physiotherapist who needs to integrate with Cliniko has different platform options than a retailer who needs to connect to Xero.

How important is search visibility? If organic search traffic is a significant source of business, you need a platform that gives you control over technical SEO elements: page titles, meta descriptions, URL structures, structured data, page speed. Some platforms give you full control; others give you almost none.

What happens in three years? Businesses evolve. A personal trainer starting out might need five pages today, but if the plan includes online booking, class schedules, membership areas, and eventually selling workout programmes, the platform needs to accommodate that growth without requiring a rebuild from scratch.

The Real Cost of Each Platform

The sticker price of a CMS is almost always misleading, because the upfront cost is the smallest part of the total investment. What matters is the total cost of ownership over three to five years — and this is where the comparison gets genuinely useful.

WordPress

WordPress itself is free, which creates the impression that it's cheap. It isn't — or rather, it can be, but the real costs are distributed across hosting, plugins, maintenance, and developer time.

Hosting runs anywhere from a few pounds a month for shared hosting (adequate for low-traffic sites) to managed WordPress hosting that handles updates, security, and performance optimisation. **Premium plugins** — for things like forms, SEO tools, security, and page builders — typically cost between forty and two hundred pounds per year each, and most WordPress sites use several. **Maintenance**, whether handled by a developer or a care plan, adds ongoing cost for updates, backups, and security monitoring.

Over three years, a well-maintained WordPress site for a small business typically costs more than people expect when they hear "WordPress is free." But the cost is front-loaded in the build and distributed across ongoing maintenance, rather than locked into monthly subscriptions. And crucially, you own the site — you can move hosts, change developers, or modify anything without permission from a platform vendor.

Shopify

Shopify's pricing is transparent at first glance — monthly plans with clear feature tiers. But the real cost includes transaction fees on every sale (unless you use Shopify Payments exclusively), plus the apps required for functionality that isn't included in the base platform.

The app ecosystem is Shopify's greatest strength and its most significant hidden cost. Review filtering, advanced SEO tools, loyalty programmes, multi-currency support, custom product options — each typically adds ten to fifty pounds per month. A typical Shopify store running the apps it actually needs often costs considerably more per month than the headline subscription price suggests.

Over three years, the cumulative subscription and app costs often exceed what a WordPress + WooCommerce build would have cost. The trade-off is that Shopify handles hosting, security, and updates automatically, and the ecommerce functionality is genuinely excellent out of the box.

Squarespace and Wix

The most predictable costs of any platform. Monthly subscription, domain included after the first year, hosting and security handled. What you pay is close to what it costs — with one caveat: limitations in these platforms often lead to hiring developers to work around constraints that wouldn't exist on more flexible platforms. The money saved on the platform can be partially offset by the cost of working within its limitations.

Custom Development

The highest upfront cost by a significant margin. Design, development, and testing for a custom-built site costs several times more than a WordPress or Shopify build. Ongoing costs depend on hosting choices and maintenance requirements, but the key cost factor is dependency: you need a developer (or development team) who understands the custom codebase for any changes, fixes, or updates. If that relationship ends, finding a replacement who can work with someone else's custom code is expensive and time-consuming.

WordPress: Honest Assessment

WordPress powers roughly 40% of websites globally, and for most UK service businesses — accountants, solicitors, consultancies, tradespeople, healthcare practices — it remains the sensible default. Not because it's perfect, but because it offers the best balance of flexibility, content management capability, SEO control, and ecosystem maturity.

The **block editor** (Gutenberg) has improved substantially since its rocky launch. Non-technical users can now update text, swap images, rearrange sections, and manage basic layouts without touching code. It's not as intuitive as Squarespace's drag-and-drop, but it's capable and getting better with each release. Full Site Editing extends this to headers, footers, and page templates, reducing the need for developer involvement in routine design changes.

The **plugin ecosystem** is WordPress's greatest asset and its biggest liability simultaneously. There is genuinely a plugin for almost anything, which means you can extend functionality without custom development. But every plugin is a potential security vulnerability, performance drag, and compatibility risk. A WordPress site running thirty plugins is a maintenance burden that most business owners don't anticipate when the site is built.

WordPress is not "set and forget." Core updates, plugin updates, PHP version updates, security monitoring, and periodic performance optimisation are not optional — they're necessary to keep the site secure, functional, and performing well. A WordPress site that hasn't been updated in eighteen months is a security incident waiting to happen. This maintenance reality is the most common source of frustration for business owners who chose WordPress expecting it to look after itself.

For businesses willing to invest in ongoing maintenance — whether through a care plan, a relationship with a developer, or learning to handle updates themselves — WordPress offers a level of flexibility and control that no closed platform can match. For those who genuinely want something they never need to think about, it's the wrong choice.

Shopify: When Selling Is the Whole Point

If your primary business function is selling physical products online, Shopify is purpose-built for that job and does it better than anything else at its price point. Inventory management, payment processing, shipping calculations, tax handling, and order management work out of the box with minimal configuration. These are features that require plugins, configuration, and sometimes custom development on WordPress — on Shopify, they're native.

The platform handles hosting, security, and updates automatically. You never think about SSL certificates, server maintenance, or security patches. For business owners who want to focus on their products rather than their technology, this genuinely matters.

The frustrations tend to surface after the first year. **SEO limitations** become apparent: the blog functionality is basic, URL structures are inflexible (products always live under /products/, collections under /collections/), and some technical SEO elements are harder to control than on

WordPress. **Liquid templating** — Shopify's template language — is powerful but has a smaller developer pool than PHP/WordPress, which can affect the cost and availability of custom development work.

The biggest surprise for most Shopify merchants is the **app cost creep**. The base platform covers core ecommerce, but anything beyond that — advanced product filtering, loyalty programmes, multi-location inventory, subscription products — requires paid apps. Monthly app costs that seemed trivial individually can accumulate to a significant overhead, and switching apps often means losing data and configuration.

For straightforward product-based businesses — a clothing boutique, a food producer selling direct, a gift shop going online — Shopify is excellent and the monthly cost is justified by the reduction in technical headaches. For businesses that need heavy content alongside their shop, or those with tight margins where app costs eat into profitability, the picture is more complicated.

Squarespace and Wix: The Honest Trade-Off

These platforms deserve genuine credit for what they do well. For a portrait photographer, a yoga instructor, a freelance consultant, or any business where the website is essentially a credible online presence rather than a commercial engine, Squarespace and Wix can be the right choice. The templates are polished, the editing experience is intuitive, and you can have something presentable online in a weekend.

The trade-off is a ceiling, and it's lower than most people expect when they start. SEO control is limited — you can set page titles and meta descriptions, but technical SEO elements like structured data, advanced redirect management, and granular URL control are restricted or unavailable. Extending functionality beyond what the platform provides is either impossible or requires clunky workarounds. Performance is adequate but not controllable — you can't optimise server configuration, implement advanced caching, or fine-tune loading behaviour.

And the most significant limitation only becomes apparent when you want to leave:**migration from Squarespace or Wix means rebuilding from scratch.** Your content can be partially exported, but your design, your layouts, your custom elements, and your SEO history don't transfer. If you outgrow the platform, moving to WordPress or Shopify is not a migration — it's a new website project.

If you're confident your website needs won't outgrow what these platforms offer, they're a solid, affordable choice. If there's any chance you'll need more flexibility within two to three years, starting on a more extensible platform costs less in the long run than migrating later.

The Headless Question

Headless CMS is a term you'll encounter if you spend any time researching modern web development. The concept is straightforward: instead of a single system that manages both content and presentation (like WordPress), you separate them. Content lives in a dedicated CMS — Contentful, Sanity, Strapi, or similar — and the website is built separately using a modern framework like Next.js or Astro, pulling content from the CMS via an API.

The advantages are real: exceptional performance (pages can be pre-built and served from a CDN), complete design freedom (no template constraints), and the ability to deliver the same content to multiple channels — website, mobile app, kiosk, digital signage — from a single content source.

The honest assessment is that **headless is over-recommended**, largely because developers enjoy building with modern frameworks and the technical architecture is genuinely elegant. But for a ten-page service business website, headless is over-engineering. The performance gains are marginal compared to a well-optimised WordPress site. The development cost is higher. The content editing experience is often less intuitive for non-technical users. And you're dependent on a developer for changes that a business owner could handle themselves in WordPress.

Headless CMS makes genuine sense when you have **multiple delivery channels** (a website and a mobile app sharing the same content), when**performance is genuinely business-critical** (sub-second load times drive measurable revenue differences), when you have a **development team that can support it long-term**, or when your content model is complex enough to benefit from a structured content system designed specifically for that purpose.

For everyone else, a well-built WordPress site or a properly configured Shopify store will serve you better, cost less, and be easier to maintain.

Migration: The Decision Nobody Plans For

Most businesses don't think about platform migration when they're choosing their first CMS. It feels premature, like thinking about divorce before the wedding. But platform migrations are common — businesses outgrow their tools, requirements change, better options emerge — and the cost and complexity vary dramatically depending on where you're starting.

What transfers: raw content (text, images) can usually be exported in some form. Basic blog posts and pages move between platforms with moderate effort. Product catalogues can be exported as CSV files from most ecommerce platforms, though data structures rarely match perfectly and cleaning up the import is always more work than anyone estimates.

What doesn't transfer: design and layout. Every migration is functionally a redesign, because templates, custom styling, and page layouts are platform-specific. This is the most expensive part of any migration, and the part most often underestimated.

What you can lose: search equity. Every page on your old site that ranked in Google had authority built up over months or years. If the URL structure changes during migration (and it almost always does), you need comprehensive 301 redirects mapping every old URL to its new equivalent. Miss this, and you lose rankings that took months to build — visitors finding your old URLs through bookmarks, external links, or cached search results will hit dead ends. Google will eventually figure out the new structure, but "eventually" means weeks to months of reduced visibility.

The practical takeaway: **choosing a more capable platform initially is almost always cheaper than migrating to it later.** The extra upfront investment in a flexible platform pays for itself many times over compared to the cost, disruption, and risk of a migration project two or three years down the line.

AI and the Evolving CMS Landscape

AI is changing how content management systems work, though the impact is more evolutionary than revolutionary so far. WordPress has AI-powered plugins for content drafting, image generation, and SEO suggestions. Shopify Magic offers AI-generated product descriptions. Headless CMS platforms are integrating AI into content workflows.

More interesting than the AI features themselves is what they signal about platform longevity. Platforms with active development communities and corporate backing are adapting quickly. Platforms that have stagnated are falling behind. When choosing a CMS, the health and trajectory of its development community matters for the same reason it matters when choosing a car manufacturer: you want to be confident that updates, improvements, and support will continue for the lifetime of your investment.

For a deeper comparison of specific platform features and the latest capabilities, our detailed CMS comparison covers the technical landscape in more depth.

Making the Decision

After all the comparisons and considerations, the decision comes down to three questions:

What does your website need to do in year one? If it needs to sell products, start with Shopify. If it needs flexible content management with room to grow, start with WordPress. If it genuinely just needs to exist as a credible online presence, Squarespace will do.

What will it need to do in year three? If you can see complexity coming — ecommerce, booking systems, member areas, multiple content types — start on a platform that can accommodate it. Growing into a platform is manageable; migrating away from one is expensive.

Who will maintain it? If the answer is you, the editing experience and learning curve matter more than any feature list. If the answer is a developer, flexibility and technical capability matter more. If the answer is nobody — and this is more common than anyone admits — either commit to a care plan or choose a managed platform that handles maintenance automatically.

If the answer to that third question is "nobody," no platform will save you. A neglected WordPress site becomes a security risk. A neglected Shopify store becomes irrelevant. A neglected Squarespace page becomes embarrassing. The CMS is not the strategy — it's the tool. The strategy is everything you do with it.