



5 *Keys to*
Rockin'
Websites



WEBDESIGN.COM
PRESS



Meet iThemes.

iThemes Media, LLC was founded in 2008 by [Cory Miller](#), a former newspaper journalist and public relations/communication practitioner, turned freelance moonlighting web designer, turned full-time entrepreneur. Miller founded iThemes in his home, fulfilling a lifelong dream of running his own company.

Since then, the company has grown into a full enterprise providing professional, premium themes ([iThemes.com](#)), professional plugins ([PluginBuddy.com](#)) and over 300 hours of professional web design and WordPress developer training – with 15-20 new courses being added each month ([WebDesign.com](#)). These three brands make up what is generally referred to as the iThemes brand.

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Introduction

Throughout this time of growth, we've learned a lot of do's and don'ts. In fact, most of the products we create and our own internal operating procedures have come out of mistakes we've made. And sometimes they were whoppers!

The same is true with creating rockin' websites that produce the intended results. We had a lot of trial and error, and have honed it down to 5 key elements every rockin' website must have. It's not enough to have a site that looks good. It also has to produce.

These **5 Keys to Rockin' Websites** will help you create your best site, or redesign an existing site, so that you get your intended results. These keys will serve as a shortcut for you so you can get on with the business of your business.

Ultimately, our goal is really to make people's lives more awesome...and we know that having rockin' websites that produce great businesses can, in turn, produce high quality lives and desirable lifestyles.

Please let us know what you think and let us know how we can best support you in creating the life you want.

—The Entire Team at iThemes

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“Whoa.
That website rocks.”

That sentiment didn't happen automatically. Someone put a lot of time, effort and forethought into a website to garner that reaction. If you want a site that rocks people's socks off, you've got some work to do. We can help. We've got five keys that can help you build a rockin' website.

Key #1: A Killer Brandable Domain Name

Your domain name is one of the first things people see. Is it something catchy and unique that will stick in people's heads? Or is it long and forgettable? One of the first steps to having a rockin' website is your domain name. You need a short and catchy url that people can remember and share with their friends. It needs to be something you can build a brand around.

Owning your own domain name is a no-brainer. You can't be a respectable website sitting on Blogspot or Tumblr with some ridiculous domain like **YourName.SomethingElse.com**. If you want your site to rock, give it the respect of having its own name. But picking your domain is easier said than done.

Here are some tips to help you out:

- **Keep It Short:** The longer your url is the harder it will be to remember, and the more likely people will misspell it.
- **Easy to Remember:** A string of six random letters might be really short, but it's not easy to remember. Your domain name has to stick in people's minds in order for them to remember it and tell others about it.
- **Work With Your Brand:** If you already have a brand name you really need to find a url that works with your brand. People will try to type in the name of your company with a .com at the end anyway, so you might as well go with it. It goes without saying that you don't use someone else's brand or brand terms without their written permission. For example, WordPress is a brand, so you can't use that term in your domain name. But you can use "WP" as we have done at WPShirts.com.
- **Use Keywords:** Using search terms as part of your domain name can increase your search engine rankings and increase the chances of people finding your site. They need to fit into the name naturally, though. For example, WebDesign.com includes the common search term "web design", assisting it in organic search engine ranking. What keywords would people search under in order to find your type of business? Can you work one or more of them into your domain name without it sounding too awkward?

- **Relevant and Descriptive:** It helps if your domain name describes what your site does in some way. It doesn't have to (Amazon, Google, Yahoo are all good examples), but it makes it that much easier, especially if you're not Amazon, Google or Yahoo.
- **How Does It Sound:** Say your url out loud—is it clear how to spell it? If someone tells a friend the url over the phone would they have to spell it out? If you did a radio ad would it be perfectly clear how to spell it?
- **Avoid Numbers:** Numbers in a domain name can be very confusing. It is never clear if the numbers should be written out or not: 7 or seven?
- **Avoid Homophones:** 4 or for? There, their or they're? Your or you're? To, too or two? See how confusing that can be? When someone is confused, they usually just move on to the next thing – such as your competitor's site.
- **Spell it Right:** Beware of words that are easily misspelled. If you do use them, buy the url with the misspellings and redirect users to the correct url.
- **It's Dot Com:** Stick with the top level domains, like .com for businesses and .org for nonprofits. There are all kinds of other options out there, such as .biz, .info and .tv, but they're just not as accepted and people are likely to type .com anyway. The iPhone includes a “.com” button, which shows you just how widespread .coms are.

If you do use one of the other types of domain names, make sure you are using it for a specific purpose. For example, we have live streaming training webinars every Tuesday at 11am central time. We broadcast these at iThemes.tv. See how we used our existing brand for recognizability with the .tv domain for a specific, singular purpose?

- **Ask Other People:** It's easy to think you have a killer domain name and overlook the fact that it could easily mean something else. Getting a different perspective can save you some embarrassment.
- **Avoid Hard to Read Letters:** Certain letters next to each other can be hard to read, depending on the font, like l and i (lilili) and m, n and r (mnrnmnr) or v and w (vwvww).
- **Buy What You Need:** If the url you love is taken you can always make the current owner an offer. It will cost you more money, but it can be worth it in the end. And it might be less expensive than you think.

Spend some time brainstorming and come up with lots of ideas. If you have a few you like, it might be worth registering them all just in case. There's nothing worse than spending weeks debating a domain name, finally deciding and discovering that someone beat you to it. However you get there, you need a strong url that works. It can be something practical that just does the job, or it can be something memorable that helps your site spread. Re-branding your site later on can be challenging, so choose wisely the first time.

What happens if you don't have a great domain name?

- Your name isn't memorable, so it's less likely people will spread the word, no matter how good your information is.
- You may not like it after awhile because you'll be frustrated with the poor results it's getting. One of the worst things that can happen to an entrepreneur is that they fall out of love with their business or domain name.
- Nobody knows who you are or finds your site, so all your hard work is for naught.

Key #2: High Quality Hosting

A rockin' website can't rock without great hosting. A host is the server where your website's files are located and usually a packaged service that makes your website available to the public. If a website is slow or doesn't always load properly, it's usually a problem with the hosting company.

If you want to have a good website, it has to be there when someone tries to visit. If it's not there, you'll lose people. If it's a poor host your site might go down more often, you'll experience slow load times and hiccups when pages load and then stop. Your audience won't put up with that.

It is also critical to select a host that is WordPress-friendly. You want a hosting company that not only understands WordPress but welcomes WP users with open arms. While the hosting company can't provide you with WordPress specific support, if their promotional materials are in any way negative toward WordPress or the level of help they are willing to give you, just go somewhere else.

- Hosting should be something you pick once and then never have to worry about. And it does work that way, if you pick the right host.
- Pick a company that's reliable and responsive. They should have a solid track record and be able to point to a list of happy clients.
- Talk to your friends and ask for recommendations. You'll get an honest assessment and learn who's good and who to avoid.
- Check out what kind of support the company has. No matter how good they are it's possible something will go wrong, and when it does you need to know how quickly they'll respond. It only takes one second of ill-timed downtime to lose a customer.

We recommend [HostGator](#). We've had a great experience with them and they offer excellent customer service and affordable prices. Plus, if you use coupon code BackupBuddy, you'll get 25% off your initial order. This is perfect for people wanting a long-term hosting solution that is WordPress friendly and understandings what WordPress sites need.

Once again, Hostgator is our company of choice.

What happens if you don't have high quality hosting?

Basically it's a set up for a nightmare!

- Your site goes down – usually at the most inopportune time.
- Customers can't find you.
- It's too difficult to make changes to your own files, so you have to rely on someone else, which increases your costs (and likely increases your frustration).
- You start to get fed up, which spills over in to how you manage your business and interact with your customers. Not a good thing.

Key #3:

Easy to Maintain

Websites don't run themselves. Well, they can, but when it happens it's not pretty. Anything you can do to make the maintenance process easier is going to increase your likelihood of success. Time spent upgrading and maintaining your site is time you could have spent writing content, interacting with customers or making things better.

Maintaining your site means upgrading themes and plugins, as well as creating new content. But if doing any of these is difficult, it takes time away from serving your customers, marketing, and developing strong relationships (which translate into business success).

If you want your website to rock, it needs to be easy.

You should spend your time on content, not fighting with the code or some archaic system in order to upload your content. You want something that's simple and easy. Otherwise that barrier to entry is going to kill your excitement and energy for the site and pretty soon you'll be putting off working on the site. The next thing you know it's horribly out-dated, your traffic has nosedived and you've wasted your effort. You need to keep your site current and up to date and the best way to do that is to make sure it's easy to maintain.

Easy to maintain means that you're in control. You have the keys to your own website. You're not dependent on anyone else to update your site. If you have to email your text to someone else and wait for them to add it, you're doing it wrong.

This is so important because you need to be able to change your website whenever you want. This gives you the flexibility to shift on the fly and react to what's happening in your industry immediately. It should work on your schedule, not someone else's.

Get the right software.

A content management system (CMS) is the best way to make your site easy to maintain. A CMS is a piece of software that's installed on your server. Usually you log in through a webpage and you can edit your site directly in the browser. A CMS will let you easily add new pages, upload photos, change text and more.

There are all kinds of different CMS options out there, but we recommend [WordPress](#). It's flexible, powerful and easy to use. It can do as much or as little as you need. There are also loads of plugins that extend WordPress's functionality and themes that change how it looks. Plus, WordPress is open source, which means it is free to use.

Keep it current.

You also want to make sure the software you use is easy to update. WordPress is constantly evolving and releasing new versions, often with important security upgrades. You want to keep your installation current, and that's another maintenance hurdle. Thankfully WordPress makes it easy. Most of the time you can do upgrades with the click of a button. Whatever system you go with, make sure it's not a hassle. If it's a hassle, you'll put it off, it won't get done and your site won't be ready to rock.

To keep your theme and plugins current, we created a free plugin called [Easy Theme and Plugin Upgrades](#) (available from the WordPress repository). This makes your life easier – upgrading is as simple as selecting the zip file to upload, selecting “Yes” from a drop-down, and clicking “Install Now”.

Choose an easy-to-use professional/premium theme.

There is a lot of debate about whether you should use a free theme or a premium (paid-for) theme. Bottom line – you have to choose what is right for you. But keep in mind how much easier it is to work with a theme company that has multiple out-of-the-box themes to choose from and an extensive support desk with a strong reputation. No matter what theme you use, at some point you're going to have questions. Does your theme provide a place where you can get professional answers and support? Is the theme easy for you to use? Can you use it as-is right away and make modifications as you go?

Back it up.

Keeping your site backed up is about peace of mind and protecting your investment. If you put a lot of time into your site there's no reason to throw it away by leaving it susceptible to lost data, hackers or other events outside your control. If your backup system isn't easy and automatic, it'll never happen.

It's never a good idea to rely solely on your hosting company for your backups. You want to have more control than that! It's also not a good idea to rely on your memory – hoping you'll remember to back your site up once a week or so. If you're like most people, you already have a lot to keep track of. History has shown that when it comes to making backups – whether of your website or your hard drive – people have all the best intentions, but rarely follow through when left to their own devices.

Using a simple and easy to use backup system is a must have. With WordPress we recommend the [BackupBuddy plugin from PluginBuddy.com](#). It backs up EVERYTHING – your entire WordPress installation, including content, plugins, widgets, etc. – not just the database. And YOU are in complete control of when you backup, where the backups are stored, and how many are stored. And you have the ability to quickly and completely restore your site with just a few clicks should the unthinkable happen.

Stop the spam.

If your site is going to have any kind of community, then there's the potential for spam. You want to spend your time interacting with people, not sorting through spam. Make sure whatever system you use has good spam filters and gives you control. WordPress comes with powerful tools and there are plenty of plugins to give you extra power.

One recommended strategy is to use contact forms vs. displaying your email address on the site. Specifically, we use and recommend [Gravity Forms](#). This is much more than a contact form, of course. It's really more of an entire information gathering system that helps you reduce spam while building a stronger relationship with your readers and customers.

Take it easy.

The whole point of all this setup work is to get the software and the systems out of the way and let you focus on your site and your content. Make sure you choose wisely now so you don't run into headaches later. The right setup will make your site easy to use, update and maintain. That means you'll be able to focus more on what matters—the content. And that's a giant leap toward having a rockin' website.

What happens if your site is not easy to maintain?

If it's not easy to maintain, you'll either not maintain it, which has untold negative ramifications, or you'll spend a lot of money getting other people to handle it for you. If you know what's involved in maintaining your site, you'll have that much more control over your business and business expenses.

Key #4:

Attractive But Useful Design

Now that we've covered some of the basics of how your site is setup, it's time to talk about how it looks – and evaluate whether how it looks does what you need it to. Web design is important, but you need to remember that it's not just about how it looks—it's about how it works. You want your site to look good, sure, but you also want it to be useful.

A beautiful site that's impossible to use is a waste.

Think about design maintenance.

Just like we talked about your site being easy to maintain, you need to make sure your design is easy to maintain and update as well. If you're using WordPress, this will mean you want a theme that's flexible and easy to change (check out [iThemes Builder](#)). Not all themes are created equal. So you'll want to do your research. You might want to pay for a quality theme instead of relying on a free one. You might even hire someone to design a custom theme for your site. Just make sure it's easy to tweak.

You may want to change photos or add a banner somewhere or modify the size of text, for example. There are any number of design changes you might want to make down the road and the more flexible your design is the easier you'll be able to make those changes. That means less frustration and a more happy you. That's the path that leads to a rockin' website.

Fit your brand.

One of the most important things to consider is a design that matches your brand. The visual elements of your site will communicate a lot about who you are and what you're offering. You need to be sure the visual matches reality. The design doesn't just look good, it helps communicate who you are.

If you're a straight-laced, by the numbers kind of company, a grunge font and graffiti look is not going to fit at all. It's a total mismatch. If you're a fun and carefree company, a rigid, dark design isn't going to work either. You want everything to work together to communicate a singular message about who you are. Don't be afraid to let who you are shine through in your brand and design. You may want to keep a check on how wacky you let your site get, but be authentically you.

Plan and organize.

Much of your website's design will come down to organization. How do you arrange the information and divide it up into pages? How do users navigate your site to find what they're looking for? You need to organize your information in a way that makes sense—not just to you, but to your users.

A common mistake companies make is to model their website structure on their company structure.

Big mistake. Nobody cares how your company is organized and it likely wouldn't make sense to your customer anyway. Divisions between marketing, research and production mean nothing. Think like your ideal customer and organize your site from their perspective. What are they looking for? How would they think to find it? In what order or sequence would they tend to search for information on your site?

A well organized site and the easy maintenance we talked about before go hand in hand. Can you easily add new pages without breaking your site's structure? Are you using drop downs that easily add those new menu items and create a simple, easy to use navigation? Let's hope so.

Set priorities.

An effective design will also give priority to what's important (and that means what's important to your customers, not you). Be sure you're putting the important things where people will see them easily and naturally. Upper right and upper left portions of the site are key spots the eyes go to.

Also, don't bury your important content on a secondary page. Find a way to put it on the homepage, or at least use a teaser to get people to take notice, then lead them to the rest of the important content. A good site design will use highlights and features to draw attention and give a sense of priority.

Sometimes that hierarchy of information is hard to determine when you're too close. Step back and get the perspective of an outsider. Is your About page and picture of your headquarters really that important? Apple doesn't even have an about page. Why not? Maybe instead of talking about themselves, they let their products and approach do it for them.

Know yourself.

While you're considering all these elements of a useful design, also remember your own strengths and weaknesses. Know yourself. If keeping your content current is going to be a problem, design the site with that in mind. If you love updating content and it drives sales, put it front and center. But if that's a constant chore for you, minimize your news section (or don't even include one).

This is perhaps the most important component of a useful design. If it doesn't work for you, it's not useful.

What happens if your site does not have an attractive, useful design?

- You won't like your own site, so you won't keep it updated or tend to it the way you should.
- Your site won't produce the results you want or attract the ideal visitors and customers.
- Visitors will be confused when they come to your site, which will make them leave to look for something less confusing.

Key #5: Effective and Functional

More than anything a rockin' website must do something. If it doesn't accomplish anything, what's the point? Your site needs to be effective.

Define the objectives.

Effective at what? Your website needs to have clear objectives. What do you want your website to do? Generate sales? Attract emails signups? Give away useful information? What do you expect people to do? Are they here to read information or browse products or contact you for follow-up? Make sure it's clear. This will also drive your design process, so make sure you think it through early.

Motivate action.

An effective website motivates people to action. They need to do something and the site needs to help make that happen. You need to offer a call to action that makes it clear what you want your site visitors to do. Do you want them to join your mailing list, vote on an idea, sign a pledge, buy a product, apply something you've taught them? Whatever it is, make it clear.

Know your audience.

In order to be effective, you need to know your audience and your ideal customer. Who are they? What are they interested in? How do they think? If you don't know your audience, you'll have a hard time relating and connecting with them. Learn who they are and plan your site accordingly.

It's helpful to have a specific customer (real, imaginary, or a composite) in mind when you design your site and write your copy. That way you know you're creating it for the user, not your own ego.

Measure, measure.

For a site to be effective you also have to know what's working and what's not. The only way you can know what works is to make your site measurable. Build in ways to track effectiveness. Maybe you track web stats that show you the number of visitors and compare it to your number of sales—do your sales increase with the number of visitors? Or do your sales spike after you've sent out an email newsletter or posted a specific blog entry? Know what's happening on your site. Evaluate your stats so you can refine your site and make it even better. If your blog entries have little impact on anything, maybe you should blog less – or differently. Or if traffic nosedives when you don't blog, maybe it's time to blog more.

But make sure everything you measure ties back to your objectives. Traffic is great, but if it's not accomplishing your objectives then it's worthless. Numbers in and of themselves are meaningless—they need to be tied to something.

Go where people are.

Having a website is like having your headquarters on the Internet. It's a great central hub for all your information, but you can't expect all your customers to come to you. You have to go to them. Include subscription options on your site for email, RSS, Twitter, Facebook, Linked In and any other tools your particular customers might use. The goal is to speak people's language. Let people follow you how they want to. They might not want to visit your site, but would follow your every word on Twitter.

These lists of followers are incredibly valuable to you because it's a way to stay in touch with your fans. These are people interested enough in what you're doing that they want to stay connected. That's a goldmine of customers to tap into—so be sure you treat them right! It's a good idea to offer some kind of incentive for subscribing or following. Give them a discount or a valuable, free PDF (like this one!) to make subscribing or following more enticing and meaningful.

Focus on good content.

You're an expert at what you do right? So share that knowledge with your customers. Educate them. You'll be proving your expertise, you'll position yourself as an expert in your field and you'll generate good will among potential customers. It's also a good way to make your site easier to find—it gives search engines something to point to and it gives real people links they can share with their friends.

Creating good content is the most important way to make your site effective. That's why blogs have been so popular over the years—they're all about content, quality content, that gets updated and expanded on a regular basis.

Be findable.

An effective site is one people can find. You need to make sure your site shows up in the search engines for search terms related to what you do. That's one of the biggest ways people will find your site. The process of doing that is called search engine optimization (SEO) and it's a big business. But you don't need to be intimidated—there are simple things you can do to ensure that your site is optimized for the web. From choosing WordPress as your content management system to selecting a few choice plugins and carefully crafting your content, you can ensure that your site appears high in the search results and people can find it.

If you aren't already managing your own SEO efforts, consider using the [SEO plugin that comes with iThemes Builder](#), or the [All-in-One SEO Pack](#) available from the WordPress.org repository.

Make contact easy.

Finally, in order to be effective, contact has to be easy. We talked about your call to action and making it clear what you want your customers to do. But you also need to make sure simple contact is easy. Sometimes your call to action won't fit every customer but they still want to take that next step. Make it easy for them by making it easy to get in touch with you. If you accept phone calls, make sure your phone number is easy to find and use a simple contact form. We provide a free contact form called [ContactBuddy](#). Plus we recommend the premium plugin [Gravity Forms](#).

What happens if your site is not effective and functional?

Seems like a silly question, right? Obviously this is a must, just as all the keys to a rockin' website are.

If you're going to have a website, it might as well be a rockin' one.

Some bonuses:

*While these 5 keys are fairly straightforward, we also recognize that doing the work takes some, well, work. This section is designed to share tools and resources we use on a regular basis that may be of assistance to you. Our goal is that you have the most rockin' website you can, that it match you and your brand authentically, and that in creating this ideal site you are designing – and living – **an awesome life**.*

Tools and Support to Do the Work

iThemes Builder - A powerful WordPress theme that gives you flexibility and functionality, without having to modify any of your theme code. It also includes support from the iThemes team to help you make the most of Builder, plus the Builder SEO plugin and the super-easy-to-use Style Manager.

PluginBuddy - PluginBuddy has an entire collection of WordPress plugins that can help you customize your site, giving it a unique look and creating a magnetic experience for your readers. Basically the plugins at PluginBuddy help you do more, more easily. From back up to mobile, we've got you covered.

BackupBuddy - This is our #1 selling plugin because of how easy it is to use and how much peace and relief it brings to users. Knowing your site is backed up and can be restored or migrated at a moment's notice give your power and control over your site.

WebDesign.com - WebDesign.com already has over 250 hours of professional WordPress and web design training available, with 15-20 additional courses being added every month. Membership also includes the much-raved about WordPress Developer's Course, as well as multiple premium training programs.

The Web Designer's ToolKit - The 3-in-1 success building toolkit for anyone wanting to manage their own website or have their own web design business. This ToolKit includes everything you need – the All-Access Theme Pass, PluginBuddy Developer Suite, WebDesign.com Premium Annual Membership and your personal copy of WordPress All-in-One for Dummies.

Read More

Hostgator Hosting - Our recommended WordPress-friendly and BackupBuddy-friendly hosting resource.

Gravity Forms - Contact Forms, Order Forms, plus so much more.

Recommended Books

[WordPress All-in-One for Dummies](#)

A thorough how-to guide for maximizing your WordPress experience. This one giant book includes eight mini-books in one handy resource (our own Cory Miller is one of the authors!). *WordPress All-in-One For Dummies* is included with any purchase of the [WebDesigner's ToolKit](#) from [iThemes.com](#).

[WordPress for Dummies](#)

The basic best-selling guide to WordPress for beginners, fully updated for the newest version of WordPress. Written by Lisa Sabin-Wilson, a good friend of iThemes and founder of one of our partner company, [AllureThemes.com](#).

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iThemes is the leader in premium, professional WordPress themes for web designers and website owners who want to create rockin' websites without having to touch a line of code. Our motto is "Less code. More websites." With a massive selection of themes to choose from - including the flagship theme, iThemes Builder and its 40+ child themes, plus the 80+ Classic Themes - you're sure to find a theme that's just right for your web design project. Visit iThemes.com to select the right theme for you (and your clients).