



Selling With WordPress: Easy E-Commerce Options for Authors and Publishers



The world of WordPress is booming. In fact, it's estimated WordPress now runs 25% of all websites that have a Content Management System (CMS)¹. For your WordPress project, you can choose to work with any of a wide range of designers, developers, agencies and hosting companies; not to mention a thriving ecosystem of good-value themes, free and premium plugins and other goodies. This cornucopia of choices can be overwhelming.

Bookswarm has built its business around WordPress, and one of the things we're increasingly being asked by clients to work on is e-commerce. With the range of options widening we thought we'd provide a tour of some of the solutions out there, and look at some of the issues and challenges specific to the world of publishing, and to selling books online.

Quick and cheap

If your requirement is simply for ad-hoc selling, maybe of a limited-edition product or tickets for an event, this can be achieved without any fuss using GravityForms and its PayPal add-in. GravityForms is a brilliant form-building plugin for WordPress, widely used by developers. Once you have a PayPal Payments Standard or Pro account, you can use the add-in to make any form in to an order form.

PayPal handles the money and GravityForms can generate the order acknowledgment to the customer and the e-mail to your team with details of the new order. Great if you need e-commerce in a hurry, but still perfectly professional if correctly set up.

We have created forms like this to sell event passes and short-run publications, but with the power of GravityForms you could sell almost anything, including allowing users to customise products while they're placing an order.

¹ Source: [Venturebeat](#)

Shortcode-based solutions

We have been very interested to see the emergence of a new type of e-commerce solution in the last few years. These 'shortcode' based solutions are designed to be easily and quickly integrated in to existing websites, and work extremely well with WordPress, especially if integrated in to an existing product catalogue.

They rely on the insertion of a couple of lines of code in to an existing site: one snippet (in every page) adds support for a basket and checkout to the whole site; the second (one shortcode per product) handles the creation of the 'Buy' buttons.

PRO-TIP: A shortcode is a WordPress-specific code that lets you do nifty things with very little effort. Shortcodes can embed files or create objects that would normally require lots of complicated, ugly code in just one line. Shortcode = shortcut.

One such provider is [Shoprocket](#) and another is [Snipcart](#). While Shoprocket requires you to add details of each of your products to its system, Snipcart doesn't need that extra step – so a website that's already built on a database of products (title, ISBN and price) could be up and running as a shop in very little time indeed.

The cost of Snipcart is paid in the form of a percentage of sales taken through the platform – 2% for most customers. This is in addition to the fees taken by the payment gateway provider. With options including PayPal, Stripe and Authorize.Net, there is some scope to shop around and get the best deal, although the range of provider options is nowhere near as wide as when using WooCommerce (more on which later).

One area where Snipcart is quite prescriptive is shipping. You can integrate your shop with couriers, such as FedEx and UPS, and users will be given weight-based shipping prices based on their location. Or you can offer free shipping, and absorb that cost in to the prices you offer via the website. However, there is limited scope for the more complex shipping rules that some publishers will require.

CASE STUDY: We implemented Snipcart-based e-commerce for independent publisher Patrician Press. Patrician already had a content-managed website, built by Bookswarm, which listed all of their books. We had Snipcart up and running in a matter of hours, with Buy buttons in situ and a link to the cart and checkout. Because all of the key Snipcart screens appear as pop-ups, no design adjustments were needed.

For publishers and even authors wanting to dip a toe in to the waters of e-commerce, shortcode-based solutions could be an excellent and speedy way to find out what the appetite for direct sales is from their audience, without having to commit to a whole new system or to a long-term e-commerce strategy.

WooCommerce for the win



WooCommerce is the daddy of WordPress ecommerce plugins – and since its acquisition by Automattic, the owners of WordPress.com, it's now more than ever the leading choice.

The first thing to know about WooCommerce is that the core software is free. Out of the box it provides a full, searchable



catalogue, shopping cart, checkout, customer log-in, stock control, support for virtual and downloadable products, a range of approaches to shipping costs and many more features besides. And if you only want to use PayPal to process payments, that's built-in too.

Some extensions do cost money: a wide range of payment processors are supported – for example SagePay, WorldPay, Stripe – but typically an extension costing around \$79 is required to use them. These fall in to two types:

- 'Redirect' type payment processors see the user leaving the site to make their payment, then returning when it's been successful
- Embedded payment processing takes place within the pages of your site – and although you will still never be exposed to the credit card details of your customers, these systems may require your site to be compliant with Payment Card Industry guidelines, which can introduce additional complexity to the project

A vast array of premium extensions is available, both from Woo themselves and from third parties. Want to offer 'buy two, get one free'? There's an extension for that. Want to sell memberships which offer discounts on products? There's an extension for that too. Almost any kind of promotional pricing scenario you can think of has been catered for already. You can even sell DRM-protected eBooks directly from within WooCommerce using EditionGuard (although they won't be compatible with Kindle devices). There are even plugins which help retailers to comply with the Mini One-Stop Shop (MOSS) VAT regime which currently applies to the sale of digital downloads to buyers within the EU.

PRO TIP: Shipping (postage and packing, if you prefer) is often a very complex area, and for businesses which have an established track record with e-commerce (or mail order), it can be important to maintain existing approaches to offering free shipping, or charging different shipping rates to customers in different parts of the world. The good news is, WooCommerce can cope with almost any scenario. It now includes support for 'shipping zones' so the shipping charges applied will be determined by the destination address of the customer.

For publishers without world rights in their list, it is also possible to exclude some of their products from being sent to certain countries or groups of countries.

Because WooCommerce is well-established software with its own Application Programming Interface (API), it can be integrated with all kinds of external systems. Bookswarm has built plugins to import product data from retail system Merlio and from bibliographic data providers Booksonix and Biblio, and to send details of completed orders to Combined Book Services, Gardners, Macmillan Distribution and Booksource.

Bookswarm has built WooCommerce-based shops for Alma Books, Belgravia Books Collective, Christopherus Homeschool Resources, Floris Books, Grub Street, Matthew James Publishing, Robert Hale, SPCK, and Wasafiri Magazine. Collectively, those projects have encompassed a wide sweep of requirements:

- Bundling
- Promotional discount codes distributed via e-mail and social media
- Preferential pricing for key accounts
- Complex shipping rules
- Territorial restrictions
- Subscriptions
- Memberships



- Gifting
- Custom reports and data exports
- Gift Aid for charitable donations

WooCommerce (and the array of free and premium extensions around it) has risen to the challenge of providing every one of these features. If you're looking to sell a meaningful inventory of products, and especially if you need to make your shop talk to other parts of your supply chain, WooCommerce may well be an option worth exploring.

More than one way to sell

Of course, these three approaches aren't the only ones available – but they represent a spectrum from ad-hoc to fully-featured that will cover the needs of a great many publishers and even authors who wish to sell directly – perhaps selling signed stock or limited editions. E-commerce does not need to be scary, and it does not need to be expensive, and we hope this white paper can provide some inspiration for those looking to do business from their websites in future, or improve their existing setup.

About Bookswarm

Bookswarm specialises in creating wonderful websites for book publishers, agents, bookshops and others in the world of books.

Bookswarm's unwavering sector focus enables us to add considerable value to every project, because we understand the book trade, the book production process and the considerable challenges facing publishers.

About the author



Simon Appleby is the founder and Managing Director of [Bookswarm](#), the only digital agency in the UK dedicated to delivering projects for publishers, authors and others in the world of books. Bookswarm has unrivalled experience in meeting the communications needs of publishers and authors in a way that is both excellent value for money and very easy to use, and specialises in WordPress development.

Bookswarm have delivered e-commerce projects for Alma Books, Belgravia Books Collective, Christopherus Homeschool Resources, Floris Books, Green Bottle Press, Grub Street, IVP, Matthew James Publishing, Patrician Press, Robert Hale, SPCK, and Wasafiri Magazine.

You can e-mail Simon – simon.appleby@bookswarm.co.uk – or call him on +44 (0) 7847 912989.