

Matt Mullenweg: Conquering the internet

To most entrepreneurs, the idea of spending years developing a free, open-source content management system sounds like a poor way to make a living, much less to start a successful business. Matt Mullenweg, however, did just that in creating WordPress, and wrote himself into the history books in the process.

With a net worth of over \$40 million USD, Mullenweg's software now powers over 75,000,000 websites, and he runs a business that directly hosts approximately half that number. WordPress is the single most popular content management system (CMS) on the internet, holding nearly 60 per cent of the CMS market share. The secret to Mullenweg's success lies both in his personal talents, and his unorthodox entry into entrepreneurship.

Early Life

Mullenweg's father was a computer scientist, meaning that he grew up around computers and programming. He did not, however, set out determined to launch a career using his coding skills, or to become an entrepreneur. Rather, he attended a high school for performing and visual arts, where he studied jazz saxophone, before studying political science at the University of Houston in Texas. It was there that he, together with co-founder Mike Little, decided to develop WordPress using Michel Valdivia's open-source b2 blogging platform in 2003.

How Mullenweg took over the internet

Mullenweg grew up understanding that the Internet offered nearly unlimited potential with regard to how web pages could work, how content could be set up and formatted, and how different sites could interact. Simply knowing that he could change the b2 platform to suit his needs was the seed that eventually became WordPress. After launching WordPress, though, this attitude continued to allow him to transform his product to suit his needs, and to make WordPress into a uniquely useful and efficient tool.

In 2004, Mullenweg co-founded the Global Multimedia Protocols Group (GMPG), which enabled the use of software to automatically identify and gather data from web pages that used their microformats. By early 2005, Mullenweg and his WordPress team, working with CNET, delivered the theme system, moderation features, and a redesign of the front and back ends. This put Mullenweg's CMS, and his new company, Automattic, on the map, but it was WordPress' open-source background that ultimately made it the massive success that it is today.

Using open source to dominate the market

Unlike its competing content systems, WordPress can be customised by third parties. As a result, users did immediately contribute to its development, and continue to do so today, making it incredibly customisable and versatile. There are over 3000 free GPL licensed themes available to users, and many thousands more available for purchase.

The WordPress core contains over 430,000 lines of code, contributed by more than 70 developers. Since its launch in 2003, it has had an estimated 112 years worth of working hours dedicated to its development, much of which improved the user experience at no cost to WordPress itself. As a result, other content management systems simply can't compete effectively. Paid WordPress features largely only serve to enhance a free open-source platform that is already better than what competing paid platforms offer.

What we can learn

Matt Mullenweg is a rare entrepreneur in that he created the ecosystem within which his business operates. Wordpress.com, his for-profit hosting service and free blogging platform, is so successful not only because of its simple utility, versatility, and quality, but because of its association with the free open-source WordPress software (available via WordPress.org) that he built. WordPress is the world's default content management system, and any products Mullenweg's business produces for it automatically become similarly incumbent.

Harnessing the power of free

WordPress was open-source by default, because it was based on b2, but Mullenweg could have chosen to code his own platform from scratch, rather than going the open source route. His choice, whether it was deliberate or not, defined his success. While he couldn't claim ownership of his software, and therefore couldn't sell it, he effectively created opportunity for other entrepreneurs and developers, as well as his own business.

Other businesses like Yoast, ElegantThemes, and WP Engine developed WordPress products, enhancing the CMS without requiring any kind of investment or encouragement from Mullenweg or Automattic. In this way, the WordPress software continues to evolve, growing and becoming more relevant over time; even, in theory, without any ongoing effort on Mullenweg's part. His paid features and services, however, would benefit by association, effectively marketing his products to the world. This has placed him and his business at the head of a self-sustaining and self-perpetuating brand, ultimately powered and grown by the developers and users who rely on it for their own success.

Meta Title: Matt Mullenweg: Conquering the Internet

Meta Description: In 2003, Matt Mullenweg decided to modify an open source blog platform. Today, and created what would soon become the world's most popular content management system.

Meta Keywords: matt mullenweg, wordpress, automattic, content management system, CMS, mullenweg, entrepreneur