

WordCamps

Building open-source camaraderie

Disruptive brands re-invent their category.

WordPress – the free, open-source platform that powers millions of websites worldwide – has opened the Web to small businesses and bloggers. Now powering 17% of the Web, with 100,000 new sites created every day, WordPress continues to shape Web design through community input. And WordCamps bring that community together.

WordCamps are informal, community-organized events put together by WordPress users locally, in cities around the world. Two- and three-day Camps bring together a wide range of bloggers, small business owners, casual WordPress users and core developers to share ideas and get to know each other.

There were about 70 WordCamps last year, half in the U.S. and half scattered around the world. It's a pretty traditional conference format: How-to sessions and case studies from local users, plus presentations by WordPress scions known worldwide. What makes WordCamp different: Everyone there is really into WordPress.

"It's a treat to be around other WordPress people and geek out. It's a super geeky fiefdom," says Jennifer Mylo, Master of Suggestion at Automattic, the parent of WordPress. "Because WordPress is an open-source product that isn't made in one place, people who collaborate don't see each other. WordCamp is their chance to be face-to-face with each other."

WordPress has no traditional marketing. As an open-source product, everything that builds the brand is grassroots word of mouth. And homegrown stickers have become the calling card of WordCamps.

In this culture, showing stickers on your laptop is pretty popular, like backpackers collect patches when they hike different trails," Mylo says. Stickers become a calling card and a conversation-starter. "So much that happens at WordCamp is based on conversation rather than traditional business tools," Mylo says.





“The community is the brand,”

Event organizers in each city design a sticker for their WordCamp, with a local touch. For an early WordCamp New York City, organizers married WordPress’ “W” logo to the iconic font from NYC’s subway system. “People still to this day regret they didn’t go to that WordCamp because the sticker was so cool,” Mylo laughs.

Another year, Camp sponsors each picked a NYC landmark and paid \$1 for each floor in that building as their sponsorship fee. The sticker? A modified skyline with just those buildings. The hidden meaning gave an insider feeling to the group. “When the sticker has some back story, people like that,” Mylo says.

Inside jokes delight the inner circle. In San Francisco, organizers did a riff on the popular xkcd comic strip, whose creator Randall Munroe poked fun at WordCamp. The sticker caused an uproar: A WordCamp attendee took offense and attacked WordCamp organizers on Munroe’s behalf . . . not realizing that Munroe gave permission and liked the parody. “It just shows who’s really in the inner circle and who isn’t, based on what you understand about the sticker,” Mylo says.

There’s a cachet to accumulating stickers from various WordCamps. Multi-colored die cut stickers offer more design options, but vinyl stickers are hardier; that matters to early adopters who proudly display brand badges going way back. “When you get a new laptop you lose that history,” Mylo says. “Then you just have to start over.”

Beyond the halls of WordCamp, WordPress geeks recognize each other by the Camp stickers on their laptops. “When a community is trying to build WordCamp locally, it helps when people see the stickers on a laptop at the coffee shop. It starts a conversation,” Mylo says. Like a lodge pin or frat ring, stickers help you recognize members of the same club. That reinforces the built-in camaraderie around a brand that users feel so intensely about. And when your brand is reinventing the category, user intensity drives change.

Simply by using WordPress to expand their own small businesses, users build the brand and the WordPress community, reinforcing the sense of collaboration that drives an open-source project. “The community is the brand,” Mylo says. So is the sticker.



Five tips to bonding loyal users together

- 1** Make it fun. Think about the community you’re trying to please. Go for authentic personality.
- 2** Limit availability. There’s cachet to having “this year’s” sticker. When WordCamp San Francisco stickers got delayed in the mail, by Day Two attendees were frantic to get them. Organizers had to stamp people’s hands while handing out stickers, so people wouldn’t come back for more. (Some tried anyway.)
- 3** Make it legible. A hard-to-read logo doesn’t help spread the word. Make it big enough to catch the attention of like-minded people out in public.
- 4** Use vinyl stickers so they last. People put stickers on their laptops and phones, so others see it all the time. Keep your logo looking sharp.
- 5** Give stickers away. People who pay for a sticker want to save it. If you give it away, it encourages them to do something creative with it. “You get way more than 25 cents’ worth of marketing by giving it away for free,” says Jen Mylo, Master of Suggestion at Automattic. “You’re giving people the chance to walk around carrying your logo. Why would you charge for that?”

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