

WEBSITE DECISIONS

Website builder or managed custom website: choosing for a small service business

A website builder is a sensible choice when its tools cover your work, you can keep the content accurate, and the cash savings matter. A managed website can be worth paying for when you need someone to take responsibility for a clearly defined build and recurring changes. Either approach can produce an effective service-business website. Either can leave you with an expensive site that nobody maintains.

Sparrow Group builds and maintains custom websites. This guide compares that service with doing the work yourself and hiring help on a website builder, including situations where those alternatives are the better fit.

A practical way to compare

FIT

Start with the visitor's job and the features you actually need.

COST

Compare the same period, with your cash and your time kept clear.

CARE

Know who handles changes and what you can take away.

Includes current Sparrow plan-payment totals, explicitly hypothetical time examples, a realistic preview exercise and links to first-party documentation.

Companion: the fillable website comparison worksheet.

Separate the software from the service

"Website builder versus custom website" combines two different decisions:

1. What system will the website use?
2. Who will build it, maintain it and approve changes?

You can use a builder yourself or pay a professional to work in it. A custom website can come with ongoing care or be handed over for you to manage. Paying for a platform subscription does not automatically hire someone to choose your services, write your project descriptions or update your opening hours.

Route	What you are choosing	What to check before buying
Hosted builder, managed by you	An editing system and hosted platform	Can you complete real content and maintenance tasks with the available tools?
Builder with professional help	The same kind of platform, plus a separately defined service	Which edits and support tasks are the professional's responsibility? Who controls the account?
Managed WordPress	WordPress plus a hosting and maintenance arrangement	What is included for the host, themes, plugins, backups, restoration and content work?
Custom informational website	A project built around an agreed scope, with or without ongoing care	What is delivered, how changes happen, what support covers and what you can take away?

WordPress also needs a distinction. WordPress.org provides open-source software that can be installed with a hosting provider. WordPress.com is a commercial managed hosting service using that software. The maintenance arrangement varies; treating all WordPress websites as a single DIY product obscures the choice. [WordPress.com's comparison](#) explains the difference.

Start with the jobs your website must do

For a small service business, write a short description of a useful visit. For example: "A homeowner can identify the repair we handle, check whether we serve their area, see a relevant project and send the information we need to reply." That gives you something to test in a builder trial or an agency preview.

List the actual requirements before comparing designs:

- The services you want to sell, including work you do not accept.
- Genuine service areas, hours and contact details.
- Project photographs, permission to use them and short factual explanations.
- The first inquiry details you need, such as service type and general location.
- Any booking, payment, inventory or customer-login workflow that must keep working.
- Who will reply when a suitable inquiry arrives.

A five-page informational site with a simple contact path is a different project from a scheduling application with deposits, staff availability and customer accounts. Check the required workflow in the specific plan or proposal. A polished template is not evidence that a particular integration is included.

Our [Poteet Homes project walkthrough](#) gives a concrete example of service information, portfolio presentation and contact choices. Its visible catalog and filter controls also illustrate why specialized features need their own scope. The walkthrough is a design discussion, with no measured sales-growth claim.

If an existing website already does most of this, price a small repair before a replacement. A wrong link or an outdated service description may need a short edit in the current system. A rebuild can be appropriate, but the reason should be more specific than the age or brand of its software.

Work out who will handle the next twelve months

Imagine the site is finished. You have a new project photograph, a changed phone number and a service you no longer provide. Who makes those changes? How do you check that the photograph is readable on a phone and that the contact link still points to the intended destination?

Hosted builders take care of parts of the platform. For example, Wix documents that its sites run on its own infrastructure and that Wix performs platform software updates. Squarespace states that its website plans include hosting. Those are useful services, but the business content still needs an owner. [Wix hosting and updates](#), [Squarespace hosting](#).

For self-hosted WordPress, agree who handles updates and recovery. WordPress recommends backing up before an update, and its documentation describes opt-in automatic updates for individual plugins and themes. A host or maintainer may perform these tasks; ask for the actual arrangement. [WordPress updates, plugin and theme auto-updates](#).

For any provider, distinguish an acknowledgment from completion. A reply saying "we have your request" does not mean the change is live. Ask what counts as a small change, what needs a new quote, what happens when an update is urgent and who checks the result.

AI assistance can reduce the effort of drafting descriptions, preparing images and checking pages. It does not establish which phone number is correct or whether a project photograph may be published. You still need an authorized person to confirm business facts and approve work. Include that review time in both a DIY plan and a managed plan.

Compare cash over the same period

Start with actual quotes. Include the build, platform or hosting, necessary apps, domain registration, email and ongoing work. Check renewal prices and billing periods. If hosting is already included, do not add it again. If a required integration is outside a package, put it in the comparison.

A simple cash model for continued service, subject to the contract's minimum commitment, is:

Total cash over N months = one-time costs + N × recurring monthly costs.

For annual subscriptions, use their actual payment amounts when planning cash flow. Dividing by twelve is useful for comparison, but it does not turn an annual bill into a monthly payment. Add taxes, expected renewals and separately quoted work where they apply. Do not treat an empty cost field as evidence that the cost is zero.

Here are Sparrow's current plan-payment totals for a completed agreed website with service continued throughout the stated period:

Sparrow plan	Monthly price	Initial three-payment commitment	24 live-service months	36 live-service months
Standard	\$199	\$597	\$4,776	\$7,164
Premium	\$279	\$837	\$6,696	\$10,044

The initial commitment is already included in those 24- and 36-month totals. It is not another setup charge. Within the agreed website scope, the separate setup fee is \$0. The first payment is due at kickoff and covers the build and first month of live service; the next monthly payment is due one month after launch. A prelaunch delay does not trigger an extra monthly service payment.

These are plan payments, not every possible cost. Domain registration, email-provider subscriptions and approved outside expenses are separate. The calculation assumes the current price remains unchanged and excludes taxes and the value of your time. New proposals follow the [published plan summary](#) and written project scope; existing client agreements control existing service.

Our [website cost calculator](#) lets you enter a real alternative quote and your expected recurring costs. It compares entered costs, not equivalent deliverables or business returns. It does not need your email address.

If you expect very little ongoing work, also request a one-time build and handover quote with separately priced hosting or maintenance. That arrangement may suit you better than a continuing care package. A low kickoff payment is useful for cash flow, but it is only one part of the longer comparison.

Put your time in a separate column

DIY time can be worthwhile. You may enjoy editing your site, learn useful skills or need direct control over frequent changes. Equally, a low subscription bill can come with more work than you want to do. Use a measured estimate instead of assuming either outcome.

For illustration only, suppose a DIY option costs \$30 per month and has no setup charge. This is a made-up planning input, not a Wix, Squarespace or WordPress price. Over 24 months it costs \$720. Standard's plan payments are \$4,776, a \$4,056 cash difference, before any differing outside costs.

If you value your time at \$30 per hour, that difference equals 135.2 hours over two years, or about 5.63 hours per month. The relevant question is whether the managed option saves that much of your time after allowing for the facts, feedback and approvals you must still supply. A managed provider does not remove all owner participation.

Change the assumptions and the answer changes:

Explicitly hypothetical 24-month case	Cash cost	Owner time assumption	Cash plus time valued at \$35/hour
DIY, modest time requirement	\$720	24 hours initially + 2 hours/month = 72 hours	\$3,240
DIY, larger time requirement	\$720	72 hours initially + 6 hours/month = 216 hours	\$8,280
Sparrow Standard with illustrative owner participation	\$4,776	4 hours initially + 0.5 hours/month = 16 hours	\$5,336

These time figures are chosen examples, not measured averages, delivery promises or predictions about your business. The same Standard scope is assumed in both comparisons, and common outside costs are omitted equally. Under the first assumptions DIY has the lower combined figure; under the second, Standard does. Your time may have a different personal value, and an hour saved does not automatically become an hour of paid work.

Cash affordability is a separate constraint. If the managed plan does not fit your available cash, a time calculation does not make the bill affordable. A smaller DIY site or a targeted repair can be the practical starting point.

Check ownership by asking what you can actually move

There are several things to control: the domain account, the content and image rights, the website project or platform account, and any booking or email services. Having one of them does not necessarily give you the others.

Wix says the content you create belongs to you, while the functioning Wix site must run on Wix's servers. Squarespace can export certain content to a WordPress-format XML file, but its documented exclusions include style settings, custom CSS and several page/content types. Neither statement means you have no exit; it means moving may involve reconstructing parts of the site. [Wix's hosting/export explanation](#), [Squarespace's export limits](#).

For a custom project, ask for the same practical clarity. What source and notes will you receive? What licenses apply? Can another provider run it? Which forms or services need configuration? A source handover does not by itself promise a visual editor or ongoing hosting elsewhere.

Sparrow's published summary makes handover available once the agreed initial build is complete and the initial commitment is fully paid. It includes the completed project source, handover notes and an ongoing right to use and modify the included project code. Reusable components and third-party assets keep their applicable licenses. Paying the outstanding initial balance after the build is complete makes handover available without an extra three-calendar-month wait or buyout fee. Check the [ownership and cancellation details](#) before deciding.

Treat migration as its own job

Before replacing a site, inventory useful page URLs, photographs, documents, contact forms, booking links and connected accounts. Decide which items to preserve and who is responsible for moving them. Keep the domain and email working throughout the change.

If URLs change, prepare an old-to-new mapping and appropriate redirects. Google documents that visibility can fluctuate while a moved site is recrawled and reindexed; a migration is not a promise of an immediate search improvement. Keep relevant old paths where practical and test the actual destinations. [Google's site-move guidance](#).

For Sparrow, a complex migration or integration is separately scoped. A price for an agreed new informational website is not a quote to preserve every feature and page of an unknown existing system.

Ask for evidence about SEO and speed

Custom code is not a ranking guarantee. A builder's SEO checklist is not one either. Wix, for example, provides controls that allow or prevent search-engine indexing. The useful questions are whether your actual pages can be accessed and indexed, explain the business accurately and help customers make a decision. [Wix indexing controls](#).

For speed, ask for the tested URL, device, conditions and date, along with evidence from real visitors when enough data exists. Google says good Core Web Vitals and tool results do not guarantee top search rankings. A performance score helps diagnose a page; it does not demonstrate more calls or sales. [Google on page experience](#).

Judge an improvement by its stated job. Did the corrected contact path reach the intended destination? Did a factual service page answer a customer question? Are real accepted inquiries suitable for the work you sell? Keep search impressions, visits, inquiries and paying clients as separate measurements.

When each route is a sensible fit

DIY is a strong candidate when your required features exist in a platform, a named person can maintain it and a trial shows the work is manageable. It is especially reasonable when available cash is tight, the site is small or you need to make frequent immediate edits yourself.

Professional help on a builder is a strong candidate when you like the current platform but want better structure, copy, project presentation or maintenance. You may be able to keep useful pages and integrations while paying for a specific improvement.

A managed custom site is a strong candidate when the informational scope fits, you value a provider implementing and checking agreed changes, and the continuing price is justified by work you will actually use. Ask to see relevant project examples and a realistic change request before choosing.

Some needs point beyond a simple brochure plan. If you need live inventory, complex scheduling, membership or an application, choose and scope that workflow directly. A specialist platform or a custom application project may be more appropriate than either a DIY brochure site or Sparrow's standard website plans.

Support timing can also decide the fit. Sparrow targets an acknowledgment within one business day and completion of routine in-scope updates within five business days after complete approved inputs. Support hours are Monday-Friday, 9 am-5 pm Central time, excluding US federal holidays. These are targets, not guaranteed resolution deadlines. If your business needs same-day operational changes, agree a suitable editing route or a different support arrangement before buying.

Try a realistic page before committing

Use one real service, one permitted photograph and your actual inquiry instructions in a platform trial or provider preview. Then try these three changes: replace the photograph, update a contact detail and revise one service paragraph. Record the time, any help required and the checks needed after the edit.

On a phone, ask someone unfamiliar with the business to identify the service, area served and next step. Have them explain what they expect to happen after contacting you. If their answer differs from your process, revise the page. This exercise tests the content and workflow, not just whether someone likes the design.

Before signing, put the page list, required features, content responsibilities, update allowance, response targets, outside costs and exit arrangements in one comparison. For Sparrow, both website plans cover up to five agreed core pages, one design direction and two consolidated initial revision rounds, with static brochure hosting. Standard includes two monthly update batches of up to three small approved changes each; Premium includes four. New pages, layouts, features, integrations and migrations need a separate scope.

Premium adds a blog index and one approved monthly content improvement: an article of up to 1,000 words or a substantive update to one existing service or case-study page. It also includes an optional 20-minute monthly consultation and one-time configuration of one business mailbox; the email-provider subscription is separate. Choose those extras if you have useful work for them. A website plan is not automatically an ongoing SEO campaign. Read the [current plan details](#) for allowances, support, billing and cancellation.

If your current website can do the job with a small improvement, begin there. If you want a managed custom website, bring the same requirements and cost assumptions to [a project discussion](#). The right proposal should make the work, price and responsibilities easy to compare.

Sources and current terms

The guide links to first-party documentation and Sparrow's published scope. Vendor documentation describes the vendor's own platform. Prices and terms were checked on October 29, 2026; recheck current terms before buying. The time examples are illustrative, not measured averages.

1. WordPress.com's comparison

<https://wordpress.com/support/com-vs-org/>

2. Poteet Homes project walkthrough

<https://sparrowgroup.tech/projects/poteet-homes/>

3. Wix hosting and updates

<https://support.wix.com/en/article/can-i-export-my-wix-site-to-another-hosting-company>

4. Squarespace hosting

<https://support.squarespace.com/hc/en-us/articles/207155658-Is-hosting-included>

5. WordPress updates

<https://wordpress.org/documentation/article/updating-wordpress/>

6. plugin and theme auto-updates

<https://wordpress.org/documentation/article/plugins-themes-auto-updates/>

7. published plan summary

<https://sparrowgroup.tech/website-plans/>

8. website cost calculator

<https://sparrowgroup.tech/website-cost-calculator/>

9. Squarespace's export limits

<https://support.squarespace.com/hc/en-us/articles/206566687-Export-your-site-content>

10. Google's site-move guidance

<https://developers.google.com/search/docs/crawling-indexing/site-move-with-url-changes>

11. Wix indexing controls

<https://support.wix.com/en/article/enabling-search-engines-eg-google-to-index-your-site>

12. Google on page experience

<https://developers.google.com/search/docs/appearance/page-experience>

13. a project discussion

<https://sparrowgroup.tech/contact/>