

Mullenweg Talks About Commercially Motivating WordPress Companies via @sejournal, @martinibuster



At the recent WordCamp Canada, WordPress co-founder Matt Mullenweg answered a question about how individuals and agencies could support the WordPress ecosystem against “bad actors” who don’t share the same community values. The question gave Mullenweg the opportunity to portray himself as the victim of a court that’s muzzling his free speech and to encourage the WordPress community to vote with their pocketbooks.

Question About Protecting WordPress Against Bad Actors

The person asking the question had two things on their mind:

1. How can individuals and agencies help protect WordPress’s

community values from exploitative or profit-driven actors?

2. Should there be a formal certification system to identify and promote ethical contributors and agencies within the ecosystem?

The question asked reinforced that the WordPress community is divided into two sides, with those who stand with Mullenweg in his dispute with WP Engine and those on the other side who disapprove of the drama.

This is the question that was asked:

“WordPress has always thrived because of its open, community-driven ethos, but as the ecosystem grows, we’re seeing more like large, profit-driven players who don’t necessarily share the values. How can individual contributors and agencies like ours actively help protect WordPress and uphold the values and ethics that have sustained it from bad actors and people who might try to exploit the community.

And do you see room for something more formal, like a certification for individuals and agencies that define what being a good actor is to help educate clients and even the market to help kind of protect in a more proactive way from those sorts of bad actors?”

The question paints assumes a polarization in the WordPress community, with the exploitative profit-seeking bad actors on one side and the ethical WordPress supporters on the other.

No Bad Actors

Matt Mullenweg began his answer by stating that he’s not one to call anyone a bad actor.

He answered:

“So first, I’ll say, I don’t want to say that there’s bad

actors. I think there might be bad actions sometimes and just temporarily bad actors who hopefully will be good in the future. So, you know, every saint has a past, every sinner has a future. So I never want to define like any company or any person is like permanently good or bad. Let's talk about actions. "

Is This You?

It was a strange way to begin his answer because he used the phrase "bad actors" in his at last years WordCamp USA that called out WP Engine:

"I think that we also just need to call out bad actors. And you got to, the only way to fight a bully is to fight them back. If you just allow them to run rampant on the playground, they're just going to keep terrorizing everyone."

He followed that speech with a blog post where he went further and called WP Engine a "cancer to WordPress."

You can hear it at the 33:48 minute mark of the recording from last year's WordCamp

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Motivating Good Behavior

Mullenweg continued his answer by discussing ways to motivate companies to give back to the WordPress community while also enforcing the GPL and protecting the WordPress trademark. Lastly, he encouraged the WordPress community to vote with their wallets by spending money on companies that that are defined as "good" and giving less to businesses who are presumably defined as a bad actors.

He continued:

“So second, I think with these actions, we can start to create incentive systems. And it’s part of what we’re doing with Five for the Future, which is basically saying you contribute back, which also implies that you’re not violating the GPL or something like that.

So we’ve got the hard stuff, like if you violate the GPL, you’re gonna get a letter, violate the trademark, that is more of a legal thing, but also the gentle stuff, like how can we encourage a good behavior by giving people higher rankings in the directory or in the showcase, for example, then finally, I’ll just say vote with your wallet.”

At this point he continued with the topic of motivating companies to do the right thing and drifted off into talking about WP Engine without actually naming WP Engine.

Mullenweg continued:

“So each one of you here has the ability to strongly influence these companies. By the way, if they’re commercially motivated, great. Let’s commercially motivate them to do the right thing by giving more business to the good companies and less business to the other companies.

This has actually been happening a lot the past year. I think I can say this. There’s a site called WordPressEngineTracker.com, which is currently tracking a number of sites that have left a certain host. It’s about to crash 100,000, about to cross 100,000, that have switched to other hosts, and over 74,000 have gone offline since September of last year.

We actually used to make all this data public. It was all the whole list was on there. They got a court order, so that way the data could be fact-checked by press or other people. There was actually a court order that made us take that down. So again, trying to muzzle free speech and transparency. But

we're allowed to keep that site up, so check it out while you can."

Mullenweg's comments frame spending choices as a form of moral expression within the WordPress ecosystem. By urging the community to "commercially motivate" companies, he encourages consumer spending as a way of enforcing ethical accountability, implicitly targeting WP Engine and unnamed others that fall short.

He positioned himself as the victim whose free speech is muzzled, but the court order simply required him and Automattic to stop sharing a spreadsheet of WP Engine's customers. He also framed the whole dispute as one about ethics and morals, invoking the religious imagery of sinners and saints. WordPress is both a business and a community, but it's not a religion. So it's somewhat odd that those connections were made in the context of contributing money or time back into WordPress, which is a cultural obligation but not a legal (or religious) one.

Watch the Q & A here:

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