WP engine

CASE STUDY

TEXAS A&M AGRILIFE

Industry
Education

Site
http://agrilife.org/ and the network of hundreds of AgriLife sites

Challenge
Managing hundreds of internal client sites with a CMS that was difficult to use

Results
More control, easier site management with WP Engine multisite capabilities

"Even if we hired a great engineer to manage things in-house, we would never get the level of service we receive from WP Engine."

—Travis Ward,
Web Production Manager,
Texas A&M AgriLife

Hassle-Free Management of Hundreds of Sites

TEXAS A&M AGRILIFE POWERS ENVIRONMENT WITH WP ENGINE MULTISITE

The Company

Texas A&M AgriLife is a diverse organization that oversees five agencies in the Texas A&M University System: Texas A&M College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Texas A&M AgriLife Research, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, Texas A&M Veterinary Medical Diagnostic Laboratory, and the Texas A&M Forest Service. The AgriLife Web team helps the various AgriLife agencies extend their information to the web.

The Site

Each of the five Texas A&M AgriLife groups has unique web environments and needs across hundreds of different websites.

The Challenge

Texas A&M AgriLife previously had a content management system that Web Production Manager Travis Ward described as "proprietary and heavy-handed." The system was difficult to use, gobbled up a lot of bandwidth, and took a lot of insider user knowledge to update and operate efficiently.

Ward said he was brought in as a WordPress developer to overcome the challenges of that limiting CMS, and moved Texas A&M AgriLife's network of sites to WordPress. The Texas Master Gardeners agency, which has roughly 75 chapters across the state of Texas, was the first AgriLife agency to test out the WordPress platform. Ward said he set up multisite and had pre-loaded themes and plugins the agency could use to launch new sites.

The trial was a success, but at the time, AgriLife hosted its WordPress sites in-house, and the servers ran slowly without an obvious cause.

"The in-house IT team didn't have the WordPress expertise to manage the servers and make

it run to our satisfaction," Ward said.

Texas A&M AgriLife's hundreds of internal clients all want unique sites. Yet developing hundreds of brand-new themes and individual sites would be virtually impossible with Texas A&M AgriLife's resources, Ward said.

The Solution

In late 2011, Texas A&M AgriLife moved one multisite server to WP Engine's platform. That worked well, Ward said, prompting the organization to move all its multisite servers to WP Engine.

Today, all of Texas A&M AgriLife's multisite installs are hosted on WP Engine's market-leading managed WordPress hosting platform. AgriLife hosts roughly 1,000 sites across several multisite installs, including 250 different County Extension sites, several College departmental sites, numerous Texas 4-H sites, and 400 to 500 AgriLife.org sites.

Ward said WP Engine multisite lets his organization give end users choices, while allowing him to maintain a level of control. Using multisite empowers AgriLife's various agencies to quickly and easily set up WordPress sites and customize them with pre-selected and vetted themes and plugins.

For higher education, specifically, multisite delivers a host of benefits. In many instances, faculty members want their own unique sites, but many schools do not have the resources to develop a new theme for each faculty member. Multisite gives universities the power to pre-select themes and offer a deployment that adds the necessary links, logos, accessibility features, and other requirements. The end user gets a lot of options while one office controls what's available.

"Multisite provides a certain amount of control and gives users choice," Ward said. "The end users have a lot of options, but at the same time, they're not going to have their own install and their own plugins, which may not work as well together as the ones that we've chosen."

Multisite also makes managing usernames and administration much easier. Ward and his team can generate aggregated reports per installation rather than from hundreds of different sites. It also allows for authentication off the University's Central Authentication System.

The Results

For Ward, using multisite eases user management and relieves the strain on Texas A&M AgriLife's already thin resources.

Multisite is a massive time saver because with a standard configuration he and his team would have to set up each individual client site, upload themes and plugins, and replicate that process for every site they create, Ward said.

"Multisite makes it very easy for our people to stand up a new site that's already configured with the correct themes and default plugins that we make available," he said. "We can get a request in the afternoon and stand up a site later that day. Launching sites is much easier. From there we can spend time training users and providing support."

Leveraging WP Engine multisite is also more affordable for Texas A&M AgriLife—using a managed WordPress hosting provider eliminates the need for Texas A&M AgriLife to hire a full-time engineer to administer and host the server.

"Even if we hired a great engineer to manage things in-house, we would never get the level of service we receive from WP Engine," Ward said, noting that support is always responsive, helpful, and knowledgeable.

Ward added the WP Engine platform's swift frontend load times, easy backups, one-click snapshots, and flexible SSL security make his job much easier; and the frequently-updated list of features available in the dashboard, such as easy domain mapping, simple redirects, and the ability to add a content delivery network (CDN) on a per-domain basis, are major time savers.

"WP Engine provides an excellent value for us and the number of sites we have. It's a reliable platform that allows us to better serve our growing number of internal customers," he said.

About WP Engine

WP Engine is a leading SaaS content management platform for websites and applications built on WordPress. Founded in 2010, the company is headquartered in Austin, Texas and has offices in San Francisco, California, San Antonio, Texas, and London, England.