

Website evolution for mobile and tablet devices

Websites have improved dramatically since 2012, driven by the launch of tablet devices. It's increasingly rare now to use your mobile or tablet to view a large organisation's site and find it is difficult to display pictures or read the text on a small device screen. However, where the websites of smaller organisations are concerned it's a different story as, until now, site redevelopment has been limited by high costs.

For smaller organisations there's still a long way to go to ensure that the majority of their websites are designed so that menus, text and pictures all look good, regardless of the web device you are using.



This is exactly where a 'responsive' website comes in.

'Responsive' means exactly that. Any website developed using a responsive web template will automatically adjust the page size, width and rotation for users to see it full screen on any PC, laptop or mobile device.

So responsive websites are designed to automatically resize the pages, menus, text, images and look of the site depending on the device you are browsing on.

Text and headings will always appear at the most suitable size for smaller mobile or tablet screens.

Pictures will also auto-resize within the page layout, and can also usually be clicked on, so that they can then be viewed full-screen to see them in more detail.

For a responsive site see www.admarineservices.com

Responsive site built by GET using WordPress The7

Why having a responsive website is so important

If your website is not 'responsive', in simple terms it just won't look good on a smartphone or tablet. Also, if users can't easily find their way around your site using a mobile, they will simply go to another website:

- 67% say - a mobile-friendly website makes me more likely to buy a product or use a service
- 61% say - if I don't see what I'm looking for straight away on a mobile site, I'll quickly move away

Google research April 2017

Create your responsive website using WordPress

With more mobile and tablet devices entering the market every day, this is changing the way people use the Internet. So the need is growing for well-designed websites that work better on all mobile devices.

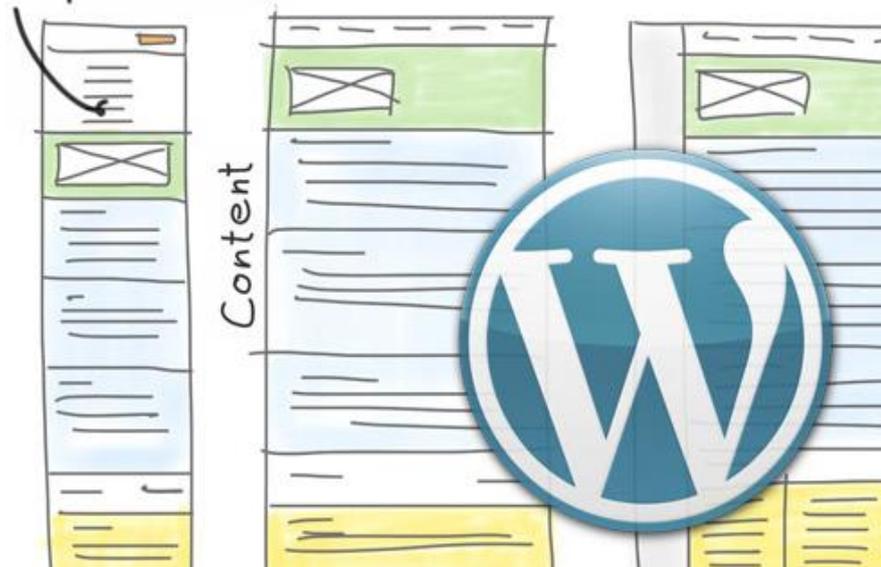
The good news is that a pioneer of responsive technology is WordPress, known the world over for its Blog writing platform, but less well known for the ability to create websites relatively easily. WordPress is an extremely popular, flexible, easy to use and open-source system that powers 30% of the world's websites

- WordPress has a 70% global share of CMS (Content Management Systems) as of April 2017
- The WordPress CMS has always been free, adheres to web standards and offers great usability
- Nearly 1 million websites are based on WordPress, translated into 40 different popular languages

Of course you may conclude whilst WordPress is a great web platform, due to your time, resources and budget you are best outsourcing your responsive web development to someone like GET Consultants.

But, assuming you'd at least like to know more about how responsive sites are designed, let's get started.

Responsive Menu



Developing your responsive site

At first, the idea of designing and developing a fully responsive, mobile-ready WordPress theme might appear to be overwhelming.

You might be thinking, "How do I handle a responsive design with all of this flexible content that a WordPress theme usually has?"

"What should I consider when designing for touch devices?" And, "Do I really have to get rid of drop-down menus and other hover elements on mobile devices?"

After doing research and looking at some of the responsive WordPress themes and theme frameworks out there, you will probably conclude that WordPress is the way to go for your new site pretty quickly. Evolving (and often free) WordPress theme designs can reap enormous benefits for your organisation.

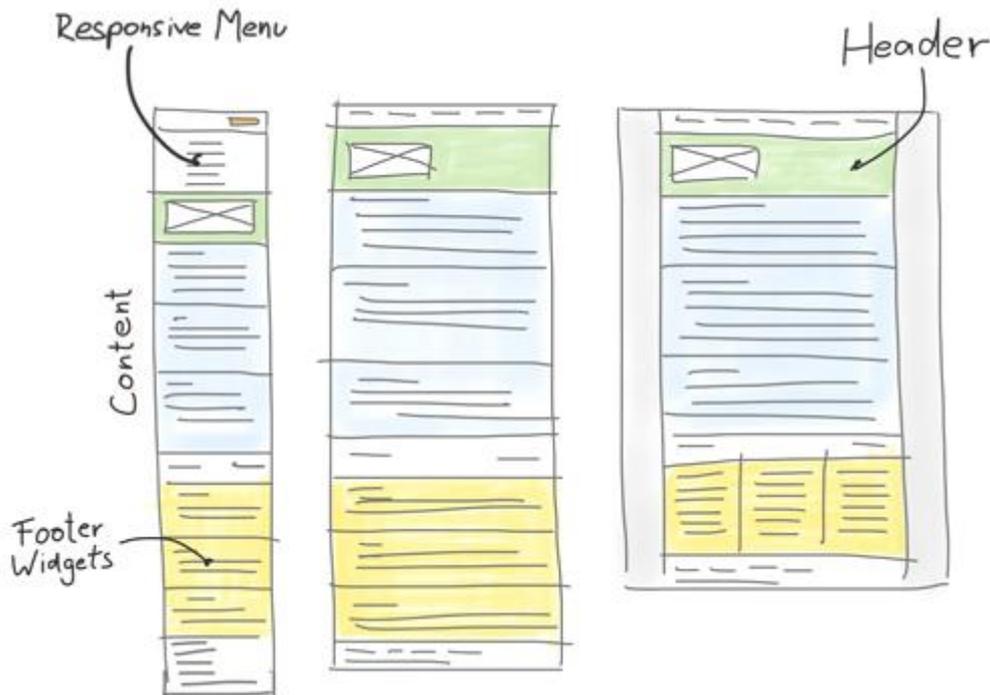
Preparing your design concept

Having a detailed web page design concept is much more important for a responsive WordPress theme than for a static-width theme. At this stage, you can take advantage of the fact that many of the latest WordPress templates create a clever and practical layout that adapts smoothly to different sized screens.

First, you will need consider what you want to achieve with your WordPress theme, which users you are targeting, and what their specific needs are. With these considerations, you can then create a useful shopping list of for your layout, including what are the best elements to choose to put into your website.

CREATING THE THEME'S CONCEPT

Using this list, you can then plan your theme by sketching out the layout at various screen sizes for both your home page and inner pages. This will include the elements you have chosen to attract the attention of visitors most, and what navigation, structure, look and feel and graphics your site should ideally have.

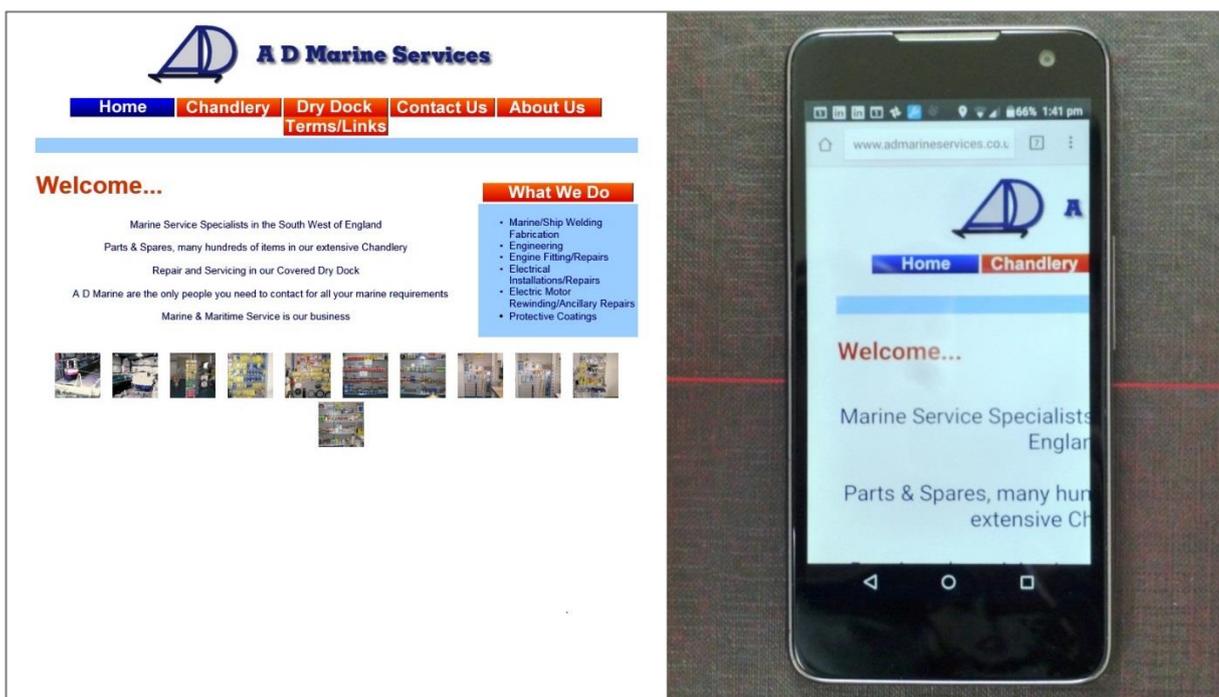


When sketching out, be aware that the layout widths you choose are only rough reference points to represent the common screen sizes of today's smartphones, tablets and desktop computers.

Your goal should always be to create a responsive design that adapts smoothly to a wide diversity of screen sizes.

While working on your concept sketches, think about which layout options to include in the theme (such as header and sidebar options or multiple widget areas) and how they will adapt to different screen sizes.

Also have a look at other websites in your industry sector to see what works and what doesn't work.

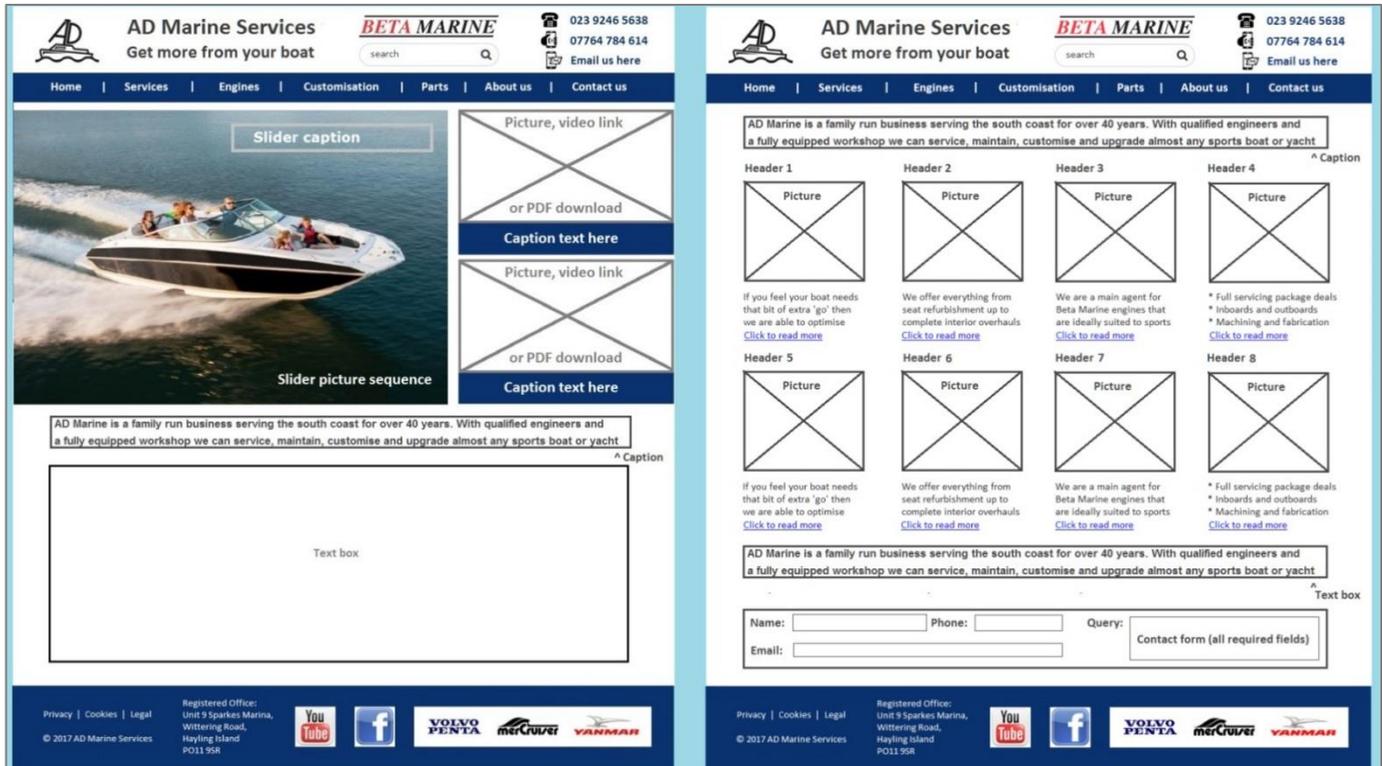


A competitor's marine services website showing the issues of poor and non-responsive site design

TOOLS FOR CONCEPT SKETCHING

Which method you decide to use to develop the theme's concept is not important. Just choose one that allows you to work quickly and that doesn't interrupt your workflow. Or you can just outsource this stage.

If you feel most comfortable sketching design ideas on a piece of paper or in a notebook, then use this. You can use a computer design package, an iPad or apps such as Paper by FiftyThree or Bamboo Paper with a digital pen. Working out concepts makes sharing ideas with your website developer a lot easier.



Using a computer design package to draft out initial website page concepts and layouts

A GOOD CONCEPT SAVES TIME

If you develop the concept precisely at the beginning of the project, you will save a lot of time and effort later in the design process. The layout will adapt to different screen sizes more intelligently if you have thought a lot about the design's behavior before even starting to build the site template and graphics etc.

Theme specific challenges to consider

Because designing a WordPress theme with very flexible content is quite a different challenge than designing a static website, at this early stage of the process you should find solutions to the following theme-specific problems:

1. WORDPRESS' NAVIGATION MENU

Until responsive website design found its way into WordPress theme designs, most themes seemed to rely on good old-fashioned drop-down menus to give users multi-level navigation. But because drop-down menus rely on mouse hovering, they don't work well on touch devices, so there are already some smart solutions for developing responsive, touch device-ready navigation.

2. RESPONSIVE LAYOUT OPTIONS

Most WordPress themes offer users multiple layout options, such as left or right sidebar, header widget and footer elements. To offer this kind of flexibility in a responsive theme, you will have to consider how all of the layout elements will behave on different screen sizes.

For instance, if you want to offer a left sidebar option, consider that the content of this sidebar would appear above the main content area on mobile devices. In most cases, this wouldn't be the best solution because mobile users want to read the most important content first (such as the latest news post) without having to scroll down a sidebar.

3. FLEXIBLE WIDGET AREAS

Widget areas are another challenge for responsive designers. After all, designing one is not easy if you don't know what kind of content the user will put in it. So you will need to make sure that your design works no matter which and how many widgets are used in the widget areas.

Designing your responsive website

Because you are creating a responsive website, designing the entire website pixel by pixel in Photoshop and then just handing it over to a web developer would result in too static a design and too time-consuming a process. Responsive website design requires a different, but less time consuming approach.

WORKING WITH REFERENCE POINTS

The design process should be used to figure out the general look and feel of the theme you require. At this stage, in combination with your website developer, you should also work intensively on the challenges mentioned, such as responsive navigation, layout variations and flexible widget areas.

How you prepare the design for further development will depend partly on the nature of the project and how closely you will work with the website developer. In general, showing your design in the three layout versions is a good starting point: smartphone, tablet and desktop. These 'screenshots' can then be used as reference points for website development. You should aim for your outline design to work at any size.



A well designed responsive website layout as it appears on a PC and on a mobile

DESIGNING IN THE BROWSER

Design details such as font sizes, white space and button styles can be defined later directly in the web browser (Chrome, Internet Explorer etc). Because browsers often treat these elements differently, designing and testing them directly in their final environments is way more efficient.

DESIGNING FOR TOUCH DEVICES

Because your design will also be used on touch devices, you have to consider the special requirements of these devices. Using a finger to navigate a website is entirely different than using a precise mouse cursor.

This is why buttons and form input fields need to be at the right size. Font sizes and white space should also be applied more generously, so that users can navigate easily and read content comfortably.

EXERCISE YOUR COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Staying in constant communication with your website developer during the entire process is important. Especially in a responsive design process, incorporating the website developer's knowledge into your decisions will keep you from having to change things later on, or making time-consuming design changes.

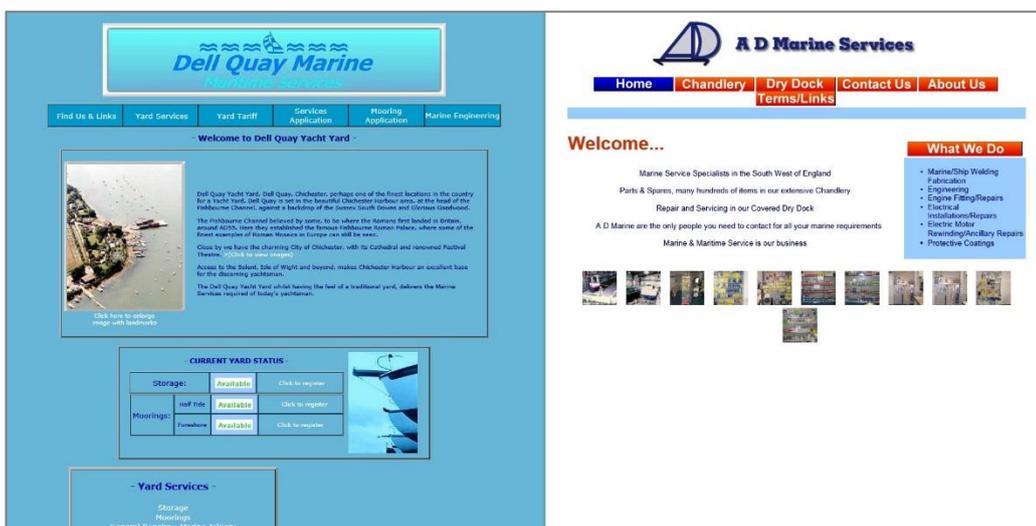
Development

After the design process, the first decision is whether to code the website theme from scratch or to use a blank or starter theme. If you want to work with one of the popular responsive frameworks like The7 from ThemeForest, you can choose a starter theme that already includes a built-in responsive framework.

Of course, the way you start a theme will always depend on the project and your personal preferences. But, if you want to keep website development costs down, then using a well-developed standard WordPress responsive theme for your new website serves as a solid foundation for development.

GO MOBILE FIRST

A smart approach is to design and develop for the smallest layout first (i.e. smartphones) and then work your way up to tablet and desktop screen sizes. It's also a good idea to have a look at websites of your competitors on a PC, tablet and mobile to see what you do and don't like from their designs.



Two rival marine services companies showing how not to design a website for PC viewing

SUPPORTING MEDIA QUERIES IN OLD BROWSERS

With the smartphone layout as your default, you will need to rely on a JavaScript solution such as Respond.js to support media queries in old browsers (such as Internet Explorer 7 and 8).

Alternatively, you could add CSS classes for old IE browsers through conditional comments, and then add CSS styles to set a maximum width for old IE browsers outside of your media queries.

IMAGES IN A RESPONSIVE THEME

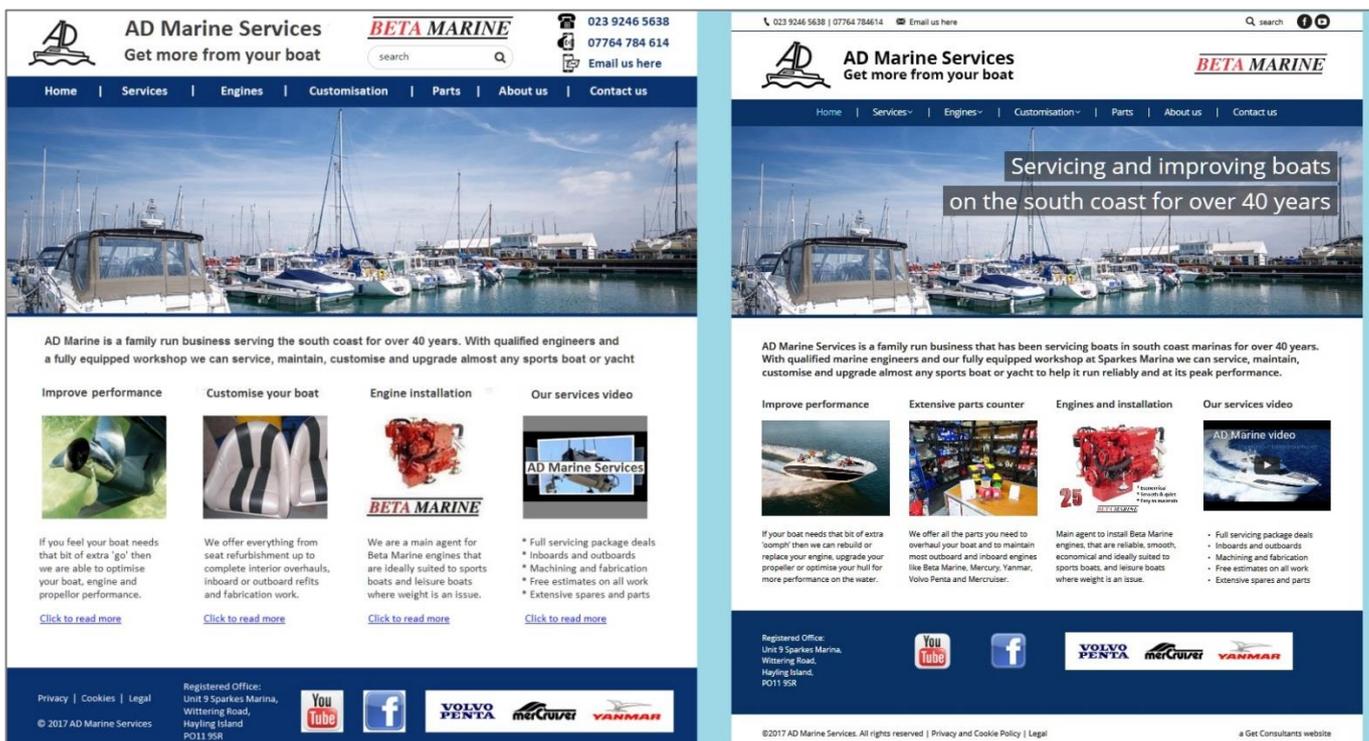
With the release of high-pixel-density devices such as the newer iPads and new MacBook Pro, you will also need to reconsider the images in your theme.

Alternatives to images would be to use a CSS solution or use icon fonts. Fewer images will also result in a much more lightweight theme, which will speed up performance on slow mobile Internet connections.

Testing your website

Particularly when developing a responsive theme, testing your work live as soon and as often as possible is critical. This way, you can quickly correct styles during development as necessary. Also, test whether fonts are easy to read and whether images, gallery sliders and embedded elements such as video work correctly on different devices, for example iPhones.

Because of the different behavior of mobile browsers, touchscreens and high-density screens, constantly testing your theme on actual devices is important. Finding ways to test your theme during the development process can be quite a challenge. Of course, you won't be able to test on all of the devices out there, but besides the devices that you own, you could ask friends, family, other freelancers and coworkers to help you test. You can also visit your local electronics store to test on the devices there.



Initial home page design concept and the final website as developed by GET using WordPress The7 theme

Responsive theme versus mobile plugin

A mobile theme plugin such as the popular WPtouch plugin can be a great temporary solution to give mobile users a better experience on an existing website. In most cases, offering visitors an optimised mobile experience with the help of a plugin is probably better than not optimising at all.

But in the long term, a fully responsive theme has many advantages to a plugin:

- The website can maintain its **unique branding** across all devices.
- Users will get the **same experience** on all devices and thus have less trouble navigating the website.
- The website will be **easier to maintain** (an administrator won't need to install and update the plugin).



A responsive WordPress theme on the left, and a mobile plugin on the right

Conclusion

Responsive Web design has been described as a trend, and many website design agencies used to big site design fees and high day rates to build websites might hope this 'trend' will pass sooner or later!

In a multiple-device world, where the Internet seems to be available everywhere, responsive Web design is much more like a natural web development process. Whilst responsive WordPress themes are still relatively new and being improved day by day, these type of websites already show clear benefits.

Responsive design is not a "Web design trend" - it's a new mindset to developing sites.

The reality is that responsive Web design is here to stay, and why? Because it's a simpler, better, more cost effective way of designing your website. In fact, why would you design your website any other way?

For more information about designing your website using responsive web design call GET Consultants.