

Multiverse Media Group, Inc. Presents:

WordPress Multisite in 2025: A Comprehensive Guide for Multi-Location Businesses

WordPress Multisite is a powerful core feature that allows you to run multiple websites from a single WordPress installation ¹. All sites in a multisite “network” share the same WordPress core files (and can share plugins and themes), yet have separate content databases and upload directories ¹. In other words, you host a **collection of sites on one platform**, making it ideal for organizations with many similar websites – such as franchisors with multiple franchisee sites or other multi-location businesses ². Below, we’ll dive into the latest capabilities of WordPress Multisite as of 2025, and how to leverage it for a network of location-based websites.

What Is WordPress Multisite and Why Use It?

WordPress Multisite enables you to **manage several websites within one installation** of WordPress ¹. Each site (often called a *subsite*) in the network has its own content and identity, but all sites can share common resources like themes and plugins ³. This structure is especially useful for multi-location businesses or franchises where each location/site needs unique content but the brand wants a consistent look or functionality across all sites ². For example, a franchise owner can maintain a network of sites for each store location – each site with localized pages and information – while using a common theme and set of plugins for uniform branding and features ².

At the same time, Multisite provides centralized control. When you convert a single WordPress site into a multisite network, your main administrator account becomes the **Network Super Admin** (network administrator) ⁴. The Super Admin can oversee **all sites from one dashboard**, managing users, installing themes/plugins, and adjusting settings *network-wide* ⁴. Individual site owners (site admins) can manage content on their own subsite, but **only the Super Admin can perform high-level tasks** like installing new plugins or adding new sites ⁵ ⁶. This hierarchy is perfect for franchisors/franchisees: the franchisor (Super Admin) retains control over the overall platform (ensuring security, consistent plugins, etc.), while each franchisee (site admin) updates their own site’s pages, posts, and media without affecting others.

It’s important to note that sites in a multisite network are **functionally separate** in terms of content and audience. They aren’t automatically interlinked or sharing users/content unless you purposefully set up plugins to do so ⁷. If your goal is to have tightly integrated content or user accounts across what could otherwise be sections of a single website, a multisite might not be the best solution ⁸. For instance, if you only need a few pages with different styling or restricted content for certain users, those can often be handled within a single site (using plugins or custom page templates) without the overhead of a network ⁹. But if you truly need separate sites for different locations, regions, or departments – each with their own admins and content – WordPress Multisite is built for that scenario.

Setting Up a Multisite Network (Subsites, Domains, and Configuration)

Enabling Multisite is straightforward: you add a single line to your `wp-config.php` (`WP_ALLOW_MULTISITE`, set to true) and go through the Network Setup in the WordPress dashboard ¹⁰. During setup, you'll choose how your subsites' URLs will be structured – either as **subdomains** or **subdirectories** of the main site ¹¹.

- **Subdirectories:** e.g. `example.com/location1` and `example.com/location2`. This option is simpler to configure (no special DNS requirements) ¹¹. All subsites live under the main domain, which can be beneficial if you want to keep a unified domain for branding or SEO purposes.
- **Subdomains:** e.g. `location1.example.com` and `location2.example.com`. This gives each site a distinct URL and can appear more professional for separate branches or locations ¹¹. Using subdomains does require a wildcard DNS record for your domain (so that all `*.example.com` subdomains point to your server) ¹².

WordPress refers to these as “*domain-based*” (subdomain) networks vs. “*path-based*” (subdirectory) networks ¹³. Under the hood, both types work similarly, and WordPress will set the configuration accordingly when you install the network. After setup, your Network Admin dashboard will provide tools to create new sites at any time (you can also allow users to sign up and create their own sites, if desired) ¹⁴ ¹⁵.

Custom Domains for Subsites: One common request for franchises is to use completely custom domains for each subsite (for example, having “mylocation1.com” and “mylocation2.com” both managed in one multisite). This is absolutely possible. Since WordPress 4.5, **domain mapping is a native feature** – you can assign a top-level domain to any subsite without a plugin ¹⁶. The Network Admin's site edit screen lets you change the “Site Address (URL)” of a subsite to any domain you've configured in DNS ¹⁷ ¹⁸. Just ensure the domain is pointing to your WordPress server, and update the site's address in the network settings.

WordPress Network Admin allows setting a custom domain for any subsite by editing its Site Address (URL). In this screenshot, a network admin maps a subsite from a subdomain to `example3.com`. Domain mapping is built-in as of WordPress 4.5, so each franchise location can use its own domain within one multisite network ¹⁶.

Under Network Admin settings, you'll also find options to control site registrations, user registrations, upload limits, and more ¹⁹ ²⁰. For example, you can limit who is allowed to create new sites, set default content for new sites, and define what file types site admins are allowed to upload across the network ²¹ ²². By default, when a new site is created, it inherits the network's allowed file types. (As an aside, WordPress Multisite stores the list of permitted file extensions at the time each site is created. In practice, this means if new file types become supported in WordPress core, existing sites may not automatically allow them – the Super Admin can adjust network settings or use a snippet to add them for all sites ²³ ²⁴.)

Latest Features and Improvements (2024–2025)

WordPress core development in 2024 has brought several enhancements that benefit Multisite users. The platform is continuously updated for performance, security, and modern web capabilities, which all apply to multisite networks as well:

- **Modern Image Format Support:** WordPress 6.5 introduced support for AVIF images, a next-gen image format offering dramatically smaller file sizes ²⁵ ²⁶ . Along with WebP (added in earlier versions), this means your franchise sites can serve high-quality images more efficiently – faster load times for your customers. Newly created multisite networks in 2024+ automatically include AVIF and WebP in the allowed upload types ²⁷ . (For older networks, the Super Admin should ensure these are added to the allowed file types so every site can use them.) Smaller images and responsive image support translate to better performance across all your locations' sites ²⁸ ²⁹ .
- **Multisite Metadata:** WordPress 6.3 added an API for site metadata, allowing developers to store custom data per site in a network ³⁰ . This is more of a developer feature, but it can power advanced use cases – for example, storing each franchise location's profile info or settings in a central way. Plugins can leverage this to create network-wide directories of sites or custom dashboards for the franchisor.
- **Custom Port Support:** Historically, WordPress Multisite could only run on the default web ports, which made local development tricky if you weren't on port 80. WordPress 6.6 removed this limitation by allowing **custom port numbers in multisite URLs** ³¹ . This means if you're running a development server at `localhost:8889` or any non-standard port, you can now set up a multisite there without hacks ³² . It's a behind-the-scenes improvement, but it smooths out developer workflows when building or testing your multi-location network.
- **Improved Network Admin UX:** Ongoing refinements to the Network Admin interface make overseeing a multisite more convenient. For example, WordPress now includes each site's ID in the debug info on the Site Health screen ³³ , which helps when diagnosing issues on large networks. The Super Admin can also enable or disable themes on a per-site basis in one place, and WordPress 6.x has ensured that if a theme is disabled network-wide, any site already using it won't break unexpectedly ³⁴ (it will continue to function on that site until a change is made). Similarly, plugins can be network-activated or activated on individual sites, and the interface clearly indicates what's active where ⁶ .
- **Security and Passwords:** Security is paramount when you're managing many sites (and many user accounts) in one installation. A noteworthy core update in early 2025 was the switch to **bcrypt for password hashing** (instead of the older MD5-based scheme) ³⁵ . This upgrade, introduced in WordPress 6.8 "Cecil," means stronger protection for user passwords across your entire network. WordPress 6.8 also included over a hundred other improvements and bug fixes, some specifically targeting multisite edge cases ³⁶ – reinforcing that the core team is actively maintaining Multisite alongside other features.

Beyond these, WordPress has merged features like **Plugin Dependencies** (6.5) into core ³⁷ , which can indirectly benefit Multisite admins too. For instance, if a must-have plugin for all your sites relies on another

plugin, WordPress will now recognize that and help ensure the required plugin is in place ³⁸. Core enhancements for accessibility, performance, and the block editor also apply to every site in a network. The bottom line is that as WordPress evolves, multisite networks also gain stability, speed, and capabilities – all of which help you provide a better experience to your franchisees and customers.

SEO Considerations for Multisite Networks

For franchisors and franchisees, **SEO** is a key concern – you want each location's site to rank well for local searches, without technical drawbacks. The good news is that WordPress Multisite can be SEO-friendly, but you should plan your URL structure and content strategy accordingly:

- **Subdomain vs. Subdirectory – SEO Impact:** There has long been debate in the SEO world about whether it's better to host content on subdomains or subdirectories. Google's official word is that **both approaches are fine** – you won't be penalized simply for choosing one over the other. Google representatives (Matt Cutts and John Mueller) have repeatedly stated that you should use whichever structure makes sense and that *"Google websearch is fine with using either subdomains or subdirectories"*, as long as you keep the setup consistent ³⁹. In practice, if all your franchise sites share a domain (subfolders), they inherently share authority, whereas subdomains or separate domains treat each site more independently. Both models can work: many companies use subdomains for different regions, and others use subfolders or separate domains. Choose based on your branding and organizational needs. If each franchise is meant to have a distinct brand presence, a subdomain or unique domain might make sense; if you want a unified brand site with sections for each location, subdirectories could be better. From an SEO standpoint, **consistency is key** – avoid frequently changing the URL structure of sites in your network, since that can confuse search indexing ³⁹.
- **Managing Multiple Domains:** If you map custom domains to each site (e.g. location1.com, location2.com in one network), remember that search engines will treat those like completely separate websites. That's not a bad thing, but it means you'll need to build SEO authority for each domain. Be sure to verify each domain property in Google Search Console/Bing Webmaster Tools individually, and submit sitemaps for each site. The advantage here is each franchise site can target its local keywords and build local backlinks without being tied to a central domain's reputation. The drawback is a newer franchise domain won't inherit any SEO "juice" from the main brand automatically. If SEO resources are limited, some franchisors choose a single domain strategy (either sub-sites or just pages) to concentrate their efforts. On the flip side, separate domains on a multisite give you flexibility to sell or transfer a site (franchise) in the future, since it's essentially its own site – an important business consideration beyond pure SEO.
- **Content Duplication and Local Content:** One thing to avoid is making all your location sites carbon copies of each other. Multisite makes it easy to spin up sites with the same theme and even the same baseline pages, but for SEO (and user experience) each site should have **substantive unique content**. Google does *not* impose a "duplicate content penalty" in the sense of punishing your ranking, but if multiple sites have identical content, Google will simply choose one to rank and ignore the duplicates ⁴⁰. For a multi-location business, this means each franchise site should feature genuinely local content – think location-specific services, team bios, testimonials, event info, and especially unique text on the homepage and about pages. While you might provide franchisees with templated content to ensure brand consistency, encourage them to localize it. This not only

helps SEO by differentiating the sites, but it also provides a better experience to visitors looking for information relevant to that location.

- **Linking and Cross-Promotion:** You can leverage the network nature of your sites to boost SEO *if it makes sense for users*. For example, a “Locations” page on the main site (or each site) can link to all the franchise sites. This can help search engines discover the relationship between the sites (especially useful if using subdomains or separate domains) and spread some link equity around. However, avoid any artificial “link schemes” – links should be logical (like a store finder or a corporate site linking to franchise sites). Since Multisite sites are separate in content, **Google will see them as separate unless you interlink** ⁴¹. Many successful franchise networks maintain a central corporate site for brand-level content, and individual sites for locations – the corporate site often links out to the local sites, giving them a bit of authority boost and helping users navigate to their nearest location.
- **Local SEO and Schema:** Each site in the network should be optimized for local search. This includes standard local SEO practices: ensure each site has the correct business name, address, phone number (NAP) visible, and consider adding **LocalBusiness schema markup** on each site’s contact page to help search engines understand the local entity. WordPress doesn’t do this by default, but you can network-activate an SEO plugin to manage schema and metadata for all sites (many SEO plugins are multisite-compatible). Just remember that on a multisite, an SEO plugin’s settings might be configured per site, so you’ll want to either set up a default that franchisees can fine-tune, or enforce certain meta tags globally as the Super Admin.
- **Emerging Search Engines and AI Assistants:** In 2025, search is not just Google and Bing – users also turn to AI-powered tools (like **ChatGPT-based search assistants**) to find information. These AI systems generally pull information from your website content. The same best practices apply: clear, well-structured content about each location will increase the chances that an AI assistant provides accurate answers about your business. Ensure each site’s crucial details (hours, address, services) are in text the bots can read, and kept up to date. For instance, if ChatGPT or another AI indexes the web, having each franchise site clearly indicate its city and services will help the AI distinguish one location from another when responding to user queries. While AI search is new, it reinforces an old principle: **focus on quality content and user experience**. If each of your multisite locations delivers valuable, relevant content to users, both traditional search engines and AI-driven tools will reward that.

Tips for Success in a Franchise Multisite

To wrap up, here are some key takeaways and tips for managing a WordPress multisite for a franchisor/franchisee scenario:

- **Keep the Core Updated:** All your sites share one WordPress installation, so maintaining updates is easier – you update the core, themes, and plugins once for all. Take advantage of this by staying current with WordPress releases (for security and new features). Recent versions have made this straightforward, and you can even use the **Network Admin Updates screen** to update everything in one place ⁴². Consider enabling auto-updates for minor core releases and plugin updates if it fits your update policy – it will apply those safely across the network.

- **Use Network-Active Plugins Wisely:** Plugins installed on a multisite can either be network-activated (for all sites) or activated on individual sites. For features every site needs (like an SEO plugin, a forms plugin, backup tools, etc.), network activate them so they're uniformly available and you don't have to manage them per site ⁶. For niche features that only some franchises use, you can leave them available for site admins to activate as needed. Always vet plugins for multisite compatibility (most popular plugins are, but double-check documentation). Remember that only the Super Admin can install plugins or themes – a great security benefit – so you maintain quality control over the extensions used network-wide.
- **Consistent Branding with Flexibility:** WordPress Multisite lets you enforce consistency while still allowing flexibility. For example, you might **network-enable a base theme** (the company's official theme) so all sites start with the same design. You can even automatically apply global updates to that theme. If certain franchises have a bit of autonomy in design, you could permit a few alternate themes or use **child themes** so that local sites can have a slightly different look (colors, logos, etc.) without deviating from the core design. The network admin can make specific themes available to specific sites ⁴³. Many enterprise multisite setups use this approach: one parent theme for the core brand style, and child themes per franchise to allow minor customizations.
- **Centralized Management, Decentralized Content:** Train your franchisee site admins on using WordPress – since each site's dashboard will be just like a normal WordPress site, they can create pages, posts, and manage menus for their own site without risk to others. As the Super Admin, you should establish some governance: e.g. you might preload each new site with certain pages (Home, About, Contact) and perhaps a starter set of draft posts or guidelines. The Network Admin settings let you specify default content for new sites (like a welcome post, sample page, default category, etc.) ²¹. Use this to ensure every franchise site launches with the basics in place. From there, franchisees can fill in the local details.
- **Backup and Testing:** With multisite, all sites are in one database, so make sure you have a robust backup strategy for the whole network. If possible, test updates on a staging server – enabling multisite on a staging clone of your network – before pushing updates live. This is especially important when you have dozens or hundreds of sites; you want to avoid any plugin update unexpectedly affecting all your franchise sites. WordPress is quite stable, and the benefit is that one well-tested update process covers everything.

In summary, WordPress Multisite in 2025 is a mature, flexible solution for multi-location businesses. It offers the **best of both worlds**: centralized control for the brand and individualized sites for each location. From an SEO perspective, it can be optimized to ensure each franchise site shines in local search results. From a management perspective, it dramatically streamlines maintenance (one dashboard instead of many). And with the continuous improvements from the WordPress core team – ranging from performance enhancements to developer features – a multisite network is only getting more capable and easier to run over time. Whether you're a franchisor looking to empower your franchisees with their own mini-sites, or a multi-unit business aiming for consistent yet localized web presence, WordPress Multisite is a proven foundation that can grow with your enterprise ⁴⁴ ⁴⁵. By staying informed of the latest features and following best practices, you'll ensure both your team and your end customers get the best experience across all your sites.

Useful Resources and Trusted Sources:

1. WordPress Developer Handbook – “WordPress Multisite/Network” 46 2
2. Learn WordPress Lesson – “Setting up a WordPress Multisite Network” 1 11
3. WordPress Developer Handbook – “Before You Create a Network” 8 13
4. WordPress Developer Handbook – “WordPress Multisite Domain Mapping” 17 16
5. Learn WordPress Tutorial – “Managing a WordPress Multisite Network” (Network Admin roles and settings) 4 22
6. WordPress Developer Handbook – “Network Admin” (Features of Network Admin screens) 5 6
7. Make WordPress Core – WordPress 6.6 Dev Notes (Multisite improvements) 31 27
8. Make WordPress Core – WordPress 6.5 adds AVIF support (FAQ on Multisite file types) 23 24
9. WordPress News – WordPress 6.8 Release Post (highlights: security, performance) 35 36
10. Ahrefs Blog (quoting Google) – “Subdomains or Subfolders for SEO” 39 41
11. Google Search Central (via SEM Post) – Duplicate content is not a penalty 40
12. WordPress Enterprise Page – Enterprise use cases (WordPress for multi-site at scale) 44 45

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