



Lesson #34

Case Study 2:

Different Sidebars For Different Categories Limitations

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Introduction

In the process of developing the theme, we walked through the process of creating different sidebars for each category. This is one of the many strengths of Word Press and it is so useful. On a simpler to medium complex website, this may not always be a problem. In fact, you'll hardly encounter issues with it.

However, when a client starts adding more categories and cross posts into many categories, this could be a problem. I've had an opportunity to develop such a site in the past and will share what I learned about the limitations of using this technique in this lesson.

Case Background

The client wanted to use Word Press as the content management system to pull together various sections of a site. The old site was built with a variety of tools from Front Page to Joomla to Blogger. It was a big project.

On its own, this project didn't sound too complicated. It was just took a lot of work and planning because of existing content and traffic. The easy part was pulling content into WordPress, organizing and customizing the theme. The real challenge surfaced much later after the project was done.

To help you understand why, here's an illustration how the site was pulled together.

Old Site	New Site	Sidebar
FAQ's managed by Joomla	Created FAQ category with sub-categories, then importing Joomla articles here.	Newsletter signup box with FAQ sub-category listing

Old Site	New Site	Sidebar
Reprint Articles	Created Article category with multiple sub-categories	Newsletter signup box with article sub-category listings
Blog managed with Blogger	Created a category called Blog with multiple sub-categories	Newsletter signup box with blog sub-category listings and blog RSS feed

There's a lot more, but this should give you a rough idea. There were many categories and each category has sub-categories to boot. The client also wanted the sidebars of each category to be slightly different. There would be some elements that are carried consistently throughout the site and some elements in the sidebar that are different as illustrated in the table above.

We successfully delivered those requirements by using conditional tags in the sidebar. Refer to lesson 52 if you need a refresher.

The Problem

Everything worked fine until the client started adding content to the site. Which was kinda like the point of having a Web site right ☺. As it that wasn't enough, the client also wanted every piece of content to appear in the blog. I coded the theme and advised the client to mark the post as belonging to the blog category and its sub categories too if they want to display it in the blog area. Big Mistake!

In case I've lost you, here's what the client did.

Blog Post -> Filed in the 'blog' category, 'blog' sub-category, article category, and article sub-category.

The post was put into four categories, two of them being a top level category and two were second level categories. The blog and article categories have different sidebars but Word Press now gets confused because it doesn't know which one to display. So it'll choose the first category that comes first – this is by category ID not alphabetical. As you can imagine, this could produce unexpected results.

Sure enough, a post that should have the article sidebar is displaying the blog sidebar. It was a mess.

The Fix

So, how do we fix something like this? At this point in writing, this is one of the limitations of WordPress. The easiest is to advise the client to choose only one top level category. We also fixed the blog page to display new posts regardless which category the post is in. Doing both solved the problem but all is not entirely without consequences either.

When you choose a specific top level category, the post will also carry that category's slug in the URL. There is no way to file a post under 'Article' category and still have the URL have 'blog' in it e.g. <http://domain.com/blog/post-title/>

Is this getting complicated enough for you? If I've completely lost you, my apologies. This was a very complicated site and it can be difficult to describe. What you need to take away from this lesson is this.

Whenever you have different sidebars for different categories, advise your client not to cross post a single post in multiple categories. You can have sub-categories and put a post into sub-categories of the parent.

When you start jumping across to different top level categories, that could mess up the sidebars. So your client needs to be disciplined in the categorization of a post.

This is not entirely a bad thing because when it comes to SEO, the less often a post appears on the same blog, the better. When you put a post in two different categories, the post appears three times. Once in the post page of course, once each on the category archive pages. This could be construed as duplicate content. By making your client understand this, they may be more inclined to think through where the post really belongs to.

Next Lesson...

Let's talk about backups!

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