Platforms, Ecosystems & co.

Idea In Short

Most people mix up the terminologies: "platform", "ecosystem", "website", "portal", "microsite" and "marketplace". In simple terms:

- A website is your main shop
- A microsite is your pop-up stand
- A portal is your entrance hall and info desk
- A marketplace is a shared market hall
- A platform is the mall building and rules
- An ecosystem is the whole city that grows around it

Once you see these differences, you'll make better product decisions, write clearer specifications, and stop confusing your team and stakeholders with vague labels.

If you work on digital products, you've probably heard someone say, "We're building a platform" when they really mean "a website with login". This confusion leads to bloated requirements, unrealistic expectations, and messy roadmaps.

Using the right words [terminologies] forces you to be clear about what you're actually building, who you're serving, and what value you're promising. Let's demystify these six terms with simple language and everyday analogies.

Website

A website is a collection of web pages under one address, usually representing one brand or topic. Think of it as your main shop on a street: it has a sign, a door, and different sections inside.

Typical website traits:

- One main purpose: inform, present, or sell
- Sections, such as "Home, About, Services, Blog, Contact"
- Usually long-lived and brand-centric

Example:

> Your consulting firm's main site where visitors can learn who you are, what you offer, read your articles, and get in touch.

If someone says "We just need a place to explain our offer and publish content", they need a website, not a platform.

Microsite

A microsite is a small, focused website created for a specific campaign, product, or event. It often lives on its own URL or subdomain and has its own design and tone.

Think of a microsite as a pop-up stand in front of your shop for a special promotion. It's there to draw attention to one thing, not to represent everything you do.

Typical microsite traits:

- Narrow scope: one campaign, event, or product
- Often temporary or seasonal
- Design can differ from the main brand site to stand out

Example:

> summer-sale.yourbrand.com built just for a limited-time offer, with its own visuals, message, and landing pages focused purely on conversion.

If you say, "We're launching a special campaign and don't want to clutter our main site", you probably need a **microsite**.

Portal

A portal is a single entry point that brings many services, tools, or information sources together for specific users. Users typically log in and see a personalized dashboard.

Imagine the main entrance hall and information desk of a large office building. From there, you can access different offices, services, and facilities, but the lobby is where you start and orient yourself.

Typical portal traits:

- Login-based, role-based content
- Aggregates data from multiple systems
- Designed around a specific user group (customers, employees, partners)

Example:

- A customer portal where clients can see invoices, submit support tickets, access documentation, and manage subscriptions
- An employee portal with HR tools, internal news, and apps all in one place

If the requirement is "We need one place where users can access all our services and information", you're talking about a **portal**.

Marketplace

A marketplace is where many sellers and many buyers meet to do transactions. The marketplace operator doesn't own all the products; it provides the space, trust, and mechanisms for others to trade.

Picture a big indoor market hall packed with independent stalls. Each stall is a different vendor, but everyone shares the same building, flows of visitors, payment rules, and security.

Typical marketplace traits:

- Many sellers, many buyers
- Listings, search, comparison, and transactions
- Reviews, ratings, and reputation systems are common

Example:

- Amazon Marketplace or Etsy, where third-party sellers list products
- A course marketplace where different instructors sell their own courses

If you say, "We want other providers to sell to our audience on our site", you're designing a marketplace, not just a website with e-commerce.

Platform

A platform is the underlying digital infrastructure that enables different groups to interact and create value together. It is less about what the platform owner does directly and more about what others can build or do on top of it.

Think of a platform as the shopping mall building plus all its rules and services: the physical space, electricity, security, cleaning, parking, and the leasing rules for tenants. The mall doesn't sell most of the goods itself; it enables shops and visitors to meet and transact.

Typical platform traits:

- Designed for interactions between distinct groups (e.g., buyers and sellers, developers and users, content creators and viewers)
- Provides shared services: payments, identity, discovery, APIs, distribution
- Third parties can extend or enrich it (apps, plug-ins, integrations, content)

Example:

- The Apple App Store or Google Play, where developers publish apps and users find and install them
- Shopify, enabling merchants to run stores, use apps, connect with logistics and payment providers

If the goal sounds like "We want others to build on top of us", then you're thinking in platform terms. A platform is not just "a website with users"; it's an environment where outside participants can create additional value.

Ecosystem

An ecosystem is the broader network of companies, developers, partners, and users that grows around a platform (or set of platforms). They create complementary products and services and depend on each other.

Now, instead of just the mall, think of the entire city: public transport, restaurants, nearby offices, delivery services, banks, events, and local government. All of these make the mall more attractive, and the mall, in turn, helps the city thrive.

Typical ecosystem traits:

- Many independent actors (partners, suppliers, integrators, communities)
- Loosely coordinated but mutually reinforcing
- Value emerges from the whole network, not a single product

Example:

> The "Apple ecosystem" is not just the iPhone. It includes app developers, accessory makers, content creators, payment providers, support partners, and even training companies—all thriving because Apple's platforms exist.

If your ambition is "We want a whole world of partners and solutions to form around what we do", you're aiming to build an ecosystem, not just a product.

One analogy to rule them all

Let's put it all together in the same picture:

- **Platform** = The shopping mall building and its rules

- **Marketplace** = The central market hall inside where many sellers meet many buyers
- **Website** = A single shop in the city
- **Microsite** = A pop-up stand for a special event or promotion
- **Portal** = The main lobby and information desk that routes you to different places and services
- **Ecosystem** = The whole city around the mall: transport, restaurants, suppliers, events, and more

Once you see it this way, it becomes much easier to label what you are building—and what you are not.

Applying this to your own products

If you're leading a digital initiative, try this quick test with your team:

1. Ask, "Are we a shop, a pop-up, a lobby, a market hall, a mall, or a city?"
2. Force yourself to choose only one primary identity for now
3. Adjust your scope, roadmap, and messaging to match that identity

You'll be surprised how many fuzzy debates disappear once everyone agrees on what you're actually building.

Summary

Most digital projects are over-sold as "platforms" when they are just websites, portals, or, at best, marketplaces. A website is your main shop; a microsite is your focused pop-up; a portal is your entrance hall; a marketplace is your shared market hall; a platform is the mall itself; an ecosystem is the city that grows around it. When you use these terms precisely, you clarify scope, manage expectations, communicate better with stakeholders, and make smarter product decisions.