STEVE BUSINESS

THE SMALL BUSINESS STARTER GUIDE

A practical workbook for turning a useful idea into a tested, organised and financially aware small business.

Learn. Innovate. Build. Inspire.

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How to use this guide

This guide is designed for first-time founders and small business owners. It provides a working framework, not a promise of success. Adapt examples to your location, customers, legal requirements and resources.

1. Start with a real customer problem

A business begins with a customer, not a logo. Describe who experiences the problem, how often it occurs, what the customer does today and what the current solution costs in time or money. Interview people about recent behaviour rather than asking only whether they like your idea.

Look for urgency, repeat demand and willingness to pay. Compliments, views and social-media likes are weak evidence compared with a paid pilot or repeat order. Keep the first test small enough that a negative result is affordable.

2. Ten low-capital ideas to investigate

Cleaning for homes or offices; laundry collection and ironing; tutoring; basic computer setup; social-media content for local shops; graphic design; pre-ordered snacks; narrow-range product resale; event support; and spreadsheet setup or bookkeeping when qualified.

No idea is automatically low-cost. Check equipment, permits, transport, supplier prices, competition, safety and local demand. A service may need less inventory but still requires time, skill and trust.

3. Write a simple business plan

Describe the customer, problem, offer, difference, sales channel, delivery process, resources and risks. Add a financial forecast with transparent assumptions. A one-page plan can be enough to begin; update it when evidence changes.

Cover customer and value proposition; market and alternatives; operations and suppliers; marketing and sales; legal checks; startup costs; recurring expenses; cash flow; and milestones. The SBA framework is a useful reference, though local rules differ.

4. Price the offer and understand the numbers

Revenue is sales earned. Direct costs relate to goods or services delivered. Gross profit is revenue minus direct costs. Operating expenses support the business overall, such as rent, software, utilities and general marketing. Net profit accounts for relevant expenses, interest and taxes.

Example: sell 40 units at 25 each: revenue is 1,000. If each costs 12, direct costs are 480 and gross profit is 520. If operating expenses are 300, operating profit before interest and tax is 220. These are illustrative figures.

Remember: Revenue is not profit, and profit is not the same as cash in the bank.

5. Make the first online sale

Use one clear offer, accurate photos, a price or quote process, delivery details, payment methods and contact information. A website is not always necessary for the first test; a suitable marketplace or social channel can help test demand.

Respond promptly, confirm orders in writing, deliver what was promised and ask for feedback. Track visits, enquiries, orders, cancellations and repeat purchases. Protect customer information and follow local consumer

and payment rules.

6. Manage cash and records

Record sales and expenses consistently. Keep invoices and receipts, separate personal and business money, and reconcile cash and bank balances. Track unpaid invoices and supplier bills. A business can show accounting profit and still run short of cash when payments arrive late.

Prepare a monthly budget and short cash forecast. Include rent, transport, payment fees, packaging, stock losses, repairs, taxes and owner compensation where relevant. Review actual results against the plan.

7. Choose practical digital tools

A spreadsheet may be enough for early sales and expense tracking. Add a calendar, cloud storage, secure business email, design tool and customer list when they solve a real problem. Compare price, privacy, permissions, export and backup options.

Use unique passwords and multi-factor authentication. Restrict access to sensitive records. Do not upload confidential customer or financial information into an unapproved service.

8. Why small businesses struggle

Common problems include weak demand, unclear positioning, underpricing, poor cash management, unreliable delivery, overexpansion and dependence on one customer or supplier. Watch for declining repeat orders, rising costs, delayed payments and complaints.

Separate facts from assumptions. Decide whether to persist, adapt or stop. Do not borrow simply to repeat a model that loses money on each sale. Seek qualified local advice for tax, legal and financing questions.

9. A 30-day validation plan

Days 1–5: define customer and problem; list alternatives; check local rules. Days 6–10: interview buyers. Days 11–15: define a small offer and calculate direct costs. Days 16–22: run a paid pilot or preorder test. Days 23–26: deliver and request feedback. Days 27–30: review revenue, costs, time and customer response.

Set a spending limit before the test. Do not buy major equipment, rent premises or hire staff until evidence supports the next commitment.

10. Simple founder checklist

Can I describe the customer and problem in one sentence? Have I spoken with people who experience it? Is the offer clear? Do I know direct and recurring costs? Can I deliver reliably? Have I checked permits and consumer rules? Are payments and records secure? What evidence would make me continue, change or stop?

A small business grows through repeated learning: understand the customer, make a clear offer, deliver reliably, record the numbers and improve. The goal of an early test is to reduce uncertainty before committing more money.

Further reading

U.S. Small Business Administration — market research: https://www.sba.gov/business-guide/plan-your-business/market-research-competitive-analysis

U.S. Small Business Administration — business plans: https://www.sba.gov/business-guide/plan-your-business/write-your-business-plan

U.S. Small Business Administration — finances: https://www.sba.gov/business-guide/manage-your-business/manage-your-finances

CISA — Secure Our World: https://www.cisa.gov/secure-our-world

Important note

This publication is general education, not legal, tax, accounting, investment or individual financial advice. Laws, permits, consumer rules, tax treatment and payment services vary by country. Confirm local requirements with qualified professionals or relevant authorities. Examples are hypothetical.