



The Web Design Business

Build the front door of every local business, then get paid monthly to keep the lights on. The site is the sale; the care plan is the business.

\$100-760

START LEAN

21-45 days

FIRST DOLLAR

70-85%

TYPICAL MARGIN

Is this your business?

Every business needs a website, most local ones have a bad one, and the owner knows it every time a customer says 'I couldn't find your hours.' Web design turns that universal embarrassment into \$2,000-10,000 projects, and, more importantly, into care plans that pay monthly for years. The course-sellers pitch this as a build business. The operators who last know the build is the door and the recurring book behind it is the actual asset.

\$100-760

LEAN STARTUP COST

\$1,500-3,000

STANDARD BUILD

21-45 days

TIME TO FIRST DOLLAR

70-85%

TYPICAL GROSS MARGIN

Yes, fully

SOLO-FRIENDLY

Yes, entirely

HOME-BASED

BUILT FOR THESE FOUNDER TYPES

THE BUILDER

THE CRAFTSMAN

3/5 difficulty

THE HONEST FIT TEST

Half this job is design and build; the other half is extracting photos, copy, and decisions from busy owners who go quiet for weeks. If chasing a plumber for his service list sounds beneath you, this will grind. If you like shipping visible work, systematizing the repeatable parts, and stacking \$100-a-month care plans into a snowball, this is one of the most durable laptop businesses there is.

Who pays, and why now.

Roughly a quarter of American small businesses still have no website at all, and a huge share of the rest run sites that are slow, dated, broken on phones, or silent about what the business actually does.

Customers check the site before they call, the way they check the storefront before they walk in. A bad site quietly taxes every other dollar the owner spends on marketing, and most owners feel it without being able to name it. That feeling is the market.

The demand drivers are durable. Sites age on a three-to-four year redesign cycle, so every site ever built is a future project with a date on it. Google keeps raising the bar on speed and mobile experience, which strands older sites. And the buying moment recurs: new ownership, a rebrand, a new location, an embarrassing moment in front of a customer. You are never selling a novelty; you are selling the fix for a known, visible problem.

Competition is loud and weak at the same time.

Above you sit real agencies charging \$25,000 and ignoring anyone smaller; below you sit \$500 template mills and a cousin with a Wix login. The middle, \$2,000-10,000 with professional process, actual copywriting, and a human who answers, is wide open in almost every market. You will lose deals to cheap and lose deals to fancy. The owners in the middle, who want it done right by someone accountable, are the business.

The honest constraint: project revenue resets to zero every month, which is why the care plan is not an add-on, it is the business model. Hosting management, updates, backups, security, and small edits at \$50-200 a month turns every build into an annuity. Forty plans is \$4,000-6,000 a month before you sell a single new site. Builders who skip this stay on the treadmill forever; builders who stack it eventually own their calendar.

WHO BUYS	WHAT THEY PAY	WHAT THEY ACTUALLY WANT
Home services (plumbers, HVAC, roofers)	\$2,500-5,500 per site	A site that ranks, loads on a phone, and makes the phone ring
Professional practices (dental, legal, accounting)	\$3,500-8,000 per site	Credibility that matches their fees, plus bookings
Restaurants and retail	\$2,000-4,000 per site	Menus, hours, ordering links, and photos that sell the room
Small B2B companies	\$5,000-10,000 per site	A sales asset their reps can send without apologizing

THE AVERAGE CARE PLAN

\$125/mo

Forty care plans is \$5,000 a month of recurring revenue that renews itself while you sleep. Builds get the attention; plans build the wealth. Every site you ship should leave the shop with a plan attached, priced and presented as the default, not the upsell.

Every dollar, before you spend it.

Modern builders and template systems collapsed the startup cost of this business to nearly nothing. Your money goes to the legal foundation and a thin toolkit; your real investment is the unpaid week it takes to build the demo work that wins job one.

THE LEAN BUILD · START HERE	WHY IT EARNS ITS PLACE	COST
Laptop you already own	The whole studio fits in a browser tab	\$0
Site builder or CMS (WordPress, Webflow, Framer)	Pick one platform and go deep; switching costs you months	\$0-40/mo
Design tool (Figma free tier)	Mockups before builds; approvals before pixels	\$0-15/mo
Stock photo and icon library	Until the client's photographer exists, this is the difference	\$0-30/mo
LLC + business license	Your liability wall. See the legal page	\$50-500
Professional liability (E&O) insurance	You ship business-critical assets; cover the mistakes	\$30-60/mo
Your own portfolio site + domain	Your site IS the audition; it gets your best week of work	\$20-100
Business bank account + bookkeeping app	Separate money from day one; future-you says thanks	\$0-15/mo
Lean total		\$100-760 all-in
THE STANDARD BUILD · ADD AFTER FIRST REVENUE	WHAT IT UNLOCKS	COST
Care-plan stack (backups, uptime, security tooling)	The infrastructure of your recurring book; pays for itself at plan three	\$30-80/mo
Premium theme and plugin licenses	Agency licenses cover unlimited client sites; buy once, bill forever	\$100-300/yr
Proposal + contract software	E-sign and deposit in one link; faster yes, fewer ghosts	\$20-40/mo
Basic SEO tooling	Keyword and audit data makes every pitch and every build smarter	\$30-60/mo

THE RULE

Do not buy a \$3,000 agency course, a custom logo, or a fancy office chair before client three. One platform, one niche template you have built three times, and a deposit policy beat every accelerator ever sold. Revenue buys tools; tools do not buy revenue.

Clean from day one.

Web design disputes are rarely dramatic and almost always preventable: they come from fuzzy scope, stalled content, and confusion over who owns what. The contract is not paperwork; it is the project plan with teeth.

- Form your LLC:** File in your home state, get the EIN free at irs.gov, open the business bank account. THE LAUNCHPAD Module Three walks every step.
- Design contract with hard scope:** Page count, features, two revision rounds, content deadlines, and what happens when the client goes silent: after 14 days the project pauses and a restart fee applies. The stalled-project clause will save your year.
- 50% deposit before work begins:** Half up front, balance before launch, in writing. The deposit is also your qualifier: an owner who will not commit money will not commit photos, copy, or decisions either.
- IP transfer on final payment:** The client owns the site, content, and design when paid in full; you keep portfolio rights and your reusable components. Until the balance clears, the work is yours. This clause collects invoices politely.
- The client owns their domain and hosting:** Register nothing in your name. Designers who hold domains hostage poison this market; being loudly the opposite wins referrals. You manage access; they hold the keys.
- License everything:** Stock photos, fonts, themes, and plugins licensed through proper channels, with client sites covered by your agency licenses. One lifted image can cost more than the project paid.
- Accessibility awareness:** ADA website demand letters against small businesses are real and rising. Build to WCAG basics (contrast, alt text, keyboard navigation) and say so in proposals: it is protection for the client and a differentiator for you.

INSURANCE, SPECIFICALLY

Professional liability (E&O) at \$30-60 a month is the core policy: a checkout bug, a botched migration, or a site outage during the client's busy season are claimable mistakes. Add cyber liability once you hold admin access to a dozen client sites, because at that point you are the breach vector for all of them.

WATCH FOR

The content stall. The single most common way these projects die is not design disagreement, it is waiting months for the client's photos and copy. Solve it structurally: include copywriting in the price, use a content questionnaire with deadlines, and enforce the pause clause. The builders who write the words ship on time and charge more for it.

Requirements vary by state and city. Verify with your state, city clerk, and a licensed professional. Education, not legal advice.

Three doors. Real numbers.

Productize. Fixed packages with named scope beat custom quotes in speed, margin, and sanity. Price by the package, anchor with the middle door, attach a care plan to every quote as the default, and never start without the deposit.

	RECOMMEND	
<p>DOOR ONE</p> <h3>The Launch Site</h3> <p>\$2,000–2,500 starter</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ 1-3 pages, mobile-first, built in 2 weeks◆ Copywriting included from your questionnaire◆ Contact form, map, click-to-call, review links◆ Basic on-page SEO and analytics installed	<p>DOOR TWO</p> <h3>The Business Site</h3> <p>\$4,000–5,500 most-booked</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ 5-7 pages with service pages that can rank◆ Copywriting and stock photography included◆ Reviews, gallery, and lead-capture forms◆ On-page SEO foundation and speed optimization◆ Launch training video for the owner	<p>DOOR THREE</p> <h3>The Growth Site</h3> <p>\$7,500–10,000 premium</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Everything in The Business Site, custom design◆ Booking, quoting, or e-commerce functionality◆ Local landing pages for each service area◆ 90 days of post-launch tweaks included◆ Priority scheduling and direct line

PRICING NOTES FOR THIS BUSINESS

- Floor: \$1,500 for anything with your name on it. Below that you are competing with template mills on their terms, and they are better at being cheap than you are.
- The care plan (\$75-200 a month: hosting management, updates, backups, security, small edits) goes on every quote as the default option, not a checkbox.
- Include copywriting in every package. It removes the content stall, raises quality, and justifies a third of your price by itself.
- Price by package and outcome, never by the hour. Owners cannot compare hourly rates, but they understand what a finished front door costs.
- Rush jobs exist and cost 25-50% more. Speed is real value; bill it like value.

THE UPSSELL THAT PAYS THE RENT

The care plan, presented at the proposal, not after launch: 'every site we build is maintained, here are the two plan options.' Updates, backups, security, uptime monitoring, and a monthly batch of small edits. It is \$1,200-2,400 a year per client for a few hours of systematized work, it keeps you in position for the inevitable redesign, and it is the difference between a freelancer and a firm.

Names, not strategies.

The portfolio paradox is brutal here because the work is so visible: no sites, no trust. The fix is to build proof before anyone pays you, then trade discounted excellence for case-study rights.

Thirty days of deliberate work replaces years of 'experience.'

1 **Build three demo sites first**

Pick your niche and build three fictional-but-real sites: a plumber, a dentist, a restaurant. Full pages, real copy, live URLs. Nobody asks how many clients paid for a portfolio that looks this good. This is your unpaid first week and the best investment in the playbook.

2 **Two founding builds at half rate**

Offer two real businesses your middle package at 50% in exchange for a review, a case study, and permission to show the before-and-after. Founding builds are how you buy a track record honestly.

3 **The embarrassing-site list**

Walk your own zip code online: list ten good businesses (4.5+ stars) whose sites are broken on a phone or stamped 2014. The quality gap between their reviews and their site is the pitch, and the owner already feels it.

4 **The homepage mockup**

For one well-chosen prospect, redesign their homepage above-the-fold and send the screenshot: their logo, their reviews, their photos, your layout. Spec work this specific converts because it shows the owner their own business looking the way it should.

5 **Adjacent freelancers and agencies**

Photographers, SEO operators, ads people, and marketing consultants all have clients with bad websites and no builder to send them to. Three referral relationships can quietly fill a year.

6 **One owner room**

The chamber mixer, the contractor association, the restaurant group. Become the person who answers website questions generously. Owners hire people they have met, and rooms produce referrals in clusters.

THE EXACT ASK

"Hi [name], I build websites for [niche] businesses here in [city]. I came across [business] looking for a [service] and noticed the site is hard to use on a phone, which is where most of your customers are finding you. I mocked up what your homepage could look like, using your own reviews and photos: screenshot attached, free, use it either way. I'm taking two founding clients this month at half my normal rate while I build my local portfolio. Would you want a fifteen-minute call this week?"

THE FOUNDING-CUSTOMER DEAL

Two founding builds at 50% off the package price, in exchange for a Google review, a written case study, before-and-after rights, and the care plan at full rate from month one. At build three, founding pricing retires publicly. The discount buys proof; the care plans make even the discounted builds profitable within the year.

Owned, earned, then paid.

Your marketing is your own site, visible transformations, and a referral engine that runs through every launch. Web design is bought on proof and trust, not ads: the before and afters do the selling if you put them where owners look.

CHANNEL, RANKED	WHY IT WORKS HERE	THE FIRST MOVE
Your own website + Google Business Profile	The shoemaker's shoes: prospects judge your site before your work	Treat your site as your flagship build; claim the profile; collect a review per project
Before-and-after redesign content	The transformation IS the ad, same as a washed driveway	Post the split-screen of every launch on LinkedIn, Instagram, and the portfolio
Referral partners (SEO, ads, photographers)	Adjacent pros meet your exact buyer weekly and have no builder to recommend	Set up three two-way referral deals with a 10% thank-you fee
Every launch as an event	A launched site makes the owner proud; pride is shareable	Give every client a launch post to share; ask for one introduction at handoff
Local owner rooms	Owners buy from people in the room, not from ads	One chamber or association meeting monthly; answer site questions generously

FIVE CONTENT PIECES THAT WIN THIS NICHE

- We rebuilt this plumber's 2013 website: the before, the after, and what changed in his calls
- What a small business website actually costs in 2026, and what the cheap ones leave out
- The 60-second phone test: is your website sending customers to your competitor?
- Why your site needs a care plan: what happens to an unmaintained website in 12 months
- Five things every [niche] website needs above the fold, with real local examples

THE REVIEW MACHINE

Ask at launch, at the peak-pride moment when the owner first sees their new site live on their own phone: 'It would mean a lot if you shared that feeling in a Google review. I'll text you the link right now.' Then ask again, softer, at the 90-day care-plan check-in when the results are in. Reviews from named local owners are the highest-converting asset this business produces.

One unit, one month, no fog.

Two honest snapshots: what one standard build actually nets, and what a steady solo month looks like once the care-plan book starts compounding. These use the middle door at \$4,500 and real tool costs. No 'six-figure agency in 90 days' math.

ONE UNIT: ONE BUSINESS SITE AT \$4,500	AMOUNT	A WORKING MONTH: SOLO, 2 BUILDS + 20 CARE PLANS	AMOUNT
Revenue	\$4,500	Revenue (builds + care plans)	\$10,600
Software, stock, plugin share	-\$120	Software, licenses, care-plan stack	-\$320
Payment processing (2.9%)	-\$131	Subcontract (copy or dev overflow)	-\$500
Insurance + overhead share	-\$60	Insurance, phone, internet share	-\$180
Gross profit (35-45 hrs over 3 weeks)	\$4,189	Marketing (rooms, portfolio, cards)	-\$150
Tax reserve (27%)	-\$1,131	Pre-tax profit	\$9,450
Yours, per build	\$3,058	Tax reserve (27%)	-\$2,552
		Owner take-home	\$6,898

BREAK-EVEN

1 site

One founding build at half rate returns the entire lean startup cost several times over. The real economics live in the second number: twenty care plans is \$2,000-2,500 a month that arrives whether or not you sold anything, and the book only grows. Builds feed you this month; plans feed you in year three.

Illustrative figures at typical market rates; your market, prices, and costs will differ. Run YOUR numbers in the One-Page P&L from THE LAUNCHPAD, Module Six. Remember the 25-30% tax reserve on every dollar of profit.

Pre-decided, so motivation is never consulted.

WEEK ONE: FOUNDATIONS

- LLC filed, EIN issued, business bank account open
- E&O insurance bound; certificate saved
- Platform chosen; niche chosen; both written down
- Your own portfolio site designed and live
- Contract finalized: deposit, scope, pause clause, IP transfer

WEEK TWO: DOORS OPEN

- Three niche demo sites built and polished
- Embarrassing-site list of 10 local businesses built
- One homepage mockup created and sent
- Founding offer pitched to 5 warm contacts
- Care plan tiers and pricing finalized

WEEK THREE: MOMENTUM

- First founding client signed; 50% deposit collected
- Content questionnaire returned; copy drafted by you
- Design mockup approved; build underway
- Second founding build closed or pipeline at 10 warm
- Three referral partnerships pitched (SEO, ads, photo)

WEEK FOUR: THE SYSTEM

- First site launched; review asked at the pride moment
- Care plan activated; before-and-after published
- Launch post given to client; one introduction requested
- Founding pricing publicly retired or final spot announced
- Month-one P&L done; pick one growth lever for month two

DAY 30 VERDICT

Green light: one site launched or near launch, a second signed, a care plan active, and 5+ warm conversations. Yellow: interest but no deposits: your proof is thin or your packages are vague, so finish the demo sites and quote fixed packages only, then re-run week two. Red: zero signings despite 25+ real asks: stop pitching, build the three demo sites to a jaw-dropping standard, and return with proof. In this business the work argues for you or nothing does.

How this business fails, and how it grows.

THE FIVE KILLERS

- ✗ **The custom-quote treadmill**
Quoting every project from scratch burns your evenings and trains clients to negotiate. Fixed packages with named scope close faster, defend margin, and make your pipeline predictable.

- ✗ **Starting without the deposit**
A project started on a handshake is a hobby with homework. The 50% deposit qualifies the client, funds the work, and changes how seriously everyone treats deadlines, including you.

- ✗ **Letting content stall the build**
Waiting on client photos and copy is how a three-week project becomes a five-month resentment. Include copywriting, set content deadlines in the contract, and enforce the pause clause without apology.

- ✗ **Shipping without the care plan**
A site handed off with no maintenance plan is a future emergency and a lost annuity. Present the plan as the default at proposal time; a builder with forty plans owns their calendar.

- ✗ **Competing with the template mills**
Someone will always do it for \$500, badly. Do not chase them down. Your market is the owner who already bought cheap once and felt it; sell process, copy, and accountability at a price that funds all three.

THREE SCALE PATHS

- 1 **The niche machine**
One industry, one repeatable build, many cities: sites for dentists, for contractors, for restaurants. The template library compounds, the copy questionnaire sharpens, and referrals travel inside the industry without you.

- 2 **The recurring book**
Push every client onto care plans and add SEO, hosting management, and quarterly improvements. A book of 60 plans at \$150 is \$9,000 a month of revenue that does not depend on selling a single new build, and books like that can eventually be sold.

- 3 **The studio**
Subcontract development and design, keep client relationships, scoping, and quality yourself. Two reliable contractors triple your throughput; your job becomes proposals, standards, and the pipeline. The agency, without the payroll cliff.

YOUR FIRST HIRE

A part-time developer or VA for care-plan tickets and site updates once the book passes fifteen plans. The maintenance work is documented, repeatable, and beneath your billable rate: exactly what a first hire should absorb. They are also your systems test: if your update checklist cannot guide a stranger safely around a client site, the care plan is a promise, not a product.

THE STAIRCASE CONTINUES

The playbook is the map. The machine is waiting.

Everything this playbook describes, Epic Advisory Group can build with you: the brand, the cinematic website, the entity, the engine. Describe your idea to the Launch Engine and see your business real in about sixty seconds, free.

- The Launch Engine: your idea, built free, in about a minute
- THE ASCENT: Founder Edition: the eight-module course
- Launch-in-a-Box: entity, brand, site, and first campaign, one flat price
- Growth, capital readiness, and the path to the public markets

"There is no right age. There is only the decision."



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