



The Online Course Business

Package what you know into something people pay to learn. Sold before it is built, priced on outcomes, and honest about the fact that audiences come first.

\$100-400

START LEAN

21-60 days (presale)

FIRST DOLLAR

85-95%

TYPICAL MARGIN

Is this your business?

An online course turns a skill you already have into a product that teaches it: 90% margins, no inventory, infinitely replicable. The industry built around this idea is also the most dishonest in this series, selling 'passive six figures' to people with no audience and no proof anyone wants the topic. The real model is almost backwards from the pitch: you sell the course before you build it, to a small audience you earned by teaching free first, and the first version is live, small, and imperfect on purpose.

\$100-400

LEAN STARTUP COST

\$800-2,000

STANDARD BUILD

21-60 days (presale)

TIME TO FIRST DOLLAR

85-95%

TYPICAL GROSS MARGIN

Yes, fully

SOLO-FRIENDLY

Yes, entirely

HOME-BASED

BUILT FOR THESE FOUNDER TYPES

THE ADVISOR

THE STORYTELLER

3/5 difficulty

THE HONEST FIT TEST

You need two things: a skill with a provable outcome (people paid you, hired you, or visibly benefited from it) and the willingness to teach publicly for free before anyone pays. If you have no demonstrable results in your topic, earn those first; a course is how expertise gets packaged, not how it gets faked. If you have the receipts and like teaching, this is among the highest-margin businesses that exist.

Who pays, and why now.

Online education is a global market measured in hundreds of billions, growing as careers change faster than universities can. But the market that matters to you is smaller and more specific: people with a painful, urgent problem your skill solves, who would rather pay \$200-500 for a direct path than spend six months assembling free YouTube fragments. The buyer is not purchasing videos; she is purchasing a shortcut with a guide, and shortcuts price on the value of the destination.

The honest industry numbers reshape strategy. Self-paced course completion rates commonly run 10-15%, refund requests cluster among buyers who never log in, and the median course earns very little because the median creator has no audience. Meanwhile cohort-based courses (live, dated, with a group) complete at several times that rate, charge 3-10x more, and are dramatically easier to launch small. That is why this playbook starts you live and small, not with a 60-video library nobody asked for.

Topic selection follows a pyramid of proof. Strongest: skills people already pay you for (your trade, your craft, your day job's rare skill). Strong: transformations you have visibly achieved and can document. Weak: topics you would simply enjoy teaching. Brutal but useful test: have at least three people ever asked 'can you show me how you did that?' If nobody asks, there is no pull, and courses without pull require advertising budgets that first-time creators do not have.

Competition from free content is real and beatable. YouTube has everything and organizes nothing: the paying student buys sequence, curation, feedback, accountability, and access to you. This is also why niching wins: 'learn woodworking' fights every free channel on earth, while 'build your first hardwood dining table in six weekends' sells a specific outcome to a specific person who can picture the finished table in their dining room.

WHO BUYS	WHAT THEY PAY	WHAT THEY ACTUALLY WANT
Career advancers	\$150-800 per course	A skill that moves income: certifications, software, trades, freelancing
Side-hustle starters	\$100-500	A believable, sequenced path from zero to first dollar in a specific model
Hobbyists going deeper	\$50-300	Structured mastery and feedback in their craft, from someone whose work they admire
Businesses training teams	\$500-5,000 for licenses or workshops	A trusted outsider to upskill staff; the quiet B2B layer most creators never invoice

TYPICAL SELF-PACED COMPLETION RATE

10-15%

Most students never finish self-paced courses, and unfinished students refund more and refer less. Cohorts, deadlines, and community multiply completion, which is why the live-first model is not just easier to launch: it builds the testimonials the evergreen version will later run on.

Every dollar, before you spend it.

Course startup costs are embarrassingly low, which is exactly why the space is crowded with junk. Your real investments are credibility (free public teaching) and the presale. Spend nothing on production until strangers have paid; a course that cannot presell to twenty people cannot sell to two hundred.

THE LEAN BUILD · START HERE	WHY IT EARNS ITS PLACE	COST
Audience platform of choice	One channel: YouTube, LinkedIn, TikTok, or a newsletter. Free, but it is the real startup cost in hours	\$0
Email list tool	ConvertKit/Kit or MailerLite free tiers carry you past your first thousand subscribers	\$0-29/mo
Presale checkout	A simple payment link and landing page: Stripe link, Gumroad, or Carrd + Stripe	\$0-19/mo
Live delivery (cohort one)	Zoom plus a free community space (Discord or Circle trial) is a complete classroom	\$0-16/mo
Microphone	The one production purchase that matters; audiences forgive average video, never bad audio	\$60-100
Business basics	Sole prop is fine for cohort one; LLC as revenue arrives. See legal	\$0-200
Lean total		\$60-380 to first revenue

THE STANDARD BUILD · ADD AFTER FIRST REVENUE	WHAT IT UNLOCKS	COST
Course platform	Teachable, Podia, or Kajabi once the evergreen version exists; not before	\$39-149/mo
Lighting and camera upgrade	For recording the polished self-paced version from cohort learnings	\$150-400
Editing help	A freelance editor for the recorded library; your hours belong in teaching and marketing	\$300-800 one-time
Community platform paid tier	Circle or similar once the student base justifies it	\$39-99/mo

THE RULE

The sequence is law: audience, then presale, then production. Every reversed version (build the course, then find buyers) is the same expensive ghost town. If twenty strangers will not pay a deposit for the outcome, the topic, the audience, or the offer needs work, and you just learned that for free.

Clean from day one.

Course law is mostly marketing law. The FTC actively polices how money-making and results claims are made, and the business-opportunity space is its favorite hunting ground. The rules below are simple, and following them also happens to be the best long-term marketing strategy: provable claims, honest policies.

- Income and results claims: provable or absent:** Never imply typical students earn specific amounts. Testimonials must be real, representative in context, and disclosed honestly; 'results not typical' fine print does not cure a misleading headline. The FTC has fined course sellers millions for exactly this.
- A written refund policy, enforced as written:** Pick a clear standard (14-30 days, or action-based: 'complete module one first') and honor it without games. Refund disputes become chargebacks, and chargebacks threaten the Stripe account everything runs on.
- Sole prop to start, LLC at real revenue:** Cohort one can legally run under your name. Form the LLC once the model proves out, take the free EIN at irs.gov, and separate the bank accounts. THE LAUNCHPAD Module Three walks every filing.
- Sales tax on digital education varies:** Some states tax online courses and digital goods, others exempt live instruction. Course platforms calculate much of this for you; a direct-Stripe setup leaves it to you. Confirm your home state's rule when revenue gets real.
- Own your materials, license what you use:** Stock footage, music, fonts, and slides templates all carry licenses; keep receipts. And your own course IP deserves protection: copyright notices on materials and clear personal-use terms for students.
- Disclose affiliate and sponsorship relationships:** If you recommend tools inside the course or content and earn commissions, say so plainly. FTC disclosure rules apply to educators exactly as they do to influencers.
- Mind regulated topics:** Financial, legal, medical, and mental-health education needs disclaimers that you teach information, not personalized advice, and some claims (trading returns, health outcomes) carry regulator attention regardless of disclaimers.

INSURANCE, SPECIFICALLY

Professional liability (errors and omissions) is the relevant policy once teaching is your income, typically \$30-60 a month, and worth it earlier if you teach anything adjacent to finance, health, or safety. The LLC plus honest marketing is the primary shield; E&O is the backstop for the claim that your advice caused a loss.

WATCH FOR

The screenshot problem. One enthusiastic 'my student made \$30k!' post can be the exhibit in an FTC complaint years later, because marketing claims are judged by the impression they create, not the asterisk beneath them. Build the testimonial library around documented, typical outcomes and transformation stories, not income screenshots. It converts nearly as well and it is the version of the business that survives scrutiny.

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

Three doors. Real numbers.

Courses price on outcome, not hours of video: a \$2,000 course that reliably moves someone's income is cheap, and a \$49 course on the same promise reads as untrustworthy. The three doors are the classic education ladder: a self-paced core, a cohort with access to you, and a premium tier with direct guidance.

DOOR ONE	DOOR TWO RECOMMEND	DOOR THREE
<p>The Course</p> <p>\$149-397 self-paced</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ The full recorded system, templates, and worksheets ◆ Community access for questions ◆ Built FROM cohort recordings, not before them ◆ The evergreen engine once launches prove demand 	<p>The Cohort</p> <p>\$497-997 most valuable</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Live weekly sessions over 4-8 weeks with deadlines ◆ Group feedback and accountability: completion multiplies ◆ Direct access to you while it runs ◆ Where testimonials and case studies are manufactured ◆ Runs 2-4 times a year; scarcity is real, not theater 	<p>The Inner Circle</p> <p>\$1,500-5,000 premium</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Cohort plus 1:1 sessions or done-with-you review ◆ Limited seats (5-10) per run ◆ Funds the business while the audience is still small ◆ Anchors every other price in the ladder

PRICING NOTES FOR THIS BUSINESS

- Presale the first cohort at roughly half the intended price, labeled honestly as a founding cohort buying early access and shaping the curriculum.
- Payment plans (3 x \$197 against a \$497 ticket) reliably lift conversion 20-30% on anything over \$300; expect a few failed payments as the cost.
- Raise prices every cohort while testimonials accumulate; the third run of a working course is routinely double the first.
- Do not launch at \$49 'to be accessible.' Low prices attract non-completers, raise refund rates, and make the testimonial engine worse, not kinder.

THE UPSSELL THAT PAYS THE RENT

The next step. Every course completer faces a new problem your skill also solves: the graduate of 'first freelance clients' needs 'raising your rates.' A simple alumni offer (advanced workshop, group coaching, or the inner circle) presented at the moment of completion converts at rates cold traffic never will, because trust is already built.

Names, not strategies.

Your first ten students come from teaching free until a small audience trusts you, then inviting them into a founding cohort. This is slower than running ads and faster than building a video library nobody buys. Ten paying founders plus their documented results is the asset every future launch runs on.

1 Teach free for 60-90 days first

Pick one platform and publish helpful, specific teaching 3-5 times a week: answers, breakdowns, before-and-afters from your own work. You are not building fame; you are building 300 people who believe you can teach this.

2 The waitlist with a deposit

Offer early access: a \$50 refundable deposit holds a founding seat. Deposits are the only validation signal that means anything; interest is free and worthless.

3 Your professional network, honestly

People who have watched you do the actual work (colleagues, clients, industry contacts) convert at the highest rate of any source. One direct message each, no blast.

4 Communities where your topic lives

Be the consistently useful answer in the subreddit, Discord, or trade group for a month, then mention the founding cohort once, transparently, where rules allow.

5 One free live workshop

A genuinely valuable 60-minute session teaching one complete piece of the system, with the cohort pitch in the final ten minutes. It is the highest-converting launch event a small audience can attend.

THE EXACT ASK

"The founding-cohort post: 'For the past two months I have been sharing how I [specific skill with your specific proof]. Enough of you have asked for the full system that I am running a founding cohort: six weeks, live, maximum twelve people, starting [date]. Founding price is [half the future price] because you will shape the curriculum with me, and I will work closely with every one of you. If you want one of the twelve seats, the deposit link is here. Questions in the comments, I answer everything.' Then the direct version for warm leads: 'Hi [name], you asked me about [topic] a while back. I am running a founding cohort next month and I held a seat with your name on it if you want one.' Specific, capped, dated, and honest about why it is cheap."

THE FOUNDING-CUSTOMER DEAL

Founding cohort: 50% of intended price, capped at 10-12 seats, in exchange for showing up live, honest feedback, and a testimonial if (and only if) the result earns one. Cap it for real and close it on time: the integrity of the first scarcity sets the tone for every launch after.

Owned, earned, then paid.

Course marketing is teaching in public, forever. The free content demonstrates the paid promise, the email list converts it, and launches concentrate it. Creators who sell hard without teaching first are shouting into a void; creators who teach without ever asking are running a charity. The rhythm is both.

CHANNEL, RANKED	WHY IT WORKS HERE	THE FIRST MOVE
One primary content platform	Demonstrated teaching is the only ad that proves the product	3-5 teaching posts or videos weekly on one platform; depth beats presence everywhere
Email list	Launches live and die on the list; algorithms do not owe you reach on launch day	A genuinely useful lead magnet (template, checklist, mini-lesson); one teaching email weekly
Live workshops and webinars	The highest-converting format for considered purchases over \$300	One free workshop per launch cycle; teach a real win, pitch in the last ten minutes
Student results engine	Documented transformations outsell any copywriting	Capture results during every cohort: before/after, interviews, milestones, with permission
Podcast and guest appearances	Borrows trusted audiences that match your topic	Pitch 2-3 shows or newsletters per month with a specific teachable angle

FIVE CONTENT PIECES THAT WIN THIS NICHE

- Teach one complete small win per week: a result the viewer can get today, proving the bigger promise
- The myth-versus-reality series for your topic, correcting what gurus and free content get wrong
- Student spotlight breakdowns: where they started, what they did week by week, where they landed
- Your own receipts: the documented story of the result your course teaches, numbers included
- A 'watch me do it live' session: the unedited version of the skill, which builds more trust than any polish

THE REVIEW MACHINE

Testimonials are the conversion engine, so manufacture the conditions honestly: small cohorts, real attention, documented progress checkpoints. Ask at the moment of a student's win, not at course end ('that result you just posted: could I share it, and would you say a sentence about the process?'). Video beats text, specifics beat praise, and a B2B-style case study of one student is worth twenty 'great course!' lines.

One unit, one month, no fog.

Two honest snapshots: one self-paced sale with the real deductions creators forget, and a launch month built on a modest 800-person email list. Between launches, expect quieter months; the smoothing comes later from evergreen sales and the alumni ladder.

ONE UNIT: ONE \$297 SELF-PACED SALE	AMOUNT	A WORKING MONTH: COHORT LAUNCH MONTH (800-PERSON LIST)	AMOUNT
Revenue	\$297.00	Cohort: 14 seats x \$597	\$8,358
Payment processing (2.9% + \$0.30)	-\$8.91	Inner circle: 2 seats x \$1,500	\$3,000
Platform + tools share	-\$6.00	Payment processing	-\$340
Refund reserve (8%)	-\$23.76	Tools (email, Zoom, community)	-\$95
Gross profit	\$258.33	Workshop ads (optional boost)	-\$250
Tax reserve (27%)	-\$69.75	Refunds (one seat)	-\$597
Yours, per student	\$188.58	Pre-tax profit	\$10,076
		Tax reserve (27%)	-\$2,721
		Owner take-home	\$7,355

BREAK-EVEN

First 1-3 sales

Dollar costs are recovered almost immediately; the real investment is the two to three months of audience-building before anyone pays. Creators who account for those hours honestly still find the math generous: few businesses convert expertise to margin this efficiently once the flywheel exists.

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

- Define the one transformation: who, from where, to where, in how long
- Audit your proof: results, work samples, anyone you have already helped
- Pick one content platform and publish your first 5 teaching posts
- Set up the email tool and a lead magnet that solves one real step
- Outline the 6-week curriculum as outcomes per week, not topics

WEEK TWO: DOORS OPEN

- Publish daily-ish: answers, breakdowns, your own receipts
- DM or email 15 people who have seen your work; ask what they would want covered
- Founding cohort offer written: dates, cap, price, refund policy
- Deposit link live; waitlist page up
- Refund policy and claims language checked against the legal page

WEEK THREE: MOMENTUM

- Announce the founding cohort to your list and platform
- Host the free 60-minute workshop; pitch in the final ten minutes
- Personal follow-ups to every workshop attendee and warm lead
- Close half the seats; post honest progress ('7 of 12 taken')
- Build only week one's materials; stay one week ahead, always

WEEK FOUR: THE SYSTEM

- Close the cohort at the cap or the deadline, whichever first
- Run week one live; collect feedback and a baseline from every student
- Document everything: sessions recorded, wins screenshotted with permission
- Set the next-cohort waitlist live before this one ends
- Month-one review: list growth, workshop conversion, seat economics

DAY 30 VERDICT

Green light: 8+ paid founding seats and students showing up live: run it brilliantly, the testimonials are next quarter's revenue. Yellow: 3-7 seats: deliver an outstanding small cohort anyway, then fix the leak (audience too small, promise too vague, or proof too thin) before relaunching. Red: under 3 deposits despite a real audience push: the offer failed validation, which is the system working. Interview the people who did not buy, sharpen the transformation, and rerun the presale before building anything.

How this business fails, and how it grows.

THE FIVE KILLERS

- ✗ **Building the library before the buyer**
Six months of recording, zero presale, three sales. The course graveyard is full of polished content nobody validated. Presell or do not build.

- ✗ **Teaching a topic without receipts**
Courses package proven expertise. If your only credential is enthusiasm, the market smells it, and the refund rate confirms it. Go get the results first; they are also your marketing.

- ✗ **Income-claim marketing**
Screenshot culture sells fast and ends badly: FTC exposure, platform bans, and an audience of lottery-ticket buyers who refund. Sell the skill and the documented process, not the dream.

- ✗ **Pricing like an app instead of an outcome**
\$49 courses attract browsers who never log in and refund at the worst rates. Price on the value of the transformation and deliver accordingly.

- ✗ **Launching to nobody**
A launch is a multiplier on existing trust: 1,000 warm subscribers times 2-4% beats 50 followers times anything. If the list is tiny, the work is audience-building, not funnel-tweaking.

THREE SCALE PATHS

- 1 **The evergreen engine**
After 2-3 cohorts, edit the best recordings into the self-paced course, sell it year-round through your content and email automations, and reserve live cohorts as the premium, price-raised tier.

- 2 **The alumni ladder**
Add the advanced course, the membership community, and the mastermind. Selling the next step to people you already transformed is the highest-margin growth available anywhere in education.

- 3 **B2B and licensing**
Package the curriculum for companies: team licenses, private workshops, train-the-trainer deals. One corporate contract routinely equals a hundred consumer sales, and procurement never asks for a discount code.

YOUR FIRST HIRE

A part-time community manager or teaching assistant from your own alumni once cohorts pass 15-20 students, because answer-speed in the community is what protects completion rates, and completion protects everything else. An alum already speaks the curriculum. If you cannot hand them a moderation guide and a FAQ doc on day one, build those first; they are the operating system of the school you are becoming.

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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