



The Custom Woodworking Shop

Cutting boards that fund the shop, commissions at \$800-5,000+, and a garage that becomes a brand. Craft priced like craft, not like furniture-store clearance.

\$1,200-3,000

START LEAN

14-30 days

FIRST DOLLAR

55-70%

TYPICAL MARGIN

Is this your business?

Custom woodworking splits into two businesses that feed each other: a repeatable product line (cutting boards, charcuterie boards, small goods at \$85-160) that sells every week, and commission work (tables, built-ins, statement pieces at \$800-5,000+) that sells your reputation. The boards pay the rent and build the audience; the commissions build the wealth. Run both from a garage shop and let deposits, not savings, buy the lumber.

\$1,200-3,000

LEAN STARTUP COST

\$5,000-10,000

STANDARD BUILD

14-30 days

TIME TO FIRST DOLLAR

55-70%

TYPICAL GROSS MARGIN

Yes, fully

SOLO-FRIENDLY

Yes (garage shop)

HOME-BASED

BUILT FOR THESE FOUNDER TYPES

THE CRAFTSMAN

THE BUILDER

3/5 difficulty

THE HONEST FIT TEST

You will mill lumber on weeknights, sand more hours than you saw, and quote prices that make you nervous to people who can afford them. If you cannot already produce a clean, square, well-finished piece, build skill before building a business. If your projects already draw 'would you sell that?' questions, this is the playbook for charging properly when you answer yes.

Who pays, and why now.

Mass furniture got worse while customers got richer, and that gap is this business. Particleboard pieces that sag in three years pushed a generation of homeowners toward 'buy it once' thinking, and they will pay \$1,800 for a walnut dining table built by a person whose shop they have seen on Instagram. The customer is not buying furniture. They are buying permanence, story, and the sentence they get to say when guests ask where the table came from.

The smart structure is a two-tier catalog. Tier one is the entry SKU: cutting boards, charcuterie boards, serving trays, and small goods at \$85-160 that sell at markets, online, and as corporate gifts. They are built from offcuts, batch beautifully, and introduce hundreds of people to your work for the price of lunch with a story attached. Tier two is commissions: tables, benches, vanities, built-ins at \$800-5,000 and up, almost always sold to someone who first bought or saw a board.

Local competition is thinner than the internet makes it feel. Etsy is crowded with underpriced hobbyists racing each other to the bottom, but in your own city the number of woodworkers who answer messages, quote in writing, take deposits professionally, and deliver on the promised week is tiny. Custom buyers are nervous buyers: they are about to hand a stranger \$2,000. Professional process, not just craftsmanship, is what wins the commission.

Seasonality favors the prepared. The fourth quarter sells small goods by the dozen (gifts, corporate orders), while commission inquiries spike in January and post-tax-refund spring. A shop that batches boards in October and books commission slots in January never has an empty month.

WHO BUYS	WHAT THEY PAY	WHAT THEY ACTUALLY WANT
Gift buyers and market shoppers	\$85-160 per board or small good	A beautiful, useful object with a maker's story
Homeowners commissioning furniture	\$800-3,500 per piece	Exact dimensions, real wood, and a piece that outlives them
Designers and contractors	\$1,500-6,000+ for built-ins and statement pieces	A reliable craftsman who hits spec and deadline
Corporate and realtor gifting	\$45-90 per unit, engraved, in bulk	Branded boards for closings, clients, and holidays

THE COMMISSION RANGE

\$800-5,000+

One commission a month at the middle of this range outearns a hundred hours of underpriced boards. The boards are not the business: they are the marketing department that introduces buyers to the shop that builds the big work.

Every dollar, before you spend it.

These numbers assume you own basic tools and a space to work; the lean build fills the gaps that matter for selling, not collecting. Buy lumber per project after deposits clear, and let every commission fund the next tool. Rough lumber from a hardwood dealer costs half what big-box S4S does.

THE LEAN BUILD · START HERE	WHY IT EARNS ITS PLACE	COST
Table saw tune-up or used upgrade	The shop's heart; a well-tuned used cabinet saw beats a new jobsite saw	\$300-800
Router, bits, and flattening jig	Edge profiles and slab flattening without a \$3,000 planer	\$150-300
Random orbit sander + abrasive stock	You will sand more than you saw; buy discs by the box	\$100-180
Clamps (you need twice what you think)	Parallel and bar clamps; glue-ups are where flat panels are won	\$150-300
Finishing station (food-safe oils, varnish, pads)	Mineral oil and beeswax for boards; durable film finish for furniture	\$80-150
First lumber run (boards batch + one commission)	Walnut, maple, cherry from a hardwood dealer, rough sawn	\$200-400
Dust collection + respirator	A shop vac with separator and a real respirator; your lungs are the business	\$120-250
LLC + insurance (first month)	Liability wall plus general and product liability; see the legal page	\$100-450
Lean total		\$1,200-2,830 all-in

THE STANDARD BUILD · ADD AFTER FIRST REVENUE	WHAT IT UNLOCKS	COST
Thickness planer + jointer (used)	Unlocks rough lumber at half the cost of pre-milled; pays back fast	\$700-1,800
Track saw or bandsaw	Sheet goods and resawing; widens what you can quote	\$400-900
Laser engraver (desktop)	Monograms and logos turn \$85 boards into \$120 boards and unlock corporate orders	\$400-1,200
Finishing and photo corner	Dust-free finishing rack plus a backdrop; photos sell commissions	\$150-400

THE RULE

Tools are bought with deposits, not dreams. The trade is littered with \$20,000 shops that never sold a board. Take the commission, collect the 50% deposit, and let the job buy the planer it requires. A customer's money buying your tools is the business working; your savings buying them is a hobby with receipts.

Clean from day one.

Woodworking is lightly licensed but meaningfully liable: you are selling objects people eat from, sit on, and put their children near. The protections below are cheap, and the finish-and-safety knowledge is what separates professionals from garage sellers.

- 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.
- Seller's permit and sales tax:** Physical goods mean collecting sales tax at markets and online in your state. Market organizers and engraving clients increasingly ask for the permit number.
- General and product liability insurance:** A board that splits, a bench that fails, a table that tips: product liability follows the maker. A small-shop policy is affordable and markets require certificates for booths.
- Use food-safe finishes on food contact pieces:** Mineral oil, beeswax blends, and fully cured film finishes rated for food contact only. Document what you use per piece; 'what finish is on this?' is a question buyers and lawyers both ask.
- Know CPSIA before making anything for children:** Toys and children's furniture trigger federal CPSIA rules: lead-content limits, testing, tracking labels. Most small shops simply stay out of the children's category; if you enter it, enter it informed.
- Treat reclaimed wood with suspicion:** Pre-1978 painted wood can carry lead, and pallet wood carries unknown chemical treatments. Never put either into food-contact or children's pieces, and say so in your listings: it reads as expertise because it is.
- Check zoning, noise, and your home insurer:** Garage shops are usually fine, but planers at 9 p.m. and undisclosed business equipment are how neighbors and insurers become problems. One call to your insurer keeps a fire claim from being denied.

INSURANCE, SPECIFICALLY

General liability plus product liability is the core; add scheduled equipment coverage once the shop passes about \$5,000 in tools, because homeowner policies routinely exclude business equipment. Delivering furniture in your truck adds commercial auto considerations, and the first employee triggers workers' comp in nearly every state.

WATCH FOR

The handshake commission. Custom work without a written scope, drawing, wood spec, price, and timeline becomes a dispute the moment the customer's imagination and your build diverge. One page, signed, with a 50% non-refundable deposit, protects both sides and marks you as the professional in a market full of guys with saws.

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

Three doors. Real numbers.

Price from materials times three to four for batch products, and for commissions: materials plus shop time at \$45-75 an hour plus design time, then check the total against what a furniture store charges for the particleboard version and make sure you are well above it. Underpricing handmade work reads as low quality, not high value.

DOOR ONE	RECOMMEND DOOR TWO	DOOR THREE
<p>The Board</p> <p>\$85-160 entry SKU</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Edge-grain or end-grain hardwood board ◆ Food-safe oil and wax finish ◆ Care card and re-oiling guidance ◆ Engraving add-on at \$25-40 	<p>The Commission</p> <p>\$850-2,400 most-booked</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Coffee tables, benches, consoles, shelving ◆ Written scope with drawing and wood spec ◆ 50% deposit books your build slot ◆ Progress photos at milling, glue-up, finish ◆ Local delivery and placement included 	<p>The Statement</p> <p>\$3,000-6,500 premium</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Dining tables, built-ins, full-room pieces ◆ Design consult and material sourcing trip ◆ Three-stage payment: deposit, milling, delivery ◆ Documented build story (photo set included) ◆ First re-finish service included at year two

PRICING NOTES FOR THIS BUSINESS

- Floor: no board leaves the shop under \$85, no commission under \$850. Small custom favors are quoted as commissions or declined.
- Charge for design: two revisions included, then \$75 per round. Unlimited free revisions is how a \$1,500 table eats forty hours.
- Quote hardwood at replacement cost, not what you paid: lumber prices move, and your quote may outlive the price you bought at.
- Corporate engraving orders price per unit with a 12-unit minimum and two-week lead; they fill the gaps between commissions.

THE UPSELL THAT PAYS THE RENT

Engraving and the matching piece. A monogram turns an \$85 board into a \$120 gift, and a finished commission is the perfect moment to offer the companion: the bench that matches the table, the shelf that matches the console. Commission clients have already crossed the trust gap; the second piece sells at full price with zero acquisition cost.

Names, not strategies.

Your first ten sales are boards, and your first commission is hiding behind one of them. Lead with the product people can afford today, photograph everything like a catalog, and let the big ask come from them.

1 One craft market or makers fair

Twelve boards and a portfolio album of your bigger work. The boards sell themselves; the album sells the commissions. Collect emails and commission inquiries at the table.

2 Local Facebook groups and Instagram

Process content rules this niche: glue-ups, planer passes, the first oil coat soaking in. Post the build, then the finished piece, then 'two boards left from this batch.'

3 Realtors and corporate gifters

An engraved board is the closing gift that beats a gift card. Pitch three realtors with a sample; one steady gifter is a 20-board annuity with a logo.

4 Designers and contractors (two of each)

They get asked for custom built-ins and statement pieces constantly and need a maker who hits spec. One coffee meeting with your portfolio can route commissions for years.

5 Your own network's next milestone

Weddings, new homes, retirements in your circle all want meaningful objects. Offer the founding rate before they default to a registry. These become your first referenceable commissions.

THE EXACT ASK

"Hi, I'm [name]: I build custom hardwood pieces here in [town] under [shop name]. This walnut board is from my current batch, and the album is the commission work: tables, benches, built-ins. I'm taking ten founding orders this month at \$20 off boards and 10% off a first commission. Is there a piece you've been wanting built that nobody seems to make right?"

THE FOUNDING-CUSTOMER DEAL

First ten customers: \$20 off any board or 10% off a first commission, in exchange for a Google review and permission to share photos of the piece in their home. In-home photos are gold in this trade: they sell scale, context, and the life of the piece in a way shop photos never can. Retire the deal after ten, publicly.

Owned, earned, then paid.

Woodworking is the most watchable trade on the internet, and that attention converts locally if you aim it. The engine: process content that builds the audience, markets and gift channels that monetize the small work, and a portfolio that converts watchers into commission clients.

CHANNEL, RANKED	WHY IT WORKS HERE	THE FIRST MOVE
Instagram + TikTok process content	Planer passes and oil-coat reveals are the most-watched maker content online	Three build clips a week; every finished piece gets a reveal post
Craft markets and makers fairs	Boards convert strangers in person, and the album upsells commissions	One market a month minimum; portfolio album and commission cards on the table
Google Business Profile	'Custom table [town]' and 'cutting board near me' are buyer searches	Claim it, load the portfolio, request a review at every delivery
Email list with batch drops	Board batches sell out to a list before they ever hit social	Every buyer joins; announce batches and open commission slots monthly
Designer and contractor referrals	Trade professionals route the largest, least price-sensitive projects	Quarterly portfolio email to a list of ten local designers and builders

FIVE CONTENT PIECES THAT WIN THIS NICHE

- Rough lumber to finished board in 60 seconds (the niche's reliable workhorse)
- What a \$1,800 table costs to build, broken down honestly
- End grain vs edge grain: which board is worth your money
- The commission process from sketch to delivery, shown start to finish
- Why I will not build from pallet wood (the food-safety answer that builds trust)

THE REVIEW MACHINE

Ask at delivery, with the piece in their home and their hands on it: 'Seeing it in the space is the best part of this job. Would you share a photo of it in a Google review? I'll text you the link tonight.' Reviews with in-home photos do double duty: social proof for buyers and portfolio material for you.

One unit, one month, no fog.

Two honest snapshots: one walnut board sold direct, and a realistic solo month mixing one mid-size commission with a board batch and market sales. The tool fund line is not optional in this trade: blades dull, abrasives vanish, and machines wear.

ONE UNIT: ONE WALNUT CUTTING BOARD AT \$135	AMOUNT	A WORKING MONTH: SOLO, 1 COMMISSION + 18 BOARDS + MARKET	AMOUNT
Revenue	\$135	Revenue (\$1,800 commission + boards)	\$4,850
Lumber	-\$28	Lumber and materials	-\$1,160
Finish + abrasives	-\$6	Consumables (blades, abrasives, finish)	-\$240
Payment processing	-\$4	Shop costs (power, insurance share)	-\$220
Shop overhead share	-\$12	Marketing + booth fees	-\$190
Gross profit (~2.5 hrs)	\$85	Tool fund (10%)	-\$485
Tax reserve (27%)	-\$23	Pre-tax profit	\$2,555
Yours, per board	\$62	Tax reserve (27%)	-\$690
		Owner take-home	\$1,865

BREAK-EVEN

1 commission + 8-10 boards

The lean build is recovered by your first real commission plus a single board batch, especially since the commission's deposit buys its own materials. Capital is not the gate here: the gate is pricing courage, and every underpriced first commission trains your market to expect the wrong number.

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
- Insurance bound; seller's permit applied for
- Shop safety pass: dust collection, respirator, blade checks
- First board batch milled and glued (8-12 units)
- Pricing set: \$85 board floor, \$850 commission floor, hourly rate chosen

WEEK TWO: DOORS OPEN

- Board batch finished, oiled, and photographed like a catalog
- Instagram and Google Business Profile live with process content
- Commission one-pager built: process, deposit terms, timeline
- Founding offer announced to network and local groups
- Market booth application submitted for weeks 3-4

WEEK THREE: MOMENTUM

- First boards sold and delivered; reviews requested in-home
- First market worked; emails and commission leads collected
- Three realtors pitched with an engraved sample
- Two designers or contractors sent the portfolio
- First commission consult held; written quote delivered

WEEK FOUR: THE SYSTEM

- First commission deposit collected; materials bought with it
- Batch drop emailed to the list before posting publicly
- Founding pricing retired publicly
- Month-one P&L done; tool fund account opened
- Next month's build slots posted (scarcity, honestly earned)

DAY 30 VERDICT

Green light: 8+ boards sold, one commission deposit in hand, 4+ reviews. Yellow: boards selling but no commission interest: your portfolio and process page are not making the big work feel safe to buy; fix the album and the one-pager. Red: under 4 boards sold despite a market and 25+ asks: the product, photos, or price misfired; collect the feedback, rework the batch, and run week two again before buying any tool.

How this business fails, and how it grows.

THE FIVE KILLERS

- ✗ **Underpricing the first commissions**
The \$400 dining table becomes the story your whole market hears. Price as if you are already busy, because the alternative trains buyers you never wanted to keep.

- ✗ **Building without a deposit and a drawing**
No deposit means you funded a stranger's furniture; no drawing means their imagination is the spec. One signed page and 50% down, every commission, including friends.

- ✗ **Buying tools instead of selling work**
The planer you 'need' is usually procrastination with a power cord. Sell from the tools you own; let deposits buy the upgrades the work actually demands.

- ✗ **Ignoring finish and safety rules**
Non-food-safe finish on a board, reclaimed paint near food, a wobbly piece sold anyway: each one is a liability and a reputation grenade. Document finishes and stand behind structure.

- ✗ **Letting sanding hours vanish from quotes**
Finishing routinely takes a third of total build time and is the most commonly unquoted labor in the trade. Track real hours for five builds and re-price from data.

THREE SCALE PATHS

- 1 **The commission ladder**
Raise your floor and your hourly every quarter you stay booked, and climb toward designers, builders, and statement pieces. A solo shop at \$3,000+ average commissions with a waitlist is a six-figure craft business.

- 2 **The product line engine**
Standardize three to five SKUs, batch them monthly, and sell through your list, corporate gifting, and a handful of wholesale accounts. Predictable production smooths the feast-and-famine cycle commissions create.

- 3 **The teaching and content arm**
Workshops, build plans, and the audience your process content built become revenue with no lumber cost. A weekend class for eight people at \$200 each is a commission's profit without a commission's hours.

YOUR FIRST HIRE

A part-time finisher and shop hand for sanding, oiling, and batch finishing once commissions stay booked six weeks out. Finishing is the most teachable third of every build, and offloading it adds a commission a month to your capacity. The hire test: write your sanding-grit ladder and finish schedule on one page. If you cannot, your quality lives only in your hands, and that is a ceiling.

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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