



The Photography Business

Portrait sessions at \$250-600, weddings at \$2,500-6,000, and a portfolio that sells while you sleep. The craft is the entry fee; the business is the prize.

\$1,500-3,500

START LEAN

7-21 days

FIRST DOLLAR

60-75%

TYPICAL MARGIN

Is this your business?

Photography rewards the rare shooter who treats it as a business: portrait sessions bill \$250-600, weddings run \$2,500-6,000, and the gap between starving artists and six-figure studios is not talent, it is pricing structure, sales process, and niche discipline. Your camera is probably already good enough. What this playbook builds is the part most photographers never do: the machine that turns beautiful work into booked calendars and print revenue.

\$1,500-3,500

LEAN STARTUP COST

\$5,000-9,000

STANDARD BUILD

7-21 days

TIME TO FIRST DOLLAR

60-75%

TYPICAL GROSS MARGIN

Yes, fully

SOLO-FRIENDLY

Yes (on location)

HOME-BASED

BUILT FOR THESE FOUNDER TYPES

THE STORYTELLER

THE CRAFTSMAN

3/5 difficulty

THE HONEST FIT TEST

You will spend one hour shooting for every three or four editing, culling, and communicating, and your weekends belong to other people's milestones. If you cannot already shoot in manual and deliver consistent work, build the craft first. If clients have started asking your prices and you keep answering apologetically, this playbook is the cure.

Who pays, and why now.

Phones killed casual photography and made professional photography more valuable, not less. When everyone has ten thousand mediocre photos, the family portrait that hangs framed in the hallway, the wedding gallery that survives the marriage's fifth decade, and the headshot that wins the job interview all read as premium goods. People document everything and treasure almost nothing; professionals sell the treasured part.

The money map has tiers. Family, senior, and branding portraits run \$250-600 per session and book year-round, peaking hard in fall. Weddings command \$2,500-6,000 for established shooters and anchor a calendar a year in advance. Commercial and brand work (headshots at scale, product, real estate) pays less per image but repeats monthly. The classic profitable shape is one anchor niche plus one filler niche: weddings plus families, or brand portraits plus headshot days.

The industry's defining fork is shoot-and-burn versus in-person sales. Shoot-and-burn (flat fee, digital gallery, done) is simple and caps your average sale at the session fee. IPS photographers hold an ordering appointment and sell wall art, albums, and print collections, routinely doubling or tripling revenue per client: the \$400 session becomes a \$1,100 sale. You do not have to choose IPS on day one, but you must price knowing it exists, because your ceiling is set by which model you run.

Competition is a paradox: everyone with a camera competes for \$150 sessions, and almost nobody competes above \$400, because crossing that line requires consistency, contracts, and confidence most hobbyists never build. The crowded market is below you. Price accordingly.

WHO BUYS	WHAT THEY PAY	WHAT THEY ACTUALLY WANT
Families and seniors	\$250-600 per session	Warm direction, painless sessions, images worth framing
Couples (weddings, engagements)	\$2,500-6,000 per wedding	Certainty: the day happens once and the photos must
Professionals and small businesses	\$200-500 headshots; \$400-900 brand sessions	Images that make them look like the choice to hire
Realtors and local commerce	\$150-400 per listing or product set	Fast turnaround, consistent quality, monthly volume

REVENUE PER CLIENT WITH IPS

2-3X

The session fee is the cover charge; prints, albums, and wall art are the show. Photographers who add an ordering appointment routinely double or triple the average sale from the same shoot, the same edit, and the same client.

Every dollar, before you spend it.

The used market is your friend: camera bodies depreciate like cars while lenses hold value for decades. Buy proven gear one generation back, spend the savings on the second body (the wedding non-negotiable), and remember that no client has ever asked what camera you shot on.

THE LEAN BUILD · START HERE	WHY IT EARNS ITS PLACE	COST
Full-frame body (used, one generation back)	Proven used bodies cost half of new and shoot identically for clients	\$700-1,400
Two prime lenses (35mm + 85mm or similar)	Lenses hold value; this pair covers portraits through ceremonies	\$400-900
Editing software subscription	Industry-standard catalog and editing tools	\$12-25/mo
Gallery delivery + contract/booking platform	Online galleries, e-sign contracts, invoices, scheduling in one place	\$25-50/mo
Memory cards (dual-slot stock) + backup drive	Two card slots and a 3-2-1 backup habit; lost images end careers	\$120-250
Insurance (gear + general liability, first month)	Venues require certificates; see the legal page	\$30-60/mo
LLC + portfolio site	Liability wall plus the storefront your work deserves	\$100-400
Lean total		\$1,390-3,085 all-in

THE STANDARD BUILD · ADD AFTER FIRST REVENUE	WHAT IT UNLOCKS	COST
Second body (used)	The wedding requirement: cameras fail, ceremonies do not repeat	\$600-1,200
Speedlight + modifier kit	Receptions, indoor sessions, and editorial looks open up	\$200-450
Zoom workhorse (24-70 or 70-200, used)	Event coverage flexibility primes cannot match	\$700-1,400
IPS sample kit (albums, framed prints)	Clients buy wall art they can touch; samples pay for themselves in two orders	\$300-700

THE RULE

Gear-lust is the occupational disease of this trade, and it is fatal to margins. The discipline: no new purchase until a specific booked job requires it or the gear fund (10% of every shoot) covers it in cash. Clients book portfolios, not equipment lists, and the used lens shoots the same wedding the new one does.

Clean from day one.

Photography's legal layer is contracts, copyright, and insurance, and most working photographers are underbuilt on all three. An afternoon of setup here prevents the classic disasters: the canceled wedding, the corrupted card, the client who resells your images.

- 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.
- Use a real contract on every shoot:** Session contracts cover payment, rescheduling, and usage. Wedding contracts add the critical clauses: retainer terms, cancellation, illness backup, equipment failure, and a limitation of liability. E-sign before any date is held.
- Carry gear and liability insurance:** General liability (a guest trips on your light stand) plus scheduled equipment coverage. Most venues require a certificate of insurance before you can shoot on site; same-week requests are routine.
- Understand copyright: you own it, you license it:** The photographer owns images at creation. Clients receive a license (personal use, typically); commercial clients pay more for broader rights. Put the license in writing: it is both protection and a pricing lever.
- Use model releases where money requires them:** Using client images in your portfolio and marketing needs a release clause, built into your contract. Commercial work needs releases for every recognizable person; stock and advertising use without one is a claim waiting.
- Collect sales tax where your state says to:** Prints and products are taxable nearly everywhere; many states also tax digital images and even session fees. The rules are state-specific and photographers are a known audit category: get the answer for your state in writing.
- Check permits for parks and venues:** National parks, many state parks, and some city locations require commercial photography permits. The fine costs more than the permit, and portfolio shoots count as commercial.

INSURANCE, SPECIFICALLY

Bundle general liability with scheduled gear coverage through a photography-specific insurer; the combination is modest monthly and venues will demand the certificate. Add professional liability (errors and omissions) once weddings anchor your calendar: it is the policy that responds when a card fails or a gallery is lost.

WATCH FOR

The backup chain is your real legal exposure. A lost wedding is not a refund conversation; it is a lawsuit and a reputation execution. Shoot dual-slot, never format cards until images live in three places (working drive, backup drive, cloud), and write your backup process into the wedding contract. The photographers who survive a card failure are the ones whose second card slot already had the day on 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.

Price the session as admission, not as the product, and decide your model deliberately: shoot-and-burn simplicity or IPS revenue. Either way, the rule is the same: your price includes the invisible hours (culling, editing, communication), or those hours come out of your hourly rate without your permission.

DOOR ONE	DOOR TWO RECOMMEND	DOOR THREE
<p>The Mini</p> <p>\$250 20-minute session</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ One location, one outfit, 10 edited images ◆ Online gallery within one week ◆ Print store attached to every gallery ◆ Offered in seasonal blocks, not year-round 	<p>The Signature Session</p> <p>\$475-595 most-booked</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ 60-90 minutes, up to two locations ◆ 40+ edited images in full gallery ◆ Wardrobe and location guidance included ◆ Ordering appointment for wall art and albums ◆ Print credit included to seed the order 	<p>The Wedding Collection</p> <p>\$3,200-4,800 premium</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ 8 hours coverage with second shooter ◆ Engagement session included ◆ 500+ edited images, online gallery ◆ Heirloom album credit built in ◆ Backup gear, insurance, and a signed contract that says so

PRICING NOTES FOR THIS BUSINESS

- Minis are a calendar tool, not a price point: 8 sessions in one styled afternoon grosses \$2,000 and fills the fall pipeline. Never let minis cannibalize full sessions year-round.
- Count the real hours: a 1-hour session is 5-6 hours of work by delivery. Price the iceberg, not the tip.
- Wedding retainers (typically 30-50%) are non-refundable and book the date; the contract says why: you are declining every other inquiry for that day.
- Raise prices after every 10 bookings at full rate. Photography demand is portfolio-driven, and your portfolio improves with every shoot you complete.

THE UPSELL THAT PAYS THE RENT

Wall art and albums, sold at an ordering appointment instead of a link dump. The difference is mechanical, not pushy: clients shown 20 finished images on a screen with framed samples in hand buy \$300-900 in product; clients emailed a gallery link buy almost nothing. Even a soft IPS process (one 30-minute video call) moves the average sale dramatically.

Names, not strategies.

Your first ten paid shoots build the portfolio that books the next hundred, so choose them for what they show, not just what they pay. Pick one niche to lead with, build three portfolio-grade shoots around it, and let founding pricing buy you speed.

- 1 Model calls in your chosen niche**
Two or three styled portfolio shoots, free or trade, with full releases signed: families, a senior, a brand client. These are auditions you direct: shoot exactly the work you want to be hired for.
- 2 Your network's upcoming milestones**
Babies arriving, seniors graduating, businesses launching: your own circle holds five sessions right now at founding rates. Their galleries become your proof and their walls become your billboards.
- 3 Local Facebook groups at golden moments**
Fall family sessions, spring seniors, holiday minis: post a founding offer with three strong images two months before each peak. Photography threads in local groups book entire weekends.
- 4 Second-shooting for established photographers**
The wedding apprenticeship: you get paid \$250-500, learn the timeline pressure cooker, and build real wedding images (with permission) without holding the contract risk. Two seasons of seconding is the standard on-ramp.
- 5 Small businesses that look better than their photos**
Walk your own downtown: every restaurant, salon, and gym whose website photos are phone snapshots is a \$400-900 brand session pitch with the proof problem already visible.

THE EXACT ASK

"Hi [name], I'm booking founding clients for my photography business this season. You've seen my work: I'm taking ten sessions at \$100 off the rate I'll be posting, in exchange for letting me feature the gallery and an honest review afterward. I have [date] and [date] open: does either work to finally get [the family/the headshots/the listing] done right?"

THE FOUNDING-CUSTOMER DEAL

Ten founding sessions at \$100 off posted rates, in exchange for a signed portfolio release and a Google review on delivery day. Every founding gallery must be portfolio-grade: this round of clients is buying discounted prices, and paying you in the proof that ends the discounting forever. Retire the offer after ten, publicly.

Owned, earned, then paid.

Photography marketing is the rare case where the product markets itself, if you build the loops: galleries that get shared, sessions timed to seasonal demand, vendors who refer, and a Google profile that catches everyone searching with a credit card already out.

CHANNEL, RANKED	WHY IT WORKS HERE	THE FIRST MOVE
Instagram portfolio + reels	Clients book the feed they want their life to look like	Post every session (with release); behind-the-scenes reels humanize the price
Google Business Profile	'[Niche] photographer [town]' searches are wallet-out intent	Claim it, load galleries by category, collect a review with every delivery
Seasonal campaigns	Families think photos in fall, seniors in spring, brands in January	Announce each season's sessions 8 weeks early to the email list first
Vendor referral circle	Planners, venues, florists, and salons get asked for photographers weekly	Deliver every vendor free images of their work from every event, watermark-free
Client referral mechanics	Happy families are surrounded by identical families	Print credit for every referred booking; mention it at gallery delivery

FIVE CONTENT PIECES THAT WIN THIS NICHE

- Before-the-lens to final-image reveal (the transformation format, photography edition)
- What to wear for family photos: the guide every client searches for
- A wedding day timeline from the photographer's side, in 90 seconds
- Phone vs professional: the same scene shot both ways, no commentary needed
- Why your gallery expires: the post that quietly drives print orders

THE REVIEW MACHINE

Ask on delivery day, inside the gallery email, when the images are at peak emotional value: 'If these made you feel something, a Google review with your favorite image attached would mean everything to my small business: here's the direct link.' Reviews with photos attached are conversion gold, and delivery day is the only day clients write them unprompted.

One unit, one month, no fog.

Two honest snapshots: one signature session priced for the real hours it consumes, and a working month mixing portraits with one wedding. The gear fund line is sacred in this trade: bodies wear out, and the fund is how replacements never become emergencies.

ONE UNIT: ONE SIGNATURE SESSION AT \$475	AMOUNT	A WORKING MONTH: SOLO, 7 SESSIONS + 1 WEDDING	AMOUNT
Revenue	\$475	Revenue (sessions + \$3,650 wedding)	\$6,825
Travel + fuel	-\$15	Second shooter (wedding)	-\$350
Software + gallery share	-\$20	Software (editing, gallery, CRM)	-\$95
Payment processing	-\$14	Travel + fuel	-\$140
Gear fund (10%)	-\$45	Marketing	-\$150
Gross profit (5-6 hrs total work)	\$381	Gear fund (10%)	-\$680
Tax reserve (27%)	-\$103	Pre-tax profit	\$5,410
Yours, per session	\$278	Tax reserve (27%)	-\$1,460
		Owner take-home	\$3,950

BREAK-EVEN

4-8 sessions

A used-market lean kit is recovered within the first two months of part-time booking. The slower, truer investment is the portfolio: the 20-30 shoots it takes before your work books itself. Founding pricing exists to compress that timeline, not to become your identity.

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; contracts loaded into booking platform
- Niche chosen; pricing built on real-hours math
- Backup workflow set: dual-slot, drive, cloud
- Portfolio site live with your strongest existing work

WEEK TWO: DOORS OPEN

- Two styled model-call shoots completed, releases signed
- Google Business Profile claimed; categories and galleries loaded
- Founding offer announced to full network and local groups
- First 3-4 founding sessions booked with signed contracts
- One established wedding photographer contacted about second-shooting

WEEK THREE: MOMENTUM

- Founding sessions shot; galleries delivered inside one week
- Reviews requested in every delivery email
- Vendor circle started: free images sent to two local businesses
- Seasonal campaign drafted for the next peak (fall or spring)
- First ordering appointment or print-credit offer tested

WEEK FOUR: THE SYSTEM

- Remaining founding slots filled or offer retired publicly
- Email list started; every client and inquiry added
- Month-one P&L done; real hours per session measured
- Posted rates finalized \$100 above founding rates
- Next month: 4+ sessions booked, one niche doubled down

DAY 30 VERDICT

Green light: 6+ paid shoots, 4+ reviews, next month half-booked, portfolio visibly stronger. Yellow: shoots happening but every client arrived underpriced through favors: post the real rate card and hold it for ten asks before judging it. Red: under 3 bookings despite 25+ direct asks: the niche or the portfolio is not landing; book two more model calls aimed at one specific niche and relaunch with that proof.

How this business fails, and how it grows.

THE FIVE KILLERS

- ✗ **Pricing the shoot, not the iceberg**
A \$250 session that consumes six total hours pays \$40 an hour before costs. Count culling, editing, and communication in every price, because the clock counts them whether you do or not.

- ✗ **Shooting weddings without backup everything**
Second body, dual cards, charged spares, and a backup plan in the contract. The day cannot be reshot, and 'my camera failed' is a sentence insurance lawyers know well.

- ✗ **Staying a generalist forever**
The photographer for everything is the photographer for nothing in particular at \$150. Niches build referrable reputations: pick one, own it locally, add a second once the first books itself.

- ✗ **Free work without a strategy**
Model calls with releases that build a deliberate portfolio: strategic. Discounts for every friend of a friend, forever: a hobby with invoices. Know which one each unpaid shoot is before you raise the camera.

- ✗ **The gallery link dump**
Delivering 60 images by email and hoping prints happen is leaving half the revenue unclaimed. Even one guided ordering conversation per client moves the average sale hundreds of dollars.

THREE SCALE PATHS

- 1 **The premium climb**
Stay solo and raise the ladder: \$600 sessions, \$5,500 weddings, IPS averages above \$1,000 per client. Thirty weddings or 120 sessions a year at premium rates is a strong six-figure studio with no employees.

- 2 **The volume engine**
School, sports, headshot-day, and mini-session systems: lower price, high throughput, repeatable workflow. One school contract or a monthly corporate headshot day can underwrite the entire business.

- 3 **The associate studio**
Train associate shooters in your style, book under your brand, and edit centrally (or outsource editing first, which is the real first hire in this trade). Your calendar stops being the ceiling; your standards become the product.

YOUR FIRST HIRE

An editor before an assistant: outsourcing culling and base edits at \$0.35-1 per image buys back the 60% of your week that happens at a desk. If your editing style is consistent enough to hand off (anchor images, synced presets, a one-page style guide), you just doubled shooting capacity without hiring a photographer. If it is not consistent enough to hand off, that is the actual problem to fix.

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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