



The Coffee Cart and Catering Business

An espresso bar that travels: \$8,000-20,000 to launch, \$400-900 per booked event, and weddings as the anchor client. Caffeine, but make it a business.

\$8,000-13,000

START LEAN

30-60 days

FIRST DOLLAR

60-75% on catering

TYPICAL MARGIN

Is this your business?

The mobile coffee cart is the smartest small entry into food service: espresso has jewel-box margins, the equipment fits in a van, and the business model is booked events, not sidewalk gambling. Weddings anchor the calendar at \$700-950 per event, corporate mornings fill the weekdays, and holiday gifting season fills the winter. You are not selling coffee; you are selling a hospitality moment with steam and craft in it.

\$8,000-13,000

LEAN STARTUP COST

\$15,000-22,000

STANDARD BUILD

30-60 days

TIME TO FIRST DOLLAR

60-75% on catering

TYPICAL GROSS MARGIN

Yes; helper above 75
guests

SOLO-FRIENDLY

Yes (commissary for
some counties)

HOME-BASED

BUILT FOR THESE FOUNDER TYPES

THE CRAFTSMAN

THE CONNECTOR

3/5 difficulty

THE HONEST FIT TEST

You need genuine espresso craft (or eight weekends of obsessive practice), a service personality that performs for a three-hour event, and comfort hauling, setting up, and tearing down a 300-pound bar. Early mornings and Saturday weddings are the job. If pulling beautiful shots for a wedding crowd while charming the groom's grandmother sounds energizing, this is yours.

Who pays, and why now.

The espresso cart sells what venues and caterers usually cannot: a live craft moment. Wedding couples want a latte bar at the reception the way the last generation wanted a photo booth. Companies want baristas in the lobby for launches, all-hands mornings, and client days. Realtors and developers want them at open houses. None of these buyers blink at \$450-900 for two to three hours, because they are buying a catered experience per guest, not cups of coffee.

Booked-event economics beat retail economics in every direction that matters. A street or market cart fights weather, foot traffic, and \$4 transactions one at a time; a booked event is \$400-900 guaranteed before you load the van, with a deposit holding the date. The unit math is luxurious: a catered drink costs you \$0.80-1.40 in beans, milk, and cup against a per-guest price of \$6-9, and there is no rent, no lease, and no barista standing idle on a slow Tuesday.

Weddings are the anchor, and they come with a structural gift: they book six to twelve months out and pay deposits at signing. A spring of good wedding marketing means a summer and fall calendar you can see in advance, with deposit cash funding your growth before the events even happen. Get on three venues' preferred-vendor lists and the pipeline becomes self-filling: planners and venues recommend the cart that showed up early, looked beautiful, and never blew a breaker.

The insider rhythm is seasonal: weddings carry April through October, corporate work carries the cold months, and December is secretly the best month of the year. Corporate holiday parties, client appreciation events, and 'thanks team' gestures stack into gifting season, when companies are actively looking for exactly this kind of warm, giftable experience. The cart that markets to office managers in October has a full December while fair-weather competitors hibernate.

WHO BUYS	WHAT THEY PAY	WHAT THEY ACTUALLY WANT
Wedding couples	\$700-950 per reception	A memorable guest experience; the latte bar people mention in the car home
Companies + HR teams	\$450-900 per event, repeating	Launches, all-hands, client days, and December morale, catered without logistics
Realtors + developers	\$300-500 per open house	Dwell time, warmth, and a premium feel that helps the property sell itself
Event planners + venues	Repeat bookings across clients	A reliable, insured, beautiful vendor who makes their event look better

THE WEDDING BOOKING WINDOW

6-12 months

Couples book their vendors half a year to a year ahead and pay deposits at signing. A strong engagement-season pipeline means next summer's revenue is visible, dated, and partially banked this winter, a luxury almost

Every dollar, before you spend it.

The cart is an espresso bar reduced to essentials, and the spend concentrates in two places: a machine that can hold pace for a 100-guest rush, and power that never embarrasses you at a venue. Everything decorative can start modest and upgrade with deposits.

THE LEAN BUILD · START HERE	WHY IT EARNS ITS PLACE	COST
Commercial espresso machine (2-group, used or prosumer-plus)	The heart of the rig; it must hold steam pressure through a wedding rush	\$2,500-6,000
Commercial grinder + backup hand options	The grinder matters nearly as much as the machine; buy quality used	\$500-1,200
Cart build or converted base	A handsome cold-rolled steel or wood bar with NSF work surfaces, sized to fit through a standard door	\$1,500-4,000
Battery power station or quiet inverter generator	Battery power wins indoor venues and wedding lawns; size to your machine's draw	\$1,200-2,500
Water system: tanks, pump, filtration	Self-contained fresh and waste water plus handwash capability per health code	\$300-700
Permits, licenses, food handler certs	Health permit, business license, ServSafe; county-dependent, see legal	\$300-900
Insurance down payment (GL + equipment)	\$1M general liability; venues require COIs before you roll in	\$200-400
Smallwares, syrups, cups, opening inventory	Pitchers, scales, tampers, compostable cups that photograph well	\$500-1,000
Lean total		\$7,000-16,700 all-in

THE STANDARD BUILD · ADD AFTER FIRST REVENUE	WHAT IT UNLOCKS	COST
Cargo van or enclosed trailer	Only when bookings justify it; many carts launch from an SUV and a ramp	\$4,000-12,000 used
Premium cart aesthetics	Custom millwork, brass details, florals, branded signage: weddings pay for beautiful	\$1,500-4,000
Second machine setup (batch + cold brew)	Doubles throughput for 150+ guest corporate mornings	\$800-2,000
Booking software + contracts stack	Proposals, deposits, and calendars on autopilot	\$20-50/mo

THE RULE

Spend on the machine and the power, save on the pretty, then reverse that with deposit money. A gorgeous cart with an underpowered machine dies publicly at its first 100-guest wedding; a plain cart that serves 80 flawless lattes books its next three events from the crowd. Craft first, brass later.

Clean from day one.

A coffee cart carries real food-service regulation, but a lighter load than a full trailer: no fryers, no raw proteins, and in many counties a friendlier permit category. The rules are local and the sequence is the same: call the health department before you buy anything bolted down.

- Call the health department first:** Ask which mobile-unit category an espresso cart falls under in your county. Many treat espresso with milk as a limited or intermediate food service: real requirements (handwash, water tanks, surfaces) but lighter than full cooking rigs. Their checklist is your build spec; get it before the cart exists.
- 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.
- Health permit + commissary question:** Expect plan review, an initial inspection, and an annual permit (\$100-600 by county). Many counties require a commissary agreement for water fill, waste dump, and storage even for carts; some exempt low-risk units. Ask explicitly, get the answer in writing, and budget \$200-500 a month if required.
- Food handler + manager certification:** A food handler card is the floor; a certified food protection manager (about \$150) strengthens both compliance and your venue pitch. Keep certificates in the cart kit.
- Mobile vending vs catering distinction:** Private, invitation-only catered events often sit under lighter rules than public vending, which is another quiet advantage of the booked-event model. Public markets and festivals flip you into vendor permitting and per-event fees: know which mode each booking is, and which permits it triggers.
- Venue COIs and power sign-offs:** Venues require a certificate of insurance naming them additionally insured, and good ones ask about your power draw. A broker who issues same-day COIs and a laminated spec card for your rig (amps, water, footprint) marks you as a professional and wins repeat venue invitations.
- Sales tax registration:** Catered packages and per-cup sales are taxable in most states. Register before the first invoice, build it into package pricing, and reserve it weekly.

INSURANCE, SPECIFICALLY

General liability at \$1M is the venue-mandated floor, typically \$40-80 a month for a cart operation. Add equipment coverage (inland marine) for the machine and grinder, which travel badly and cost like jewelry, and commercial auto if a dedicated van enters the picture. Workers' comp arrives with your first paid helper in most states.

WATCH FOR

Hot milk and small guests. The realistic liability in this business is a steam burn or a tipped cup at a crowded reception, often involving a child at exactly counter height. Position the cart with a service buffer, keep cups behind the bar line until handoff, and let your barista, not guests, handle anything hot. Your insurer cares, and so do the venues that rebook you.

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

Three doors. Real numbers.

Sell packages by guest count and hours, never by the cup: hosts want one number that makes the decision easy, and per-cup pricing makes you a vending machine instead of a catered experience. Anchor on the wedding package; it is your reference price and your portfolio centerpiece.

	RECOMMEND	
<p>DOOR ONE</p> <p>The Corporate Pop-Up</p> <p>\$450-650 2 hours, up to 60 drinks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Full espresso menu plus a seasonal special ◆ Setup and teardown inside your booking window ◆ Branded cup sleeves or logo stencils available ◆ Weekday morning slots that never touch wedding season 	<p>DOOR TWO</p> <p>The Wedding Package</p> <p>\$700-950 3 hours, up to 100 guests, most-booked</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Styled cart dressed to the wedding's palette ◆ Custom menu board with a his-and-hers signature drink ◆ Professional attire and reception-grade service ◆ Decaf, dairy alternatives, and kids' cocoa included ◆ Vendor meal coordination with the planner 	<p>DOOR THREE</p> <p>The Full Day</p> <p>\$1,400-2,200 festivals + activations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ 6-8 hours of continuous service ◆ Second barista and batch-brew support included ◆ Branded activation options for sponsors ◆ Per-guest pricing above included drink counts ◆ The corporate gifting season workhorse

PRICING NOTES FOR THIS BUSINESS

- Price per guest works out to \$6-9 on packages; hold that floor and the margins protect themselves.
- Drink caps protect you: packages include a stated drink count, with overage at \$4-5 per drink. Hosts respect clear math and resent surprises.
- Deposits are non-negotiable: 50% to hold any date, balance due 14 days out, dates released if unpaid. Your Saturday is finite inventory.
- Travel beyond 30 miles bills at a flat fee, and early setup before 7 a.m. carries a modest premium. Price the inconvenience or it compounds.
- Raise wedding pricing each engagement season; you are competing on beauty and reliability, not price, and planners distrust the cheapest vendor in any category.

THE UPSSELL THAT PAYS THE RENT

The corporate gifting season. Every wedding crowd and weekday pop-up contains office managers and founders, and from October through December companies are actively spending on appreciation: holiday parties, client thank-yous, team mornings. Pitch a December package in every autumn invoice and email. Winter is dead season for fair-weather carts and the best margin quarter for the ones who work the gifting calendar.

Names, not strategies.

Your first ten bookings come from being seen pouring, because this product sells on sight and taste in a way no brochure can match. Engineer visibility with the exact people who book carts for a living: planners, venues, and office managers.

1 **Wedding venues' preferred-vendor lists**

Tour five venues, leave a one-pager with your COI attached, and offer to pour free at their next open house. Venues recommend vendors who make their space look good; the open-house pour is your audition for a year of referrals.

2 **Wedding planners (five of them)**

Planners assemble vendor teams for every client and crave reliable, beautiful, insured additions. Offer a planner's tasting: thirty minutes, four drinks, your spec card. One planner who trusts you books you blind, repeatedly.

3 **A styled shoot with photographers**

Split a styled wedding shoot with a photographer and florist who also need portfolio. Your cart, dressed and steaming, in professional golden-hour photos: that gallery is your entire wedding marketing for year one.

4 **Office managers and HR, directly**

Email twenty companies a simple offer: a discounted launch-month morning pop-up. Office managers hold recurring budgets and December gifting money, and one delighted lobby becomes a quarterly client.

5 **Bridal expos and engagement season**

A booth where you actually pour beats every static display in the hall. Book January and February expos: engagement season fills the following summer, and couples book the vendor whose latte is in their hand.

6 **Your own launch event**

Pop up free outside a busy local business (with their delighted permission), announce it everywhere, and pour for two hours. Collect emails with a giveaway, post the line, and let the neighborhood discover you in person.

THE EXACT ASK

"Hi [name], I'm [name], I run [cart name], a mobile espresso bar here in [city]. We do styled latte bars for weddings and corporate mornings: full espresso menu, our own power and water, insured, and the cart photographs beautifully. I'm booking my founding season and holding [number] dates at founding pricing. Could I do a quick tasting for you and your team, or pencil a date you already have in mind?"

THE FOUNDING-CUSTOMER DEAL

First eight bookings: \$100-150 off any package, in exchange for a detailed review, photo rights from the event, and a tag from the host's account. Wedding bookings also unlock a free anniversary pop-up offer, which couples adore and never redeem at scale. Retire founding pricing publicly at eight bookings; deposits at posted rates fund everything after.

Owned, earned, then paid.

This is a visual hospitality product bought by planners, couples, and office managers, which makes your engine photography, venue relationships, and a booking pipeline that respects the wedding calendar. Everything you post should look like steam, craft, and a beautiful event.

CHANNEL, RANKED	WHY IT WORKS HERE	THE FIRST MOVE
Instagram as your portfolio	Planners and couples vet carts entirely by feed; beautiful is the buying criterion	Post every event: the dressed cart, the signature drink board, the pour shot. Reels of latte art outperform everything
Venue + planner relationships	Preferred-vendor lists are the highest-converting channel in the wedding economy	Quarterly touchpoints with five venues and five planners; send them content shot at their events
Google Business Profile	'Coffee cart rental [city]' and 'espresso catering' searches are hosts with dates and budgets	Claim it day one; load event photos; reviews mentioning weddings boost exactly the right queries
Bridal directories + The Knot	Couples in booking mode search by category and read reviews there	Complete profiles in the bar/beverage category with real galleries and synced reviews
Email list for corporate buyers	Office managers rebook quarterly and spend hardest in Q4	Collect business cards at every weekday event; send an October gifting-season offer, every year, without fail

FIVE CONTENT PIECES THAT WIN THIS NICHE

- Dressing the cart to match a wedding palette, in 60 seconds
- What a signature drink says about the couple: our favorite menu boards
- How we pour 100 lattes in 3 hours without a line forming
- Battery-powered espresso: how the cart runs anywhere (venues, this one is for you)
- December at the office: what corporate gifting season looks like from behind the bar

THE REVIEW MACHINE

Ask the host the Monday after, when the thank-you energy is still warm: 'It was an honor to pour for your people. A short review helps other couples and companies find us: here's the link, and here are three photos from the day you're welcome to keep.' Pairing the ask with free photos triples the response rate, and reviews that name the venue compound your search ranking exactly where couples look.

One unit, one month, no fog.

Two honest snapshots: one standard wedding package, and a 10-event month in season. Espresso's per-drink economics are forgiving; the discipline this business demands is calendar density and deposit hygiene, not cost-cutting.

ONE UNIT: ONE WEDDING PACKAGE (3 HRS, 100 GUESTS, \$800)	AMOUNT	A WORKING MONTH: 10 EVENTS (JUNE: 5 WEDDINGS, 4 CORPORATE, 1 FULL DAY)	AMOUNT
Revenue	\$800	Revenue	\$6,500
Beans, milk, syrups, cups	-\$120	Consumables (beans, milk, cups)	-\$980
Barista helper (4 hrs)	-\$70	Helper labor	-\$560
Fuel, ice, water	-\$30	Fuel, commissary, supplies	-\$340
Card processing (2.9%)	-\$23	Insurance, permits, software	-\$280
Gross profit (7-hr day with travel)	\$557	Marketing (directories, expos fund)	-\$150
Tax reserve (27%)	-\$150	Pre-tax profit	\$4,190
Yours, per event	\$407	Tax reserve (27%)	-\$1,131
		Owner take-home	\$3,059

BREAK-EVEN

15-25 events

A \$10,000-14,000 launch divided by \$400-550 of owner profit per event pays back inside 15-25 bookings, which a decent wedding season plus weekday corporate work delivers in four to six months. Deposits accelerate everything: half of next quarter's revenue can sit in your account before you have steamed the milk.

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

- Health department called; cart category and checklist in hand
- LLC filed, EIN issued, business bank account open
- Machine and grinder sourced; cart build or purchase started
- Insurance bound; same-day COI broker confirmed
- Packages and pricing finalized with drink caps written in

WEEK TWO: DOORS OPEN

- Permits filed; commissary question answered in writing
- Power and water systems tested under full load at home
- Booking software live: proposals, contracts, deposits
- Dial-in practice daily; 100-drink pace test run
- Styled shoot partners confirmed, date set

WEEK THREE: MOMENTUM

- Venue tours: 5 one-pagers delivered, open-house pour offered
- Planner tastings: 2 booked minimum
- Office-manager launch offer emailed to 20 companies
- Styled shoot produced; gallery expected in 2 weeks
- Social accounts live with build and pour content

WEEK FOUR: THE SYSTEM

- First 2-3 founding bookings contracted with deposits
- Launch pop-up poured, posted, and email list started
- Bridal expo booked for next engagement season
- Month-one P&L done; per-event cost sheet verified
- Founding pricing countdown announced publicly

DAY 30 VERDICT

Green light: permits in motion or passed, 3+ contracted bookings with deposits banked, and a styled gallery on the way. Yellow: equipment ready but bookings under 2: you are marketing a cart instead of an experience; get the styled photos and planner tastings done before spending another dollar. Red: no bookings and no venue or planner meetings landed: your proof is invisible and your pitch is cold; pour publicly, free if needed, until someone sees the product steam.

How this business fails, and how it grows.

THE FIVE KILLERS

- ✗ **Underpowered equipment at full crowd**
A prosumer machine that sails through practice dies at drink forty of a wedding rush, publicly. Pace-test your full rig at 100 drinks before your first booking; the machine is the one place this business does not forgive thrift.

- ✗ **Per-cup thinking at catered events**
Counting cups makes you a vendor; packages with drink caps make you catering. One number, clear overages, deposit up front. Hosts buy certainty, and certainty is a pricing format.

- ✗ **Booking events without venue logistics**
No power confirmed, a fourth-floor walkup, no water source, no load-in plan: each one turns a \$800 day into a \$200 disaster. A pre-event logistics sheet, answered by every host, is your flight checklist.

- ✗ **Ignoring winter until it arrives**
Wedding-season euphoria ends in November, and carts with no corporate pipeline go dark for a quarter. October is when December is won: pitch gifting-season packages while the leaves are still on the trees.

- ✗ **Skiping the deposit out of niceness**
An unpaid date is not booked, it is reserved hope, and ghosted Saturdays are unrecoverable inventory. Fifty percent at signing, balance at 14 days, no exceptions for anyone, especially friends.

THREE SCALE PATHS

- 1 **The second cart**
A duplicate rig with a trained barista crew runs the Saturday you had to decline, and weddings cluster on the same dozen Saturdays a year. Two carts at June density roughly doubles peak-season revenue on the same brand, booking system, and prep routine.

- 2 **The corporate program**
Convert one-off pop-ups into monthly office residencies and quarterly contracts, with December gifting as the annual crescendo. Recurring weekday revenue smooths wedding seasonality and makes your calendar bankable enough to hire against.

- 3 **The beverage catering company**
Add cold brew kegs, matcha and chai bars, mocktail service, and branded activations until you are the beverage layer for events generally, not just coffee. Same logistics spine, multiplied menu, and budgets that scale with corporate clients instead of cup counts.

YOUR FIRST HIRE

A trained second barista before peak season, started on weekday corporate slots where stakes are gentler, then trusted with wedding support. Pay well; a barista who can dress the cart, hold your drink standards, and charm a reception protects your reviews on the days you cannot clone yourself. They are the test of your systems: if your recipes, setup checklist, and service standards survive a Saturday without you, the second cart is already half-built.

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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