THE 7 DAY STARTUP

YOU DON'T LEARN UNTIL YOU LAUNCH

DAN NORRIS

FOREWORD BY ROB WALLING

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Foreword

by Rob Walling

I first heard about Dan Norris when he emailed to pitch me on a guest post called 13 Pre-Launch Traffic Strategies for Startups[1].

No wait… that's not right.

The first time I *actually* heard about Dan Norris was on the Tropical MBA[2] podcast— the hosts mentioned Dan's (now defunct) startup Inform.ly.

Umm… that's not right, either.

It was when Dan launched his podcast…

His blog…

His email newsletter…

Or when he put himself in the hotseat on Jason Calcanis' This Week in Startups[3].

I think you're starting to get the picture… The scary truth is that *Dan Norris is a hustler*.

In fact, there are few who can match Dan's *sheer volume of hustle*, be it when cranking out podcast episodes, blog posts, or putting himself out there on other peoples' podcasts (mine included[4]). I've always admired this about him.

It's this hustle that enabled him to iterate, pivot, and brute force his way through multiple failed startup attempts and arrive at a standout success, WP Curve. And he went from spending six months to find his first paying customer to spending 7 Days.

I've worked with thousands of entrepreneurs over the years through my podcast[5], blog[6], startup conference[7], and my most recent startup[8]. Without question, the biggest mistake people make is obsessing over their idea and not focusing enough on finding people willing to pay for their product.

The 7 Day Startup is based on the hard knocks Dan has endured while launching idea after idea. He architected this book to get you from zero to paying customer in 7 Days and he's distilled his lessons into relatable stories and actionable takeaways to get you started as quickly as possible.

I know what you're thinking: "7 Days?! Has all this hustle rotted his brain? No one can launch an idea in 7 days."

And to that I offer a story:

When I interviewed Dan I, too, was incredulous at the thought of getting an idea out the door in 7 days. My email marketing startup, Drip[9], was as minimally viable as you can imagine, and it *still* took months to launch.

Dan's response to my pushback?

"I think it's worth considering whether or not Drip is a good idea for a first time entrepreneur who's bootstrapping. [In my book I have a] list of criteria for good ideas and one of them is the ability to build and test quickly.

Drip might be a good idea for a 3rd or 4th time entrepreneur, but it may not be a good idea for a first time entrepreneur because it might be too hard and too competitive to build something like that."

Well said, sir.

If you're a third-or fourth-time entrepreneur, I would hope you have it dialed in by now. Everyone else: you'd be well advised to listen to him.

I wish you all the best on your journey,

Rob Walling
Fresno, CA
August, 2014

You Don’t Learn Until You Launch

“It’s fine to celebrate success but it is more important to heed the lessons of failure.” **Bill Gates**

In 2007, I was one year into my first business. Flying back from my honeymoon, I finished the book *Think and Grow Rich*. It advised thinking of a financial goal for the next 12 months, and saying it every day. I thought of $100k as an annual wage, to pay myself from my business profits. The maximum I could draw at the time was $40k, which was about half of what I was earning at my previous job a year earlier.

I said it to myself every day throughout 2007.

But I didn’t hit the goal. I didn’t even hit half of the goal. Not in 2007, or 2008, or 2009, or 2010, or 2011. In 2012, my wage dropped so far it fell below zero.

In June 2013, I had nothing left and was two weeks away from giving up on entrepreneurship for good and getting a job.

Flicking through the limited opportunities in my area, I considered moving my family back to the city. I’d thought of myself as an entrepreneur for the last fourteen years, and I’d ridden the roller coaster of business ownership for the last seven.

What the hell was the point?

My First Business Idea

In the year 2000 I was a long-haired twenty-year-old, struggling through a business degree at university. Bored out of my brain, I needed to choose an elective to make up for the courses I had failed, and stumbled across a brand new subject called "Entrepreneurship."

I dreamed of launching and running my own successful startup.

The objective was to come up with a business idea and plan how to make it happen. I figured it made sense to choose at least one course that taught me about starting and running a business, since that is what I was studying.

At that time you used Dogpile or Hotbot to search the web. There wasn't much there; all the good stuff was in the library. One day I came across a publication called the Ultimate HR Manual. As a Human Resources major, I hid it behind a stack of musty books in the never-used frog anatomy section. It couldn't leave the building — it was too powerful.

The manual held all the secrets for managing human resources. It outlined exactly how to hire and fire, how to recruit amazing talent, how to manage change, how to build a team, and how to train. It was the holy grail of HR.

I needed a business idea for my course, and after I discovered the HR manual, it dawned on me:

What if I put the HR manual… *online*?

I could create a site where business owners could access all the forms and processes required for best practicing HR, including position descriptions, employee surveys, HR Audits, and training programs. That would be cool! Wouldn't it?

My first business idea was born.

Over the next six months I mapped out the idea and planned exactly what topics to include, how to deliver the documents, how to charge, and even how to employ writers.

This was going to make me my first million. HR managers were already paying thousands for HR staff, so I figured they would certainly pay a few hundred dollars for every document they could ever need. As far as my research revealed, nothing like this existed.

I was proud of my plan—it was organized, meticulous, and thorough. Nervously submitting the assignment with hopes of earning a great mark, I waited… and *waited* for the results. Finally, the day came. I opened the assignment and saw an A. BOOM!

There was one problem: I didn't launch the business.

Sure, I had created a beautiful business plan after spending countless hours in the library deep diving into painstaking research.

But launching a business wasn't in the marking criteria.

Looking back, the timing was perfect. I had this idea just after the first dot com crash, and services like this became mainstream a few years later. HR documents and policies were easy to share and buy online. In hindsight, I'm sure it had the potential to be a seven-or eight-figure business.

I will never know for sure. You can never predict what happens after you start a business. Long-term plans and detailed documents are pointless. Most businesses go on to do something very different from what they set out to do. Today, this is called a pivot.

I learned a very valuable lesson from my failure to launch.

That lesson is: "You don't learn until you launch."

My First Business

The term “business” can mean different things to different people. If you buy a lawn mowing franchise, you are technically in business. But you are really just working for yourself.

The entrepreneur is the person who sold you the franchise. They created something from scratch, in extreme uncertainty with a high potential reward.

In 2006 I had just earned a promotion at my cushy corporate role, was 26, and finally ready to start a business. I told my co-workers that I would be a millionaire before I was 30.

My newest business idea was building websites for people. The fact that I didn’t know how to build a website and had no IT qualifications didn’t bother me. Instead, I threw myself in the deep end, learning rapidly from reading books and doing the work. My new clients would ask me questions like, “Can you build a website using ASP?”

I would say yes, then frantically search Google to find out what ASP was and get to work.

Everything looked great early on. I landed a project in my first week and earned $40,000 in my first year. Sure, it wasn’t exactly $1,000,000—but I was happy to have even lasted a whole year!

In year two, I generated around $80,000 in revenue and by year three I had eclipsed the hallowed six-figure mark.

Before I knew it I had an office, local employees, a server, a phone system, hundreds of clients, and an influx of new leads. I had built a real business. I was on the path to becoming a millionaire. Or so I thought.

I had one major problem:

The business was not profitable.

It wasn't profitable in year one, year seven, or anywhere in between. I didn't become a millionaire before 30. I went backwards as all of my friends went forward. I was 30, living week to week, renting and earning a lower wage than anyone I knew.

It got worse before it got better.

I realized that bringing in more revenue wouldn't solve my profitability problem. The business was not growing. I tried everything, and I mean *everything*, to make it work. No matter what I did, I couldn't move the needle.

I'd have big successes like winning a $20,000 project, and then a big failure like writing off a $10,000 invoice or hiring the wrong person. It was never consistent.

I even bought another company for $40,000, thinking I'd add straight "profit to the bottom line." My revenue went up by $40,000 and so did my costs.

I regularly worked at Christmas time to appease my worst clients. I struggled with loneliness, a lack of motivation, and confidence. I had put myself out there, leaving my friends and co-workers. I knew people expected big things. *I* expected big things. I had never expected to fail.

There were plenty of positive signs where I'd think things were going to work out, but then something would change and I'd be knocked back on my arse again. This. Happened. All. The. Time.

I lost faith in my own judgment and committed to various courses of action, thinking they would save my business, only to have each one fail. After seven years in business I was turning over about $180,000 per year, but was still only making around $40,000 per year. I had never got even close to my honeymoon goal of a $100,000 salary.

In the end, I accepted that it was a problem I couldn't solve. I sold the business

to build something new.

This time, I was going all in. I wanted to build something real. A startup that would succeed spectacularly. I wanted to stop scraping by and finally become a success. I wasn’t leaving any room for the alternative.

My First Startup

There was enough money from the sale of my first business to cover 12 months of expenses. If I couldn't get traction by then, I would have to move cities and get a job. This was scary, but it didn't seem like a real threat because I was confident that I could make it work.

I knew what to do this time. I was going to create something big, something that could scale. I had four possible ideas I could run with.

1. A pot plant stand that supported heavy pots—a friend had told me they couldn't find one.
2. A surfing app that allowed surfers to check into their local break—think Foursquare for surfers.
3. An SEO app that enabled website owners to order SEO services for keywords.
4. An analytics dashboard that simplified analytics from various places.

I had no idea about product design or manufacturing, so the pot plant stand was out. I couldn't foresee making any money from the surfing app, so that was out too. I started building the SEO app and Google introduced new rules that punished that style of link building. Strike Three.

The analytics dashboard was the remaining idea, so I ran with it. I called it Web Control Room at first and later renamed it *Informly* to make it sound more like a startup.

Throughout the twelve months, most of the time I felt things were going well; there was good traction on the website, a lot of free signups, and regular press coverage. I had a great team and we put together a solid application that was unique, useful, and solved a big problem. Or so some people said.

After eleven months of trying everything, I was earning just $476 in recurring

monthly revenue and spending $2,000+ a month. I had burned through all the money I made on the first business and was two weeks away from running out.

I started looking at jobs and wondered how we'd go about moving back to the city closest to where the jobs were.

I'd failed again.

This time it looked like there was no coming back.

My 7 Day Success

With two weeks left I had one last crack. This would be my final startup attempt.

I learned a lot from my first and second businesses and wanted to try to apply this knowledge to my new idea. This time, I didn't have seven years or eleven months. At the end of the week, I needed traction on the idea or I would have to shut everything down and start job hunting.

Running mainly on adrenaline, I ignored a lot of the activities I would typically spend time on when planning a business. Instead, I focused only on things that would lead to paying customers.

I avoided steps including:

- Sexy ideas. I wanted to solve a problem and sell a service. Fast.
- My failure. I had failed a lot in fourteen years, but I didn't have time to worry about my shortcomings.
- Permission. I used to ask for opinions on my ideas, but not this time.
- Assumptions. There was no time to make them or to test them. I had to launch.
- The small stuff. I didn't have months to agonize over a logo, business name or design—I put the site up in one day.
- Pricing strategy. I set a price and would let my customers tell me whether it was worth it.
- The perfect payment gateway. Informly's payment gateway took six months to set up. This time, I used a PayPal button that I set up in 30 minutes.

On Saturday, I decided to launch WP Live Ninja (now WP Curve), a WordPress support service that offered unlimited small WordPress jobs 24/7 for $69 per month. By Saturday afternoon the domain was registered; on Tuesday the site was live; and by Wednesday I sent out an email launching the service. I landed

my first paying customer that day.

In the first week, I signed up 10 customers. This resulted in $476 of recurring monthly revenue, which was the exact amount I'd worked up to during the previous twelve months with Informly.

This may not sound like much, but my excitement was through the roof! This was the one and people were voting with their wallets. WordPress issues are an annoying problem that people are prepared to pay for. It was a monthly recurring service in a big market that I knew could scale into something significant.

Within twenty-three days I was covering costs and within a month my San Francisco-based co-founder Alex had joined me. Thoughts of moving to get a job were a distant memory.

Each month we grew by around 15% because people started proactively spreading the word. After 13 months we had 475 customers and were making over $33,000 in monthly recurring revenue (MRR). Just as important for me, I had blown past my $100,000 annual wage.

After one year, WP Curve was far ahead of where my agency was after seven. We had twice as many customers, twice the revenue, more staff, a stronger team, lower costs, a simpler business model, happier customers, and four times more profit.

Most importantly, it was a real business. A high growth startup in a big market with a lot of potential. We are still growing at 15%+ per month. After fourteen years, I'd finally realized my dream of being an entrepreneur running a high growth startup.

It only took 7 Days.

What is a Startup?

"A startup is a human institution designed to deliver a new product or service under conditions of extreme uncertainty." **Eric Ries**

There is a lot of bullshit in startup land. Every second person is starting an incubator, raising money, pivoting, exiting, scaling, starting, failing, and telling the world as they do it.

That said, I do prefer the word "Startup" to the word "Business," which is why I've used it in this book.

A business is anything that derives a wage for its founder. By that definition, buying a lawn mowing franchise or opening a corner store is a business. But neither is a startup.

A startup is a bit more exciting. It has:

1. High impact potential.
2. High levels of innovation.
3. High levels of uncertainty.

A local business can't be a startup without ambitions to take it to the world. A franchise restricted by franchise rules can't be a startup. Neither has the potential for a big impact.

Eric Ries defines a startup as *"a human institution designed to deliver a new product or service under conditions of extreme uncertainty."* That doesn't mean you have to risk everything to create a startup. This book is primarily about reducing risk. But with a startup you do lose some of the predictability and certainty that comes with less innovative businesses.

If there’s no innovation, then it’s not a startup. That’s why the majority of startups have a technical focus. That said, innovation can also be present in ways other than with technology.

With high impact potential and high levels of innovation, a startup has the ability to change the world.

That’s why I want you to think about launching a startup instead of a business. Anyone can create a job for themselves. But not everyone can change the world

Idea, Execution, Hustle

"Things may come to those who wait … but only the things left by those who hustle."

Anonymous

There is so much business advice out there that it's hard to cut through what's needed to get a startup going. Consider the following popular maxims:

- Work *on* your business, not *in* your business—impossible and impractical when you are bootstrapping a new idea.
- Optimize your funnel—pointless when you have no leads.
- Hack your growth—difficult before you have customers.

The goal of this book is to get you from wantrepreneur (someone who wants to be an entrepreneur) to entrepreneur. From someone who has an idea to someone who has a startup.

I chat with wantrepreneurs about their ideas all the time. Almost every time they are failing at one of three things, almost in equal measure. On the flip side, successful startup companies excel at all of them.

I can't think of a single entrepreneur that I've met who does all of these things well. This is part of the reason why the vast majority of successful startups are teams not individuals. Be honest with yourself. If you can't do all of these things alone, it's time to find a co-founder.

Idea

Another popular maxim in entrepreneurial circles is, “Ideas don’t matter, only execution matters.”

That advice is well-intentioned, but wrong.

Take a look at the trending startups on Angel List, the companies getting funded through Crunchbase, or think about your successful entrepreneurial friends. They are all working on something that has some sort of unique quality to it. It might not be the next iPhone, but it is an idea that has successfully captured enough attention to take off.

Your idea is important and I dedicate a fair amount of time to it on Day 1.

The problem is, it’s only one part of three elements required to successfully get a startup off the ground. It’s where wantrepreneurs spend 100% of their time. They can talk ‘till they are blue in the face about their idea, but when it comes to the other elements, they fall flat.

We will spend one day on your idea, you will choose the best one, and then we’ll move on.

Execution

Once you have an idea that has some merit, it needs to be executed well. This book is all about getting something to market quickly. However, that doesn't take away from the fact that it's an ongoing process to continually execute your idea well.

> Execution is your ability to present your idea just as well as the best ideas in the world.

You won't be able to execute your idea in seven days at a level that compares with the best in the world. That should be your goal in the medium term.

There's no use complaining about being self-funded and not having resources. Customers don't care. They make comparisons and make a choice. If you don't execute as well as the competition, they will chose the competition.

Execution is a really big problem outside of the big startup hubs. It's very misunderstood, and simply getting a brand and a website to look and feel like an exciting startup is difficult.

If you aren't able to present your idea in a way that compares favourably with the best in the world, then look for a co-founder who can.

Hustle

The final element is hustle. I'm not necessarily talking about cold calling or "getting out of the building."

Hustle is relentlessly pursuing what needs to be done at the time.

Hustle is Marco Zappacosta from Thumbtack getting a "No" from 42 out of 44 VCs.

Hustle is Seth Godin getting 900 rejection letters in a row.

Hustle is Chris Sacca creating a company, a website, and business cards just to be taken seriously at networking events.

Hustle for an early stage startup is generally about spending your time on the things that are most likely to bring you customers. That could mean "getting out of the building" for some. For you, your skillset, your customers, and your business, it might mean something totally different.

I built my business off the back of content marketing. I wrote 250 posts in the first year, 13 in one day. Our content is now a lead generation machine to the point where we don't advertise at all.

For you, it could be networking. It could be calling people and asking them to pay. It could be working on relationships. Whatever it is, it has to be the best way for you to spend your time, to solve your biggest problem right now.

If you don't yet have a business, you need to launch and this book will help you do that. You need to hustle for the next seven days and you can get it done. You have to *not* do the other stuff, and relentlessly pursue launching.

Once you launch, you need to get more people paying you. You have to relentlessly pursue your best method of getting customers, and not the stuff you naturally gravitate to.

Anti-hustle is what wantrepreneurs do. They do everything other than what *needs* to be done. They keep coding. They design new features. They optimize their site. They think up new, world-changing ideas. They hang out at startup events discussing their idea. They go to startup weekend and launch a new idea. They do everything other than what they need to do—which, more often than not, is getting more customers.

Some people are not good at hustle.

They don’t know how to filter the noise, work out what they really need to do, and then tirelessly get that shit done.

Be honest with yourself. If idea, execution, or hustle are not you, then find a co-founder who excels in those areas. You will need it if you want to have a successful startup.

Why 7 Days?

"Move fast and break things." **Mark Zuckerberg**

13 years into my soul-crushing indoctrination into entrepreneurship, it became clear why I'd failed so many times. I had acted based on assumptions instead of making decisions based on real data.

- When I purchased another company, I assumed I could bolt on $40,000 profit. Wrong.
- When I launched Informly, I assumed that if I created something great then people would buy it. Wrong.
- When I released a new version of Informly, I assumed that people would act according to the survey results. Wrong again.

The only time I didn't act out of assumptions was with WP Curve. I had no time to assume anything. I launched, and every important decision came afterwards. I based those decisions on real customer behavior, not assumptions.

The ability to learn from real data is why the 7 Day Startup works. You wipe assumptions off the table. Your focus is on launching in 7 Days.

Avoid Failed Validation Techniques

"The Lean Startup" movement has made people think that business has become a simple scientific experiment. Pre-sell $10,000 worth of your product and there's a definite need there. Create a landing page, and if you get conversions of over 30%, then you have a great business.

It's validated.

In rare circumstances, this works. Let's delve into some of the reasons why, in most cases, it doesn't.

Validation Doesn't Work Well When the Answer Isn't an Obvious "YES"

The popular stories you hear about startup validation go something like this:

1. I created a website with a brief video.
2. It went viral.
3. I bought a yacht.

Dropbox started from a 3-minute video posted to Hacker News and their signup list jumped to 75,000 people in one day. At the time of writing they are now a $10 billion company.

That's great *if* you can get 75,000 opt-ins in one day. But if you don't, is it a bad idea? Maybe you just don't have much kudos on Hacker News. Maybe people don't understand it. Maybe your video is crap. Maybe the right people didn't see it.

The reality is that most ideas aren't going to go viral. Let's face it: the chances of you coming up with the next Dropbox are low. This is particularly true for bootstrapped companies.

Email Opt-In/Beta Signup Totals Do Not Indicate Purchase Intent

Email signups are often considered the key indicator of whether an idea is sound.

With the first version of my analytics dashboard, I had 1,000 people sign up for the beta (three months) and 1,200 people enter their email to be notified of launch.

These may seem like small numbers, but it took five years to build up an email list of 2,000 people in my last business. I really felt like I was onto a winner.

There is a very big difference between someone entering their email and someone paying you each month for a product. I've consistently discovered that once I launch a product, on page conversions go down. It's easy for someone to enter their email to be notified.

It's much harder for someone to sign up, try, and use a new service.

People Saying "It's a Good Idea" Doesn't Mean It Is

As part of validating Buffer, Joel Gascoigne "simply tweeted the link and asked people what they thought of the idea."

His post on validating Buffer indicates that he read a lot into this:

> "*After a few people used it to give me their email and I got some useful feedback via email and Twitter, I considered it validated. In the words of Eric Ries, I had my first validated learning about customers*".

Really? A few of your mates said it was a good idea and therefore it's "validated?"

It turns out that Buffer *was* a good idea and a product that people were willing to pay for. Does that mean the validation technique was a good one? I don't think so.

Here are some of the things that people around me said when I built Informly:

"It's a great business." (Startup veteran Jason Calacanis. I sent him a login; he never logged in).

"I'm not sure if this email will make it to you, but you've managed to build the software most of us wished we already did!" (Startup founder and angel investor; didn't end up becoming a paid customer).

"Thanks for helping to solve a problem most of us face every day," and *"Great work man! I use this product frequently and have recommended it to quite a few people."* (Didn't end up becoming a paid customer).

"I have just jumped onto the new platform from http://inform.ly and love it!" (Didn't end up becoming a paid customer).

"I'm in love with it. Let me know if you ever need a testimonial. I've been waiting for this all my life". (Didn't end up becoming a paid customer).

"Hey Dan! Informly is amazing! What an epic idea. You can manage everything that matters from one place" (Didn't end up becoming a paid customer).

These are unsolicited. I had a lot of friends telling me it was a great idea and also giving me great testimonials. They are bad at predicting their own behavior and even if they think they will buy, it doesn't mean they will.

People don't want to hurt your feelings.

Coverage in Tech Press Doesn't Work

When I launched the first version of Informly it was a personal validation goal to get featured by a respected tech publication. I thought having that level of confirmation would be some sort of indication that I was onto something.

So I was thrilled to get coverage with The Next Web and Mashable, and Australian tech sites like Startup Daily, Anthill, and StartupSmart. This was pretty remarkable given that:

- I’d never built a consumer web app before.
- I had marketed it mainly through my own blog posts.
- When I started I had no network in the startup community.
- I had no funding and no co-founders.

I’ve read stories of getting 12,000 users from Mashable coverage. Combine that with the other coverage, and I should be onto a winner, right? Guess how many paid users were sent by the above traffic sources?

Zero.

Targeted Surveys Don’t Work

I know which content...		
	Total	Percentage
Views & engagement	28	37%
Social shares	20	26%
Leads	9	12%
Revenue	4	5%
People	4	5%
Would pay		
Yes	17	22%
No	16	21%
Possibly	43	57%

Not long after realizing that the idea wasn't going to fly, I decided to pivot to a content marketing analytics app. This time I was determined to make sure I validated the idea before working on it for six months.

I built a targeted list of keen content marketers and asked them a bunch of questions in a survey. The purpose of the survey was to ascertain:

- Were people measuring their content marketing?
- Would they pay for a tool that enabled them to measure it?

It even included specific questions like “Would you pay for this feature if I built it?” The results are above and they are clear:

- People generally weren’t measuring the important metrics for working out if their content was resulting in more business.
- 60% would possibly pay for it.
- 20% would definitely pay for it.

I thought it was tapping into a big need.

Post launch, most of the people in the beta list didn’t even use the product. No one paid for it and, after launching it to the public, the signup rate (on-page conversions) was well below the previous version of the product.

Three people signed up to pay for this new iteration. One cancelled within a week and the other two didn’t actually use it.

I should blame the product for some of this. It was the best I could do within six weeks and it definitely needed improvement. But the results were shocking to me at the time. How could they be so different from the survey results?

As Steve Jobs said, *“People don’t know what they want until you show it to them.”* The opposite is also true:

People don’t know what they *don’t* want until they are forced to open their wallets.

Pre-Selling is a Flawed Experiment

Pre-selling your product before it exists is often touted as the answer to startup

validation techniques that don't work. This is how pre-selling works.

- You make an offer for people to pre-purchase your product at a discount.
- People are getting a good deal, but since the product isn't live yet, they accept that they might have to wait a while and are happy to make that compromise.

There are a few reasons why this approach is often not the way to go:

- Your goal at this stage in the business is to test your assumptions. Making overly generous offers is only testing whether or not someone wants to pay you the heavily discounted amount. It doesn't test your real offer and is therefore a flawed experiment.
- People get excited about launches. Time and time again I get higher conversions on pre-launch pages than I do once products actually launch. The same applies to pre-selling. Just because you can get a few people to sign up for your "coming soon business," it doesn't validate the business. You may find after you launch that you have no momentum to continue building the business. In that respect it might be a useful way to fund your idea, but it's not a method of validation.
- The people who sign up to pre-sold deals may be your best customers. By providing them with a yearly (or god forbid lifetime) plan, you have killed any chance of building momentum with those people as you grow. Momentum is a key part of a successful startup. Countless businesses have died after an over-hyped launch and a failure to build ongoing traction.

The idea of someone paying you actual money *before* you build something has a lot of appeal, but you have to ask yourself what you are testing. To *really* test whether you can build a business, you have to start building it.

A few one off sales doesn't get you any closer to knowing whether you can do that.

The Concept of "Validation" is Too Simplistic

The fact is, business isn’t some sort of simple scientific experiment. There are a lot of factors that influence whether your company will thrive or die. “Validated” implies that it will be a good business, but there are a lot more influencing factors.

Luck plays a huge part. Timing might even be more important. The abilities to sell your great idea or build a team to execute your idea are also important factors. There’s a huge forgotten void between “idea” and “successful business” that validation doesn’t account for.

A lot of the ideas that people have are great ideas that are already validated. If someone is doing the exact same thing you are doing and doing it successfully, then the idea is valid, right? Maybe; but does that mean you can create a successful business with the same idea? Not necessarily.

Again, this is particularly true for bootstrapped founders with limited resources. “Validated” doesn’t mean the business will work. Achieving “product market fit” doesn’t mean the business will work.

Product/market/founder fit is probably more useful, but I’m beginning to sound like a university assignment. We’re living in the land of assumptions.

No more assumptions. No more validation. Launch.

Work More Efficiently

When I was at university I figured out that I worked much faster the day before my assignments were due. At first I fought it because it seemed like a slack student thing to do. By the end, I embraced it.

When an assignment was announced, I would go to the library and copy ten or so books that were relevant to the topic. I wouldn't touch the assignment again until the day before it was due. That's when I'd crack open the books and delve into the content. For exams, it meant I was more likely to remember the content the next day and my work rate was insanely efficient.

This strategy took me from failing three out of four subjects in my first year to averaging six and a half out of seven in my last year. They even put me on the Dean's list for exceptional students. If only the Dean knew!

You don't want to do this every night, but there's no doubt that a kick in the arse will drive you—at least temporarily—to perform at a higher level.

It's proven in research. You work more efficiently when you are close to a deadline. If you are a long way out, you make tasks up that you think are important. As a result, you don't get any of the important work done.

Before you start a task, your brain visualizes the hardest parts to come. It then tries to simulate real work by focusing on small mindless tasks. In other words, you spend hours and days fussing over logos and website copy instead of selling your product!

Once you start something with a clear end date, it drives you forward.

Be an Entrepreneur

A wantrepreneur is someone who wants to be an entrepreneur, but is so obsessed with watching TED talks and talking about their business ideas that they never launch them.

You know the type? Every time you see them, they have a new million dollar idea. Or a sad story about how they thought of Facebook three years before Zuckerberg.

They don't understand that entrepreneurs are rarely the inventors who came up with breakthrough technologies. Instead, they are people who took a small problem and worked it to death until they found a solution that gained traction.

If you have a conversation with a friend about your business idea this month, and next month you are having the same conversation, you are a wantrepreneur.

If you want to be an entrepreneur, you have to launch. If you follow the ideas in this book, I believe you can become an entrepreneur by this time next week.

But 7 Days is Not Long Enough

Yes it is.

It's amazing what you can achieve in 7 Days. You can't deliver on your whole grand vision, but you can launch something. When you do, you can start talking to people who are paying you money. This is when you start making sensible business decisions and avoid assumptions.

Beware that launching fast requires you to compromise a lot.

Once you commit to launching in 7 Days, you'll change your thinking on exactly what to launch.

In this book, I'll run through examples from all sorts of companies that have been able to launch in 7 Days. These cover a wide range including services, software, product delivery and marketplaces. Not just all businesses you would associate with quick and easy launches.

Still not convinced?

- Is your business in non-professional services or consulting? You can call someone right now, help them, and ask for money.
- Do you want to launch a plugin or software app? What can you do manually instead of with the software—at least in the short term? What features can you live without? Start talking with real paying customers and use those conversations to decide on your next move.
- Are you looking to release an online training or membership site? The technology will allow you to launch it in 7 Days. Save your epic launch plans for later, when you can make decisions based on real customer behavior.
- Want to create a physical product? How about you sell someone else's product first and get real feedback instead of acting on assumptions?

People who start businesses in these fields take months or years to plan and execute it, only to learn that it wasn’t a good business to start with.

Launching in 7 Days requires a mindset shift. In the past, a software app like the one described above would go into an incubator and get seed funding. The founders would build a team and work on the product for six months before launching. But what happens if it’s not a hit? They pivot to figure out why and try to work out how much of their wasted code they can salvage.

The 7 Day Startup mindset is that you will launch it in 7 Days. You won’t waste any time building something that you don’t know people want.

Once you aim for a week, you will start to question every assumption and figure out a way to make it happen.

No. Seriously. I Can’t Launch in 7 Days.

If that really is the case then perhaps you are going about it the wrong way. If you have launched a dozen successful businesses, and you are doing it for fun, let’s face it: you probably don’t need this book. If not, what you need is to minimize risk and minimize the time you spend working based on assumptions.

If your idea is going to take six months to test, then I would suggest choosing a different idea. This book will help you do that.

Let’s get stuck in. It’s time to launch a startup!

The 7 Pre-Launch Tasks

This is not like a typical business book. Don't bother with tactics to "find your ideal market" or "create your unique selling proposition" or "practice your elevator pitch." These activities are pointless before you launch because they are based on assumptions.

I will walk you through exactly what to do on each of the 7 Days. For now, let's consider the things that need to happen before you launch.

Day One - You need to have an idea. I'll explain how to generate ideas and tell a good one from a bad one (as best we can without having real customers).

Day Two - You need to have something to launch at the end of the seven days. I'll explain what a Minimum Viable Product (MVP) is and you can start thinking about what you will launch.

Day Three - You need a business name. It doesn't really matter what it is, but I'll look at a few ways you can create a simple, useful name.

Day Four - You need a landing page or some sort of online presence. I'll show you how to build a website in less than a day.

Day Five - In this chapter I will give you a look at free methods for getting your business in front of enough people to help you decide whether or not to continue.

Day Six - You need to measure what success means to you. The last thing you want is to launch and then not know whether you have a hit a few weeks later. I'll help you set some goals and plan to make changes if you don't reach those goals.

Day Seven - You have to launch.

In the last chapter, “Business Rules to Live By” I will outline the general principles that you can apply to any business.

If you were expecting a 50-page plan, I’m sorry to disappoint.

You can use these steps when launching your business or any product within a current business. I’m assuming you are launching an entire business, so please keep that in mind as you read the chapters.

Note you will also have to go through a process at some stage to set up a legal entity. As I’m not a lawyer, I can’t tell you whether you have to do that before you launch. I won’t be discussing the legal aspects of setting up a business in this book.

Play Along on Twitter

I'm really keen to play along as you build your business. Give me a shout out on Twitter with the hashtag #7daystartup (my handle is @thedannorris) as you go, and let me know what you are up to. Or if you prefer, feel free to email me at dan@wpcurve.com.

The 7 Day Startup

Day 1 - The 9 Elements of a Great Bootstrapped Business Idea

"The world always seems brighter when you've just made something that wasn't there before." **Neil Gaiman**

As I've previously mentioned, it's not helpful or accurate to suggest that ideas don't matter.

There are a lot of things that matter in making a successful business:

1. The Idea Matters - A bad idea, executed well, will not make a good business.
2. Execution Matters - A good idea, executed poorly, will not make a good business.
3. A Founder's Ability to Get Customers (To Hustle) Matters - A great idea, executed well, will fail without customers.
4. Timing Matters - Speaking hypothetically about an idea is pointless if the timing is wrong.
5. Luck Matters - In fact, it matters much more than most entrepreneurs would care to admit.

Your idea matters. At the same time, you don't want to stress over it for weeks on end. In fact, you should spend just one day on it.

The beauty is that you can always change your idea once you start learning from real customer data. This isn't politics. Backflips are highly encouraged in Startup Land!

If you only spend one day on your idea, you'll be more open to changing it if doesn't work out.

You might already have some ideas—you might hear people complaining about

a pain point, or you might have to start cold-calling people to find out what you can work on. I can't give you the idea for your next business.

An idea that you think is great or that someone tells you is great may not result in a good business for you.

The 9 Elements of a Bootstrapped Business Idea

1. Enjoyable daily tasks

You often hear people say "follow your passion" when it comes to business. Thankfully, I learned early on that this is a bad idea. When I was younger I did a trial for a mechanics apprenticeship. I aced the exam, prompting the manager to ask me why I wanted to be a mechanic. I told him I was "passionate" about cars. He said, "So is Jay Leno, but he doesn't fix cars for a living".

If you want to be an entrepreneur, you need to be passionate about growing a business.

I've also made the mistake of starting businesses that I flat out didn't like. This is a motivation killer that has to be avoided.

Rather than complicating things with diagrams and rules, let's just agree on this:

It makes no sense to start a business that is going to have you doing work you don't enjoy.

That's as far as we need to take the passion equation.

Think long and hard about what your day-to-day tasks will be. Visualize yourself doing these tasks.

If you don’t like what you see, then it’s not a good business idea for you. Other than that, don’t worry about passion.

2. Product/founder fit

People talk a lot about product/market fit, but for bootstrappers the idea of product/founder fit is just as important. In my first agency, I was a poor match. I knew that, but I pushed on anyway.

Some people are perfectly matched with their companies and some people aren’t. It’s worth thinking about what skills you have, what are you known for, and where you can provide the most value.

If that doesn’t line up with your business idea, then it’s going to be a long, hard struggle.

3. Scalable business model

For listed companies, if profits unexpectedly go up, the stock explodes. If they unexpectedly fall, the stock crashes. This is because businesses rarely stagnate. It’s considered unusual if a business is neither growing or contracting.

Yet freelancers and small business people accept a business that isn’t growing. They accept that the business barely generates a wage for the founder.

Startup founders should have the ambition to grow their business into a larger company. If you don’t have that ambition, what you are creating is not a startup.

Some businesses lend themselves to business models that have growth in their DNA. A software as a service (SaaS) company would expect to bring in more recurring revenue each month. A local store or a franchise, however, will have fairly static (albeit cyclical) profits.

Your idea is not a solid startup idea if you don’t have the capacity to make use of a profitable, growing business model.

It’s time to start thinking about how you might charge consumers and whether you could reasonably expect to grow this business idea month over month.

4. Operates profitably without the founder

Most small businesses would die without their founders. They are too tied to the delivery of the product or service, or they just don’t have enough profits to hire people to replace all of the jobs they do.

A lot of people fall into the trap of not worrying about this because they expect to “hustle” early on with little reward. It’s okay to accept that, but fundamentally there needs to be a profit margin built into the product or service you sell.

You need to be able to see a point where you can hire in staff or systems to replace you, and still continue to generate a profit. At that point it becomes a real business.

Can you see your idea becoming a real business that operates profitably without you?

5. An asset you can sell

Business is not just about making money. It’s about creating something that is valuable. Not “I think what I’m doing is valuable,” but a third party validating that there is value there.

Things that carry value are assets, so it’s your job as a startup founder to build them.

Focusing on short-term launches or projects won’t build assets. Assets are built over time by ignoring short-term

built over time by ignoring short-term distractions in favor of a bigger, long-term vision.

A list of customers that pay you every month is an asset. If you focus on short-term projects you'll make more money initially. But if you turn down projects and focus on providing recurring value, you build a valuable asset.

Your product design and intellectual property are assets. If you resell or copy someone else's product, you might have better margins in the short term; but creating your own gives you a long-term asset.

Your team is an asset. If you hire mediocre people to save money, you get more money in the short term. If you hire great people, you are building a valuable asset that grows your business.

Your website is an asset. If you pay cheap SEO teams to spam your site with crap, you might rank in Google for one day. But if you deliver outstanding content for years, you'll end up with an unbeatable competitive advantage.

Traffic to your website is great, but a large list of people on your email list is an asset.

At the idea stage you have to think about what assets your idea will result in. Some ideas—when worked on—will naturally result in the development of assets over time, and some won't.

If you work on this idea for five years, what will you have in the end?

6. Large market potential

The long-term goal of a startup is to become a legitimate player in the industry

and create an impact. To do that, they have to serve large markets. They may start serving a small market, but to maintain consistently growing profits, they can't be restricted by the pool they are swimming in.

At the idea stage, give some thought to whether you are building a business for a small group of people or whether it can grow into a large market.

7. Tap into pain or pleasure differentiators

Everyone will tell you to have a "unique selling proposition" or a "differentiator." What they don't tell you is it's not enough to just be different.

All that matters is what your customers care about.

WP Curve is not just unique compared to competitors. It also goes above and beyond in the areas that matter most to customers.

- Our support is unlimited, so customers don't have to worry about the pain of unexpected invoices.
- Our support is live 24/7, so customers don't have to worry about the pain of being organized and waiting around for advice.
- We offer same day turnaround on jobs, so customers can enjoy the pleasure of creating new content on their site, instead of waiting around for days or weeks to have it fixed.

I'd worked with small business owners for many years and I knew the agency model just didn't cut it anymore. The industry went from web developers being the only one to touch a website to business owners maintaining their own content in a few short years. Agencies weren't equipped to deal with this and provide the service that the new type of business owner needed.

The technical change had resulted in a different set of expectations for customers. Agencies failing to meet those expectations had created a new set of

pain points for customers. Our service solved those pain points.

What will your customers really care about? Does your idea tap into a deep pain or pleasure point for them? Or is it just ‘a cool idea’?

8. Unique lead generation advantage

As I mentioned above, having a good idea that is executed well isn’t the full equation. You still need to find customers. The best bootstrapped businesses have ways of generating leads that tap into a key differentiator in the business or the founder.

For example, CrazyEgg and KissMetrics generate a huge percentage of their business through content marketing. Their co-founder, Neil Patel, is probably the most prolific creator of high quality content in the industry. This is a unique advantage for Neil’s companies.

John Dumas from Entrepreneur on Fire is a confident and energetic presenter. He has generated six-figure months in his first year of business by selling directly on webinars. This way of generating leads taps into a core skill that gives John his advantage.

How you are going to generate leads for your business? What will make you, and your company, unique?

9. Ability to launch quickly

Unfortunately, innovations like the iPhone don’t get built by first-time entrepreneurs or self-funded companies. For a business idea to be a good idea for a bootstrapper, it needs to be something you can launch quickly.

Complex software products, physical products, or local physical businesses are difficult. If it’s going to take you a year to launch, you won’t learn from real

customer data as you go.

Choose an idea that you can launch and modify quickly. Then when you start getting real data from paying customers, you can innovate and get the product just right.

I'd love it if you chose something that you can launch in seven days. If you can't, you should still pick an idea you can launch in two months as opposed to two years.

Is Your Idea a Good Idea?

Consider most small businesses. It's clear that they don't meet many of the above elements.

- They don't generate enough profit to pay a replacement founder, and when they do, it's not consistent.
- They are difficult to sell for a reasonable amount of money. If you are able to sell them, they might fall apart without the founder.
- They die because one piece fails or they often hit ceilings where they can't grow anymore.
- Their revenue plateaus year after year because they operate in small markets.

Think about your own idea and whether it's going to fall into the same traps. Choose a business idea that meets the nine elements well and you are ready to move on.

You can tweak the idea later, but some of these fundamentals will be hard issues to solve later on. It's important that the potential is there from the start. You should also consider these things:

Don't Pick Low-Hanging Fruit

Creating a startup means creating something valuable for your customers that is

a long-term asset. It doesn't mean going after low-hanging fruit, getting caught up in get rich quick schemes, or chasing passive income. Here are some examples:

- Web designers host client sites to make a bit of money. The host is delivering the most value in that scenario.
- Consultants "white label" existing products and double the price. What value are they creating? What asset are they building?
- Drop shippers take someone else's products and sell them for more money without doing much. This is okay for the short term, but what separates them from everyone else? Their Google rankings? Good luck with that.

We are talking about launching a real startup here. Something that gives you a purpose, creates something original in the world, and builds long term value. You need to think about how you can truly create something.

Consistently producing original concepts will boost your motivation and confidence, set you up as an authority, and put you in a place where you can develop real, long-term assets.

Creating something real could mean writing content on your company blog, or producing a software app that accomplishes a task slightly better than everyone else. You could start a services business that delivers services in a unique way. Or make a physical product that offers something new.

It *is* possible to start a business without constructing anything, but in the long term the businesses that stand out are the most creative ones.

Creation doesn't just happen one day in the future when you think the time is right.

It's something that the best companies and the smartest entrepreneurs do every day.

It took me seven years to build my agency "business," and only after selling it did I realize that it wasn't a real business. I want you to build a real business the first time.

It needs to be original and provide significant, ongoing value to its customers; and to you.

Don't Try to be Steve Jobs

With Informly, I tried to be Steve Jobs.

I let my creative side take over my entrepreneurial side. It helps for entrepreneurs to be creative, but fundamentally entrepreneurship is about creating a product that people want and selling it to them.

Jobs' statement, *"People don't know what they want until you show it to them,"* is correct. It's also extremely dangerous advice for a new entrepreneur. Informly ultimately failed. I'm not Steve Jobs.

Playing the visionary is a privilege reserved for second-and third-time entrepreneurs. It's fun, but it's fraught with danger.

As an entrepreneur you need something that people want to pay for, with their money or attention. Asking them will not work, because people are bad at predicting their own behavior.

For your first startup, there is a much easier way:

Solve problems where people are already

paying for solutions.

Compare my analytics dashboard software to our WordPress support service. Customers generally used Google Analytics (which is free). Most didn't use paid analytics software and didn't even know that you could get dashboards with all of your stats in the one place.

I was trying to establish a new behavior and convince them of a problem they didn't know they had.

For WP Curve, most of the people in our audience use WordPress. They aren't developers, which means from time to time they will run into problems. To varying degrees, most of them were paying to solve these problems either by:

- Engaging an agency (an expensive option, creating a pain point around cost).
- Using a freelancer (who is only one person and isn't always available, creating a pain point around responsiveness).
- Finding cheap developers on marketplace sites (creating pain points around security, quality of work, and lack of project management).

We could relieve these pain points without cultivating any new behaviors from our customers. They are already budgeting for it and resigned to the fact that they have to pay for it.

Thinking about your business this way can be useful, even at the idea stage.

Everyone might be saying that your idea is great, but look at whether or not they are currently paying for a solution to the

same problem.

This will tell you how hard it will be to convince them to pay you for your product.

When you've had a few exits and you've bought the yacht, it's time to be Steve Jobs.

Until then, start by solving existing problems that people are already paying for solutions to.

Idea Evaluation Checklist

The Nine Elements	**Comment**
Enjoyable daily tasks	
Product/founder fit	
Scalable business model	
Operates profitably without the founder	
An asset you can sell	
Large market potential	
Taps into pain or pleasure differentiators	
Unique lead generation advantage	
Ability to launch quickly	

Day 1 Task *- Brainstorm a bunch of ideas and evaluate them against the checklist. Choose the idea that stands out as being the best option for you. You can use the template provided at wpcurve.com/7daystartup if that helps.*

Day 2 - WTF is an MVP?

"Learning is the essential unit of progress for startups."

Eric Ries

The Lean Startup introduced a lot of new fancy words into startup lingo. The most misunderstood is the MVP, or "Minimum Viable Product."

The concept of the MVP is (in Eric Ries' words):

> *"The first step is to enter the Build phase as quickly as possible with a minimum viable product (MVP). The MVP is that version of the product that enables a full turn of the Build-Measure-Learn loop with a minimum amount of effort and the least amount of development time."*

What this means: Rather than spending six months creating a product or service, do only the smallest amount of work required to truly test it.

In practice, this is interpreted in a lot of ways that prove to be detrimental to bootstrapped startups. They create a really crappy version of the product or service without enough features to make it desirable enough for someone to pay for. Or they don't create anything, and instead put up a landing page and base their decisions on email opt-ins. Or they realize it will take too long to create their actual product, so they create something else.

Most of these interpretations go wrong when they get away from effectively measuring what needs to be measured. In short, they overemphasize the "minimum" and underemphasize the "viable."

A common MVP mistake is overemphasizing the "minimum" and underemphasizing the "viable."

underemphasizing the "viable."

As an example, Informly was designed to pull in people's stats and give them a summary. I wanted to test if people wanted to pay for this, so I built out a working version with only a few integrations. Most startup founders would call this an MVP.

Yet this fails the MVP test. Why?

I put out a product with a lot fewer features than other products that were already available. As a result, no one wanted it. Does that mean it was a bad idea or the business was doomed? There was no way to tell. If it did have all the features, it may have been more popular.

A much better MVP would have been:

1. Put screenshots up of an analytics report and explain what the product does.
2. When someone signs up (pays), get them to click on a few logos to select the services they liked.
3. Tell them their report will be ready soon.
4. Call them up and talk them through what's being done, build the report, and give it to them.

This would have taken me one day.

It would have tested my assumption that people wanted the service much more effectively than a feature-lacking product. The customer would have experienced something reasonably similar to what my product would do for them.

Once you have your product or service idea, it's time to think about what you can launch within one week that represents your final vision for your product or service as closely as possible. That is from the customer's point of view. The ugly "behind the scenes" view does not matter right now.

The key is to forget about automation and figure out what you can do manually.

The WP Curve MVP

I didn’t make the same mistake twice with WP Curve because I had no choice but to make it happen in a week. If I had longer, I may have started looking at support systems or built one that suited our style of small jobs.

I might have started building out models for how developers would complete tasks or a WordPress plugin for requesting fixes. I probably would have hired developers around the world to make sure I could staff the business 24/7.

I didn’t need to do any of that because there are manual replacements for all of it. This allowed me to give the exact service to the customer that I planned to give once we were established.

Here’s how it looked:

1. I had a subscription to some live chat software left over from Informly, so I put that up on the site as the way to request jobs. It was available to everyone, not just customers, but I wasn’t worried about that. If it wasted a bit of time, that was okay.
2. I only had one developer, which meant someone else had to be online the other 16 hours in the day. That was me. I found a free mobile app that integrated with the Olark software and I had my phone on live every night. Anyone who jumped on chat in those early days was waking me up, but they didn’t know it! Again, short-term pain was not a problem.
3. There was no time for a support desk so we used the live chat and a support email address. Customers didn’t care; they prefer email.

This looks ugly as hell from a business owner’s end. The customer, however, saw a developer on call 24/7, and they were validating the value of it by paying me.

An MVP in a service business isn’t too hard, but with software or physical products it becomes a bit trickier. The same principles apply, though. You need

to think about how you can mimic the customer experience as much as possible, as quickly as possible.

Here are a few examples of well-executed MVPs that went on to make great companies.

AppSumo

Noah Kagan wanted to make a deals site for software apps. He could have focused on building the platform for managing the deals or building the email list. Neither of those things were necessary to give customers a realistic taste of the product he had in mind.

Noah's vision was to provide customers with time-limited, heavily-discounted deals on digital goods. He was active on Reddit and found that Imgur was selling pro accounts on the site for $25 per year.

He emailed the founder of Imgur and asked him if he could sell the plan for a decent discount. He then bought a bunch of very affordable ads and sold 200 deals. It lacked all of the fancy systems that AppSumo has today, but to the customer it was very much in line with what you experience now.

In one weekend he was able to see that he had a way to market the idea, people would pay, and he could make money. AppSumo was a $1m company within one year.

Underground Cellar

Jeffrey Shaw wanted to build a daily deals website for wine with a twist. Instead of offering discounted deals, he would offer a randomized free upgrade with every purchase.

He assumed that the motivation for buying on the site would be about the excitement and surprise as opposed to the cost savings. The way he tested this was brilliant and represented a creative (and valid) MVP.

He threw a party!

Everyone who came paid $15 and got a bottle of wine. Some were $15 bottles, some were $100 bottles. Everyone loved the excitement of checking out what they got, particularly the ones with $100 bottles! People passed them around and chatted about the wines.

The actual business would have needed a custom website platform, a randomization technology, payment gateways, and much more. Jeff needed to know whether or not people would go for this concept. He was able to test it without any technology.

Undergroundcellar.com[10] was born and is now a profitable and established business.

Bare Metrics

The Baremetrics.io[11] story is one I love because Josh started something that was very similar to Informly, but he didn't make the same mistakes.

Josh Pigford was a user of the popular payment gateway Stripe and was desperate to get some decent analytics from his account. He had the idea in October 2013 and he built the first version in eight days.

He focused only on what he needed to make it worth paying for. He didn't overthink the details on the design or the development. His sole focus was to "get this to a point where I can prove people want it," and the only "proof" that is valid is money. As soon as it was remotely valuable, he shipped it.

He didn't ship a free version for people to play with. He shipped a working version and charged for it. After a month he was making $1,000 in MRR. Over the next few months, he continued to learn from paying customers, focusing on what they wanted (and ignoring the rest). After nine months he was earning $18,800 MRR.

When Josh launched, Bare Metrics was a limited feature set, but it did what it promised. Bare Metrics included a handful of metrics that you couldn't get from Stripe directly. It didn't allow you to set the date or deep dive into data and only updated once a day. But Bare Metrics was enough for people to want to pay for their services.

Josh's five lessons were:

1. Build what you need, not what you think others need (i.e. don't act on assumptions)
2. Charge from day one
3. Stop trying to build the perfect product
4. Ship fast, ship frequently

5. Price for the customers you want

Bare Metrics is a fairly simple analytics tool. However, their plans range from $29 to $249/month. This might rule some people out, but it also means his customers are serious businesses.

Tidy

Everyone knows two-sided marketplaces are one of the hardest business models to pull off, right? Well Stacey Jacobs didn't get the memo. After deciding to start a home cleaning marketplace, she built the site, engaged the cleaners, started marketing and had her first customers in seven days.

What I love about Stacey's story is she only did what was 100% necessary at each stage. For example, to get the supply side of the marketplace sorted (the cleaners), she didn't start a huge drive for signups. She simply put an ad on a classifieds site, narrowed the 60 replies down to 10 people to interview, and chose three. Three cleaners was enough for her to be able to offer the service in one region in Sydney's eastern suburbs.

To get customers, she ran enough online ads to sign up a few paying customers. She then focused on making them happy and getting them referring before moving on.

Stacy is operating in a space where similar companies, like HomeJoy, are landing multiple eight-figure investment rounds and deals with the likes of AirBnb. That doesn't mean she can't take a lean approach, launch quickly, and with minimal risk.

What Will Your MVP Look Like?

Today you need to think about what your MVP will look like and how you can build it in 7 Days. Here are some questions that you need to answer:

- How can you perform a service or offer a product to real customers?
- How will you get them to pay you after seven days?
- How close will your MVP be to the final vision of your product?
- What can you do manually (hint: probably everything)?
- What can you do yourself instead of delegating?
- How can you make your offer as real as possible for the end customer?

Your product or service will need to be at a point where you can offer it at the end of the week. This won't be easy. It will be fun. It will also force you to be creative and to put something in the hands of your customers and to ask them for money.

Day 2 Task *- Write down exactly what you will launch on Day 7. What will your customers get, what is included, and what is excluded? If necessary, write down what is automated and what will be done manually in the short term.*

Day 3 - Choose a Business Name

"It's more effective to do something valuable than to hope a logo or name will say it for you."
Jason Cohen (founder of WP Engine)

The purpose of the 7 Day Startup is to help you get to launch quickly and avoid the activities that are common distractions for early companies. There is no better example of this than choosing a business name, something that new entrepreneurs agonize over for weeks or months prior to launching.

There are a number of reasons why you don't need to spend more than a day on your business name:

1. It will distract you from what is really important, which is creating something great. That is ultimately what matters and will be what makes or breaks your brand.
2. Your business will probably change significantly by the time you get established. Nintendo started out making playing cards. Tiffany's started out making stationery.
3. You will grow into whatever name you come up with. Most names mean very little when they are first conceived. Steve Jobs impulsively named Apple after the farm he dropped acid on. If that method works, then anything goes!
4. You can change your business name down the track—often quite easily. Even big brands have managed to do so successfully. For small, agile startups, it can often be done for virtually zero cost in a matter of hours or days. You are not stuck with your name for life. Google started out as "BackRub." Creepy.
5. Your customers don't care.

Let's look at a useful framework for choosing an "acceptable" business name. This is the highest level you need to strive for at this stage in your business. Having the perfect worldwide brand can come later, but we want to avoid having a terrible name.

The irony is that a terrible name is often the result of overthinking it.

Come up With a Few Options

The most sensible way to approach your business name is to come up with a few options. From there you can use some logic to pick the best one.

There are many ways you might go about doing this. Here are some naming tricks to get started:

- A place. Apple was named after an apple farm. Adobe was named after a creek that ran behind the founder's house.
- Combine two words to create a new one. Aldi is a combination of "Albrecht" (name of the founders) and "discount." Intel combined "Integrated Electronics." Groupon combined "Group Coupon."
- Use an acronym for your service. IBM stood for "International Business Machines."
- Look for industry terms. In our case, "WP" is commonly used for companies in the WordPress space.
- Use the dictionary. Jack Dorsey liked the name Twitch so he looked at words around it in the dictionary and found the word "Twitter."
- Extend a related word. I put "inform" into wordoid.com to come up with Informly.
- Outsource it. crowdSPRING.com[12] is one site that will get others to come up with business names for you. The one-day turnaround might be an issue here, so forums or social media might work better, or you can ask your friends.

The more time you spend looking at names, the weirder it gets. IKEA was named after the first two letters of the founder's name (Ingvar Kamprad[13]) and

the names of the property and the village in which he grew up (Elmtaryd Agunnaryd). Zynga was named after Mark Pincus' bulldog.

Yahoo started as "Jerry's Guide to the World Wide Web" and then became an acronym for "Yet Another Hierarchical Officious Oracle."

Where the name comes from doesn't really matter.

Come up with ten names that aren't ridiculous and then apply this framework to choose the best one.

A Framework for Choosing an Acceptable Business Name

1. Is it taken?

It's best not to choose a name that's already taken. I can't provide legal advice here on how to work out if you have the right to use a name, but as a bare minimum you should check:

- Is there a trademark on the name in your region? You can use uspto.gov/trademarks[14] in the U.S.
- Is the .com taken for the name? This will often point you to whether or not someone is actively using the name. This doesn't necessarily mean you rule it out, but it's another consideration.
- Is the Twitter handle taken? This can give you a good idea of how active someone is if the name is taken. You can use knowem.com/[15] to see what social profiles are active under the name.
- Are you able to register the name for your business in your local area?

None of these are absolute deal-breakers. There are plenty of businesses who have started with names that have been used for other things. It's up to you to look at how the name is being used and decide if it's an acceptable level of risk for you to use it.

2. Is it simple?

Always favor a name that's simple. Even if it doesn't mean anything, being simple makes it memorable. Eventually it will mean something. Case in point: Apple.

Here are some quick guidelines: Try to avoid making up words. Don't use misspellings or words that people commonly misspell. This only increases the chance people won't find you. Most importantly, keep your name to fewer than 12 characters if possible. Every single one of the top 25 brands in the world are 12 characters or less[16]. I repeat:

> **Every single one of the top 25 brands in the world are 12 characters or less.**

That is assuming, of course, that you can use an abbreviated form such as "GE" instead of "General Electric."

3. Is it easy to say out loud?

No matter how clever you are at marketing, there is a very good chance that your best method for finding customers will be word of mouth. Your business name has to be easy to say in order for people to talk about you.

Amazon was originally named Cadabra. During one conversation between founder Jeff Bezos and his lawyer, the lawyer mistook the name for "Cadaver." Bezos realized that others could make the same mistake and changed it to Amazon.

4. Do you like it?

You will have to say it a lot, so you better like it. It will grow on you to some extent, but don't start with something you don't like.

5. Does it make sense for your idea?

As a bonus, if the name clearly makes sense for your idea, then it's a real winner.

DropBox says what it does without being too specific. Our WordPress conversions plugin is called ConvertPress[17].

6. Broader is better.

You are an early stage company, so it's hard to know exactly what you will be doing down the track. Don't use specific keywords in your domain name or specific mentions of your service or your location. This could easily change and create a bit of unnecessary work for you.

As a general rule, something broader will serve you better. Twitter started as a text message platform, but the name works perfectly well for the web and mobile app it is today.

A Simple Checklist for Choosing the Best Company Name

Put your ten names into this checklist and choose whichever one gets the best score.

Name	Is it taken?	Is it simple?	Sound good?	Do you like it?	Is it sensible?	Is it broad?	Score/6
Name 1							
Name 2							
Name 3							
Name 4							
Name 5							

Day 3 Task *- Come up with a bunch of potential business names and evaluate*

them against the criteria above. Choose whichever one makes the most sense to you and run with it. Grab the best domain you can for that name. I have this chart and other resources at wpcurve.com/7daystartup

Day 4 - Build a Website in One Day for under $100

"A good plan, violently executed now, is better than a perfect plan next week."

General George S. Patton, Jr.

Now that you have a business idea and name, you are ready to start articulating what your message will be.

1. The purpose of the landing page is twofold:
2. To start communicating with customers and learning how they respond.

To begin to build what will ultimately sell your product.

You don't want to spend weeks or months on the landing page. One day is a reasonable amount of time to get a page ready.

There are a few general approaches you can take with setting up your site.

1. Create a site designed to capture email addresses before you ultimately launch in four days' time.
2. Create a site that "pre-sells" your product before you launch it.
3. Create the actual sales page that you'll use on launch day.

It's imperative that on Day 7 you have a page with a payment button on it, because that is the only way you'll learn if people want what you are offering.

Before then, it's useful to put up a quick landing page that communicates something small about the idea. Even if it's only for a few days, it doesn't hurt to start communicating. You might be able to build a small list to email when you launch.

I'll run through the detailed steps of how to set up a WordPress site for under $100. If you already know how to set up a WordPress site, or you already have

one, feel free to skip this section. Further down in the chapter I discuss a simple marketing funnel that will be useful for you.

Depending on the technology you use, the steps may be slightly different. The prices are based on advertised deals at the time of writing.

Step 1 – Register a Domain ($4 - 5 minutes)

Once you are happy with your name, it's time to register a domain. Ideally the .com is available, but if it's not you can use another extension.

- Visit godaddy.com[18]
- Search for a domain.
- Register it.

Step 2 – Set up Hosting ($4 / month - 10 minutes)

WP Curve is hosted with WP Engine. They aren't cheap, but I take the site seriously so I want the best. For now, you can get away with something simple.

If your host supports cPanel, it will make your life a lot easier. You should be able to install WordPress with just a few clicks, so check for the availability of a one-click WordPress setup before you choose a host (more on this later).

- Sign up for a shared hosting plan with GoDaddy[19]or Bluehost[20]. (*Note: I'm not suggesting these are great hosts; I'm putting them forward as affordable fast options.)*
- Ask them where you need to "repoint your nameservers" to—it will be something like ns1.bluehost.com and ns2.bluehost.com *(Note: if you have your domain with GoDaddy and you wish to host with them, you won't have to change nameservers).*
- Log in to your GoDaddy domain management console (where you bought the domain), then look for the options to "Manage Domain" and look for "Update your nameservers."

- Replace whatever is there with the nameservers from your host.

A few notes:

- The domain will take generally 2-24 hours before it shows up on your new host, so I like to do this as soon as I register the domain. Normally it's a few hours.
- Your new host may have a temporary page showing so you know if it's working.
- If you run into problems, your host should help you. If you are nice, they will do quite a bit for you, even if they don't cover development tasks in their scope.

Step 3 – Install WordPress ($0 - 15 minutes)

Installing WordPress is easy, no matter who you are hosting with. It's made a lot easier if your host includes a tool to help with your installation. Fantastico and Softaculous are two examples of options inside the Hosting Control panels that allow you to set up WordPress quickly.

Ask your host if they have a WordPress one-click install option. If so, follow the steps for installation.

If not, you will have to do it the old-fashioned way, which is roughly 5-10 minutes work.

Here are the steps for doing it the old-fashioned way in cPanel:

1. Log into cPanel using the details provided to you when you signed up for your hosting account.
2. Click on MySQL Database Wizard.
3. Work through the process of setting up a database and a database user—remember to copy the password you create for the user and keep it somewhere safe.
4. Give the user all permissions associated with that database. There's not a lot you can break at this stage so go for it, and if you get stuck, most hosts will

point you in the right direction (especially if you explain you wanted a one-click install).

5. Visit wordpress.org[21] and download the WordPress files.
6. Open the File Manager inside cPanel, click on "public_html", and then "upload."
7. Upload the WordPress .zip file.
8. In the File Manager, select the .zip file and click "Extract" at the top.
9. Visit your domain in a browser and WordPress should recognize that it's installed and needs to be configured.
10. Walk through the process of telling WordPress what database to use and setting up users, *etc.*

That should take a few minutes, and then you're done. You have a complete WordPress installation. Congratulations; you are now running the same website platform as The New York Times!

Step 4 – Choose a Theme or Landing Page ($69 - 1 hour)

The next step is to put up a "Coming Soon" page with lead capture or a theme for your live site.

It's up to you whether you want to capture emails here or you want to put up a simple one-page website. I'll provide instructions for both.

Steps for creating a simple lead capture page

- Inside WordPress, mouse over "Plugins" on the left and click "Add new."
- Enter the keywords, "SeedProd Coming Soon," and hit "Search Plugins."
- Click "Install now" next to the plugin called "Coming Soon."
- Click "Activate Plugin" to turn it on.
- On the left, mouse over "Settings" and click "Coming Soon."
- From there you can enable the "Coming Soon" page and connect it to an

email system like MailChimp, Drip, or Infusionsoft to collect email addresses.

This will set up a landing page on your new homepage that will capture emails.

Steps for creating a themed WordPress page

If you don't want to set up a temporary page, you can start putting together your full site with a WordPress theme.

WordPress gives you the ability to get world class themes very cheaply and install them in seconds. I used ElegantThemes.com[22], and they sell a range of themes for just $69. The more recent themes in particular are great, with many of them being well designed, modern, and mobile-responsive.

- Visit elegantthemes.com[23] and purchase your theme.
- Download your theme .zip file and save it to your local computer.
- Inside WordPress, mouse over "Appearance" and click "Themes."
- Click the tab called "Install Themes."
- Click upload, select the zip file and click "Install."
- After it's installed, click "Activate" and then visit the homepage to see how it looks.

Most of the time, it will need to be configured or customized to look exactly how you imagined it would. Don't get too tricky with it; just set it up the way it's designed. You can get fancier later on.

A Suggested Basic Marketing Funnel

Since you've already begun your marketing, it's useful to think about how you will be signing up customers.

I'll go into detail about how you will market your business in Day 5. For now, though, I'll suggest a basic marketing funnel as a starting point.

A marketing funnel is the process by which someone will become a customer. One that works well in a lot of cases is:

- Customer visits your website and "opts in" by handing over their email address in return for a freebie that helps solve a problem they have.
- Over time you send them useful information about that problem.
- When they are ready to buy, they visit your payment page and purchase.

For this to work, you really only need three things:

1. A page that collects email addresses. As mentioned above, "Coming Soon" can do this for a launch page. Or you can use an opt in plugin like our plugin ConvertPress.com[24] for other parts of the site.
2. A system you can use to email people. I use Infusionsoft.com[25], but MailChimp.com[26] is a great free solution for a new business and getdrip.com[27] is a good lightweight automation option.
3. A page where you can sell your product/service.

This is the basic funnel my team uses across all of our businesses, so it can work for a new business idea all the way through to an established company.

I've covered the steps for setting up the email opt-in above, so now I'll look at the steps for creating your payment page.

PayPal is still by far the easiest way to get online payments happening quickly.

- Visit paypal.com[28] and create an account if you don't have one. A personal account is generally fine as a starting point.
- Search their help for creating "Buy Now" buttons. The specific steps change regularly, but at the time of writing it's just a matter of clicking on your profile at the top and then clicking on "Selling Tools."
- Create a "Buy Now" button for one-off sales or a "Subscription" button for monthly subscriptions.
- Back on your website inside WordPress, mouse over "Pages" and click "Add Page." Enter the sales copy and images for your page, and in the "Code" view for the page, paste in the HTML script that PayPal gave you for the button.
- Save the page, then click "View Page" and give it a test. Click the payment button and make sure it takes you off to PayPal and doesn't give you an error.

Note: there is a plugin called Post Snippets[29] you can use for the PayPal code if it's giving you errors. Sometimes WordPress will mess up code you place directly in the editor.

There are a few more things that will help you out enormously with your site, particularly when it comes to increasing sales and increasing opt ins.

1. The copy is extremely important and it can make or break your business. If you are just getting started with copywriting, you should use Dane Maxwell's CopyWriting Checklist[30] as a starting point.
2. When you are selling online, images make a huge difference. A professionally-designed theme is a great place to start, and the images you add in will also have a big impact.
3. Set up Google Analytics so you can understand how people are using the site. Visit google.com/analytics[31] and create an account, then install the YOAST Google Analytics plugin in WordPress to hook it up. Set up conversion goals for your purchase or your email opt-in.

Ready to go!

The power of WordPress is that you have the ability to customize and expand your site.

The site you build on Day 4 is a good place to start, but the important thing is that you've built it on a platform with virtually no limits. You are using the same platform as CNN, The New York Times, and Forbes. On top of that, there are easy ways to improve your site and get access to support if you need it. You have the world's best content marketing platform at your fingertips.

As you get more ideas, add them to your site and start paying attention to what feedback you get. You can also keep an eye on analytics and, ideally, what conversions you are getting on that landing page.

Day 4 Task *- Build yourself a website! If you need help setting things up, check out wpcurve.com/7daystartup for many of the worksheets and exercises.*

Day 5 - 10 Ways to Market Your Business

This is definitely a stumbling block for many people when starting their business. It's fine to open your doors, but how do you get in front of the right people? I don't want this to hold you back, so I've provided 10 specific stories about how other companies gained early customers. You will find many more up at *wpcurve.com/7daystartup.*

It's up to you whether you do these on Day 7 when you launch, the days following, or even now. I'd suggest you don't plan past the first 30 days. Give yourself enough activities in that first month of business to try a bunch of strategies. Figure out what works for you and what doesn't. Make sure you get your product in front of enough qualified buyers. This will help you learn what works for you and what to do next.

If you want to get a copy of this plan so you can start crafting your own as you read this chapter, you can grab the Google doc from wpcurve.com/7daystartup.

The main purpose of marketing is to get your product in front of qualified buyers. This means getting people to your landing page or your sales page. A lot of these suggestions are online strategies for generating traffic to your site. However, you might find face-to-face strategies work better for you, so I've included a few of those as well.

Also remember that these ideas are all designed to market your business quickly. There are many other powerful ways you can market new products. Partnerships with other companies can be extremely fruitful, but they don't generally come together quickly. Crowdfunding sites can also be great ways to launch physical products, but it's difficult to get backers quickly. The following ideas can all be done in the first few days after launching and can result in real paying customers right away.

1 - Create Content on Your Site

Most of our early customers came as a result of our content marketing efforts.

Before I give you my own notes, here's how Liam from Trak.io[32] used the same technique to sign up 217 paid customers in the first few months of launching.

Liam researched some rising trends and realized that at the time "Growth Hacking" was a popular term. He looked at what was out there and saw that most of the content was discussing what the job role meant. There wasn't a whole lot of implement-worthy info that startup founders and marketers could lift from the page and apply to their business.

Liam jumped on this opportunity and published a few very detailed blog posts on the topic. He gained around 2,500 free signups through this tactic after a few posts did particularly well.

Liam's business is now growing organically, but this was just the boost he needed. It enabled him to get enough early customers to start building a great product with direct customer feedback.

I agree with Liam when he says content marketing isn't the fastest way to get customers. But he also agrees that it's cheap, it's fun, and it helps other people. That's a lot of good reasons to consider using content in your business. On top of that, there are some things you can do to get quicker results like publishing your content on other high trafficked sites.

Here are a few quick notes from my own experience:

1. Create in-depth content based around the customer problems that your business solves.
2. Make content as actionable and useful to your target audience as possible.
3. It can't be boring. Don't just create content around your area of expertise. Create anything that is interesting to your potential customers.

4. Optimize your site for email opt-ins so you can get people back to your site by sending emails.
5. Don't worry about SEO. Focus predominantly on creating useful content.
6. Try a bunch of content mediums and look for where you get traction (on-site written content, infographics, videos, podcasts, ebooks or whitepapers, etc.).

The key is to make sure you know what sort of content produces the outcomes you want. If you don't have a big audience, then creating lots of content on your own site won't generate lots of short-term sales, but it will build long-term momentum. In the early days, do more off-site work like podcast interviews and guest posts to put yourself in front of new audiences.

I'm extremely passionate about content marketing and I've put a lot of free resources up at *wpcurve.com/7daystartup* for you to check out.

2 - Start Sending Emails

Your email list will become one of the most valuable assets in your business. A list of people who trust you, that you can contact exclusively whenever you like, is a gold mine. It can take time to build up a decent list, but the best thing you can do is start as early as possible. I suggest building an email list before you launch and continually looking at ways of growing your list.

WP Curve's email list is around 12,000 people. Here are the top ways the company has gone about building the list:

1. Adding people I knew early on. Well-known Tech Blogger Andrew Chen did the same thing. He started writing emails to his friends at first. This got him in the habit of sending the emails, and before long he had a big list to talk to.
2. Set up landing pages that you can point people to. One of the highest-

converting landing pages will be the page you have before you launch. This can become your email list after you launch.

3. Make sure you are sending out a lot of high quality, relevant information. Don't try to sell to everyone on the list.
4. Give away something relevant and valuable to people to get them onto the list. I have had good results with free software, plugins, templates, ebooks, and training courses. This book itself was given away free in return for an (optional) email address.
5. Create great content on your site and provide giveaways (lead magnets) that are related to that content. For example, I gave away a Conversion Review Template on any of my content that talks about conversions.
6. Keep all of your emails personal and encourage people to reply to the emails. This can be a great way to learn what customers want and gain lightning-fast feedback on your business ideas. On top of that, you get opportunities to help people out and build up some goodwill among your online community. People will help you if you help them first.

The easiest way to get started with email marketing is signing up for a free account on MailChimp.com[33]. I used MailChimp for years before migrating to Infusionsoft.com[34] for some more advanced features.

If you want to access the template that helps you increase your email conversions, you can grab it for free at wpcurve.com/7daystartup.

3 - Podcasting

When I sold my last agency I went on a mission to create as much content as I could. One of the best things I did was start a podcast. Not so much for the immediate lead generation, but more for the ongoing networking opportunities.

My podcast, Startup Chat, is only moderately popular. But it has been the easiest way I can imagine to network with some amazing entrepreneurs.

We've built real relationships with influencers in our space including Neil Patel, Sean Ellis, James Schramko, Noah Kagan, and Dan Andrews.

Everyone I know who has started a podcast lists the networking as the number one benefit. If you are like me, and you don't love the idea of calling an influencer just to talk, then a podcast interview is an awesome alternative. You are creating free content for them and helping to spread their message, so you don't feel bad asking for the interview.

Some other benefits of podcasting:

1. It's quite easy to do. Not everyone can write, but most people can talk.
2. Hearing your voice builds people's trust significantly.
3. It opens you up to entire new marketing channels like iTunes and Stitcher Radio.
4. It allows you to have one-on-one time with people in entirely new situations (when they are driving, at the gym etc.).
5. It gives you great authority in your field. A lot of people have a blog, but podcasting is still fairly new. I think people assume it's difficult and you have to have a studio to do it, but that's not the case. Most podcasters I know, even the ones with seven-figure businesses, are doing their podcast from home.

I'm also a big advocate of going on other people's podcasts. When you have your own podcast, you'll start getting invitations to appear on other ones. It takes hardly any time and they do all the work, so jump on it! I'm not above asking people if I can come on their podcast either. It builds an association between you and another influencer, it's fun, easy, and spreads your message to new audiences.

If you are interested in getting started with podcasting, I have prepared a detailed guide which you can get for free at wpcurve.com/7daystartup.

4 - Forums and Online Groups

Online forums or social media groups can be a great place to build networks and find customers.

When Damian Thompson wanted to launch his new business, Linchpin.net[35], he started with a private forum of entrepreneurs called dynamitecircle.com[36]. Damian was a trusted member of the group, having been one of the original members. When he posted an offer, a number of people took him up on it straight away.

Damian signed up his first four monthly customers for his marketing automation service from that forum. This gave him $3,000 *month of recurring revenue, which was enough to make his first hire. And guess where that staff member came from? Yep, from the forum, too! 18 months on, Damien has built his business up to $30,000* month.

Forums have a certain level of trust built in, so a lot of the hard work is done if you are already a valued member. I signed up my first customer for WP Curve in the same forum—and Damian was that customer!

Social media groups can offer similar results.

One of the benefits of groups like these is that they are paid groups, which pre-qualifies the members. The fact that they are willing and able to pay to be in the group makes them, in turn, far more likely to pay you.

If you are a member of groups like this then they could be a good place to start your marketing. Be conscious of the rules and don't oversell. Even just offering a deal or a freebie to members of the group might be enough to kickstart some business with real customers. If you aren't a member of a paid group in your niche, I'd definitely consider joining one.

5 - Guest Blogging

I've talked about content marketing already, but I feel guest blogging deserves its own section due to its ability to drive leads quickly.

When Terry Lin worked in finance, there were a few niche gossip blogs that folks in the industry would follow. Not the big players like Forbes, Wall Street Journal, etc., but smaller ones with content revolving around bonuses, employment, and a lifestyle relevant to the banker in major cities like NYC, London, Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Singapore.

When Terry left the industry to start his men's accessories business, ballerleather.com[37], he approached the editor of one of these blogs for a guest post. He planned on sharing his story of starting a business and the lessons he's learned since leaving the industry. It was a unique angle and the content was different than most of the usual topics. From initial outreach to the post going live, it was done within a week.

The article was only a short 600-word piece, but it was highly relevant to folks in the finance industry. Terry's bio at the bottom included a link to his business, and by the end of the day he had made $700 in sales.

The key for Terry was just being honest and upfront while constructing a genuinely real and interesting post to share with his audience. The other crucial factor is that he knew his ideal customers extremely well. Effective guest blogging is like every other form of marketing: it's all about targeting. If you can get your message in front of the right people, it will work well. If you get the message in front of irrelevant people, it won't work at all.

6 - Listing Sites

Prateek Dayal created a help desk system called SupportBee.com[38]. When he launched, he visited a number of app comparison sites and added Support Bee in where he could.

After adding his app to alternativeto.net[39], people would find the software after researching alternatives to other help desk tools. He started getting a few free signups a day and has had many more paying customers come from the free listing.

In every industry there are a range of sites that list businesses in different ways. Some examples could be:

- If you were a web designer, you could submit your nice designs to CSS directories.
- If you are a startup, you could submit your idea to startup sites like Betali.st[40] and KillerStartups.com[41].
- Any kind of product or service with a nice landing page I would submit to producthunt.com[42], a booming product listing site.
- If you created an app, you could submit it to Appvita.com[43] or Cloudli.st[44].
- If you have some kind of certified skill, there might be a central site that lists people with your skill or qualification.
- If you have a software app that integrates with other apps, you can apply to be in their integration directory. This is often cited by software product owners as a great way to get in front of qualified buyers, and I also used this to get a handful of paying customers early on with Informly.

Usually, Googling will reveal a whole bunch of potential sites in any industry. You'd be amazed at the amount of traffic some of these sites get. If you can get some good traction, you will get a lot of visitors and maybe some email opt-ins or customers.

7 - Webinars

John Dumas started daily podcasting at entrepreneuronfire.com[45] in September 2012. I spoke with him in December after he'd recorded 115 episodes with entrepreneurs. At that stage he was getting 100,000 monthly downloads but he wasn't making much money. In the 18 month since then, John has made over 1.3

million dollars.

Most of his revenue comes by selling memberships to his online training community for podcasters called Podcasters Paradise. In his most recent monthly report (June 2014) he attributed $134,000 in revenue to membership sales, 86% of which came directly from webinars.

This is John's exact process:

- He built up a large audience. Obviously this took him some time but the same could be done quickly on a much smaller scale.
- He gives away freebies on his site like ebooks in return for an email address. After you enter your email address you are taken to a page that talks about a free webinar on podcasting.
- The webinars provide a lot of value and help people get started with podcasting. For people who are interested in more information he has a special deal for membership to the community.
- John routinely gets hundreds of people onto these weekly webinars and closes thousands in sales.

You can learn John's exact process at webinaronfire.com[46].

If you think a webinar could be the right fit for you and your audience, give it a go. Make sure you record it and the worst case is it ends up being a useful video to post on your site.

8 - Presenting

Organizing local, in-person events has been a winning strategy for all types of businesses for a long time; from local small businesses to global software companies like Hubspot, Constant Contact, and Salesforce.

Adam Franklin uses local workshops, meetups, and conferences to help attendees with their web marketing. In turn this helps position his web marketing

firm, BluewireMedia.com[47], as a leader. While other firms were obsessing over SEO tactics and Adwords, Adam and his team were putting on live events.

The events were profitable exercises on their own, but they also brought in countless leads and high-value clients to his business. On the feedback forms, some attendees would literally write “we want to engage your services” and become clients the next day.

It also elevated Adam’s authority level to a point where, in a few short years, he became a traditionally-published author of the book *Web Marketing That Works* and a well-known social media speaker.

Doing live, local events is a powerful form of content marketing. The only difference from other methods is it’s done in person, which helps strengthen ties and cement business relationships faster. Events can be daunting to host, because what happens if no one shows up? But they can pay off handsomely if you are game to try.

If this is a skill area for you, don’t hesitate to put on an event and use it as a way to generate leads.

9 - Doing Free Work

There are so many variations of doing free work, and I love them all!

Derek Murphy had been a book editor for a few years and he started doing book covers for his own books. He then offered them for free to other authors. In fact, Derek did this book’s cover design after he reached out and offered to do it for free.

He was able to get a bunch of testimonials and referrals from some high-profile indie publishing authors and bloggers as a result of the free covers.

He has designed book covers for hundreds of authors and is the recommended

provider of book covers for a number of other high-profile bloggers.

When Clint Mayer started out with his online marketing consultancy oracledigital.com.au[48] in 2010, he decided to do SEO video audits for free. He would either offer them to people who asked for advice or he'd do them cold and send them to people who were spending up big on Yellow Pages.

Those efforts produced a number of paid customers, including one who has paid $150k over that four-year period.

I love this strategy of marketing a business and I get behind it every time I see it in action. Towards the end of last year, someone handed me a loaf of bread in a parking lot. Seemed legit. They said it was from a bakery opening around the corner and I'd love it.

I did love it, and I posted it on Instagram and Facebook and anywhere else I could. Within weeks most of the people I knew from my local area knew about this bakery. It's now one of the most popular bakeries/cafes in the area.

Early on your main challenge will be getting people to use your product or service. If you can do that then you'll start learning a lot about what you need to do to perfect it. You'll also gather testimonials and referrals which will help drive future growth.

Note this is to help spread the word, it's not a validation exercise. Free users are not the same as paying customers.

10 - Media Coverage

Getting press attention for your company can be a huge bonus. If it's well targeted, it leads to direct customers. Perhaps a bigger benefit is the extra proof and credibility you get as a result.

WP Curve has been featured by WP Engine, ShoeString startups, LifeHacker,

Forbes, inc.com, and Fox News. My team got a lot out of those mentions including direct signups, logos for our homepage, a lot of social media activity, and attention from others in the industry.

I didn't have the money to pay a PR agency, so my team and I had to tackle it ourselves. Here are some of the things the team has done to get press coverage:

1. Pulled lists of relevant journalists to contact about running stories.
2. Chased our entrepreneurial friends, who had been featured and looked for intros to the journalist who covered them.
3. Paid attention to parts of our business that could be newsworthy and looked for stories. For example, I'd spent 12 months building a business that was losing money and then within 23 days had made WP Curve profitable. I pitched this idea to Startup Daily, who published an article about the story[49].
4. Dropped everything for opportunities to be featured in the media. When Clayton Morris mentioned to Alex that he could potentially chat to him about Wordpress, he jumped to action. Alex booked flights to New York, crammed a TV presenters' course in, bought a new jacket (for $700, mind you), and a week later he was on Fox TV[50].
5. Talked about ourselves a lot. It's uncomfortable at times, particularly when putting all of our revenue numbers up on our blog[51]. But this gets people talking and interesting stories emerge.
6. Sent some of our best articles to other websites, to help with those relationships.

I've stayed away from crazy marketing stunts, but no doubt that can be effective as well. In the end they are looking for a story—journalists don't want to feature you for the sake of it. Look for stories in everything you are doing and maintain good relationships with journalists and influencers.

This does take time, but if you can promote unique stories around your launch,

that tends to be a good time to be featured.

This chapter could have been 50 Ways to Market Your Business

This chapter was originally going to be “50 Ways to Market Your Business.” What I realized while writing, though, was that most of these methods were the same thing. Marketing is really just about getting your message out to qualified people as efficiently as possible. Connect your message with them as best you can.

You might do it by getting noticed through a unique service offering or a giveaway.

You might do it by paid advertising.

You might do it by throwing a party.

What matters is that you do it in the way that utilizes your unique strengths and gets you customers! For some people, that’s face to face networking; for others, it’s creating content. Test out a bunch of options and double down on what is working well. Look for sources of momentum and do more of what is working.

Day 5 Task *- Build a list of what marketing methods you are going to choose. Put together a rough plan for the first week or two of your launch. To make it easier, I’ve created a template for you to use at wpcurve.com/7daystartup.*

Day 6 - Set Targets

The point of launching a business quickly is that you can get real data from real customers. This will help you determine if the business is having an impact. But how do you know what a good result is?

In examples where companies really take off, you don't need to worry about this step. Companies like Buffer and Dropbox never had to worry about whether or not they were onto something; thousands of people were signing up. It was obvious!

Similarly, when companies are an outright flop, that tends to be obvious as well.

They are the one-percenters. Most companies fall in the middle, so it's important to have some sort of framework around whether or not your business is going well.

The way I like to think about this is to focus on the One Metric That Matters (OMTM) at different stages in your business.[52]

When you launch, it makes sense to focus on the number of people who sign up and pay you. Set a reasonable target that takes into consideration your reach and your marketing efforts and price point.

People have a tendency to set really aggressive targets in business and I've found those to be potentially de-motivating. Most businesses will naturally grow over time if the fundamentals are right. When you are starting out, you have a big hurdle to get over. Most people want a few runs on the board before they put their trust in a business. Shoot for a few customers early on and set a realistic monthly growth rate from there.

For WP Curve, I wanted to get ten customers in the first month or around $500 in MRR. From there I wanted to grow at 10% per month for at least the first six

months. This was bare minimum and thankfully WP Curve outpaced this significantly.

With any business I've started, my primary goal has been to get to a point where I'm paying myself a reasonable wage as early as possible. The figure I've always used is $40,000 per year. If I can get to the point where I'm paying myself a wage of $40,000, I know I have enough there to keep the business going. Eventually I have the faith that I'll continue to improve this number.

With WP Curve, I got ten customers in the first week. It broke even after 23 days and I hit my $40k annual estimated wage in about six months, as a result of exceeding 10% growth each month. After 13 months that amount was over $130,000.

The metric of choice has always been MRR. I've kept a spreadsheet from day one that translates this number into an estimated wage for each founder and reports monthly growth rates.

Every business is different and your OMTM may be different. Recurring businesses are easier to understand. Your OMTM is getting more people signing up than those leaving. On the other hand, product businesses or project based businesses are a bit trickier.

Here are some general principles around setting your OMTM target:

- Make it a financial metric, not a vanity metric like website visits or Facebook likes.
- Pay particular attention to who is signing up. If it's just your friends, then that's very different from the general public.

Save your excitement until you land people

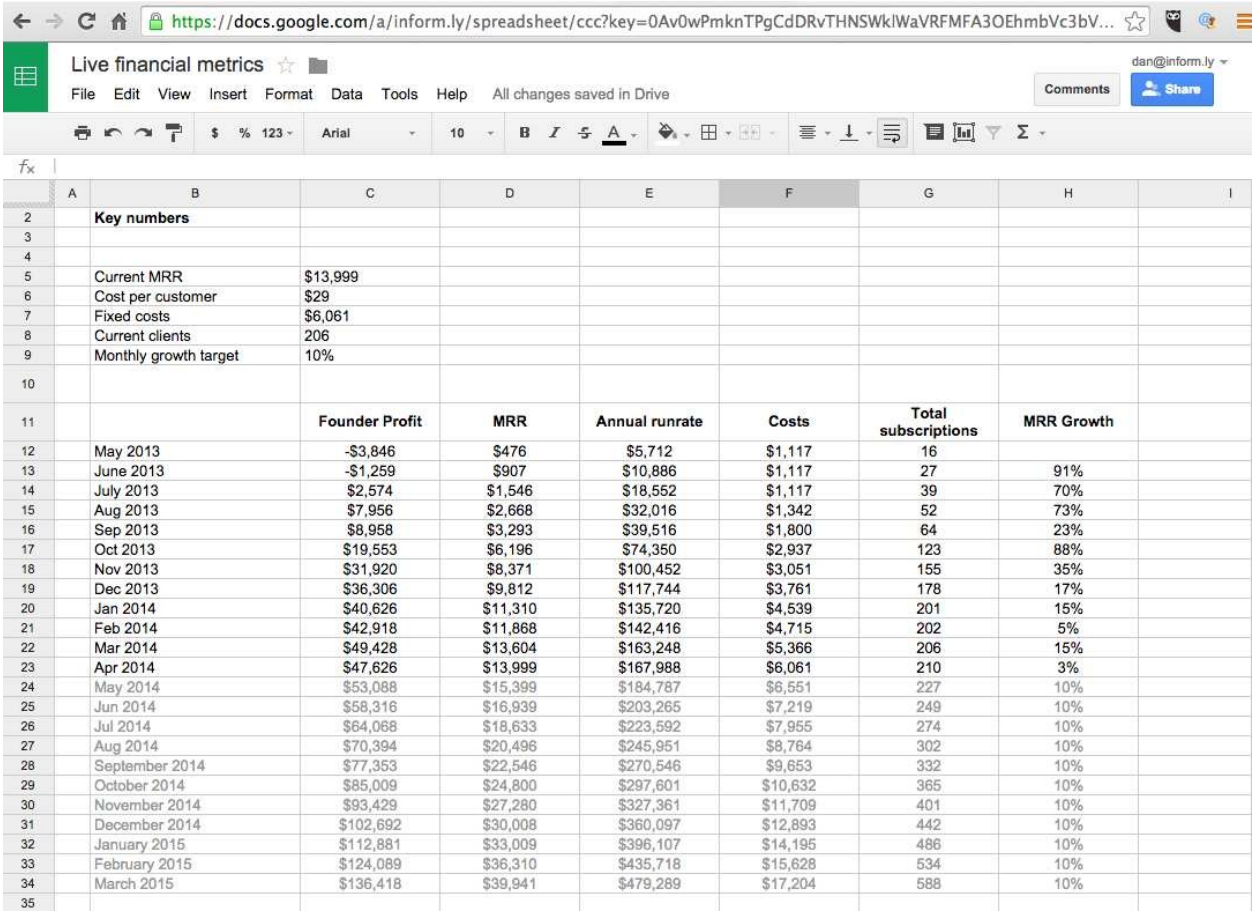
you don’t know as customers.

- Set a goal for the first month and re-visit it each month after that. My team uses a live Google doc for tracking financials. It requires manual updating, but it’s great for motivation and it allows you to have live estimates instead of relying on old data in accounting systems. There’s a free template at wpcurve.com/7daystartup.
- Don’t measure something that no longer represents an important metric for your business. The OMTM will change over time.

Below are two tables. First is a table providing you examples of what your OMTM could be at any given time. Next you will see an example of a live financial metrics spreadsheet for a typical business.

Stage	What to measure	How to measure it	What represents success
Problem/Idea Validation	Do people need this product?	Ask your current customers how disappointed they would be if you closed down the service.	If 40% say they would be disappointed or very disappointed, you are probably onto something.
MVP Launch	How many people have signed up for it?	Total signups in the first week or month.	It's up to you. I wanted to see at least ten monthly recurring customers within the first month.
Business Model Validation	Profit margin	The percentage profit you will make with the founders working in the business. The percentage profit you will make if you had to hire replacements for the founders.	Ideally there is enough profit margin for the business to hypothetically run and grow without the founders. Percentages will vary significantly based on a lot of factors. In my recurring services business, I aim for around 50%.
Growth	CPA and LTV	Use the CPA Calculator at wpcurve.com/7daystartup to work out how much customers cost to acquire. LTV: A simple Churn measure is the number of subscribers lost during the period divided by the total subscribers at the start of the period.	Ideally LTV should be a lot higher than CPA. It can take a while to get to that point.

OMTM gauge



Live financial metrics

	Key numbers						
	Current MRR	$13,999					
	Cost per customer	$29					
	Fixed costs	$6,061					
	Current clients	206					
	Monthly growth target	10%					
		Founder Profit	**MRR**	**Annual runrate**	**Costs**	**Total subscriptions**	**MRR Growth**
	May 2013	-$3,846	$476	$5,712	$1,117	16	
	June 2013	-$1,259	$907	$10,886	$1,117	27	91%
	July 2013	$2,574	$1,546	$18,552	$1,117	39	70%
	Aug 2013	$7,956	$2,668	$32,016	$1,342	52	73%
	Sep 2013	$8,958	$3,293	$39,516	$1,800	64	23%
	Oct 2013	$19,553	$6,196	$74,350	$2,937	123	88%
	Nov 2013	$31,920	$8,371	$100,452	$3,051	155	35%
	Dec 2013	$36,306	$9,812	$117,744	$3,761	178	17%
	Jan 2014	$40,626	$11,310	$135,720	$4,539	201	15%
	Feb 2014	$42,918	$11,868	$142,416	$4,715	202	5%
	Mar 2014	$49,428	$13,604	$163,248	$5,366	206	15%
	Apr 2014	$47,626	$13,999	$167,988	$6,061	210	3%
	May 2014	$53,088	$15,399	$184,787	$6,551	227	10%
	Jun 2014	$58,316	$16,939	$203,265	$7,219	249	10%
	Jul 2014	$64,068	$18,633	$223,592	$7,955	274	10%
	Aug 2014	$70,394	$20,496	$245,951	$8,764	302	10%
	September 2014	$77,353	$22,546	$270,546	$9,653	332	10%
	October 2014	$85,009	$24,800	$297,601	$10,632	365	10%
	November 2014	$93,429	$27,280	$327,361	$11,709	401	10%
	December 2014	$102,692	$30,008	$360,097	$12,893	442	10%
	January 2015	$112,881	$33,009	$396,107	$14,195	486	10%
	February 2015	$124,089	$36,310	$435,718	$15,628	534	10%
	March 2015	$136,418	$39,941	$479,289	$17,204	588	10%

Example of a live financial metrics spreadsheet

The truth is that running a business is never black and white. How do you know when you are onto something or when you should give up? This is one of the most common questions I get asked. Unfortunately I can never really answer. You need to use your own judgment to determine if you feel like you are onto something that will meet your expectations.

Focus on what your paying customers are saying and how many people continue to pay you, and you can't go too far wrong.

Day 6 Task *- Create a spreadsheet that covers the first few months in business, the number of signups, revenue, estimated costs, and monthly growth. You can use the template provided at wpcurve.com/7daystartup to get started.*

Day 7 - Launch

"If you are not embarrassed by the first version of your product, you've launched too late."

Reid Hoffman

Launch day is like every other day. It is an important day, because you enter into the period of real data collection and running a real business with paying customers.

But it's just a day.

Here is a short list of ideas to get you started:

- Put up your live website with the payment button. Include as many options as you can for people to contact you. You want to talk to customers and potential customers as much as possible from today onwards. Consider having live chat, email, physical address, phone number, and social media profiles. I have another business helloify.com, that is a great option for live chat software.
- Email anyone who is on your pre-launch list. Thank them for their interest and ask them to sign up if your offering is suitable for them.
- Post an update to social networks and any forums or groups that allow you to do so.
- If you are a member of any forums that allow you to have a signature that mentions your business, update those signatures with a specific call to action.
- Tell your friends and press contacts and ask them to share the news.
- Thank people who have helped you get to launch day.
- Continue with your influencer outreach. Launch day might be too soon to ask for a favor, but it doesn't hurt to mention it.
- Publish a post on your blog about the launch. Thank the people who have helped you, and include a call to action for people to purchase.
- Ask your entrepreneurial friends to share the news. If you help people out 90% of the time and only ask for help 10% of the time, the launch day is a

good day to ask for help.

- Go back over your marketing plan and start executing each of the items you wrote down. Podcast interviews are a good one to do on launch day; it gets you talking to people and keeps the buzz going. Start tracking which methods are working well for you.
- I'd love to know if you've launched a business using this method, so give me a shout out on social media @thedannorris or #7daystartup. I'll even help spread the word if I think my audience would be interested.

The most important thing is… don't stress! A launch will very rarely make or break a successful sustainable business, which is what you are trying to build.

Dan Andrews of Tropical MBA[53] has said that it takes 1,000 days to build a business.

Launch day is just 1 out of 1,000.

Day 7 Task *- Launch and start executing your marketing plan.*

Refine Your Business Model

"Growth is never by mere chance; it is the result of forces working together."

James Cash Penney

Great work; you've launched! The planning and launch are done. But the real work happens now. Now you have to hustle up real paying customers; you have to pay attention to whether they are paying, whether they are staying, and whether they are referring. And you have to listen to what they say, to work out if and how you are going to grow this business.

On top of that, you need to build the business into something that is fundamentally profitable or else it will never grow, so I want to spend a bit of time on that.

Creating a product and getting customers is great, but businesses will not survive and thrive without growing profits over time. Having a good idea and paying customers on launch day doesn't guarantee that will happen.

For you to achieve ongoing growth, you need a self-sufficient business model.

The reason this chapter comes *after* launch is because your business model will mostly be dictated by your customers. For example, we've started recurring businesses before, only to change them later because customers just wouldn't accept a recurring fee for that particular product. Once you figure these sorts of things out, you can work out a way to grow the business.

I don't want to talk down the importance of getting your first few customers, because that in itself is hard. You can't stop there. Some businesses are fundamentally unscalable and some are built with growth already in their DNA.

Building a Business That Couldn't Grow

I've mentioned that my previous agency was simply unable to grow profitably. You'd be surprised how many businesses are designed in this way. The model is fundamentally wrong, and makes them impossible to grow. The numbers just don't add up.

Let's think about what I would have had to do to grow my previous agency.

1. For starters, I would have had to get more leads. Since leads came through face-to-face meetings and content, that would mean hiring a salesperson and a content creator. Those two hires alone would have completely killed any profit there was in the business. This wasn't an option at any stage of the business; I simply couldn't afford to make the hire.
2. I could have increased the costs of my projects. That would have helped short-term profits. However, high-cost, low-quantity sales are difficult to scale. They would have turned the business into a higher-touch sales machine and I would have needed salespeople. I know other similar business owners who tried and failed as this is a huge risk. It was an extremely competitive field, too, so higher costs would have probably meant lower sales.
3. I wasn't capable of managing any more clients, so I would have had to hire staff to replace me. Clients had been trained to receive individual local service, so I would have needed a local client manager. I did this at one point and, of course, it killed my margins and was unsustainable.
4. I would have had to physically get through more work. The work was complex. We had writers, coders, designers, project managers, and SEOs. I myself did a lot of jobs including conversion optimization, copywriting, *etc.* Some of that can be done with affordable contractors; some can't. The work's complexity would require more project managers, which also would

have been difficult to do with affordable contractors. Again, it would mean more expensive local staff. All of these costs would have completely killed the profits.

The thing is, none of this occurred to me when I was quoting a website for $2,000. That seemed like a lot. And it was enough to get me to a certain point, but it was doomed to fail.

I tried everything you can think of, but I couldn’t grow the business profitably. When revenues went up so did the costs and stress, but profits remained stagnant.

In order to grow it, I had to scrap it and start over again.

Every decision you make about how you design your business and what work to take on will impact its ability to grow.

Build a Business With Growth in its DNA

I did a lot of soul searching after I sold that business. I knew I did a lot wrong, and I wanted to make sure I didn't make the same mistakes next time.

I also want to make sure you don't make the same mistakes, so I've come up with five criteria for building a business with growth in its DNA.

1. Profit Margin

It's easy to work out whether or not your business has profit margin, or to at least estimate it early on.

Imagine not being involved in your business at all—everything the customer experiences gets handled by a team of people or systems. How much does it cost you to keep that customer and how much revenue do they generate?

The actual, acceptable percentage will depend on a lot of things, but obviously you have to be making more than it's costing you to service each customer. For our services startup I decided a reasonable figure was double. That is: half of our revenue is costs, half is profit, so I'd have a 50% margin. If it costs $50 / month to service a customer, I would price the service at $100.

This is a very rough rule but I've found when you be truly honest about your real costs, most small businesses don't have a margin this high.

I solved this problem by cutting out 99% of what I offered and only offering a service that I knew affordable contractors could excel at it. This enabled me to have an acceptable margin in the business of around 50%.

For you, it could mean something different—perhaps just charging more. However I would warn you about falling into the trap of charging more. It's much like cutting costs, you can only do it till a point. I much prefer having a

reasonable margin and getting more customers at that price. If you are in a big market, that will be a never ending growth strategy.

2. Large Market

I'm not into niches. I want to make sure whatever I start could be a $1,000,000 business in a few years, ideally more. I hope you are the same.

If you want something that grows, it has to have something to grow *into*, and the last thing you want is to kill your momentum by hitting a ceiling. I've mentioned serving a large market previously, but since it's such a big growth inhibitor, it bears repeating here.

This is part of your business model as it's a decision about who you say "yes" or "no" to. Make sure there is enough potential in what you are doing to have a continually-growing business.

3. Asset Building

When I sold my business, I learned that project clients were worth very little. The website and the recurring clients were transferable assets. The historical revenue from project work wasn't worth much at all.

When you sign up additional customers, are you building an asset? What other assets are growing naturally as you work on your business? Assets help your business grow and make it worth something when you sell.

A business is like a house. You can never imagine yourself leaving, but you do. Every single time.

Any type of intellectual property is a great example, but not every business can have that.

What are you working on today that will

What are you working on today that will make you indestructible tomorrow?

4. Simple Business Model

Having a simple product and a simple value proposition makes everything else easier. From elevator pitches to growth tracking to hiring—the more complex a model, the harder it is to know when things are going well. If you can't measure it, you can't manage it.

A business with one basic product like Buffer or Dropbox is a growth machine. If you want a scalable business model, it's much better to work on one simple offering than thirty different ones. Keep this in mind as you focus your attention and don't get distracted. Follow the momentum.

5. Recurring or Predictable Revenue

Having a simple MRR model makes everything easier. There are other benefits like predictable revenue, simple metrics, simple goals, easy-to-see growth/growth sources, easy resourcing/scaling, and constant sources of motivation. A year in and I am still manually updating the MRR on a daily basis and giving my team members virtual high-fives.

Quite often, in a recurring monthly business, a bad month is just growing less than every other month. There isn't a huge roller coaster of good months and bad months like you have in other businesses. Increasing the amount of money you are going to make next month and every month after is a great feeling. A simple MRR model has an inherent growth trait. The equation is simple: Have more customers signing up than leaving, and you will grow.

Not every service suits a recurring model, so you could think about other ways

to build predictable revenue. Seriously consider offering a recurring aspect to your business if you think there's a chance you can make it work. It will often mean fewer customers, but if those customers are one-off sales that don't contribute to long term growth, then you might be better off without them. If your testing shows it can't work and you are leaving too much business on the table, then focus on making sure your revenue is predictable.

To help, I'll give you some examples of business models and how they fit the criteria.

Simple	Recurring	Best practice example
Yes	Yes	dropbox.com
Yes	Yes	wpcurve.com
It depends, but it is possible.	Yes	dollarshaveclub.com
Yes	Yes	tropicalmba.com/innercircle/

Criteria	Profit margin	Large market
SaaS (Software as a Service)	Yes, extremely high margins	Yes, except for niche SaaS
Service as a service	Yes, margins aren't as good as SaaS though	Yes, as long as you don't niche down
Recurring products	They can be more profitable than one-off products because of the higher LTV	Potentially yes; there are some huge markets available in physical products
Memberships	Difficult to scale; generally founder involvement is high	Generally not

Simple	Recurring	Best practice example
It depends, but it is possible	No	backtotheroots.com
Yes	They tend not to work too well as a recurring product	entrepreneuronfire.com/podcasterparadise
No	Some yes, some no. Not 100% recurring.	bluewiremedia.com.au
Can be productized but generally isn't	Sometimes	The main ones are large corporate consultancies which aren't really relevant here

Criteria	Profit margin	Large market
Physical goods	Possible but not easy; margins are an issue, shipping is a challenge	Yes
Info products	Good margins but often too reliant on the founder	Sometimes
Local agency	No	No
Consulting (project based)	Probably good but not scalable	Generally local in nature

Asset	Simple	Recurring	Best practice example
No	Can be, but freelancers are often expected to do a wide range of things	Generally not	Most successful freelancers go on to start product-based businesses
No	No	No	There are some obvious examples that have been able to scale, but most haven't
No	No	No	Franchises generally make good jobs but have little growth potential

Criteria	Profit margin	Large market
Freelancing (hourly)	Probably not great once you take into account the non-billable work	Possibly, although often price sensitive
Local restaurant	No	No
Franchisee	No	No

For those of you on eReaders, the more green, the better. Otherwise, keep track of the yeses. If you can choose a business model that is all yeses and greens, then that's great. If not, you might have to go with some red and yellow while you build up the green percentage. Basecamp.com[54] started as a project web agency before they had enough revenue to drop the one-off work.

A local restaurant might pay you a nice founder's wage, but it's difficult to grow. Information products might give you big bursts of revenue, but a few years down the track your business may not have progressed.

Build growth elements into the DNA of your business and optimize for ongoing profit growth and asset value. In a few years you will have something valuable instead of a job that just pays reasonably well.

14 Business Rules to Live By

"The only way to win is to learn faster than anyone else." **Eric Ries** Hopefully I've set you on a path to create an exciting and profitable startup. The first major hurdle is launching; then, getting your first customer; and then, proving the concept and generating a wage for yourself in a scalable way. What happens after all that?

Now it's time to run your business, and your decisions from here out will make or break it in the long term.

Most businesses don't survive, so what do you do to keep yours growing?

Despite a lot of failures, I've managed to stay in business for eight years. Here are some of the personal philosophies that helped me get there.

1. Test Every Assumption

You are better off launching quickly and paying attention to real data rather than making assumptions. This doesn't just apply to launching; it's a general business principle that you can apply for almost every decision.

Most of the assumptions you have prior to and after launching your business will be wrong.

- Before the iPhone, people assumed you needed a keyboard or a stylus on your phone. Five years on, the BlackBerry and styluses are all but extinct.
- In the '70s people assumed no one wanted a computer in their home. Now everyone has a computer in their pocket and some people wear them on their wrist or their face!
- In the early 2000's people were happy copying their data to USB sticks. Now they use Dropbox.
- In the 2000's, people assumed mass market electric sports cars were impossible. 10 years later Tesla brought out the mass produced electric Model S and won car of the year.

Your assumptions don't have to be as dramatic. The business world is changing rapidly, small things don't get tested.

If you have an open mind, you can easily test your assumptions and those assumptions made by others in your industry.

- Why does everyone in your industry do things a certain way?
- What do your customers really like about your service?
- Why aren't people buying your product?
- Why *are* they buying your product?
- Are people using your product?
- How are they using it?
- Why do they love it?

- What do they tell people when they refer you?
- Are certain parts of your product necessary?
- Do you need an office?
- Do you need a business card?
- Do you need a logo?

Similar to the examples above, there may be assumptions in your industry that have prevented people from doing certain things. There’s a very good chance they haven’t been tested recently. One small discovery might be enough to kickstart a whole new business or product.

2. Solve Problems as They Arise

A lot of business owners spend time solving problems they don't have. Rob Walling refers to this as premature optimization. Examples include:

1. Getting a flawless credit card payment process setup before they have customers.
2. Optimizing their website before they have traffic.
3. Hiring staff before they have work for them.
4. Investing in the best systems before they have enough work to warrant it.

Normally these decisions stem from believing that when you have a problem, you won't be able to resolve it quickly. Yet this assumption is often wrong. Many of these issues can be resolved quickly. Here are some examples from our own business:

1. WP Curve had 200 recurring customers for our WordPress support business before it had a help desk. We were using Google docs, Trello, and a shared email inbox. When the business outgrew that system, it moved to a help desk system in one day.
2. I launched with an MVP site that I built myself for $77. Once I had proven the business and had enough traffic to the site (20,000 visits per month), my team invested $1,000 in a professional design and it was live within a week.

These days you can solve most business problems quickly. There's no reason to spend any time on problems you don't have. Doing so will only cost you valuable time and money. It will take attention away from the work you *should* be doing.

There's a good chance that if you are a new business, you only have one problem: not enough customers. That's where you should be spending your time.

3. Do What You Say You Will Do

Being true to your word is a very important part of building trust in business. Whether you are offering services or selling a product, make sure you always deliver on what you promise.

You can do everything else right, but if you are the guy or girl that promises the world and doesn't deliver, your mistake will be uncovered in the end. Your reputation is everything and it will impact every business you start, not just this one.

It's far better to under-promise and over-deliver, or at the very least deliver exactly what you promise every time.

4. Benchmark Against the Best

Launching quickly is important early on when the conditions are uncertain. Once you have a clear path, however, quality is more important. For example, with WP Curve, the first website took me three hours to put together. When it was clear the team was going ahead with the business, I put up a new site, and made sure it was well designed and faster than anyone else in the industry.

Any time you feel yourself wondering if what you are doing is good enough, compare it to the best:

- Don't ask your friends to pick between three logos. Instead, compare them all to Apple. If it's nowhere near as good, try again.
- If you write a blog post, compare it to one on KISSmetrics.com[55]. If it's not as good, rewrite it.
- If you launch a website, compare it to bench.com[56] or simple.com[57]. If it's nowhere near as good, then you can do better.

It's often asking a lot for a small business to reach the levels of an established leader. You will be compared to leaders, and if you don't measure up, then people will notice.

By comparing yourself to the best, you set higher expectations for yourself, and you will be better for it.

5. Learn From Others and Yourself

Don’t debate every last issue internally until you are blue in the face. Whatever you are discussing can probably be solved by either looking at what other companies have done before you, or implementing a quick decision and learning from the real data.

The minutiae that you are debating could be distracting you from a fundamental problem that you aren’t seeing.

Always take a step back and ask yourself if it’s feasible that someone else may have solved this problem before.

6. Outlearn Your Competition

Eric Ries says this best:

> *"Startups exist not just to make stuff, make money, or even serve customers. They exist to learn how to build a sustainable business. This learning can be validated scientifically by running frequent experiments that allow entrepreneurs to test each element of their vision."*

The companies that learn the quickest, win. This is partly because they do no not make decisions based on assumptions and partly because they learn from their predecessors. While your competitors are debating which assumption is better than the other, you can build a competitive advantage by gathering real information from your customers.

Eric Ries calls it "Build, Measure, Learn."

Michael Masterson calls it "Ready Fire Aim."

I call it "Getting Shit Done."

7. Always Consider How Your Business Looks Without You

Don't believe that people should only work *on* their business and not *in* their business. It's crucially important that you do both.

However, you always need to be conscious of how your business will operate and grow without you. You'll naturally gravitate to things that you do well, but if your skills are hard to replace, you have to be careful.

An easy way to do that is to consider what happens when the business is, say, five times as big. WP Curve has rough estimates for:

- How many developers it will need (using an estimate of clients per developer).
- How many project managers it will need (using an estimate of clients per project manager).
- What payment fees, admin fees, and affiliate fees are per client.
- How much paid content creators will cost.
- How much a reasonable marketing expense is.
- How much a reasonable expense is for other items like conferences, video equipment, *etc.*

When putting all of this together, I can get some idea of the "real" margin in the business as it grows.

8. Look for Sources of Momentum

Do more of what is working. I've worked on over ten different business ideas and only one of them has really taken off. The best thing I've done is make sure my attention was focused on the one that had the momentum.

It would be easy for us to gloat in achieving what WP Curve has in the first year of business and think it's a result of the team's great work. The truth is: I have made big mistakes, just as regularly as I have with other failed businesses.

- I completely butchered our ideal client profile, spending months chasing the wrong kind of customer (most of them would later churn).
- The team spent four months selling to agencies for a grand total of a single $49 job, refuting one of the major assumptions I'd made launching the business in the first place.
- I had changed the pricing model regularly, only to change it back days later.
- I launched a bunch of new services, all of which failed and took away valuable time and attention from the core business.

Once momentum kicked in, these had little impact. In a job, this kind of incompetence would be grounds for dismissal and would cripple a lot of companies.

In fact, this past March WP Curve started the month by churning 22 of our paying customers for one failed product. This put the company at negative 6% growth on day one. Getting to 0% was going to be a struggle, not to mention hitting the 10% growth goal. However, by the end of March WP Curve had grown by 15%. Momentum got us there. People kept signing up.

Being part of a business that fails is tough. You feel like you are doing great work and you probably are. But no matter what you do, you can't win. You improve your product, up-skill yourself, talk to your customers, read books,

change pricing… you name it. Success eludes you.

On the other hand, when things are on a roll, no matter how many mistakes you make, things keep going in the right direction. You screw up a few jobs, miss a few deals, waste time on the wrong things, get distracted. Things still power on.

I've been in both positions in the last 12 months. From losing 90% of my savings on a startup plagued with chronic failure to a business that was profitable in 23 days and signed up over 400 monthly clients in the first year or so. Doing more or less the same things.

Momentum is a powerful force, so keep an eye out for what is working and do more of it.

9. Manage Motivation

Your own personal happiness and motivation are the most important keys to the success of your business. I know plenty of people who have created great businesses, taken them to a point, and then lost all motivation.

If you are struggling with motivation, join a forum, start a mastermind, find a co-founder, hire people to do the hard work, and get back to what you're good at.

Take the warning signs seriously.

You should be more excited about Monday than you are about Friday. If that's not the case, there's a good chance things aren't going to work out.

10. Cull Difficult Customers

Difficult customers will waste your time, kill your confidence, and destroy your motivation (and soul). No amount of money is worth working with a difficult customer.

Every difficult customer can be replaced by a better one, generally much quicker than you think. The work required to replace them is a far better use of your time than any work spent trying to help them.

My team prides themselves in sniffing out potentially difficult customers prior to sign-up and scaring them off. I also cheer when the team lets a bad customer go or they leave on their own accord. I want to work with good people, and my team values time and group sanity.

Normally it’s simply people being unreasonable. Customers with high expectations are great because they can push your business forward, but some people are unreasonable and you a better off without them.

11. Focus on Retention

The only thing that will kill a recurring business is that more customers leave than sign up. It's hard to get new customers, but it's easy for them to leave.

You need to do everything to keep your customers and the data you get from churning customers is priceless.

Make sure you are delivering constant value for your existing customers. If someone does leave, don't send them a long and detailed survey, send them this—it's a Jay Abraham trick.

> *Subject: Did we do something wrong?*
>
> *Body: Hey [first name]*
>
> *I noticed you cancelled your subscription, did we do something wrong?*

Most people will reply to this and you'll find out the real reason people are leaving.

Figure out why and deal with any issues that arise.

12. Avoid Short-Term Thinking

Building a startup takes time. Chasing short-term projects or launches is easy, but it doesn't build an asset. Launching a whole bunch of related services will boost short-term revenue, but it will add complexity to your business that will hurt you in the long term.

Patience isn't something that many entrepreneurs have, so you might have to work on this one.

I've found two things that help:

1. Use a simple spreadsheet that predicts growth 12 months in advance. Seeing those numbers can be motivating and act as a good reminder that it will be worth waiting around.
2. Have an "abundance go to" saying. The one I used to tell myself early on was: *"There are 70,000,000 WordPress websites. Surely there are 500 of them who will pay $69/month to make sure they don't have to worry about their site."* When you put it like that, it seems crazy to do anything other than continue focusing on building your business. This help with motivation, but it also is a reminder that you don't need to chase other shiny objects.

Think in the long term about what asset you are building as a result of actions you complete today. Getting carried away on short-term projects will kill any chance of momentum and hurt growth.

13. Focus on Product

Running a business can be daunting. Every expert has a different opinion on some “must have” technique or technology you need to be using. It’s hard to know where to spend your time, money, and attention.

If you are in doubt, come back to the product. Anything you can do that improves the product or improves the customer experience will be a sound investment.

If you are feeling overwhelmed with all of the things you need to do, just focus on how to make your product slightly better.

This is the best way to spend your time.

14. Love Your Work

If you don’t, the rest will fall apart.

It’s that simple.

Epilogue

Where to Go From Here?

I hope you've found this book a valuable tool for thinking about your startup. If you've had one idea while reading this book, or you've launched quicker than you would have, then I think it's been a success.

I hope you can avoid making the same mistakes I've made and launch an exciting and profitable startup the *first* time around.

I'm not talking about a business that has you "working for yourself." I'm talking about a business that serves as a vehicle for creation of something real and valuable.

Treat business advice with suspicion and test every assumption including your own. It's far more important to learn from your customers.

Understand growth and understand how your business looks without you, but don't be afraid to get your hands dirty.

Make difficult decisions early that lead to more growth and higher value later on. Look out for sources of momentum and keep doing what's working.

Listen to your customers and watch what they do.

Operate in a large market with a unique point of difference that responds to your customers' pain or pleasure points. It's a big world, and if you are smart about the way you structure your offering, there is unlimited room for growth.

Make a great product, do one thing well, and learn to say "no." It's your

business. Constantly improve your product above all else.

Move quicker and learn faster than your competition.

Create something new, create something valuable, and have fun.

More Resources

I've included a bunch of resources to help you out with your startup journey. Please visit wpcurve.com/7daystartup to download them all for free.

You can also leave a comment up there and I'll continue to improve those resources over time.

Do You Mind Helping?

I have put this book out there for free and ask for nothing in return. However, if you do feel like helping out, you can do so by sharing wpcurve.com/7daystartup with friends or on social media, or leave me an Amazon review at wpcurve.com/amazon.

I'd really appreciate if you were able to do that, but only do it if you feel the book has helped you out.

Best of luck with your startup journey. I'd love for you to stay in touch with me. The best ways to do so are:

- Jump on my weekly email list at wpcurve.com/subscribe. I read and reply to all of my emails.
- Friend or follow me on Facebook at wpcurve.com/facebook
- Follow me on Twitter at @thedannorris or go to wpcurve.com/twitter
- Give us a shout on twitter.com/hashtag/7daystartup

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