

APPAREL PRINT-ON-DEMAND GUIDE

Business Startup Guide and Workbook

A start guide for getting your own business off the ground

Veteran's Strategic Solutions LLC — Business Model Series

BEFORE YOU READ THIS

This guide works anywhere in the United States. Dollar figures are ranges, not quotes. Anything about licensing you check yourself, because it changes by state — this guide shows you where to look.

Wherever there is a blank line, write in your own answer. A guide you have not filled in is just reading material.

WHAT THIS BUSINESS ACTUALLY IS

You put your own artwork on shirts, hoodies, hats and mugs. You never touch inventory. A printing company holds the blank garments, prints your design when somebody orders, and ships it to the customer with your name on the package. You keep the difference between what they charge you and what the customer paid.

You are not in the printing business. You are in the design and audience business. The printing is a service you rent for approximately nine dollars a shirt.

What this is not: passive income. The printing is automated. Finding people who want your design is not, and that is the entire job.

THE BEST THING ABOUT THIS ONE

It costs almost nothing to find out whether it works for you.

No inventory. No equipment. No storefront. You can have three designs live and a sample shirt on your back for under fifty dollars. If it turns out not to be your thing, you are out a weekend and the price of a decent lunch.

Very few businesses let you test them that cheaply. Keep that in mind while you read the harder parts below.

HONEST GUT CHECK

- Can you make something people want to wear, or find somebody who can? Design is the product. Everything else is plumbing.
- Do you already have an audience, or a specific group you understand well? Selling to everyone sells to nobody.
- Are you willing to spend the first couple of months learning what sells rather than earning from it?

If the answer to the first two is no, that is not a character flaw — it means this particular business is not the one, and you found out for free.

WHAT THE ODDS ACTUALLY ARE

Approximately three out of four new businesses make it through their first year. About half are still running at five years. Roughly one in three make it to ten.

Two honest caveats. First, those numbers barely move by trade — federal data shows only a few points between the best and worst industries, so nobody can honestly tell you a shirt company does better than a bakery. Second, they count businesses with employees on a payroll, so a man working alone is largely not in them.

Print on demand specifically has more people starting and stopping than most business types. No government agency tracks print-on-demand stores as their own category, so there is no reliable published survival-rate figure to cite for this business specifically — treat any specific percentage you see quoted online with suspicion. What drives the churn is understood even without a precise number: the barrier to entry is nearly zero, so almost everyone tries it, and most of them try it for six weeks. Turnover is high because of who starts, not because of what the business is.

What separates the ones who last:

A cash cushion. Businesses do not usually fail because the idea was wrong. They fail because the money ran out three months before it started working. This business needs very little money, which is one reason to like it.

Charging enough. Underpricing is the most common fatal mistake here specifically, because the base cost is invisible until you do the math. Part 3 does the math for you.

Money that repeats. One design that sells for three years beats fifty that sell once.

Sticking with it past the quiet stretch. Most people fold right before it starts working.

The average is the average. It describes people who did nothing in particular to change their odds.

SNAPSHOT

Item	Detail
Money to start	\$0 to \$200
Storefront needed	No. No inventory either
Skill gate	Design, or finding a designer
License	Sales tax permit in most states — you are selling goods
Time to first sale	Two to eight weeks
Profit per shirt	\$6 to \$12

PART 1 — MAKING IT A REAL BUSINESS

Do these in order.

STEP 1. SOLE PROPRIETOR OR LLC

A sole proprietorship costs nothing and exists the moment you start selling. An LLC costs a state filing fee — \$35 in Montana up to \$500 in Massachusetts, approximately \$132 on average nationally — plus an annual fee ranging from nothing to \$800. Check licensing, zoning, and tax rules for your own city and state before starting.

Start as a sole proprietor. Form the LLC once money is actually coming in.

My state's filing fee: _____ My state's annual fee: _____

STEP 2. GET AN EIN &MDASH; IT IS FREE

Apply directly at irs.gov. Five minutes, no cost. Formation services charge \$50 to \$100 to fill in a form you can fill in yourself. Do not pay it.

STEP 3. GET A SALES TAX PERMIT

This step is different from a service business, and it catches people out. You are selling physical goods, and most states require you to register with the state before your first sale.

Your marketplace — Etsy, Amazon, Shopify — may collect and send the tax on your behalf, but registering is usually still your job. Search your state name plus “sales tax permit” and go to the state revenue department directly, not a third-party site. It is normally free or close to it.

My state's sales tax permit requirement: _____

STEP 4. OPEN A BUSINESS BANK ACCOUNT

Separate from your personal account, from day one, even as a sole proprietor. Every dollar in and out of the business goes through it and nothing else. This is the single thing that makes tax time survivable.

STEP 5. UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU OWE

Nobody is withholding taxes for you anymore. You pay self-employment tax of 15.3% on your net business income — that is Social Security and Medicare, the part an employer used to cover — plus income tax on top at your normal rate.

If you expect to owe \$1,000 or more in federal tax for the year, you pay quarterly. Due dates are April 15, June 15, September 15, and January 15 of the following year, moving to the next business day when one lands on a weekend or holiday.

The safe way to avoid penalties: pay 100% of what you owed in total last year, split into four payments. If your income last year was over \$150,000, make it 110%.

Set aside 25 to 30 percent of every payment the moment it arrives, in a separate savings account, and pay your quarterlies from there. This one habit prevents the most common way new businesses die — spending money that was never yours.

STEP 6. INSURANCE

Lower risk than a trade business, but if you sell a product you can be sued over a product. Get a general liability quote. If you ever pursue a military trademark license, proof of product liability insurance is required.

PART 2 — THE DESIGN RULE

If you did not make it, you need written permission to sell it.

That covers military insignia and unit patches, service logos and seals, sports teams, cartoon characters, song lyrics, movie quotes, and any photograph you found online.

This is not hypothetical litigation risk, and it does not fall only on big companies. In *Greg Young Publishing, Inc. v. Zazzle, Inc.* (C.D. Cal. 2017), a federal jury found the print-on-demand platform Zazzle directly liable for copyright infringement because its automated system printed and shipped copyrighted artwork that a third-party seller had uploaded — the court held that automating the printing did not shield the platform, and the same reasoning is what a court applies to the seller who uploaded the design in the first place. In *Y.Y.G.M. SA (Brandy Melville) v. Redbubble, Inc.* (9th Cir. 2021), the Ninth Circuit allowed a contributory trademark infringement claim to move forward against a print-on-demand marketplace over designs sellers had uploaded that used another company's brand. The lesson for you: “the platform did the printing, not me” has not held up as a defense for the platforms, and it holds up even less for the seller who picked the artwork.

Military marks are the specific trap for this audience, because unit shirts are the first idea almost everyone has. Every branch runs a trademark licensing office. Putting their marks on merchandise for sale requires a signed license agreement, approved artwork, and proof of product liability insurance — all before you sell anything. Being a veteran or a service member does not exempt you. Selling without it can get your merchandise seized or pulled from the marketplace.

If unit merchandise is genuinely your plan, there is a route. The Army runs a hobbyist-tier license for small, handmade, limited-distribution operations that do not meet the standard license's requirements (three years of manufacturing and distribution experience, an advance on royalties, and \$1 million/\$2 million product liability coverage). Other branches run their own programs through their own trademark or licensing offices. Contact the relevant branch's office and ask before you design anything. For the Army, that is the Army Trademark Licensing Program, reachable at usarmy.trademark-licensing@army.mil.

The simple answer: draw your own. Original designs cost nothing, nobody can take them away from you, and they are the only thing in this business you actually own.

PART 3 — THE NUMBERS PER SHIRT

Know these before you price anything.

Item	Approximate range
Base cost, standard printed tee	About \$7 to \$12 depending on platform and blank
All-in, including shipping and transaction fees	Roughly \$11 to \$15
Marketplace fees (Etsy)	Roughly 11 to 13 percent of the sale
Typical retail price	\$22 to \$27
Realistic net profit per shirt	\$6 to \$12
Target net margin	20 to 40 percent

Two things that quietly eat margin: larger sizes add \$2 to \$4, and a second print location on the back adds \$3 to \$5. Price those separately or you lose money on every 2XL you sell.

Paid advertising is where this business goes wrong fastest. If it costs \$10 in ads to sell a shirt that earns you \$9, you are paying for the privilege of working. Sell without ads until you know a design converts.

Note: Printful and Printify, two of the largest print-on-demand platforms, announced a merger in November 2024. Both brands say they will keep operating separately for now, but pricing, fees and product catalogs can shift as the companies integrate. Check current pricing on the platform itself before you commit.

PART 4 — PICKING A NICHE

This is not a local market check. Your competition is everyone with an internet connection, so the question is not who is in my town — it is who am I making this for.

STEP 1. PICK A GROUP YOU ACTUALLY BELONG TO

Your MOS. Your unit's alumni. Your hometown. Motorcycle riders. People who fish one particular lake. The narrower the better, because you need to know what makes them laugh and what they would be proud to wear in public.

STEP 2. SEARCH THAT GROUP'S PHRASE ON THE MARKETPLACE YOU PLAN TO USE

Type the phrase into the search bar and watch what the site suggests before you finish typing. Those autocomplete suggestions are real searches by real buyers. If the site suggests it, people are looking for it.

STEP 3. READ THE TOP LISTINGS &—; AND READ THEM PROPERLY

This is where most people get the wrong answer, so slow down here.

Count reviews, not favorites. Favorites mean somebody saved it. Reviews mean somebody paid. A listing with thousands of favorites and a handful of reviews is a listing people admire and do not buy.

Check when the reviews were left, not just how many. A shop with ten thousand reviews and five in the last month is a shop on the way down. A shop with sixty reviews and twenty in the last month is the one to study.

Go to pages two and three. Page one shows the winners, not the market. The gaps are further back.

Ask whether the demand is seasonal. Something that sells hard in November and dies in January is a six-week business, not a year-round one.

STEP 4. FIND THE GAP

Something the group says constantly that nobody has printed yet.

My niche: _____ Reviews on the top listing: _____ Reviews in the last month: _____

The test: if you cannot name the person who buys this in one sentence, you do not have a niche yet.

PART 5 — YOUR FIRST SALE

Do not open a store with sixty designs. Do this.

- Make three designs for one narrow group.
 - Order one for yourself. Wear it. You need to know the print quality before a stranger does.
 - Post it where that group already gathers. Not a sales pitch — wear it and let people ask.
 - When somebody asks where to get it, you have a customer.
 - When somebody buys, ask them to send a photo wearing it. That photo sells more than any advertisement you could buy.
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WHAT TO ACTUALLY SAY

Selling inside a group you belong to is different from selling to strangers, and getting it wrong can get you removed from the one place your customers live.

Read the group rules before you post anything. Most groups ban direct selling. Getting banned from your niche's main gathering place ends the business in a single afternoon.

Do not post a link cold. Members scroll past it and admins delete it.

Do post the thing itself. "Made this for the guys who did [the thing]. Wearing mine." That is a post, not an advertisement.

When somebody asks where to buy: "I've got a few, I'll send you the link." Answer in the thread or by message, never as a broadcast.

When somebody says the price is high: "Fair. It's a twelve dollar shirt from the printer before I make anything — I'm not doing volume." Being straight about your cost works better than a discount.

When nobody responds at all: that is information, not rejection. Either the design missed or the group was the wrong room. Change one and try again.

PART 6 — PRICING

Tier	What it looks like
Low	\$19 to \$21 — nets you \$4 to \$6. Volume play only
Mid	\$24 to \$27 — nets \$7 to \$10. Where most sellers should sit
Premium	\$35 to \$45 for niche or personalized items — nets \$18 or more

Recommendation: mid, and go premium wherever the design is personal. A generic funny shirt competes with a million others on price. A shirt carrying somebody's unit, their dates, their nickname does not — and it can earn considerably more for the same production cost.

Do not price below \$19. After base cost and marketplace fees there is nothing left, and a customer who bought at \$15 will not come back at \$25.

PART 7 — MONEY HELP FOR VETERANS

VR&E self-employment track, Chapter 31. You will see this advertised as VA funding for your business. Here is what it actually is: the regulation requires that your service-connected disabilities be severe enough that self-employment is the only reasonably feasible career path for you. It is not a track you simply choose. In 2021, 162 veterans were in it out of more than 80,000 veterans using VR&E overall. Apply for VR&E generally with VA Form 28-1900 and raise self-employment with your counselor, but do not build your plan around this money.

What is reliable and free to everyone:

- Small Business Development Centers (SBDC) — free business counseling, federally funded, in every state.
- SCORE — free mentoring from retired business owners.
- Veterans Business Outreach Centers (VBOC) — free, veteran-specific.

None of these cost anything or depend on a disability rating.

Honestly though — this business needs almost no capital. Your constraint is designs and an audience, and no grant fixes either one.

PART 8 — THE THREE PLACES PEOPLE GET STUCK, AND HOW TO GET PAST THEM

1. DESIGNING FOR EVERYBODY

The instinct is to make things with the widest possible appeal, because a bigger audience sounds like more sales. It works the other way round. A shirt aimed at everyone competes with a million identical shirts and gets found by nobody. A shirt aimed at forty people who were all in the same place at the same time has no competition at all, and those forty will buy it and show each other.

The fix: narrow it until it feels too narrow, then narrow it once more.

2. PAYING FOR ADVERTISING BEFORE YOU KNOW WHAT SELLS

This costs real money and it feels like the responsible thing to do. But the math is unforgiving — if it costs \$10 in advertising to sell a shirt that earns you \$9, you are working for free and paying for the privilege. That is not a sign the business is broken. It is a sign the sequence was wrong.

The fix: sell without ads until one design proves it converts. Then put money behind that one, and only that one.

3. MAKING DESIGNS INSTEAD OF SELLING THEM

Almost everyone does this. Making a new design is enjoyable, costs nothing and feels like progress. Putting yourself in front of people and asking them to buy is uncomfortable. So the store fills up with sixty designs and nobody has been told about a single one.

You already know how to do uncomfortable things on a schedule. This is that same skill pointed somewhere new.

The fix: three designs, then stop making and start selling. You can always make more once something moves.

None of these are reasons not to start. They are the three potholes in the road, and every one of them is avoidable if you know it is coming.

PART 9 — YOUR FIRST 90 DAYS

Days	What you do
1 to 14	Pick one narrow group. Research what already sells to them using Part 4. Spend nothing.
15 to 30	Make three designs. Order samples. Wear them.
31 to 45	Sales tax permit, EIN, business bank account.
46 to 60	Get your first sale without paying for advertising.
61 to 75	Ask buyers for photos and post those. Add two more designs in the same niche.
76 to 90	Find which single design sold most and make five variations of it.

THE ONE NUMBER TO TRACK

For the first 90 days: how many people in your niche have actually seen the design.

Not sales. Sales will be zero or close to it early on, and a number that reads zero for two months tells you nothing except how to feel bad. Views and eyes are within your control from day one — sales are downstream of them.

Track it honestly. Posts made, groups reached, people who saw you wearing it. If a hundred of the right people have seen it and nobody bought, that is a design problem and you have learned something real. If eleven people have seen it, you do not have a design problem — you have a distribution problem, and that one is easier to fix.

After the first sale, switch to: sales per design. Most sellers watch total revenue and never notice that one design out of thirty is carrying the whole shop. Find that one and make more like it.

Week 4 — people reached: _____ Week 8: _____ Week 12: _____

This guide is a starting framework, not legal, tax or financial advice. Licensing, insurance and tax requirements vary by state, county and city and change over time. Verify every regulatory item with the relevant authority before you operate. Tax figures reflect federal rules current as of August 2026. Dollar amounts are estimates, not quotes, and print-on-demand platform pricing changes frequently — confirm current costs on the platform before setting your prices.

STARTUP CHECKLIST

Use this checklist to turn the guide into a sequence of actions for your own market and circumstances.

Done	Startup action	Owner	Target date
☐	Choose the business structure you will use.		
☐	Get an EIN and open a separate business bank account.		
☐	Check licensing, zoning, and tax rules for your own city and state before starting.		
☐	Confirm insurance needs before your first sale.		
☐	Complete the niche research in Part 4 — this is nationwide competition, not a local market test.		
☐	Build the startup budget and record actual costs.		
☐	Set pricing using your own costs and required margin.		
☐	Prepare your shop policies (returns, exchanges, production time) and an invoice template for direct or bulk orders.		
☐	Launch outreach and record every lead and result.		

EQUIPMENT AND BUDGET WORKSHEET

List only the tools, equipment, supplies, software and services required for the version of the business you plan to launch. Typical line items for this business: sample garments, a design or mockup software subscription, a logo or brand kit, a shop or domain setup fee, and packaging inserts — not raw materials or production equipment, since the print-on-demand platform holds the inventory and does the manufacturing.

Item	Required or optional	Estimated cost	Actual cost	Supplier or source

Budget summary	Amount
Startup total	
Monthly fixed costs	
Working cash reserve	
Total funding needed	

PER-DESIGN PRICING WORKSHEET

Fill in your own numbers for each design using the ranges in Part 3 and Part 6. Recalculate whenever a platform changes its pricing.

Pricing field	Detail or calculation	Amount
Design or SKU name		
Blank garment + print cost	Base cost from the platform	
Add-ons (size, second print location, upgraded garment)		
Shipping cost (if not bundled)		
Marketplace or platform fee	Percent of sale price	
Payment processing fee		
Total cost to fulfill one unit	Sum of the above	
Target net margin	20 to 40 percent, from Part 3	
Recommended retail price		
Profit per unit at that price		
Break-even units before any paid promotion		

INVOICE TEMPLATE

Use this for direct, bulk, or custom orders you take outside your marketplace checkout — a unit order, a personalized batch, or a wholesale request.

Business information	Customer information
Business name: Address: Phone: Email: Tax ID:	Customer name: Company: Billing address: Phone: Email:

Invoice number	Invoice date	Due date	Order or design name

Description	Quantity	Rate	Amount

Subtotal	
Tax	
Payments or deposits	
Balance due	

Payment method and terms: _____

DESIGN AND SALES TRACKER

Record this for every design so you can see which one is actually carrying the shop — Part 9 shows why sales-per-design matters more than total revenue.

Design / niche	Platform	Launch date	People reached	Units sold	Revenue	Reviews

Period	People reached	Designs live	Units sold	Revenue	Best-performing design

COMPLIANCE AND SAFETY PAGE

Check licensing, zoning, and tax rules for your own city and state before starting.

Review	Requirement or safety point from the core guide
[]	A sole proprietorship costs nothing and exists the moment you start selling. An LLC costs a state filing fee — \$35 in Montana up to \$500 in Massachusetts, approximately \$132 on average nationally — plus an annual fee ranging from nothing to \$800. Check licensing, zoning, and tax rules for your own city and state before starting.
[]	Your marketplace — Etsy, Amazon, Shopify — may collect and send the tax on your behalf, but registering is usually still your job. Search your state name plus “sales tax permit” and go to the state revenue department directly, not a third-party site. It is normally free or close to it.
[]	My state's sales tax permit requirement: _____
[]	Separate from your personal account, from day one, even as a sole proprietor. Every dollar in and out of the business goes through it and nothing else. This is the single thing that makes tax time survivable.
[]	Nobody is withholding taxes for you anymore. You pay self-employment tax of 15.3% on your net business income — that is Social Security and Medicare, the part an employer used to cover — plus income tax on top at your normal rate.
[]	If you expect to owe \$1,000 or more in federal tax for the year, you pay quarterly. Due dates are April 15, June 15, September 15, and January 15 of the following year, moving to the next business day when one lands on a weekend or holiday.
[]	Lower risk than a trade business, but if you sell a product you can be sued over a product. Get a general liability quote. If you ever pursue a military trademark license, proof of product liability insurance is required.
[]	Military marks are the specific trap for this audience, because unit shirts are the first idea almost everyone has. Every branch runs a trademark licensing office. Putting their marks on merchandise for sale requires a signed license agreement, approved artwork, and proof of product liability insurance — all before you sell anything. Being a veteran or a service member does not exempt you. Selling without it can get your merchandise seized or pulled from the marketplace.
[]	If unit merchandise is genuinely your plan, there is a route. The Army runs a hobbyist-tier license for small operations, and other branches have their own programs. Contact the relevant branch's trademark licensing office and ask before you design anything. For the Army, that is the Army Trademark Licensing Program, reachable at usarmy.trademark-licensing@army.mil .
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Review	Requirement or safety point from the core guide
[]	Agency or authority contacted: _____
[]	Written confirmation or permit saved at: _____
[]	Review date: _____ Renewal or recheck date: _____

LAUNCH READINESS

Apparel Print-on-Demand Guide

PLAN	SET UP	PRICE	SELL	TRACK
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Use the worksheets in this guide to record your own numbers, decisions and results.

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