

VSG

BUSINESS GUIDES
REAL IDEAS. REAL STEPS. REAL RESULTS

2026 EDITION

UPDATED
TOOLS
TEMPLATES
CHECKLISTS
PROFIT CALCULATORS

HOT DOG CART & MOBILE FOOD BUSINESS

STARTUP GUIDE

STEP-BY-STEP. PROFITABLE. REAL-WORLD STRATEGIES.



START
LEGALLY



SOURCE
SUPPLIES



PRICE
FOR PROFIT



FIND
THE BEST
LOCATIONS



ATTRACT
CUSTOMERS



SCALE
YOUR BUSINESS

*Turn a Classic
Into a Profitable
Business*



GOOD FOOD
BRIGHTER DAYS

HOT DOGS

All Beef Dog	\$4
Cheese Dog	\$5
Chili Dog	\$5
Special Dog	\$6

Cold Drinks	\$2
Chips	\$2
Pretzels	\$3



TEMPLATES
INCLUDED



PROFIT
CALCULATORS



CHECKLISTS



LOCATION
STRATEGIES

PREMIUM GUIDE

Before You Begin

A mobile food business is not just a cart and a menu. It is a regulated operating system built around a narrow offer, safe food handling, controlled inventory, fast service, and venue economics.

NATIONWIDE RULE

Food licensing, plan review, fire inspection, sales tax, commissary requirements, and mobile-unit rules vary by jurisdiction. The FDA Food Code is a model; your state and local regulatory authority decides the rule that applies to your operation.

What this guide helps you build

- ☐ A lean menu that fits the equipment and the service window.
- ☐ A licensing and plan-review checklist before equipment purchases.
- ☐ Food-safety controls for hot holding, cold holding, cooling, date marking, and cleaning.
- ☐ An inventory, pack-out, pricing, and waste-control system.
- ☐ A venue strategy for markets, fairs, private events, and recurring locations.
- ☐ Reusable worksheets, checklists, and operating logs.

Guide map

1. Choose the Business Model
2. Validate the Concept
3. Build a Menu That Fits the Cart
4. Licensing, Plan Review, and Food Safety
5. Cart, Trailer, or Truck?
6. Equipment and Startup Budget
7. Inventory and Purchasing
8. Temperature Control and TCS Foods
9. Pricing, Food Cost, and Contribution
10. Prep, Pack-Out, and Service Windows
11. Waste, Leftovers, and Closeout
12. Locations, Events, and Venue Economics
13. Customer Flow and Service Speed
14. Marketing and Repeat Business
15. Your First 90 Days
16. Workbook and Operating Templates
17. Sources & Annual Verification Checklist

CHAPTER 1

Choose the Business Model

Start with the smallest format that can legally and safely produce the menu you want to sell.

- Hot dog cart: lowest complexity when the menu is very narrow and local rules permit the design.
- Food trailer: more equipment, storage, prep flexibility, and event capacity without the engine cost of a truck.
- Food truck: highest mobility and self-contained capacity, but usually the highest acquisition and maintenance burden.
- Event-only startup: useful for testing a concept before committing to a daily route.

BEST FIRST QUESTION

What is the smallest approved unit that can serve your actual menu at the speed your target venue requires? Answer that before shopping for equipment.

CHAPTER 2

Validate the Concept

Food vending demand can be real while your specific menu still fails. Test the offer, not the category.



A mobile-food concept should be tested where real customers gather before major equipment purchases.

Zero- or low-cost concept test

- ☐ List the active mobile-food concepts already serving your target area.
- ☐ Identify a real gap: service time, cuisine, price point, event type, or customer segment.
- ☐ Test at one permitted event, pop-up, or hosted function before committing to a full schedule.
- ☐ Track units sold by item, average ticket, service time, sell-outs, waste, and customer requests.
- ☐ Ask whether the concept still works after venue fee, food cost, labor, fuel/propane, card fees, and taxes.

Demand notes

Target customer: _____

Best daypart: _____

Best venue type: _____

Closest substitute: _____

Why this offer is different: _____

Evidence from a real event: _____

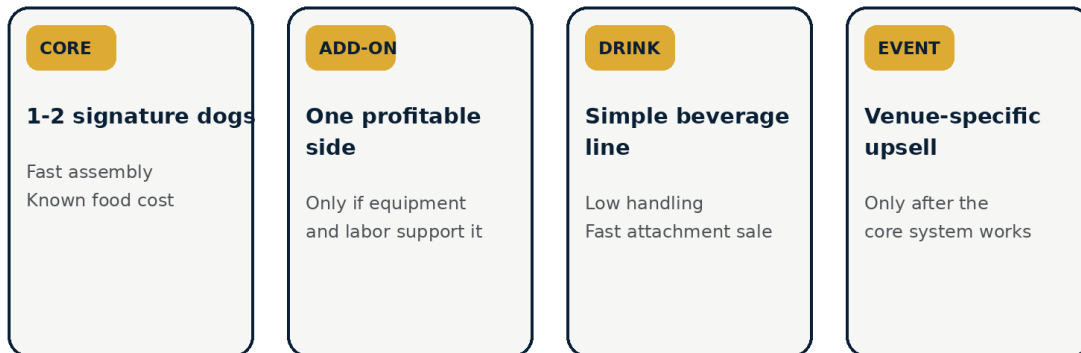
CHAPTER 3

Build a Menu That Fits the Cart

The menu drives refrigeration, hot holding, prep, staffing, speed, inventory, fire protection, and plan-review complexity.

BUILD A MENU THAT FITS THE CART

Narrow menus reduce equipment, inventory, holding and service complexity.



Rule: every menu item must earn its equipment, storage space, prep time and service complexity.

- ☐ Start with one or two signature products that share ingredients.
- ☐ Add sides only when they earn their equipment and prep burden.
- ☐ Avoid ingredients that add a new refrigeration or cooking requirement without enough sales value.
- ☐ Use venue-specific pricing or add-ons rather than rebuilding the whole menu for every event.

CHAPTER 4

Licensing, Plan Review, and Food Safety

Do not buy the cart first and ask the regulator later. Menu, equipment, plumbing, water, warewashing, refrigeration, hot holding, and commissary needs can be decided during plan review.

- ☐ Form/register the business and obtain any state/local business registrations required.
- ☐ Get an EIN from the IRS when needed; the IRS issues EINs directly for free.
- ☐ Identify the regulatory authority for mobile food in every jurisdiction where you plan to operate.
- ☐ Ask whether plan review is required before build-out or purchase.
- ☐ Confirm food-establishment permit, mobile-unit permit, commissary/servicing-area rules, and event-specific permits.
- ☐ Confirm fire/propane inspection requirements and sales-tax registration.
- ☐ Confirm whether the Person in Charge must be a Certified Food Protection Manager under the adopted local code.

FDA MODEL CODE

The 2022 FDA Food Code says the Person in Charge should be a Certified Food Protection Manager, with a minimal-risk exception determined by the regulatory authority. States and localities may adopt or modify the model differently.

CHAPTER 5

Cart, Trailer, or Truck?

Choose by approved menu, event capacity, towing/parking reality, and total lifecycle cost - not by appearance.

Format	Strength	Constraint	Good fit
Cart	Lean, fast, low footprint	Very limited equipment/storage	Narrow hot-dog/snack menu
Trailer	More kitchen for less engine cost	Needs tow vehicle and setup	Events + recurring service
Truck	Self-propelled and visible	High purchase/maintenance cost	Frequent routes + full mobile kitchen

PURCHASE GATE

Do not buy a used unit until the regulator has reviewed whether its sinks, surfaces, water, refrigeration, ventilation/fire systems, and equipment match the menu and jurisdiction.

CHAPTER 6

Equipment and Startup Budget

Buy the minimum approved system for the menu, plus enough backup capacity to survive an event.

Cart / trailer / truck: \$ _____

Cooking equipment: \$ _____

Hot holding: \$ _____

Cold holding / refrigeration: \$ _____

Handwashing: \$ _____

Warewashing / utensil system: \$ _____

Fresh water / wastewater: \$ _____

Fire / propane safety: \$ _____

Generator / shore power: \$ _____

Smallwares: \$ _____

POS / payment: \$ _____

Signage / menu board: \$ _____

Opening inventory: \$ _____

Permits / training: \$ _____

Insurance: \$ _____

Working capital: \$ _____

WORKING-CAPITAL RULE

Keep cash for inventory, event deposits, propane/fuel, ice, maintenance, and slow early weeks. Equipment alone is not the startup budget.

CHAPTER 7

Inventory and Purchasing

Inventory is where margin quietly disappears through overbuying, stale product, spoilage, and forgotten consumables.

Core inventory groups

- Protein and refrigerated ingredients
- Buns and shelf-stable condiments
- Beverages and ice

- Packaging and serviceware
- Cleaning/sanitizing supplies and test strips
- Thermometers and PPE
- Fuel/propane and other operating consumables

Order worksheet

Item: _____

Par level: _____

On hand: _____

Order quantity: _____

Vendor: _____

Case price: _____

Cost per serving: _____

INVOICE DISCIPLINE

Buy from approved sources and keep invoices/receipts organized. The source document correctly emphasizes that documented purchasing makes traceability and inspection conversations easier.

CHAPTER 8

Temperature Control and TCS Foods

Your menu must be built around the food-safety controls your jurisdiction requires.

FOOD-SAFETY TEMPERATURE CONTROL

FDA Food Code model values; always follow the rule adopted by your regulatory authority.

COLD HOLDING

41°F OR BELOW

Use calibrated thermometers.
Keep TCS food out of the danger zone.

HOT HOLDING

135°F OR ABOVE

Monitor during service.
Reheat/cool only under approved procedures.

Ready-to-eat TCS food held over 24 hours is generally date-marked for a maximum of 7 days at 41°F or below under the f

☐ Use calibrated thermometers and log temperatures during service.

- ☐ Under the FDA model code, cold-held TCS food is maintained at 41°F or below and hot-held TCS food at 135°F or above.
- ☐ Ready-to-eat TCS food held longer than 24 hours is generally date-marked for a maximum of seven days at 41°F or below under the FDA model code.
- ☐ Cooling and reheating procedures must follow the rule adopted by your regulatory authority.
- ☐ The regulator may require a commissary or servicing area based on the menu, operation, and onboard equipment.

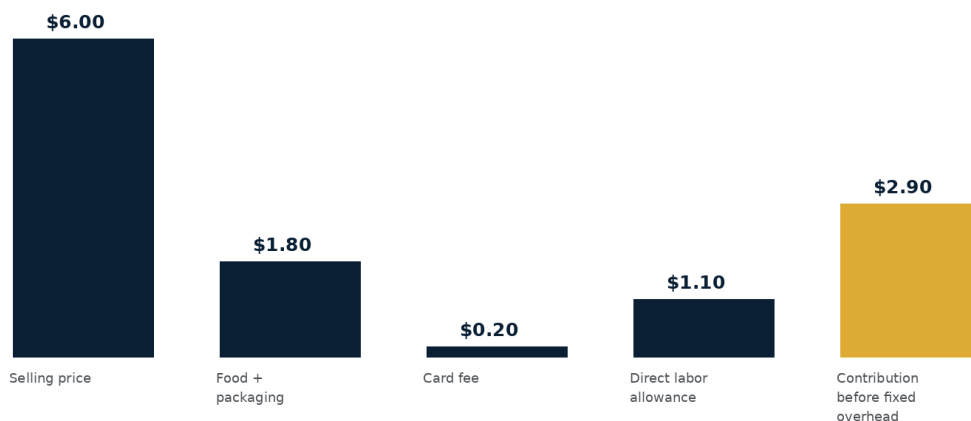
CHAPTER 9

Pricing, Food Cost, and Contribution

A busy cart can still lose money. Price from cost and venue economics, then test the market.

ILLUSTRATIVE \$6.00 MENU ITEM

Example math only - replace every number with actual ingredient, packaging, labor and overhead costs.



Track by menu item

Selling price: \$ _____

Ingredient cost: \$ _____

Packaging: \$ _____

Card fee: \$ _____

Direct labor allowance: \$ _____

Venue fee allocation: \$ _____

Contribution before fixed overhead: \$ _____

ILLUSTRATIVE CHART

The pricing graphic is sample math, not a market price. Build your own cost per serving from

current case prices and actual portion size.

CHAPTER 10

Prep, Pack-Out, and Service Windows

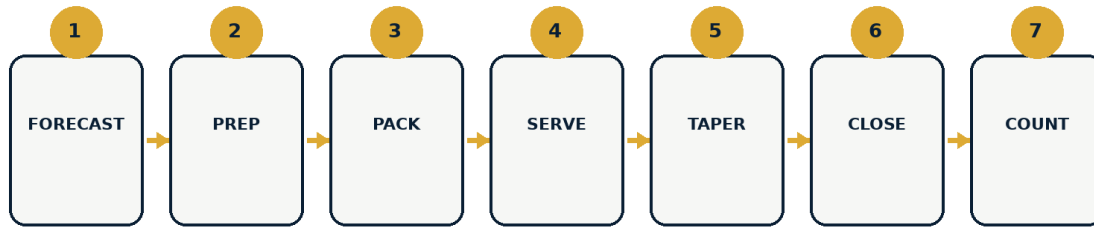
Load to the window. A three-hour evening and an eight-hour festival should not carry the same par.



A clean, organized line improves speed, temperature control, portion consistency, and inspection readiness.

THE SERVICE-WINDOW OPERATING CYCLE

Prep to the window. Do not load the cart the same way for every event.



Short window: load light. Long window: increase backup stock and ice. Close: count waste before restock.

- ☐ Forecast by venue, daypart, weather, prior sales, and event attendance quality.
- ☐ Pack core consumables every time: gloves, sanitizer/test strips, thermometers, napkins, trash bags, paper towels, and backup payment supplies.
- ☐ Use backup stock that is easy to add during service without cluttering the line.
- ☐ Taper cooking before close so held food does not become automatic waste.

CHAPTER 11

Waste, Leftovers, and Closeout

Waste is not just food thrown away. It includes open packaging, excess prep, stale buns, overfilled condiment bottles, fryer oil, spilled drinks, and stock that loses quality before the next service.



Closeout is where tomorrow's profit is protected: count inventory, control leftovers, clean, record, and reset.

Closeout sequence

- ☐ Stop loading the hot-holding system early enough to run inventory down safely.
- ☐ Count leftover sellable food before cleaning starts.
- ☐ Cool/reheat only under approved procedures and equipment.
- ☐ Date-mark retained ready-to-eat TCS foods when required.
- ☐ Filter/store/dispose of cooking oil through an approved method; never send it into the wastewater system.
- ☐ Record waste by item and reason.
- ☐ Restock from actual counts, not memory.

Waste log

Item: _____

Quantity: _____

Reason: _____

Dollar cost: _____

Process change: _____

CHAPTER 12

Locations, Events, and Venue Economics

The best location is not the busiest location. It is the location where enough of the right customers buy fast enough to cover the full cost of being there.

Event decision sheet

Venue / event: _____

Date / hours: _____

Expected attendance: _____

Vendor fee: _____

Revenue share: _____

Power included?: _____

Water / wastewater plan: _____

Fire/health permit needs: _____

Travel / lodging: _____

Expected average ticket: _____

Break-even sales: _____

Weather backup: _____

VENUE RULE

Compare net contribution, not gross sales. A large festival can produce more revenue and less profit than a smaller recurring site.

CHAPTER 13

Customer Flow and Service Speed

Speed protects revenue when the line is longest.

- ☐ Put the best-selling choices first on the menu.
- ☐ Design toppings and packaging for one-direction assembly.
- ☐ Separate order/payment from final handoff when volume justifies it.
- ☐ Keep change-making and card/POS steps simple.
- ☐ Pre-portion where food-safety rules and quality allow.
- ☐ Measure tickets served per 15 minutes during peak periods.

Peak-service worksheet

Orders in 15 min: _____

Average ticket: _____

Longest ticket time: _____

Bottleneck: _____

Fix for next event: _____

CHAPTER 14

Marketing and Repeat Business

Mobile food marketing works when customers know where you will be and buyers know how to book you.

- ☐ Post the weekly schedule consistently.
- ☐ Use clear photos of the actual food and unit.
- ☐ Build relationships with event planners, employers, apartment communities, breweries, schools where permitted, and private-event buyers.
- ☐ Collect reviews after smooth service windows.
- ☐ Create an event/catering inquiry form with date, location, attendance, power, service window, and menu needs.
- ☐ Keep customer-facing branding consistent from menu board to social pages.

CHAPTER 15

Your First 90 Days

The objective is to prove one profitable menu and one repeatable service pattern.

Days 1-30: Approvals and concept

- ☐ Choose the narrow menu and preferred unit format.
- ☐ Contact the regulatory authority before purchasing/building.
- ☐ Map licenses, plan review, tax, fire, training, commissary, and event requirements.
- ☐ Cost every menu item from real case prices.

Days 31-60: Build the operating system

- ☐ Complete approved equipment setup.
- ☐ Create inventory pars, temperature logs, cleaning list, pack-out sheet, and event quote sheet.
- ☐ Run a controlled test service or permitted event.
- ☐ Measure service speed, food cost, waste, and customer response.

Days 61-90: Prove repeatability

- ☐ Book repeat venues or events.
- ☐ Refine the menu using contribution and speed data.
- ☐ Set venue-specific pars and pricing rules.
- ☐ Decide what equipment or menu expansion is justified by proven demand.

CHAPTER 16

Workbook and Operating Templates

White space on these pages is intentional.

Menu engineering worksheet

Item: _____

Selling price: _____

Food cost: _____

Packaging cost: _____

Prep time: _____

Service time: _____

Gross contribution: _____

Keep / change / drop: _____

Pre-opening checklist

- ☐ Permits posted / available
- ☐ PIC / required certification confirmed
- ☐ Handwash setup ready
- ☐ Sanitizer + test strips ready
- ☐ Thermometers calibrated
- ☐ Cold holding at safe temperature
- ☐ Hot-holding equipment ready
- ☐ Fresh water full
- ☐ Wastewater capacity ready
- ☐ Propane/power secure
- ☐ POS connected
- ☐ Opening inventory counted
- ☐ Menu/prices displayed

CHAPTER 16

Workbook - Daily Service Sheet

FIELD	ENTRY
Date / venue	_____
Service window	_____
Weather / event notes	_____
Opening cash/POS check	_____
Opening cold temp	_____
Opening hot-holding temp	_____
Hot dogs loaded	_____
Buns loaded	_____
Chili/cheese/toppings loaded	_____
Drinks/water loaded	_____
Peak 15-min sales	_____
Total tickets	_____
Gross sales	_____
Card fees	_____
Food used	_____
Waste	_____
Closing temp checks	_____
Cleaning complete	_____
Wastewater/oil disposal complete	_____
Notes for next window	_____

CHAPTER 17

Sources & Annual Verification Checklist

Recheck every rule, fee, training requirement, and equipment standard before operating in a new jurisdiction or changing the menu.

Primary sources reviewed

- Internal source: VSG_MODEL_Hot_Dog_Inventory_Master_2026-08-30_v1.docx.
- Internal source: Food_Truck_Business_Model.docx.
- U.S. Food and Drug Administration - 2022 FDA Food Code and current Food Code resources.
- U.S. Food and Drug Administration - Food Establishment Plan Review Guide and Mobile Food Establishment guidance.
- Internal Revenue Service - Get an Employer Identification Number.
- U.S. Small Business Administration - Launch Your Business / licenses and permits guidance.

Annual verification checklist

- ☐ State/local food-establishment and mobile-vending permits
- ☐ Plan-review and equipment requirements
- ☐ Commissary / servicing-area requirements
- ☐ Certified Food Protection Manager / food-handler training requirements
- ☐ Fire, propane, hood/suppression, and extinguisher rules
- ☐ Sales-tax registration and menu-tax treatment
- ☐ Water, wastewater, warewashing, handwashing, and waste-oil rules
- ☐ Current FDA Food Code adoption/version used by the jurisdiction
- ☐ Current vendor/event permit rules and fees
- ☐ Current wholesale case prices and packaging costs
- ☐ Insurance requirements and vehicle/trailer coverage
- ☐ Food allergen and labeling requirements applicable to the menu

FINAL QUALITY RULE

Do not let a generic guide overrule the regulator who licenses your actual unit. Use the guide to ask better questions, build better numbers, and prepare a cleaner operation.