

Starting a business requires careful planning and preparation to improve your chances of success. This checklist breaks the start-up process into six key areas, helping you stay organized and focused.

It covers everything from validating your business idea and financial feasibility to legal compliance, competitive positioning, and operational setup.

✓ **You have a great business idea**

- Have a great reason to take the plunge
- Write a great business plan
- Find out why people will buy from you
- Understand your market
- Develop a sound business model

✓ **Your idea is financially feasible**

- Conduct a break-even analysis
- Calculate the capital you need to start
- Secure enough capital to finance your business
- Determine if you can make a profit
- Plan for unexpected expenses

✓ **You can compete**

- Identify competitors' strengths and weaknesses
- Develop your competitive advantage
- Figure out the size of your potential market
- Identify potential suppliers
- Make sure your location is suitable

✓ **Making your business compliant**

- Obtain necessary licenses and permits
- Decide on a business structure and register it
- Understand business taxes and register for state/local taxes
- Protect your Intellectual Property (IP)
- Obtain business insurance

✓ **Setting up operations**

- Set up bank accounts and accounting software
- Set up a financial record keeping system
- Get advice from your lawyer, accountant and advisers
- Make sure you'll be able to pay and be paid
- Employer Identification Number (EIN) set up

✓ **Launch**

- Make everyone aware you exist
- Create a great customer experience
- Build credibility
- Set up strategic alliances and join business associations
- Employ staff

You have a great business idea

Have a great reason to take the plunge

Clarify why you're starting your business—whether it's pursuing a passion, gaining financial independence, or solving a problem. A strong motivation fuels persistence and guides decision-making.

Defining your purpose keeps your business aligned with personal and professional goals. Platforms like [BrightIdea](#), [Zappi](#), and [IdeaMensch](#) can help validate your idea before you commit.

Write a great business plan

A business plan outlines goals, strategies, and financial projections, providing direction and structure. It should cover market research, target audience, competition, and operations.

Beyond planning, it helps measure progress by setting benchmarks for tracking performance. Free templates from [SCORE](#) and the [US Small Business Administration](#) (SBA) can help you get started.

Find out why people will buy from you

Identify your target customers and understand their needs, pain points, and buying behaviors. Research industry trends, conduct surveys, and analyze competitors to define your unique value.

Creating detailed customer profiles refines your marketing and product positioning. Consider demographics, lifestyle, and purchasing habits to develop a compelling value proposition.

Understand your market

Research your ideal customer's demographics, preferences, and purchasing habits. Analyze market size, industry trends, and demand to position your business effectively.

Use surveys, competitor analysis, and industry reports to gather insights. Digital tools like [Google Trends](#) and social media analytics can refine your strategy and build a competitive edge

Develop a sound business model

Define how your business generates revenue, whether through direct sales, wholesale, online platforms, or subscriptions. Choose a pricing strategy that aligns with your market and cost structure.

Consider scalability and profitability by evaluating customer acquisition costs, recurring revenue, and partnerships. Testing with a small group or a pilot phase can refine your approach before launching.

Your idea is financially feasible

Conduct a break-even analysis

There's a quick and easy way to find out if your idea is financially feasible, and it's called a break-even analysis. Simply put, it's a way to work out if you'll generate enough revenue in sales to cover all your costs, without first showing a profit.

The Small Business Administration has a [break-even analysis calculator](#) that will make the task much easier.

Calculate the capital you need to start

Estimate your start-up costs, including equipment, inventory, permits, branding, and marketing. These one-time expenses set the foundation for your business, so plan thoroughly to avoid financial surprises.

Beyond start-up costs, factor in working capital—the funds needed to cover rent, salaries, and utilities until you break even. Forecast how long profitability will take and secure enough capital to sustain operations.

Secure enough capital to finance your business

Your business needs enough funding to stay afloat until it generates steady revenue. Explore options like business loans, personal savings, investments from family and friends, or partnerships. Crowdfunding and angel investors can also provide financial support.

Having strong financial backing increases your chances of success. Talk to us about loan options, lines of credit, and other banking solutions. Platforms like [Kickstarter](#), [Indiegogo](#), and the SBA's [microloan program](#) may also help.

Determine if you can make a profit

Create a cash flow forecast to outline expected revenue and expenses. This helps anticipate sales fluctuations, manage costs, and keep enough cash on hand for operations. Accurate projections guide growth and prevent financial shortfalls.

A solid forecast is also key for securing funding, as investors assess profitability before committing. Research industry benchmarks and refine figures based on realistic sales expectations.

Plan for unexpected expenses

Unexpected costs can arise from equipment failures, regulatory changes, supply chain delays, or economic downturns. Set aside an emergency fund to cover unforeseen expenses and keep operations running smoothly.

Building a financial buffer reduces reliance on loans or last-minute funding. Regularly review and adjust your budget to accommodate market shifts and maintain financial stability.

You can compete

Identify competitors' strengths and weaknesses

Analyze competitors' strengths, such as pricing, reputation, customer service, and marketing strategies. Understanding how they attract and retain customers helps you identify ways to stand out.

Assess their weaknesses, like service gaps or customer complaints, to find opportunities for differentiation. Addressing unmet needs or improving where they fall short can help you refine your strategy and attract more customers.

Develop your competitive advantage

Your competitive advantage is what you do better than anyone else. Whether it's superior quality, innovation, exceptional service, or a unique brand story, create a strong reason for customers to choose you.

Once defined, communicate it clearly in your marketing, sales pitch, and customer interactions. Reinforcing your strengths consistently will help you

build loyalty, establish a strong market presence, and stay ahead.

Figure out the size of your potential market

Research industry reports, government data, and trade publications to estimate market demand. Identify key trends, customer demographics, and market segments to determine how many potential buyers exist.

Conduct surveys, interviews, or direct observation to gain insights into customer needs and buying behavior. A well-researched market estimate helps with business planning, investor interest, and growth strategies.

Identify potential suppliers

Reliable suppliers are essential for meeting demand. Set clear selection criteria and request samples or trial orders to evaluate quality, efficiency, and reliability before committing.

Having backup suppliers minimizes risks from delays or shortages. Building strong vendor relationships provides flexibility, better pricing, and a stable supply chain as your business grows.

Make sure your location is suitable

If you rely on foot traffic, visibility, or walk-in customers, choose a high-traffic location with easy access and parking. Businesses that customers seek out may have more flexibility in location.

Research zoning laws, lease agreements, and costs to confirm alignment with your budget and goals. Consider competition, supplier access, and workforce availability when selecting your business location.

Making your business compliant

Obtain necessary licenses and permits

The licenses and permits you need depend on your industry, location, and operations. Common ones include business licenses, health permits, zoning approvals, and professional certifications. Research federal, state, and local regulations to confirm requirements.

Visit your local government office or regulatory body to apply for permits and check renewal deadlines. Industries like food service and healthcare may have stricter rules. The US Small Business Administration (SBA) website will help you find [licenses and permits in your state](#).

Decide on a business structure and register it

Your business structure impacts taxes, liability, and flexibility. Sole Proprietorships are simple but offer no liability protection. Partnerships share ownership, while Corporations provide legal protection but have more regulations. LLCs offer a balance of liability protection and operational flexibility.

Consider tax implications, funding options, and long-term goals when choosing a structure. The SBA website offers [detailed guidance on each option](#), and consulting a legal or financial expert can help you choose the best fit for your business.

Understand business taxes and register for state/local taxes

Your business structure determines how you report and pay federal taxes, including income, self-employment, employer, and excise taxes. Sole Proprietors and Partnerships report income on personal tax returns, while Corporations file separately. Employers must also withhold and pay payroll taxes.

State and local taxes may include sales tax, franchise tax, or property tax. Check with your state's revenue department to understand obligations and register for tax accounts. You can find out more about your [state tax obligations on the SBA website](#).

Protect your Intellectual Property (IP)

If you've invented something, you may have intellectual property to protect. Trademarks help secure your business name and logo, while patents protect unique products or processes. Copyrights apply to original content such as written materials, artwork, and software. Properly securing IP rights prevents unauthorized use and strengthens your competitive position.

Start by identifying which types of IP protection apply to your business and file applications with the [United States Patent & Trademark Office \(USPTO\) website](#). Conducting an IP search before registration can help you avoid legal disputes.

Obtain business insurance

Protecting your business with the right insurance safeguards you against unexpected risks such as theft, property damage, accidents, or the loss of key personnel. Depending on your industry, you may need general liability, property, or workers' compensation insurance. Visit the [SBA website](#) to learn more about the types of coverage that best suit your business needs.

In today's digital world, cyber insurance is also worth considering, especially if your business operates online or handles sensitive customer data. Talk to us about your insurance options. We can help you explore coverage solutions to protect your business and provide peace of mind as you grow

Safeguard your business against theft, flooding, loss of key people, accidents and injury, and property with the right insurance. Find out what [types of business insurance](#) you'll need on the SBA website.

Setting up operations

Set up bank accounts and accounting software

A business checking account keeps finances organized, simplifies transactions, and builds a financial history for future funding. A savings account can help set aside money for taxes, emergencies, or growth. Choose a bank with services tailored to small businesses.

Accounting software tracks income, expenses, and invoices in real time, reducing administrative work. Many platforms integrate with tax and payroll systems, making financial management easier. Select a tool that fits your business size and seek expert advice if needed.

Set up a financial record keeping system

Accurate records help manage cash flow, file taxes, and make informed decisions. A reliable system should track income, expenses, invoices, and receipts. Hiring an accountant or bookkeeper can simplify tax compliance and financial planning as your business grows.

Using accounting software automates record-keeping and reduces manual errors. Platforms like [QuickBooks](#), [Xero](#), or [Wave](#) offer easy tracking and reporting, making financial management more efficient.

Get advice from your lawyer, accountant and advisers

A lawyer can help with contracts, business structure, and intellectual property, preventing costly legal issues. An accountant provides tax compliance, financial stability, and strategic planning. Their expertise supports long-term success.

Beyond legal and financial professionals, seek advice from mentors and industry experts. Learning from experienced business owners provides valuable insights and helps navigate challenges more effectively..

Make sure you'll be able to pay and be paid

Offer multiple payment methods to improve customer convenience and cash flow. Retail businesses should consider POS systems, while service-based businesses can use mobile payments like [Square](#), [PayPal](#), or [Venmo](#). Online invoicing makes billing faster and easier.

For outgoing payments, automate payroll, vendor payments, and recurring expenses. Direct deposit and online bill pay help maintain cash flow and prevent missed payments. Choosing secure, efficient systems simplifies transactions and supports smooth operations.

Employer Identification Number (EIN) set up

An EIN is a unique 9-digit number assigned by the IRS to identify your business. It's required for businesses with employees, corporations, partnerships, or those withholding non-wage taxes. Even if not mandatory, an EIN helps separate business and personal finances.

Applying online through the [IRS website](#) is free and takes minutes. You'll need it for opening a business bank account, filing taxes, and handling payroll, so it's best to get one early in the setup process.

Launch

Make everyone aware you exist

Start by defining your unique value proposition—why customers should choose you over competitors. Identify your target audience and tailor messaging to highlight what matters most to them, whether it's quality, price, or convenience.

Use a mix of marketing strategies to reach potential customers, including online ads, social media, email campaigns, and community outreach. Consistent branding and messaging help build recognition, trust, and long-term customer relationships.

Create a great customer experience

Develop reasons for customers to come back and buy from you again. Good value and outstanding service are two keys to customer retention and repeat sales but keep searching for more ways to lock in customers, such as loyalty schemes, providing unexpected extras, or offering special privileges.

Word of mouth is the most powerful marketing tool you can make use of, and it's free.

Build credibility

Showcase expertise through social media, blogs, and seminars. Share insights, highlight past successes, and demonstrate industry knowledge to position yourself as a trusted resource. Engaging content strengthens credibility and keeps your audience informed.

Customer testimonials and case studies provide social proof of your value. Participate in discussions, webinars, and industry events to connect with potential customers and establish authority in your field.

Set up strategic alliances and join business associations

Forming strategic partnerships can open doors to new markets, shared expertise, and collaborative opportunities. Partnering with established businesses or industry experts offers valuable insights and expands your reach.

Joining business associations provides networking, training, and resources to support growth. Organizations like the [US Chamber of Commerce](#) and the [US Association for Small Business and Entrepreneurship \(USASBE\)](#) help build credibility and connect you with industry professionals.

Employ staff

Hiring employees helps manage workload as your business grows. Clearly define job roles, required skills, and expectations to attract the right candidates. A well-structured hiring process leads to better team alignment.

Competitive pay, clear onboarding, and proper training set employees up for success. Investing in their development encourages productivity, engagement, and a strong company culture.

Notes

This is a guide only and should neither replace competent advice, nor be taken or relied upon as financial or professional advice. Seek professional advice before making any decision that could affect your business.