

Ship Small, Live Large

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*How to Start an AI Software Business, Find Your First
Customers and Buy Back Your Time*

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For everyone who ever wanted their Wednesday afternoons back.

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The Window Is Open (and It Has a Sharp Edge)

The weekend that used to be a year

At 1.14 on a Sunday morning in March 2024, my friend Arjun sent me a screen recording with no message attached. I watched it on my phone in the dark, trying not to wake Meera, and it took me a full minute to understand what I was looking at.

It was a booking system for a chain of physiotherapy clinics in Pune. Patients picked a therapist, chose a slot, got a WhatsApp reminder the night before, and the front desk saw everything on one tidy screen. I knew this software. In 2019, Arjun had built it at the agency where he worked, with three other developers and a project manager who wore the same grey hoodie every single day. It took them seven months. The client paid ₹32 lakh, which was about \$45,000 at the time, and there were two near-resignations and one actual one along the way.

Arjun had rebuilt the whole thing, from nothing, since Friday evening.

"How much of that did you write?" I typed back.

"Honestly? Maybe a fifth," he wrote. "I mostly argued with the AI until it got it right. Cost me the \$20 subscription and about \$11 in API credits. And a lot of chai."

An API, if you have not met the word, is simply a doorway one piece of software uses to ask another piece of software for something. In Arjun's case he was paying a few cents each time his code asked an AI model to write or fix more code. Eleven dollars. Against forty-five thousand.

I want to be careful here, because Arjun is a very good developer and that matters. He knew what the clinics actually needed, because he had sat through those meetings in 2019. He knew when the AI was confidently wrong, which it was, several times, including one memorable moment when it booked a patient into the same slot as herself. His weekend version was rougher than the original. It had no proper security review. Nobody had tested it on a ten-year-old Android phone in a clinic with patchy Wi-Fi.

But it worked. A receptionist could have used it on Monday.

Here is the part that kept me awake longer than the video did. The expensive, slow, specialist bit of making software (turning an idea into something that runs) has collapsed in price by something like a thousand times in about five years. I am rounding, and you could argue the number either way, but not by enough to change the point. That collapse does not only help people like Arjun. It reaches the dental receptionist who has an idea about insurance forms, the retired accountant in Leeds, the schoolteacher who knows exactly which spreadsheet ruins her Sunday evenings. People who would never have been allowed near a codebase can now describe what they want in plain English and watch it appear.

I lay there until nearly three, refreshing the video. In the corner of the frame, half hidden behind his code editor, I could see Arjun's old 2019 project timeline, still pinned to his wall, with "LAUNCH (hopefully)" circled in red.

Cheap code, expensive trust

When something gets a thousand times cheaper, the cost does not vanish. It moves. All that money and effort that used to go into building software is still out there. It has simply drained towards the parts that stayed hard.

Two of those parts matter more than the rest. The first is attention: getting one particular person, with one particular problem, to notice that your product exists at all. The second is trust: that same person deciding you are real, that you will still be around next June, and that typing their card number into your little form is not a mistake they will have to explain to their spouse. Neither of these got cheaper in 2024. They got dearer, if anything, because Arjun's weekend is now everybody's weekend, and every inbox on earth is filling up with people who also built something since Friday.

I learnt this before the AI boom made it obvious, and I learnt it slowly. My first product rewrote product descriptions for small online shops. It took me eleven days to build and four months to sell to a single human being. I will tell you the full, faintly humiliating story of those four months later in the book. For now, the ending is enough.

Her name was Linda. She ran a candle shop in Ohio, and she paid me \$19 a month (about ₹1,600, which my cousin pointed out was less than he spent on samosas in a fortnight). I asked her, a few weeks in, why she had picked my tool. There were other description writers around by then. I am guessing here, but probably dozens, several of them better built than mine and backed by companies with actual offices.

She said it was the demo video. My neighbour's dog had barked all the way through the recording, and I had been too tired to redo it. To Linda, the barking meant a person was behind the screen. A person she could email. A person who might answer.

Think about what she was not paying for. She was not paying for my prompts, which anybody could copy in an afternoon. She was not paying for my code, which was, to be generous, held together with hope. She was paying \$19 for the feeling that if something broke on a Saturday before Mother's Day, somebody in particular would care.

That feeling is the scarce thing now. You cannot generate it in a weekend, and you cannot prompt your way to it. You earn it one Linda at a time, usually in ways that look embarrassingly small from the outside: a reply sent within the hour, a bug fixed while she was still on the phone, a note remembering that her shop does a winter sale.

The first email Linda ever sent me, after her card went through, had nothing to do with software.

"Is the dog okay?" she wrote. "He sounded upset."

The Wrapper Test

In the spring of 2023 a friend of a friend, a quiet engineer in Pune I will call Nikhil, built a tool that let you upload a PDF and ask it questions. Drop in a 90-page rental agreement, type "can my landlord keep the deposit if the geyser breaks?", and get an answer with the page number. It was lovely. It took him nine days. Within four months he had about 1,100 people paying \$12 a month, which is roughly \$13,000 a month, and he had started looking at flats with a balcony.

Then the company whose model he was renting held a product announcement. Somewhere around minute twenty, a presenter dragged a PDF into the ordinary chat window and asked it a question. No extra charge. Nikhil watched it live. By the end of the following month he had lost more than half his customers, and the rest left slowly, politely, the way people leave a party once the host starts stacking chairs.

"I didn't have a company," he said to me later, over a very long phone call. "I had a feature they hadn't got round to yet."

That sentence is the whole test. **If the company that makes your AI model, or some teenager with a free browser extension, could ship your core feature within a month, you have a demo and no business.** The model is the engine. Everybody can buy the same engine. You need something bolted around it that the giants will not bother to build.

There are four things that tend to work, and Nikhil could have reached for any of them.

He could have owned a **workflow**: instead of "chat with any PDF", the full Thursday routine of a small law office, where the contract arrives by email, gets checked against the firm's own clause list, and lands in the right client folder with a summary attached. He could have picked a **niche** so narrow that a big company would find it beneath notice: shipping documents for spice exporters in Kochi, say. He could have built up **data** nobody else had, such as thousands of annotated tenancy agreements showing which clauses actually caused disputes. Or he could have held a **relationship**: the kind of customer who emails you about the dog.

***Napkin: the Wrapper Test** Write your product idea in one line. Then answer honestly:*

- *Could a big AI provider add this as a button next Tuesday?
Yes / No*
- *Could a free browser extension do 80% of it? Yes / No*
- *Which of the four layers do you own today? Workflow /
Niche / Data / Relationship / None*

Two "yes" answers and a "none" means you have a weekend project. That is fine, as long as you know it.

Nikhil is building again now. Freight invoices for small importers, a deeply boring problem. He sent me a photo last month of his new desk. Taped to the monitor was a printout of that announcement's date, with nothing else written on it.

The Small Machine

A developer friend of mine in Bengaluru, Karan, raised \$2.4 million in 2021 for an app that helped restaurants plan their staff rotas. He had a proper office with a beanbag nobody sat on, eleven employees and a slide deck with a line on it that went up and to the right. Three years later the company was sold for \$1.9 million. The investors had a clause, standard in these deals, that let them take their money back first. They took all of it. Karan walked away with nothing except a very good chair he bought from the liquidation.

"I worked harder than I've ever worked," he said, "to make other people slightly less poor."

I do not tell that story to sneer at him. He is cleverer than me, and the rota app was better built than anything I have shipped. I tell it because his ending is normal. A Harvard researcher, Shikhar Ghosh, looked at venture-backed companies and estimated that about three in four never return their investors' money. I am guessing here, but if the investors usually get paid before the founders do, the share of founders who come out with a life-changing sum must be smaller still. Perhaps one in twenty. Perhaps fewer. Nobody publishes those numbers with much enthusiasm.

The funded route is a rocket ship. It is built to reach orbit or explode, and the people paying for the fuel are quite relaxed about the explosions, because they own a hundred rockets and need only one to land on the moon. You own one rocket. You are sitting in it.

So here is my strong opinion, and you are free to disagree with it over chai: **for almost everyone reading this, raising money is the wrong goal, and small is a strategy rather than a consolation prize.**

What I want you to build instead I call **the Small Machine**. It is a lean software business run by one to three people. It solves one dull problem for a group of customers who know your

name. It earns more each month than it costs, and it keeps working when you step away for a fortnight to attend a cousin's wedding in Udaipur. Nobody will write about it in a magazine. You will not ring a bell anywhere.

The arithmetic is gentler than you might expect. Three hundred customers paying \$49 a month comes to \$14,700 (about ₹12.5 lakh) before costs. You need no investors, no beanbag and no board meeting. Most people who build a Small Machine never needed a moon. They needed their rent covered, their evenings back and the dignity of answering to customers rather than a boss.

My own machine is not glamorous. It pays our bills, and some months only just. When I explained the plan to my wife, Meera, years ago, she listened carefully and then asked the only question that mattered.

"Fine," she said. "But what does it actually do, and who has that problem on a Friday afternoon?"

I did not have an answer. Finding one took me a long time, and it began with a dentist's receptionist in Leeds who retyped the same invoice every single week.

Hunting for Boring Problems

Follow the sighs

Leeds is where the idea began on paper. The habit that got me there started a few months earlier, in a dental clinic on Tonk Road in Jaipur, where I was waiting to have a cracked molar looked at and trying not to think about the drill.

The receptionist was called Pooja. It was a Friday, a little after six in the evening, and the waiting room smelled of clove oil and the samosas someone had brought in a paper bag. Pooja had a stack of handwritten case sheets on her left and a computer on her right, and she was copying procedure codes from one to the other. Each code went into a portal run by an insurance middleman (the company that sits between the clinic and the insurer and decides whether a claim gets paid). Every few minutes the portal logged her out. She would log back in, find her place on the paper with one finger, and type again.

And every time it logged her out, she sighed. A small, practised sigh, the kind you develop for something that has annoyed you for so long it no longer deserves anger.

"How long does this take?" I asked, because I am nosy and the drill was still a while off.

"Friday evenings," she said. "All of it. Doctor writes, I type. If I make one mistake in the code, the claim comes back in three weeks and I do it again."

"Every Friday?"

"Every Friday since 2021."

I did not build anything for Pooja's clinic. I want to be honest about that, because this is not a tidy story where I rushed home and wrote software. I went home with a temporary filling and a strange itch. I had spent a year building things I thought were clever, and here was a person losing roughly three hours a week, about 150 hours a year, to a problem nobody on any startup forum was talking about. Nobody tweets about insurance codes. That silence is exactly the point.

Here is my strong opinion, and you are welcome to argue with it over chai: **the best ideas for a small software business are not found by thinking. They are found by watching someone work and listening for the sigh.** Brainstorming in a notebook gives you ideas that are interesting to you. Watching gives you problems that already cost someone their evenings, and often their employer's money.

After Tonk Road I started noticing sighs everywhere. The chartered accountant's assistant downloading bank statements one month at a time. My cousin's freight-forwarding office, where a man named Ramesh retyped container numbers from emails into a spreadsheet and then into a customs form. The same number, typed three times.

Pooja, I later heard, still does the codes on Friday. The portal still logs her out.

The Napkin hunt

A habit of noticing sighs is lovely, but it leaks. For about two months I noticed things and remembered none of them. Then I started keeping a page at the back of my notebook, and later just a napkin from whichever chai stall I was sitting at, and writing the sighs down before Jaipur traffic shook them out of my head.

That page became the exercise below. It takes five minutes. Do it tonight, before you read the next section, because the next

section only works if you have a list.

Napkin: The Boring Problem Hunt

Write down every task you have personally seen someone do in the last year that was done badly, slowly, or at a cost. Work, family, a shop you visit. Aim for ten. For each one, note:

- ***Who*** does it (a job title, not "people")
- ***How often*** (daily, weekly, every Friday since 2021)
- ***Rough hours*** per month
- ***What a mistake costs*** (a rejected claim, a fine, a lost customer)

Then circle any task where the person is already paying for help: a temp, an agency, overtime, a junior who hates it.

The circle is what matters most. A problem someone already pays for has a price tag stuck on it before you arrive. You are offering a cheaper or faster version of a cheque they already write.

Here is how Ramesh looked on my napkin, worked through properly. His office handled about 40 shipments a week. Each container number got typed three times, and with the checking, each round took roughly two minutes. That is $40 \times 3 \times 2 = 240$ minutes, so four hours a week, or about sixteen hours a month. Ramesh earned something like ₹250 an hour (about \$3), which made the typing itself worth only ₹4,000 a month. Not exciting. I nearly crossed it out.

Then I asked my cousin what happened when Ramesh got a digit wrong.

"The container sits at Mundra," he said. "Demurrage. Last time it was ₹18,000 before we sorted it."

One typo cost more than four months of Ramesh's typing. That is the column most people skip, and it is usually where the money hides. A dull task is a decent idea. A dull task where one slip costs a fortune is a business.

A few warnings from my own napkins, which were mostly wrong. Leave off tasks only you find annoying, unless you are the customer. Leave off anything that happens once a year; nobody subscribes monthly to a yearly pain. And be suspicious of any line that makes you excited before it makes you curious, because excitement is how I lost four months the first time.

My first proper list had eleven lines. Nine of them were useless. One of them was in a building in Leeds, and I had only heard about it secondhand, in a WhatsApp message from a woman I had never met, complaining about Monday mornings.

Ten conversations, three card numbers

The woman in the WhatsApp message was Claire, office manager at a lettings agency in Headingley. A friend of a friend had forwarded her complaint: every Monday she turned landlords' scrawled notes and forty phone photos into property listings, three times over, because each portal wanted a different length and a different order. I wrote to her that evening. She replied the next morning with one line. "If you're selling something, I'm busy."

I wasn't selling anything. That is the first rule of these conversations, and it is harder than it sounds, because every part of you wants to describe the clever thing you are about to build. Don't. You are there to learn how their Monday actually goes.

These are the questions I used with Claire and the nine people after her. I still use them.

- Walk me through the last time you did this. (The last time, not "usually". People lie about "usually" without meaning to.)
- How long did it take, and what were you doing instead of it?
- What have you already tried to fix it?
- What happens when it goes wrong?
- Who else would have to agree before you paid for something?

The third question is the one that sorts people. Claire had tried a template in Word, a freelancer on Upwork at £12 a listing, and a nephew. The freelancer got the bedroom counts wrong. The nephew went to university. Someone who has already spent money and patience on a problem is someone who might spend again.

I spoke to ten letting and estate agents over five weeks, mostly on video calls at awkward hours because of the time difference. Before those calls I had a plan. I was going to build a full listings platform: photo editing, floor plans, automatic posting to every portal. Six months of work, I reckoned, and I had drawn it on the whiteboard in three colours.

Then call number four. Graham, who ran a two-person agency in Harrogate, listened patiently and said, "That's very kind, but no. The portals already post for us. I don't need another login. I need the words written properly, with the compliance bits in, so I don't get a letter from Trading Standards."

A polite no. It wiped out about four-fifths of my whiteboard. Every agent after Graham said a version of the same thing, and none of them mentioned photos at all.

So I stopped describing a platform and started describing one job: paste in your notes, get three portal-ready listings with the required legal lines, in your agency's voice. At the end of each call I asked a question that still makes my stomach tighten. "If I had this working in six weeks, would you pay \$49 for the first month now, refundable if I miss the date?"

Seven people said they would think about it. Thinking is free.

Three sent card details. Claire was the first, at 11:40 on a Tuesday night her time. Her message said, "Fine. But if it calls a box room a 'cosy study' I want my money back."

One job, done annoyingly well

Three people had paid \$147 between them, which meant I owed them software in six weeks. The whiteboard still had the three-

colour platform on it. I took a photo of it for sentimental reasons and wiped off nearly everything.

What stayed was one box to paste notes into and one button. What went was a much longer list, and writing it down was oddly painful:

- Photo uploads and editing
- Floor plans
- A dashboard with charts
- User accounts with passwords (I emailed each agent a private link instead)
- A billing page (I charged cards by hand from the payment provider's website)
- Any way to change your agency's "voice" yourself

That last one I did manually. Each agent sent me five listings they were proud of, and I wrote their house style into the prompt myself, one agency at a time, at my kitchen table with chai going cold. Meera watched me do this for Graham's agency on a Sunday evening.

"So the robot is you," she said.

For the first two months, partly, yes.

I hold a strong opinion here, and I know some people disagree: **if your first version doesn't embarrass you a little, you waited too long to show it.** My candle-shop tool had beautiful buttons. I know because I spent most of a week choosing their colour. Linda never mentioned them once. What she mentioned, in an email I still have, was that it kept calling her soy candles "waxy", and she didn't want her candles to sound waxy.

The listings tool was ugly. Grey text, a white box, a button that said "Write". The first week it took forty seconds to respond and occasionally just didn't. Graham sent a screenshot of an error message with the line, "This is hideous. The Harrogate one was perfect though. Did you know about the EPC rating rule?" I did, because he had told me on call number four, and I had built

the tool so it would never leave the energy rating out. That was the job. Get the legal lines right, every time, in the agent's own voice. Everything else was decoration I could add later or never.

This is the trade you are making. A narrow product that does its one thing so reliably that people put up with slowness, ugliness and the founder charging their cards by hand. People will forgive almost anything except the job going wrong. Claire checked every listing for six weeks looking for a "cosy study". She never found one. In week seven she stopped checking.

By the end of that summer I had three paying customers, a tool that worked, and a folder on my desktop with three more invoices in it. I also had a problem I recognised with a slightly sick feeling. Somewhere in Britain were a few thousand letting agents losing their Monday mornings to the same job, and not one of them had heard of me.

I had been here before. Last time, it took four months and a barking dog.

Distribution Eats Product

Four months of talking to nobody

Zero is a hard number to look at every morning with your chai. I know, because I looked at it for about a hundred and twenty mornings in a row.

The product-description rewriter was finished in eleven days. Finished is generous. It worked: you pasted in a dull line like "Soy candle, 8oz, vanilla scent" and it gave you back three warmer versions that sounded like a person had written them. I was proud of it. So I did what I thought founders did next. I made it better.

I spent the first month on prompts. I tested them on four hundred product descriptions I had copied from real Shopify stores, keeping score in a spreadsheet with a column called "sounds human?" I spent the second month on the interface, including (I am not proud of this) nine days choosing between two shades of green for the main button. I spent the third month adding features. Bulk upload. A tone slider. A setting for British or American spelling, which I needed and almost nobody else did.

The analytics dashboard told the real story. Most days, three visitors. Two of them were me on different browsers. The third was usually a bot from somewhere I could not place on a map.

"Who have you shown it to?" Meera asked one evening, around month three.

"It's on the website," I said.

"That isn't what I asked."

She was right, and I hated it. I had shown it to my cousin, who said it was "nice" in the voice he uses for wedding food. I had posted one link on Twitter to my 140 followers, most of whom were also developers building things nobody was buying. I had not written to a single person who owned a shop. I told myself it wasn't ready. The truth was simpler. Building felt safe and asking felt like begging.

In month four, mostly out of guilt, I recorded a two-minute demo video. One take, my laptop on a stack of books, the window open because Jaipur in May gives you no choice. Halfway through, the neighbour's dog started barking at a vegetable cart. I kept going. I had no energy left for a second take. I uploaded it to YouTube and put the link in a reply on a small Shopify forum thread where someone had asked, quite desperately, how to write fifty product descriptions before a holiday sale.

Two days later, an email arrived from a candle shop in Ohio. Linda wanted to know if the thing worked on scented wax melts as well as candles. I said yes. I didn't actually know. She signed up at \$19 a month and wrote, "your demo video had a dog barking in the background and I figured you were real."

I read it standing up in the kitchen, and then I read it to Meera, who listened to the whole thing and asked one question.

"Which forum was that?"

Selling as a person, not a logo

The answer, by the way, was a forum I never went back to. I had found the one place where my customers were standing around asking for help, got a customer out of it, and then returned to fiddling with the tone slider. That is how slowly some of us learn.

So when the lettings tool had its three paying agents and nothing else, I swore I would do it properly this time. I bought a list of 400 estate agency email addresses for \$60 and wrote what I believed a serious company would write. I sent it to the first sixty on a Tuesday morning. Here it is, unedited, because I have kept it as a warning:

Dear Sir/Madam, I am reaching out to introduce an innovative AI-powered solution that helps property professionals streamline listing creation and ensure compliance. Our platform saves agencies valuable time. Would you be open to a 15-minute call this week?

One reply came back. It was from a man called Steve at an agency in Doncaster, and it said, in full: "Who are you? This reads like it was written by the software you're selling. Remove me."

He was not wrong. Every phrase in that email could have come from anyone, about anything. "Innovative." "Streamline." "Valuable time." I had hidden behind a logo I didn't even have yet, because a logo can't be rejected. Fifty-nine people had simply looked at it and pressed delete, and honestly, so would I.

The fix took an afternoon and a bit of humility. I stopped sending to the list and started reading agents' actual websites. I picked one listing per agency and rewrote it myself, properly, in their voice. Then I wrote to the person whose name was on the "About us" page:

Hi Deborah, I'm Sushil, I build a small tool for lettings agents in Yorkshire. I noticed your two-bed on Westgate doesn't mention the EPC rating, which I think Trading Standards are fussy about now. I've had a go at rewriting it in your style, attached. If it's useful, the tool does this for every listing. If not, no hard feelings, and feel free to steal the rewrite.

That one was written by a person. It had a name, a street, a small mistake I had spotted, and a gift with no strings on it. I sent twenty of those over two weeks. Eleven people replied. Four booked a call. Two paid.

Deborah's reply arrived at 7:40 the next morning:

"The EPC thing is fair, we missed it. Your rewrite is a bit flowery for us, we're not selling Downton Abbey. But you're the first one of these that's actually looked at our website. What does it cost?"

I printed that one and stuck it on the whiteboard, just above a pricing sum I had got wrong.

Borrowing someone else's crowd

Deborah taught me the lesson of the email. Linda, without meaning to, had taught me something bigger, and it took me another year to notice. I didn't find her. She was already standing in a room full of shop owners, and I had wandered in for ten minutes and then wandered out again.

Your customers already gather somewhere. They gather in small, unglamorous places with names like "Independent Letting Agents UK (Members Only)", a Facebook group I joined in the autumn with about 6,000 members and a pinned post banning anyone who sells anything. That rule frightened me for a fortnight. Then I read the group properly, every day over chai, and saw that the same three questions came up again and again. What has to go in a listing now? Has anyone had a complaint about wording? How do you stop juniors writing "stunning" about a flat above a kebab shop?

I answered the first one, at length, with no link. Then the second. By November, people were tagging me in threads I hadn't seen. A woman in Hull wrote, "Ask Sushil, he's the listings bloke," and that one sentence brought me more trials than the \$60 email list ever did. I never once posted my product.

Someone else always did it for me, which felt like cheating and wasn't.

In India the room is usually a WhatsApp group. My cousin's freight office belongs to four of them, each one a few hundred forwarders swapping container rates, complaints about customs and good-morning images of sunflowers. Ramesh showed me one on his phone, scrolling with his thumb. "Nobody reads ads here," he said. "If someone we know says a thing works, we try it by lunch." You cannot buy your way into that group. You get added by someone who vouches for you, and you get removed the first time you behave like a brochure.

The other kind of borrowed room belongs to software. Years after Linda, I finally listed the old description tool on the Shopify App Store, something I should have done in week two. It took a weekend to meet their review rules and a further eleven days waiting for approval. In the following six weeks it brought in 31 installs and 9 paying stores, more than my first four months combined, and I hadn't written a single new feature. People searching that marketplace already had a shop, a problem and a card on file. I just had to be on the shelf.

For the lettings tool, the shelf is the property software most small agencies already use. If your product can plug into the thing your customers open every morning, their software company's directory becomes your shop window, and their support team occasionally becomes your sales team without knowing it.

Meera found me one evening grinning at my phone. A stranger in the Facebook group had replied to a newcomer asking about EPC wording.

"Don't bother working it out yourself," it said. "There's a Jaipur guy who does it. Pricey, but he actually reads your website."

The slow pile

Before the Facebook group started working, I tried to buy my way past it. In October I put \$400 into search ads for "lettings listing software" and similar phrases. Each click cost about \$4, which sounded cheap until I watched what the clicks did.

- \$400 spent, roughly 100 clicks
- 6 people started a free trial
- 1 person paid, once, and cancelled after a month
- Cost of that one customer: \$400

These were strangers. They clicked, glanced, left. Nobody had vouched for me, and I hadn't looked at their website. Maybe a cleverer advertiser could have halved that cost. I am not that advertiser, and I suspect you aren't either, not yet. Ads work when you already know exactly who buys and how long they stay. In the first year you know neither, so you are paying to find out, at \$4 a go. I switched them off on a Thursday and felt oddly relieved, the way you do when you finally stop a gym membership.

What I did instead was slower and duller. I took the three questions from the group and wrote one honest page for each. The first was called "What a UK lettings listing must include in 2025". It was plain, with headings an agent could skim between viewings. For two months it brought in nobody. In month four it brought in nine visitors a day. By the following spring it was the single biggest source of trials I had, and it had cost me one Sunday afternoon and a pot of chai.

Then I built a free thing. A small checker: paste in a listing, and it flags missing details like the EPC rating or council tax band. No sign-up. It took two evenings to make, because code is the cheap part now, and agents started sharing it in the group without my asking. A few hundred people used it every month.

Some of them clicked the line at the bottom that said, "Want it rewritten in your voice? That's the paid bit."

Referrals were the quietest compounder of all. Claire mentioned the tool to a friend at a Leeds agency over a drink. Deborah mentioned it to her sister in York. I didn't pay them anything. I just answered their emails quickly and once fixed a bug for Claire at eleven at night, which, I now realise, was the best advertising money I never spent.

By March I had twenty-three paying agencies. Not one had arrived through an ad. I added up the monthly total on the whiteboard, underlined it twice and felt very pleased with myself.

Meera looked at the number, then at the API bill open on my laptop beside it.

"So how much of that is actually ours?" she said.

I opened my mouth to answer, and found I had no idea.

The Margin Math

The customer who cost me money

There is a particular stillness that comes over you when a bill is wrong in the wrong direction. Your hands stop on the keyboard. You stop breathing through your nose. Somewhere in the house a pressure cooker whistles and you do not hear it.

Meera's question sent me to the API dashboard that night. (API stands for application programming interface; in plain terms it is the doorway my software knocks on every time it asks the AI model to do something, and the model company charges me for each knock.) I had glanced at that dashboard before, the way you glance at a dentist's waiting room. I had never actually gone in and sat down.

That February's bill was \$212. Twenty-three agencies paying me, and a model bill of \$212 seemed fine, even modest, until I sorted the usage by account and one name sat at the top like a boulder.

The account belonged to a man called Darren in Salford. He was on the \$15 Solo plan, a cheaper tier I had added in January after a few independent landlords in the Facebook group asked for something smaller than the agency price. Darren was not an independent landlord. Darren, it turned out, ran a small business that tidied up listings for other people, and he had written

a little script that fed my tool every property description he could find, one after another, all day and most of the night.

Forty thousand one hundred and twelve requests in a month.

A normal agency used somewhere around 600. Each request cost me roughly a third of a cent (I worked it out later at about \$0.0035, though the price moved with the length of the listing), which sounds like nothing until you multiply. Darren alone had cost me about \$140 in model fees, roughly ₹11,700, which was more than my whole electricity bill for the winter. He had paid me fifteen dollars. After the card fee, a bit less.

So my most enthusiastic user was also, by a distance, my most expensive. He loved the product. He used it more than anyone alive. And every morning he logged in, I was quietly paying him for the privilege.

I sat very still for what Meera later claimed was four full minutes. Then I scrolled down to check whether anyone else looked like Darren. Two more Solo accounts were climbing the same way, smaller but steeper.

"Can you switch him off?" Meera said.

"He hasn't done anything wrong. The plan says unlimited."

"Who wrote 'unlimited'?"

I had. In January, at about midnight, because it looked generous on the pricing page and the agency plan said it too and I never imagined anyone would take the word literally. I opened the page again. There it was in a friendly green tick, right next to the price.

"So he's your best customer," she said, "or your worst."

The pressure cooker had boiled dry in the kitchen. Neither of us had noticed.

One page, five numbers

The next morning I took the whiteboard in my office, rubbed out a half-finished sketch of a logo I would never use, and wrote five words down the left-hand side. Price. Model. Hosting. Fees.

Support. That was the whole system. It still is, give or take the smudges.

The idea is simple enough to embarrass me now. For one ordinary customer, you write down what they pay you in a month, then subtract every cost they cause. Whatever is left is your **margin per customer**, the money that actually belongs to you. If that number is negative, every new sign-up makes you poorer, and growth only digs the hole faster.

Here is the box I wish I had drawn in January. Do it with your own numbers. Five minutes, a pencil and the back of anything.

Napkin: Margin Math for one customer

Take one typical customer on your main plan and fill in a month:

- **Price:** what they pay. My agency plan: \$49 (about ₹4,100)
- **Model cost:** their requests $\times$ cost per request. $600 \times \$0.0035 = \$2.10$ (₹176)
- **Hosting:** your server and database bill $\div$ number of customers. $\$40 \div 23 = \$1.74$ (₹146)
- **Payment fees:** roughly 2.9% plus 30 cents per card charge. \$1.72 (₹144)
- **Support:** hours spent helping all customers $\times$ what an hour of you is worth, $\div$ customers. $6 \text{ hours} \times \$15 \div 23 = \$3.91$ (₹328)

Margin = \$49 - \$9.47 = \$39.53 a month (about ₹3,300)

Now do the same sum for your heaviest user.

The support line is the one people skip, and I skipped it too for a long time, because my hours felt free. They are not. I picked \$15 an hour because that is roughly what I would pay a freelancer in Jaipur to answer emails competently, and I am guessing a bit, but leaving that line blank means pretending you work for nothing. You will not keep doing that cheerfully for very long.

Then I did the last line of the box, the one that matters.

Darren paid \$15. His model cost was \$140. Hosting, the same \$1.74 as everyone. Card fee, about 74 cents. Support, almost nothing, because Darren never once wrote to me (he was far too busy). Total cost: roughly \$142.50.

Margin: minus \$127.50 a month. About ₹10,700, gone, every month, to a man in Salford I had never spoken to.

What unsettled me most was that the agency plan looked healthy. My average across all twenty-three accounts was still positive, and if I had only ever calculated the average I would have felt fine for another six months. Averages are generous like that. They let one Darren hide behind twenty agencies in Leeds and Harrogate who write a few listings on a Tuesday and then go home.

I wrote "-127.50" in red marker under Darren's name, circled it twice, and left it on the whiteboard. It stayed there until the summer, slowly fading under my thumb every time I reached past it for the duster.

Nine dollars and a nervous stomach

The Solo plan nearly cost \$9. I had typed that number into the pricing page first, late one January night, because \$9 felt like a price nobody could be angry about. Arjun saw it on a video call the next day and laughed so hard his camera froze.

"Who is it for?" he said.

"Small landlords. People who can't afford forty-nine."

"Did any of them tell you that, or did you decide it for them?"

I had decided it for them. That is the whole problem with \$9 in one sentence. It is a price set by the founder's nerves, not by the buyer's wallet, and I hold this opinion more firmly than almost anything else in this book: **for a small AI product, \$9 a month is usually a mistake.** Run the napkin on it. The card fee takes about 56 cents. Hosting takes \$1.74. A customer who uses the tool properly burns \$2 of model costs, and if they email you

twice you have spent half an hour you will never bill for. You are left with perhaps \$3 (₹250), and one keen user wipes out the profit from twenty quiet ones. Then there is the other cost, which is harder to put on a whiteboard. Cheap plans attract people who were never sure they needed you, and they leave first.

The agents taught me how to think about price instead. A single let in Headingley earns Claire's agency a fee of roughly \$1,000. A listing that goes live a day sooner, or that doesn't get flagged for a missing EPC rating, is worth far more than \$49 to her. She was never comparing my price with Netflix. She was comparing it with an hour of her own Friday.

So I rebuilt the page in an afternoon:

- **Solo, \$19:** 150 listings a month, then a polite message.
- **Agency, \$49:** 1,000 listings, which is almost twice what a normal agency uses.
- **Volume, \$249:** 50,000 listings, for people like Darren.
- **Annual on any plan:** pay for ten months, get twelve.

The word "unlimited" went in the bin. The limits are generous enough that ordinary customers never see them, and that is the point. A limit is there for the one account in fifty that would otherwise drown you, not to nag everyone else.

The annual plans surprised me most. Four agencies switched in the first week, which put \$1,960 in my account at once (about ₹1.6 lakh), and an agency that has paid for a year does not quietly cancel in March because the owner is tidying up his card statement.

Linda, when I told her I was raising prices for new customers, wrote back: "About time. I was starting to worry about you."

Then I emailed Darren. I kept it short and did not apologise. He replied eleven minutes later.

"Fair enough, mate," he wrote. "Didn't think it'd last."

He upgraded that afternoon. I rubbed nothing off the whiteboard. I just wrote "+\$106" beside the red number, in blue, and stood back to look at the pair of them.

The quiet leak

Churn is the share of your paying customers who leave each month. Mine was about 6%, and for a long time I thought that sounded fine. Ninety-four out of a hundred people stay. Lovely.

Then one evening in May, with the fan rattling and the chai gone cold, I did the sum properly. Start with 100 customers and lose 6% every month. After one year you have 48 left. After two years you have 23. More than three-quarters of the people who once trusted you enough to type in a card number have walked out, and most of them never said why.

It gets worse when you add new customers. Say you win ten a month, which for me was a good month. At 6% churn, your business stops growing at around 167 customers, because by then you are losing ten a month as fast as you win them. You can work harder and harder and the number simply will not climb. I had been feeling vaguely stuck since February. This was the reason, written in my own handwriting.

So I went looking for the leaks, and they were small and embarrassing.

- **Failed cards.** Nearly a third of my cancellations were not cancellations at all. Cards expired, and the payment failed quietly. I set up three polite reminder emails before an account closed.
- **The silent first week.** Accounts that wrote no listings in their first seven days almost always left. I started sending a short personal email on day three, from me, asking what they were working on.
- **One question on the way out.** "What made you cancel?" with a free-text box. Nobody had to answer. About half did.

- **Annual plans**, which I have already confessed to loving.

The exit question was the humbling one. A woman called Bev, from an agency in Knaresborough, wrote: "Lovely tool. Forgot I was paying for it until my accountant asked." She had not left because the product was bad. She had left because I had never once reminded her it was doing something useful. I added a monthly email telling each agency how many listings they had written and roughly how many hours that saved. Bev came back in September.

By the end of summer, churn was a little under 3%. Same product, same prompts, same price. At 3%, ten new customers a month stops at around 333 instead of 167, and after two years you keep 48 of every hundred rather than 23. Nothing I have ever built in a weekend did as much as those four emails.

I showed Meera the new numbers on the whiteboard, the blue beside the red, the churn curve bending upwards at last.

She looked at it for a while. "So how many is enough?" she said.

I opened my mouth to answer and found I had nothing to say. I had a ceiling, a margin and a churn rate. I did not have a number for our actual life.

Your Freedom Number

Seventy agencies, give or take

Ten thousand dollars a month sat at the top of my whiteboard for nearly two years, underlined twice, and I could not have told you where it came from. I think I absorbed it. Every founder I followed online seemed to be crossing "\$10k MRR" (monthly recurring revenue, the money that arrives every month without you selling anything new), and their posts had rockets in them. So I wrote it down and treated it like a law of physics.

Meera's question made me do something I had never done. I opened our bank statements for the previous six months and added up what our life actually cost.

It took one evening and most of a pot of chai. Rent on the flat in Malviya Nagar, school fees for our daughter, groceries, my mother's medicines, the scooter, the electricity bill that doubles every May, a wedding gift for a cousin, the odd dinner out. I included the boring things. I included the embarrassing things too (I subscribe to four streaming services and watch one).

The average came to about ₹1,50,000 a month. Roughly \$1,770.

I stared at that for a long time. Then I did the rest of the sum, which you can do too.

Napkin: Your Freedom Number

- *Real monthly spending, averaged over six months: A*
- *Add a buffer for the month the fridge dies (I use 15%): $A \times 1.15 = B$*
- *Gross up for tax so B is what lands after it (I am guessing for you here; I set aside 25%): $B \div 0.75 = C$*
- *Turn profit into revenue using your margin from the last chapter (mine is about 80%): $C \div 0.8 = \text{your Freedom Number}$*

Mine went like this. \$1,770 became \$2,035 with the buffer. With tax, \$2,713. Divided by my margin, about **\$3,400 a month**.

A third of the number on the whiteboard. At \$49 an agency, that is around seventy customers. Seventy letting agents in Yorkshire and a handful of Shopify stores, Linda's among them, and our actual life was paid for. Your tax rate will differ from mine, and so will your rent, so please do not borrow my figure. Borrow the arithmetic.

I had been chasing a target three times larger than my life, and the extra two-thirds was not for anything. It was for a screenshot. The worst part was working out what that ghost of a target had already cost me: the late nights spent on features for imaginary customers number 400 to 900, when customer seventy was the one who mattered.

I wiped the \$10,000 off the board with my sleeve and wrote \$3,400 in its place, smaller, in blue.

Meera came in with two cups and looked at it.

"That's it?" she said.

"That's it."

"Then why are you still up at one in the morning?"

The marker was still in my hand. I put the cap back on it very carefully, as if that were the difficult part.

The bill nobody posts online

Nobody posts the 2 a.m. screenshot. I understand why. It has no rocket in it.

Jaipur sits four and a half hours ahead of Yorkshire in summer, which means a letting agent finishing her paperwork at half past nine in the evening lands in my inbox at two in the morning. For most of year two, my phone lay face up on the bedside table, volume on. I told myself this was good service. Graham in Harrogate once wrote at 9:41 p.m. his time, "The listing for the flat on Cold Bath Road has come out sounding like a wine label. Viewings tomorrow at nine." I fixed it in the dark with one eye open, my thumb doing the typing while the rest of me tried to stay asleep. He replied "Cheers" at 2:19. I lay awake until four.

That is the obvious cost. The quieter one took me longer to notice.

When you work alone, there is nobody to turn to and say, "Is this normal?" No colleague raises an eyebrow when you spend a whole Tuesday rewriting the same email to a customer who is about to cancel. Arjun was a WhatsApp message away, but he had his own clients and his own 1 a.m. screen recordings. Meera listened, and she listened well, though she did not want to hear about prompt temperature over dinner, and fair enough. So most days the only voices in my office were mine and the ceiling fan's. I started reading support tickets aloud just to hear a sentence that was not in my own head.

I am not sure I would have admitted any of this if it had not been for my cousin Vikram's wedding.

It was a November evening at a garden venue off Ajmer Road, marigolds strung over every possible surface and a band that knew three songs very loudly. Somewhere between the varmala and the dinner, a ticket arrived from a new agency in Wakefield. Their bulk upload had failed. I found a plastic chair behind the dessert counter, next to a tray of jalebis, and started typing.

Forty minutes later I was still there. I had fixed the upload, answered two more emails, and begun drafting a help article, because it seemed efficient while I was already sitting down.

Meera found me. She was in the green sari she had bought for the occasion, and she did not sit.

"Your mother asked me if the business is failing," she said.

"It's fine. Better than fine."

"I told her that. She said, then why does he look like that?"

I started to explain about Wakefield. She held out her hand, palm up, and waited. I gave her the phone. She dropped it into her little beaded clutch and snapped it shut.

It buzzed twice against the beads on the walk back to the lights, and neither of us said a word about it.

A notebook, a welcome email and Janet

The morning after the wedding I opened a blank document and called it "Things only I know". By lunch it had forty-one entries. How to reset a stuck bulk upload. What to say when an agent's listing comes out sounding like a wine label. Which three customers want a reply before nine their time or they ring. Most entries were two lines long. Writing them down took a week of evenings, and it was the most tedious work I have done since re-typing Ramesh's container numbers for a test file.

It was also the first time I saw the business from outside my own head. Half the entries were the same problem in different coats. Nineteen of them came back to one thing: new agencies did not know how to give the tool their voice, so I did it for them by hand, exactly as I had for Claire in that first summer, Meera watching over my shoulder.

So I automated the welcome. A new agency now uploads three old listings they are proud of, and the tool drafts a voice profile from them. They tick it or tweak it. A short series of emails goes out over their first ten days, each one answering a question I had answered by hand at least a dozen times. Day

three is about EPC ratings, because of Deborah. Support tickets in a new customer's first month fell from about six to two. I am fairly sure of that figure; I counted for a quarter, then got bored.

The two that remained still needed a person. Ideally a person who was awake in Yorkshire.

Janet had run the lettings desk at an agency in Otley for twenty-two years before retiring, and Claire introduced us. We spoke on a video call where her cat walked across the keyboard twice. I offered six hours a week, mostly evenings her time, at \$20 an hour. About \$520 a month, which was a real bite out of a \$3,400 life, and I nearly talked myself out of it twice.

"What happens if I can't fix something?" Janet said.

"You message me."

"At two in the morning, your time?"

"Yes."

She frowned at me through the screen. "Then you haven't really hired me, have you. You've hired a doorbell."

She was right, and it stung. We agreed a rule instead: anything that could wait for my morning, waited. Anything that could not, and in eight months there have been three, she rang Meera's phone, not mine.

In April we went to Mount Abu for six days. I left my laptop at home and kept my phone in the hotel safe, checking it once each evening. Janet handled eleven tickets. She marked one "for Sushil, no rush" and I answered it the following Monday, in daylight, with coffee.

The note she had left was eight words long. "Graham says the wine label is back. Fixed."

Four o'clock on a Wednesday

It happened on a Wednesday in late September, at 3:52 in the afternoon, and I almost missed it.

A small agency in Ilkley upgraded from Solo to Agency. Thirty dollars more a month. The Stripe notification slid in at

the corner of my screen while I was halfway through a reply to Bev, and I glanced at the dashboard out of habit, the way you glance at a clock you already know is slow. Monthly recurring revenue had crossed the figure circled in blue at the top of my whiteboard. The circle had been there for fourteen months. The marker had faded to the colour of weak tea.

I sat and waited for something to happen inside me.

Nothing much did. The ceiling fan turned. A scooter horn went off twice on the road outside, then a third time, longer, as if the rider had taken the first two personally. I had imagined this moment so often, usually late at night with my phone lighting up the ceiling, and in every version I felt something large. Relief, maybe. A small parade. What I actually felt was closer to stepping off a train after a long journey and standing on the platform, unsure which way the exit is.

I did not trust that feeling, so I checked the sum. Then I checked it again, with the taxes Meera had insisted on, and the buffer, and Janet's \$520. It held. The number was real and I was still sitting in the same chair, wearing the same faded T-shirt with a chai stain near the collar, with forty-one entries in a document called "Things only I know" that was now, mostly, things Janet knew too.

I am still not entirely sure why it felt so flat. My best guess is that I had been treating the number as a finish line when it was really a permission slip. Nobody hands you a medal for a permission slip. You just get to use it.

At 3:58 my phone buzzed. Meera.

"Are you doing pickup or am I?" she wrote.

For two years the honest answer had been her, almost always, with me promising next week. I looked at the half-written reply to Bev. It could wait for the morning. Janet would see anything that couldn't.

"Me," I wrote back.

I closed the laptop at 4:01. It made that small soft click, the one I had heard thousands of times at midnight and never once in daylight. Behind it, somewhere in a data centre I will never visit, the tool kept working: a listing in Harrogate being rewritten in Graham's voice, a welcome email going out to an agency in Wakefield, a voice profile being drafted from three listings someone in Leeds was proud of.

The school gate on our road opens at 4:15. I was there at 4:12, early for the first time, standing among the other parents in the dust and the heat. When she came out, bag bumping against her knees, she saw me and stopped dead.

"Why are you here?" she said.

"I finished early."

She thought about it, then handed me her water bottle and took my hand, and we walked home the long way, past the man who sells roasted corn.

About the Author

Sushil Choudhary writes about building small, sustainable software businesses in the age of AI. His approach is practical: find real problems, reach real customers and run the numbers honestly, so that a business supports a life instead of consuming it. In *Ship Small, Live Large*, he draws on his own experience as a founder, including his mistakes, to offer a grounded alternative to venture-scale hype. He writes for first-time founders, side-project builders and non-programmers who want to turn AI tools into dependable income and more time for the people and pursuits that matter most to them.