

## WEB DESIGN

# How to Start a Web Design Business: A Practical Guide



Most of the advice you can find around **how to start a web design business** focuses on the same generic steps.

Pick a niche. Write a business plan. Set up your work environment.

Let's face it though...

Anyone can come up with a business plan and buy some office supplies. But none of that actually helps you go from \$0 to running a profitable web design business.

In this article, I'm going to show you 5 practical steps you can take to start your web design business from scratch *today*.

These are the exact steps I used to grow my own web design business to six figures within one year. They're easy to follow and will work for you even if you've never designed a website or written a line of code before.

## The Biggest Challenge in Starting a Web Design Business

Before we get into the steps, I want to address an obstacle that prevents many new web designers from ever getting their businesses off the ground.

Surprisingly, it's not a lack of information, resources, or technical skills. It's not even a lack of business or sales experience.

The number one obstacle is the belief that **everything has to be perfect before you can start your web design business**.

This is the belief that causes web designers to spend months choosing the perfect business name, identifying the perfect niche, and learning everything they can about coding...

*All without ever taking action and moving towards their goals.*

Fortunately, you don't have to fall into that trap.

You can start your web design business and land your first clients in just a couple of weeks. All you need is the right strategy and the willingness to take action.

So if you're ready to get started, let's dive into the five steps.

## Step #1: Develop the Right Mindset

Your mindset is the most important factor in the success of your web design business.

The right mindset will help you consistently land bigger and better projects at every stage of your journey. The wrong one will leave you struggling for years to make a profit.

When it comes to mindset, I'm not just talking about your confidence or self-esteem (although those things are important).

I'm talking about how you view web design.

If you can get this right from the beginning, every aspect of starting and growing your business will be easier.

## You Are Not Selling Websites

Imagine you own a plumbing business...

You have customers to serve, employees to manage, and 100 other urgent tasks on your to-do list.

One day, a web designer comes to you and says:

"I noticed that your website looks pretty outdated. If you hire me, I can build you a beautiful, custom-coded website to showcase your plumbing services. It'll be fully responsive and look amazing on phones and tablets."

How likely are you to say yes to this offer?

Unless you were already looking for a web designer, investing your time and money into a new "custom-coded" website probably isn't going to be your top priority. You're simply too busy running your business to worry about that.

So what DO you worry about?

Getting more qualified leads...Making your sales process easier...Spending less time and money on processes that could be automated...

In other words, things that can move your business forward.

If a web designer offered to help you with any of those things, you'd be much more likely to stop and listen.

Because here's the truth: *Business owners don't buy websites, they buy solutions to their problems.*

Understanding this is critical if you want to build a profitable web design business. It will allow you to sell more easily and at much higher prices than your competitors.

## Understand How a Website Can Help a Business

In order to get the most out of this mindset shift, it's important to know exactly [how a website can help a business](#).

To help get you started, here are 10 powerful results a website can provide:

1. Bringing in more leads and sales
2. Filtering out poor fit customers
3. Differentiating a business from its competitors

4. Making it easier for customers to buy/book online
5. Increasing visibility (through SEO, ads, etc.)
6. Building trust and authority
7. Automating repetitive tasks
8. Improving reputation
9. Allowing customers to download important documents/information
10. Preparing customers for the sales process

Don't worry if you aren't sure how to build a website that gets these results yet. I'll cover that in the next step.

Just know that approaching a business owner with any of these solutions will be 100x more effective than trying to sell them on custom code or a beautiful design.

## Step #2: Learn How to Build a Website (in Less Than a Week)

If you've never built a website before, you may think you need to be an expert in coding before you can start helping real clients.

While this may have been true 10 or 20 years ago, it isn't today.

Most businesses only care about the results a website can bring them. And with so many easy-to-use web design tools available, you no longer need to spend years mastering HTML, CSS, and Javascript to build websites that *get results* for businesses.

### Pick One Method of Building

To avoid overwhelming yourself, I recommend learning just one method of building websites when starting out.

Here are three options that either I or my students use on a regular basis:

#### HTML Templates

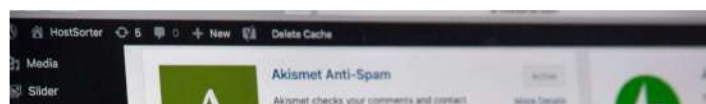


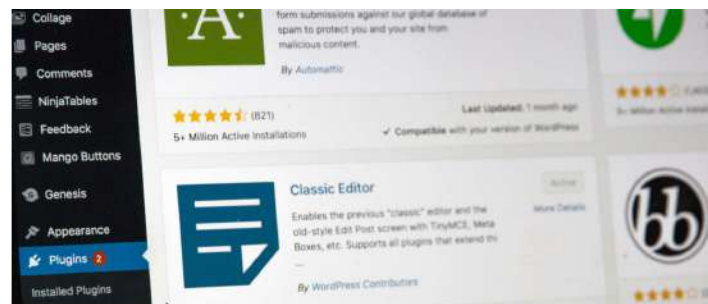
This is the method I've used to build the majority of my websites.

HTML templates are simple to use and allow you to put together an effective website in just a couple of days. All you need is [a basic understanding of HTML & CSS](#) to get started.

If you're interested in this method, I've put together a simple 20-minute video tutorial that walks you through each step of the process: [How to Build Websites the Lazy Way](#).

#### WordPress + Elementor



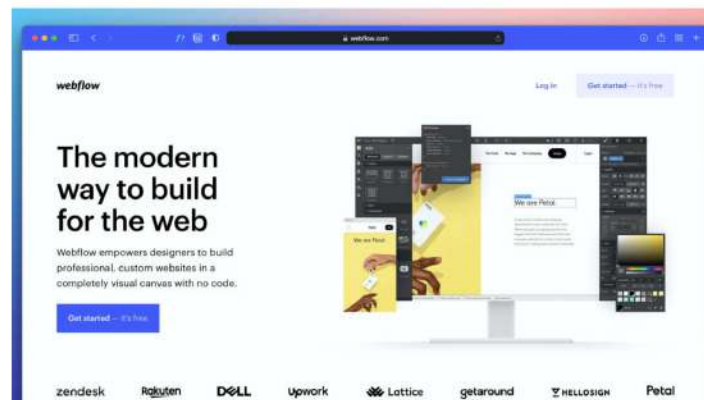


Many of my students use this method and get great results.

It's a great option if you want to build high-quality websites without having to learn any code.

Both WordPress and Elementor are free to get started and there are plenty of in-depth tutorials available online. You can also find inexpensive WordPress courses on sites like Udemy.

### Webflow



This is another option that several of my students use. It's also what this website is currently built on.

[Webflow](#) has a slightly bigger learning curve than the other options, but their [online university](#) can teach you how to build a basic website in just a few days.

## You Only Need to Know the Basics

Many designers get caught in "tutorial hell" at this stage.

They spend months trying to master every single aspect of building websites when they could be helping businesses with the knowledge they already have.

*Please avoid this trap.*

All you need to know when starting out is how to build a simple website with your chosen method. And with all the options listed above, you can definitely do that within a week.

In the next step, you'll be able to continue growing your technical knowledge and skills while working with real clients.

## Building Websites That Gets Results

While you need to learn the technical side of building a website, it's even more important to learn how to build a website that actually gets results for a business.

This is the skill that will allow you to charge premium prices for your web design services.

To help you master this, here's one of my most in-depth videos showing how I build



websites that generate massive results for my clients:



## Step #3: Get Your First Clients

Once you have the right mindset and can build a basic website, you're ready to start working with real businesses.

However, this doesn't mean you should jump right into selling your services.

### Where Most Web Designers Go Wrong

Many new web designers think the best way to make money quickly is to start selling to big businesses right away. After all, those are the businesses with money to spend on a website.

This approach usually ends up failing, and here's why:

They're trying to sell their services without any trust.

### Trust is the Key to Selling Web Design

When you approach a business to sell web design, there are plenty of reasons they might reject your offer. They may not see the value of a new website or might just be happy with how their current website is performing.

But the most common reason is that business owners view web design as HIGH RISK. They're asking themselves questions like:

- "What if they waste my time and don't deliver what they are promising?"
- "What if this person damages my business reputation?"
- "What if they scam me or my customers?"
- "What if it all goes wrong and the website is a disaster?"

When you're just starting out and have no real projects under your belt, it's very difficult to convince a business owner to trust you or the service you're offering.

So what's the solution?

Prove you can deliver results by building **1-2 portfolio websites**.

I'm not talking about creating "mock" websites or anything like that. These portfolio websites should be for real businesses with real problems.

This means you're going to find your first real clients.

### Choosing the Right Portfolio Clients

Since the goal of your portfolio is to show you can deliver results, it's important to pick businesses that will give you the best chance of success. When you work with the right type of clients at the start of your business, it's going to be much easier to land more profitable projects as your business grows.

profitable projects as your business grows.

Here are a few criteria to keep in mind when looking for potential clients (I'll explain exactly how you can find these types of clients in the next section):

### **They Already Have a Great Business**

The best way to ensure a successful portfolio project is to work with businesses that are already doing well.

Why? Because it's hard to get results for a business that is struggling, especially when you're new to web design.

Here are some signs of a great business:

- Great reputation and reviews
- High demand for what they're selling
- Track record of results
- Well known or brand name
- Unique style, service, or selling point

If you can find a business with a few or all of these points, then you have a potentially great portfolio client.

### **They Have a Bad Website**

A bad website doesn't mean an old website. It means a website that isn't getting them the best results possible.

An ideal portfolio client is a business that's already doing well but is missing out on potential results because of an underperforming website. You can ask yourself these questions to determine if a business's website is bad:

- Does it help you to buy their product or service?
- Could it be making it easier for you to take action?
- Could it be building more trust and connection?
- Is it removing/reducing your fear of taking action?

*In short – does their current website have a sales problem? Could it be more effective at selling?*

### **They're Motivated to Take Action**

This is probably the most important factor to consider when looking for portfolio clients.

Even if you find someone with an amazing business and an underperforming website, none of that matters if they aren't motivated to take action.

You only want to work with business owners who are eager to get started and really want you to help them get results. This will save you a ton of time and potential headaches in the future.

## **How to Land Portfolio Projects**

Now that you know what type of clients you should be looking for, it's time to take action and get your first projects.

Since you don't have any results you can use to build trust yet, the easiest way to find these initial clients is to look at where you *already* have trust built up.

### **Find People Who Already Trust You**

For most new web designers, your level of trust is going to be highest with people in your existing network. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Family

- Friends
- Friends of friends
- Personal connections
- Local businesses
- Work connections
- Past jobs
- Businesses you use
- Local Facebook groups
- Local business meetups
- Networking events
- Sports clubs

All you need to do is find 1-2 people in your network with real businesses and real problems that a website could help them solve.

While your trust will definitely be higher with people who already know you, don't worry if you can't find anyone in your immediate network. Even something like being from the same city or having hobbies in common can be enough to break the ice with a more distant connection.

### Keep Your Pitch Simple

Once you've identified a few potential clients, the next step is to start a conversation.

Your goal isn't to sell at this stage, so don't worry about having the perfect pitch. The best thing you can do is be honest about why you're reaching out and make it clear how you can help them.

For example, you could send them an email or Facebook message saying something like:

"Hey, I'm just starting my web design business and I'm looking to build you a portfolio website. It's going to help you with [the problem you think you can solve]. I'm willing to do this for [cheap price or for free] because I want to use it to grow my web design business."

The key here is to just start taking action and talking to people. You'd be surprised how many people will be open to helping you out when you're first starting out.

If you need more help with this, you can download my free guide: [9 Ways to Build Trust When Selling a Portfolio Web Design Project](#)

It comes with three email templates that can help you land your first portfolio project *this week*.

### Should You Work for Free?

This is a question I get asked a lot. And it's one you'll find a lot of different opinions on.

I personally think doing one or two free projects is fine at this stage of your business, but only if they meet the criteria for a good portfolio project mentioned above.

When you don't have any results to justify your price, it's much easier to get the *right* kind of clients to work with you if you're not focused on making a sale.

That being said, you want to make sure that you aren't stuck doing free work for too long. That's why I recommend keeping your portfolio projects as simple as possible (e.g. don't try and build a 10-page site or an eCommerce store for your first project).

## Navigating a Successful Portfolio Project

Before we move on to the next step, here are some tips to help ensure your first couple of projects go as smoothly as possible.

### Have a Clear Goal Before You Start

Having a clearly defined goal for your project is critical because it:

1. Helps keep the project on track, and
2. Makes it easier to identify what results you've helped the business achieve

No matter what the goal is (more sales, less poor-fit customers, etc.), make sure you and your client agree on it before you start the project.

### Keep the Project Simple

As I mentioned above, you don't want to take on large or very complex projects when you're in the portfolio stage. Doing so can massively slow down your progress.

While there's no hard rule on what size your portfolio projects should be, I recommend not going beyond a 3-5 page website. For many businesses, a simple [one-page website](#) is more than enough to get them great results.

### Make the Process as Easy as Possible for the Client

This tip applies to any project you take on but it's especially important for your first couple of websites.

Even if you're building the website for free, your client still has to invest their time and attention into the project. And the quickest way to lose a client is to add more work to their already busy schedule.

So try your best to do as much of the heavy lifting as possible.

You won't be perfect at this stage, but showing that you understand how busy your clients are (and that you respect their time) is the best way to ensure a smooth project.

## Step #4: Use Your Results to Get Bigger Projects

Once you've completed 1-2 portfolio websites, you can start using them to land higher-paying projects.

This means learning how to leverage your results effectively.

### Measuring Your Results

The first step in leveraging your results is [identifying and measuring them](#).

It's rare that a new website goes online and immediately brings in a ton of new leads or causes a huge boost in sale. In fact, the full impact of a new website often can't be measured for months or even up to a year after it goes online.

Does that mean you need to wait a year to start leveraging your portfolio projects?

Not if you know what to look for.

#### Start With Short-Term Results

As soon as a new website goes live, it can have a positive impact on a business.

The best way to identify these short-term results is to look at what problems the business was facing before you started the project and what you did to solve those problems. You also want to consider the goals you had when starting the project.

Here are some questions to help with this:

- *Is it easier for potential customers to contact the business?*
- *Can they now sell their products online?*
- *Are there better images or more trust signals on the website?*
- *Is the copywriting more compelling?*
- *Is it easier for visitors to understand their services?*



- Is it easier for visitors to understand their services?
- What does the business owner think about the new website?
- What are their family and friends saying about it?
- How are current customers responding to it?

Try to list as many results as possible for each of your portfolio projects.

Don't worry if they don't seem very significant right now—you don't need huge results to turn a portfolio project into a valuable selling tool.

## What to Look For in Future Clients

The next step is identifying the right clients to reach out to. While your search should be based on the results you just created, there are a few different ways you can approach this:

### Target Similar Businesses

The easiest way to identify new potential clients is to look at businesses similar to the ones you built portfolio sites for. If you worked with a plumbing company, that means targeting other plumbing companies.

I recommend starting with similar businesses in your general area (city, town, etc.) since location is another trust signal that can make selling easier. But if your results are strong enough, you can definitely expand your search to your whole country or even [international clients](#).

### Target Businesses in the Same Overall Niche

This approach opens up your pool of potential clients a bit more.

Instead of just targeting plumbing companies, you could target businesses in the home improvement industry as a whole. This could be landscapers, HVAC companies, painters, or even window washers.

While a landscaper may offer a very different service than a plumber, they'll likely have many similarities in terms of their goals and problems.

### Target Businesses with the Same Problems

This approach can produce some of the best results, but it requires you to be very clear on the problems you solved for your portfolio clients.

Let's say one of the big problems you solved for the plumbing company was a lack of trust signals on their website. You want to ask yourself what other types of businesses might be struggling because they aren't building enough trust online.

Here are a few options off the top of my head:

- Real estate agents
- Accountants
- Lawyers
- Dentists
- Personal trainers

All of these businesses need to build trust in order to consistently bring in new customers.

I know it may seem weird to reach out to an accountant or personal trainer after working with a plumbing company. But if you can show them that you understand their problems and have an effective solution, you'll be surprised at how many businesses will be open to your help.

### Don't Overcomplicate It

As with everything else in this article, try to keep things simple. Look at your best results and pick a category of business that you think would most benefit from your help.

Once you start taking action and speaking with different businesses, you'll quickly see who responds best.

## How to Find New Clients

Now that you know what types of businesses you want to target, it's time get in front of them.

There are plenty of different ways to get web design clients, but I find it's best to focus on three core methods at this stage. Each of these methods allows you to start taking action as soon as you finish your portfolio projects.

### 1. Ask For Referrals

This is probably the most effective way of getting your next clients—nothing builds trust like a referral from someone you previously worked with.

Asking for referrals doesn't need to be complicated or awkward. Just ask your portfolio clients if they know anyone else who might need help getting similar results or solving similar problems.

### 2. Networking Groups & Events

After referrals, networking is the highest leverage method of getting new clients.

You can find networking groups and events in almost every city these days. And if there aren't any in your area, you can always find them online.

Here are some ideas to get you started:

- [BNI \(Business Network International\)](#) – this is a paid group with chapters in most major cities
- [Local Meetups](#)
- Facebook Groups – I find paid and private groups tend to be the highest quality
- Industry Events

Ideally, you want to look for places that are likely to have the kind of clients you identified in the last section.

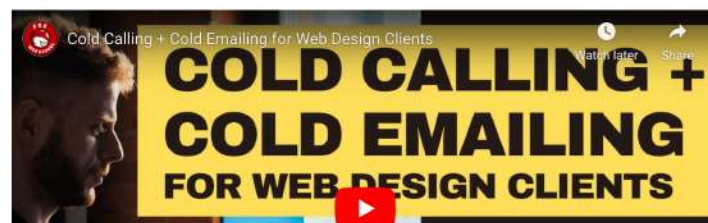
### 3. Cold Calling & Cold Emailing

A lot of people shy away from cold calling and cold emailing, but [when used the right way](#), cold outreach can be a very effective way to grow your web design business.

Here are some basic tips to keep in mind when doing any kind of cold outreach:

- Don't try to sell in your first call or email (your goal should be to *start* a conversation)
- Try to keep your initial emails/calls short
- 80% of your effort should go into picking the right businesses to contact and 20% should go into actually making contact
- Aim for quality over quantity—it's better to send 20 quality emails than 100 copy and paste ones

If you want a detailed explanation of how I use cold outreach to find clients, check out this video:





## Keep Leveraging Your Results

However you choose to find new clients at this stage, you should continue looking for ways to leverage your results into bigger and better projects. This means being strategic about choosing what projects you work on.

Before taking on any new project, you want to ask yourself questions like these:

- Will working on this project make it easier for me to get better projects in the future?
- Could working on this project open up potential referral or networking opportunities?
- Will taking on this project give me the opportunity to learn new profitable skills?

Strategically choosing your projects—instead of just taking whatever comes to you—is the key to rapidly growing your business and your income.

## Step #5: Taking Things Further

The previous four steps were designed to take you from zero experience to consistently landing profitable projects as a web designer.

You have two different choices in front of you once you hit that point...

### Option One: Keep Growing Your Business

Your approach to this will depend on the types of clients you've worked with and the results you've created, but the idea here is to build up your web design business to its full potential.

This is where you start to look at things like picking a niche, growing your brand, and using inbound marketing strategies to attract clients organically.

If you look at my content, you'll notice I don't have a lot of information on those topics.

I focus on teaching you how to use web design as a stepping stone on your entrepreneurial journey...

### Option Two: Use Web Design to Start Something Bigger

After teaching and interacting with thousands of web designers, the number one reason I see most people getting into web design is that it's a starting point for them to create something bigger in the future.

They don't want to build an agency or work as a web designer for the rest of their lives.

Instead, they see web design as a way to start making money, learn profitable skills, and gain a ton of real-world experience. Then they use the money, skills, and experience to build the next level of their big plan or vision.

That could be starting an eCommerce store, developing an app, or even building a successful brick-and-mortar business.

The end result will vary for everyone, but this "in and out" approach is the difference between web designers that make \$100,000/year and ones that end up making \$1,000,000/year.

If that approach resonates with you, here are a few final tips to help you move in the right direction:

## Learn How to Sell

Out of all the skills you can learn as a web designer, the ability to sell is easily the most useful and profitable. That's why I talk about sales in most of my content.

Fortunately, starting a web design business means [learning how to sell websites on a regular basis](#).

But don't just stop there...

Read books on sales. Watch videos of sales experts. Take sales courses.

The more you can improve your sales skills while growing your web design business, the more likely you will be to succeed in any future business you start.

## Increase Your Profits & Decrease Your Time Investment

Getting profitable fast is critical if you want to use your web design business as a launchpad for something bigger. This means a) learning [how to charge higher prices](#) and b) removing yourself from the work through outsourcing and systemization.

You should focus on both of those things as soon as you're out of the portfolio stage.

## Pay Attention to Gaps in the Market

As you work with more and more web design clients, you'll get a first-hand look at the problems different businesses are facing. Don't take these opportunities for granted—even if the problems aren't related to web design.

With the skills you develop as web designer, you'll be in the perfect position to find a solution to one of those problems and turn it into your next (even bigger) business.

## FAQs

I wrote this article to give you an easy-to-follow guide for starting your web design business. And if you follow the steps I've laid out, I'm confident you'll make faster progress than 90% of web designers out there.

However, you might still have questions about the smaller details of starting and running your business.

So here are my answers to some of the most common questions I get asked:

### Should I pick a niche when starting out?

In my experience, it's best to worry about picking a niche *after* you've finished your first few projects.

When you have no experience working with real clients, it's hard to know what niches are going to be right for you and your business. It makes more sense to get some real experience first before trying to make that decision.

### Do I need a website?

I don't recommend building your own website when you're just starting out.

The process usually just slows down new web designers, especially if they have no results or case studies to share on the site. You're better off using that time get your first few projects and start getting paid.

That being said, I understand that having your own website can help boost your confidence in the beginning. So go ahead and build one if you want—just don't spend too much time on it until you have real results to share.

### What platform/tool should I use to build websites?

The short answer: *whichever is easiest for you to learn and get results with.*



While some businesses do have a preference, most have no idea about any of this stuff—that's why they're hiring a web designer. So pick the tool that allows you to work quickly and get businesses the results they care about.

## I'm not ready to quit my job. Can I start my web design business while working?

Yes, although you might make slower progress than someone who has more time.

We all have bills to pay and there's nothing wrong with waiting until you're making a consistent income from web design before you quit your job. Just make sure you're very strategic with how you choose your first projects.

This will help you avoid wasting any of your already limited time.

## What's the best way to invoice clients?

I used [Paypal](#) when I started out and then later transitioned to using [Freshbooks](#).

There are plenty of different invoicing options available depending on where you and your clients located, but the most important thing to keep in mind is this:

*Always make it as easy as possible for your clients to pay you.*

## Should I use freelancing sites like Upwork & Fiverr to get clients?

Based on my own personal experience (I started out trying to get clients on Upwork), there are more effective ways to grow your web design business.

It wasn't until I stopped using Upwork and started following the steps laid out in this post that my business really took off.

## Should I use my own name for my web design business?

I usually tell web designers not to get too hung up on this. At the end of the day, the results you produce and your ability to get in front of clients are more important than how you choose to name your business.

But if you're feeling really stuck on this, here are a couple of guidelines that might help make the decision easier:

1. If your goal is to stay a solo freelancer or keep things small, then using your name could be a good idea.
2. If your goal is to build an agency and sell your business in the future, then it's probably better to name your business something else.

Just remember that these are things you can always change later on. The important thing when starting out is to get your first projects and build out your client base as quickly as possible.

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