WHAT KIND OF ONLINE BUSINESS SHOULD I START?

A beginner's guide to choosing your first online business model

You don't need to choose your forever business today.

You just need to understand the roads in front of you well enough to decide which one you want to explore first.

BEGIN THE JOURNEY

Start with the choice in front of you

You've decided you want to start an online business. That sounds like a decision - and it is. But almost immediately, another question appears:

What kind of online business?

This is one of the first places many beginners get stuck. Advice such as 'find your niche', 'follow your passion', 'choose a profitable idea' and 'solve a problem' can all be reasonable - but it still doesn't show you what you are actually choosing between.

So this guide looks at five common online business models: how each makes money, what you would actually spend your time doing, what you need to get started, and the good and not-so-good parts of each.

The goal isn't to decide your entire future. It is simply to choose one road worth exploring first.

Begin the Journey

1. SELLING A SERVICE

You have a skill or ability that somebody else needs, and they pay you to do something for them. That could be bookkeeping, writing, graphic design, social media management, virtual assistance, tutoring, website maintenance, editing or dozens of other services.

HOW DO YOU MAKE MONEY?

A client pays you for your time, expertise or a particular piece of work. You might charge by the hour, by the project or a set monthly amount.

WHAT WOULD YOU ACTUALLY BE DOING?

You would find clients who need your skill, agree on the work and price, then perform that work online. Much of your time is spent doing the promised service and communicating with clients.

WHAT DO YOU NEED?

A skill someone will pay for and a way for potential clients to discover you.

THE GOOD PART

It can be one of the quickest ways to start because you can sell a skill you already have.

THE NOT-SO-GOOD PART

Income is often connected to your time, and you need to be comfortable dealing directly with customers.

2. SELLING DIGITAL PRODUCTS

Instead of doing work individually for each customer, you create something digital that people can buy - such as templates, spreadsheets, ebooks, guides, worksheets, printables or courses.

HOW DO YOU MAKE MONEY?

You create the product and sell copies of it. You don't have to recreate it every time somebody buys.

WHAT WOULD YOU ACTUALLY BE DOING?

You would create and test the product, decide where to sell it, create a sales page or listing and then market it to people who might need it.

WHAT DO YOU NEED?

Something useful to create, a way to create it, somewhere to sell it and a way for buyers to find it.

THE GOOD PART

The same digital product can be sold more than once.

THE NOT-SO-GOOD PART

Creating a product doesn't automatically create customers. You still have to market it.

3. AFFILIATE MARKETING

With affiliate marketing, you recommend somebody else's product or service. If someone buys through your special affiliate link, you receive a commission.

HOW DO YOU MAKE MONEY?

A company pays you a percentage or fixed amount when your recommendation leads to a qualifying purchase.

WHAT WOULD YOU ACTUALLY BE DOING?

You would create useful content - perhaps blog posts, Pinterest content, videos, emails or social posts - and recommend relevant products or services within that content.

WHAT DO YOU NEED?

Suitable products to recommend, an affiliate programme, useful content and people who see it.

THE GOOD PART

You don't have to develop, manufacture or deliver the product yourself.

THE NOT-SO-GOOD PART

You need traffic or an audience, and you don't control the product, price or commission.

4. BUILDING A CONTENT-BASED BUSINESS

A blog, YouTube channel, newsletter or other content platform can attract an audience that can eventually be monetised through products, services, affiliates, advertising or sponsorships.

HOW DO YOU MAKE MONEY?

Usually through a combination of methods rather than simply being paid to publish content.

WHAT WOULD YOU ACTUALLY BE DOING?

Creating useful or entertaining content consistently, learning what your audience wants, attracting visitors or viewers and gradually building trust.

WHAT DO YOU NEED?

A subject you can create useful content around, somewhere to publish it and patience while you build an audience.

THE GOOD PART

Your content can become an asset that keeps bringing people into your business.

THE NOT-SO-GOOD PART

It usually takes time. Publishing content does not guarantee that people will find it.

5. SELLING PHYSICAL PRODUCTS ONLINE

This is traditional selling brought onto the internet. You sell something people can physically receive - products you make, source, resell or have supplied and shipped by another company.

HOW DO YOU MAKE MONEY?

You sell the product for more than it costs to produce, buy and deliver, after allowing for other expenses.

WHAT WOULD YOU ACTUALLY BE DOING?

You may be sourcing or making products, photographing them, creating listings, handling orders, answering questions, dealing with suppliers and organising shipping.

WHAT DO YOU NEED?

A product, somewhere to sell it and customers. Depending on the model, you may also need money for stock, packaging, delivery or platform fees.

THE GOOD PART

People readily understand buying a physical product, and established platforms can make selling easier.

THE NOT-SO-GOOD PART

There can be more moving parts - stock, suppliers, shipping, returns and upfront costs.

So which one should you choose?

You don't need to choose what 'feels right' and hope for the best. Use these questions to narrow the options.

Do I want to work directly with clients?

If you like one-to-one work and already have a useful skill, a service business may be worth exploring first.

Do I already have a skill someone might pay me for?

Don't dismiss ordinary skills. Bookkeeping, administration, writing, organising, teaching, designing and editing all solve real problems.

Would I rather create something once and sell it more than once?

Digital products may appeal to you - as long as you're also willing to learn how to market them.

Do I enjoy explaining, writing, teaching or sharing?

A content-based business or affiliate marketing may suit you, but be prepared to give it time.

Do I want to sell something tangible?

Then a physical-product business may be worth investigating. Understand the costs and logistics before buying stock.

How much money can I realistically invest?

Choose a model that fits the money you actually have available, without putting yourself under pressure.

How much time do I really have?

Not the time you wish you had. The amount you actually have around your existing responsibilities.

How quickly do I need this business to make money?

If income is needed sooner, selling an existing skill may be more realistic than spending months building an audience.

You don't have to pick only one forever

These models can overlap. A service business might later create digital products. A blogger might use affiliate marketing. A content creator might eventually sell a course.

But when you're starting, trying to build all of them at once is a very good way to become overwhelmed.

So don't choose five. Choose one to explore first.

Your first decision

Look back at the options. Which one made you think: 'I could actually see myself doing that'?

Not which one sounds as though it will make you rich fastest. Not which one somebody on social media says is 'passive'. Which one fits your skills, available time, budget and the kind of work you're willing to do?

You're not signing a lifelong contract. You're simply choosing your starting road.

One step at a time

Starting an online business becomes overwhelming when we try to answer every question at once. Today we answered just one: What kind of online business do I want to explore?

That's your first step. Now we can take the next one together.