The Zero-Click Economy Is Here, and It’s Stealing the Traffic You Rely On. Here’s How to Adapt Before It’s Too Late.

Opinions expressed by Entrepreneur contributors are their own.

Key Takeaways

- Nearly 60% of searches now end without a click to any external website. AI-generated answers now directly provide complete information — meaning customers no longer need to visit your website.
- Founders who are successfully navigating this are building to be cited (not visited), building direct audience relationships and positioning for AI recommendation, not just AI awareness.
- You have 12-18 months to adapt before this becomes a crisis. Audit your AI search presence, identify your authority assets, and launch your owned distribution.

Three months ago, a Series B SaaS founder told me his organic traffic was down 40% year-over-year, but he couldn’t figure out why. His content was performing well. His domain authority hadn’t changed. His rankings were stable. Everything looked fine in Google Search Console.

Then we looked at what was actually happening in search results. When potential customers searched for solutions in

his category, they weren’t seeing his carefully crafted meta descriptions and compelling title tags. They were seeing AI-generated answers that compared his product to competitors, synthesized reviews and made recommendations — all without ever mentioning his brand or linking to his site.

His customers weren’t avoiding his website. They simply never needed to visit it. The decision was being made in the AI answer itself.

Welcome to the zero-click economy, where nearly 60% of searches now end without a click to any external website. If you’re a founder who built your growth engine on organic search, your acquisition model is breaking. If you’re just now scaling past product-market fit and counting on SEO to drive cost-efficient growth, the playbook you’re following is already obsolete.

Why this matters more for growing companies

Enterprise brands have resources to absorb this shift. They can increase paid spend, boost brand awareness campaigns and invest in PR. They have sales teams, channel partnerships and brand equity built over decades.

You don’t have those luxuries. You probably built your growth model specifically around the efficiency of organic search. Your customer acquisition cost was manageable precisely because people found you through Google without paid ads. Your growth projections to investors assumed that channel would scale.

Now, that channel is evaporating, and your options are significantly more expensive.

Paid search is saturated and expensive. The competitors with deeper pockets will simply outbid you. Social advertising

requires constant creative refreshment and has become an optimization hamster wheel. Outbound sales works for enterprise but doesn't scale for SMB or mid-market without massive team expansion.

The founders who will win in the next 24 months aren't the ones with the best SEO strategies. They're the ones who recognize that the rules of customer acquisition just fundamentally changed — and adapt faster than their competition.

What zero-click actually looks like in practice

Let's get specific about what's happening. When your potential customer searches for your product category, here's what they're increasingly seeing:

AI overviews: Google's AI-generated summaries that appear at the top of search results, synthesizing information from multiple sources and providing direct answers. If someone searches "best CRM for small business," they get a complete answer with comparisons, feature breakdowns and recommendations without clicking anywhere.

ChatGPT search: Users are now searching directly in ChatGPT, which provides detailed, sourced answers that often include product comparisons and recommendations. It cites sources, but those citations are for credibility — users aren't clicking through to read the full content.

Perplexity and other AI search engines: Purpose-built AI search engines that provide comprehensive answers with citations. Users get everything they need in a single interface.

The pattern is consistent: Users ask questions, AI provides synthesized answers, and decisions get made without ever

visiting your site.

Here’s what’s particularly brutal for founders: You’re not just losing traffic. You’re losing the ability to control your own narrative. When a potential customer visited your website, you controlled the story. Your messaging, your positioning, your differentiation — you presented it exactly how you wanted.

Now, an AI system decides what to say about you, how to position you against competitors and whether to mention you at all.

The 3 founder traps

Having worked with dozens of companies navigating this transition, I see founders falling into three traps:

Trap 1: Optimizing for yesterday’s algorithms

I see founders doubling down on traditional SEO — more content, more backlinks, more keyword targeting. They’re fighting harder in a game where the rules have already changed. The AI doesn’t care about your keyword density or your title tags. It cares about whether you’re genuinely authoritative and whether your content is trustworthy enough to cite.

Trap 2: Treating this as a marketing problem

Founders delegate this to their head of marketing to “figure out AI SEO.” But this isn’t a channel optimization problem. This is a strategic business model problem. If your customer acquisition model depends on organic discovery and organic discovery is being mediated by AI, you need to fundamentally rethink how customers find and choose you.

Trap 3: Waiting for clarity

I hear founders say “we’re monitoring the situation” or “we’ll see how this plays out.” The founders who win during platform shifts aren’t the ones who wait for certainty. They’re the ones who act on directional correctness, while others wait for perfect information. By the time there’s clarity, the positions of strength will already be taken.

What winning founders are doing differently

The founders who are successfully navigating this aren’t abandoning search — they’re repositioning how they think about it. Here’s what they’re doing:

They’re building to be cited, not visited. Instead of creating content designed to rank and attract clicks, they’re creating content designed to be referenced by AI as authoritative sources. This means original research, proprietary data, unique methodologies and genuine expertise. When Perplexity or ChatGPT synthesizes an answer about your category, you want to be the source they cite.

One founder I’m working with shifted his content strategy from “how to” articles to publishing monthly industry benchmark reports with original data. Within four months, AI search engines started citing his company as the authoritative source for industry statistics. He’s not getting the traffic he used to get, but he’s getting something more valuable: His brand is being positioned as the expert every time someone asks a question in his category.

They’re building direct audience relationships. The smartest founders recognize that if AI is mediating discovery, they need to own distribution. They’re launching newsletters, building communities and creating content series that people subscribe to directly. They’re not counting on being discovered — they’re building persistent relationships where

they control the channel.

This doesn’t mean abandoning search. It means accepting that search is no longer sufficient as your primary customer acquisition channel. You need owned distribution that doesn’t depend on algorithmic intermediaries.

They’re positioning for AI recommendation, not just AI awareness. In a world where AI synthesizes and recommends, being mentioned isn’t enough. You need to be positioned favorably. This means actively managing how you’re described in sources that AI systems trust, building social proof in places AI can access and ensuring your differentiation is clear in the signals AI systems read.

Think of AI engines as the world’s most efficient research assistants working for your potential customers. They’re going to evaluate you against competitors, read reviews and synthesize positioning. Your job is to ensure that when they do that research, they find compelling reasons to recommend you.

The brutal truth about timing

Here’s what I tell every founder I work with: You have 12-18 months to adapt before this becomes a crisis.

Right now, traditional search still works. It’s declining, but it hasn’t collapsed. You still have time to build alternative distribution channels, reposition for AI citation and develop direct audience relationships. You can make this transition while you still have runway and resources.

If you wait until your organic traffic drops 60%, you’ll be making desperate moves from a position of weakness. You’ll be cutting costs, reducing headcount and trying to rebuild your growth engine while your board is panicking about your CAC economics.

The founders who move now get to make strategic choices. The founders who wait will be forced into reactive scrambles.

Your 3-month action plan

If you're serious about adapting, here's where to start:

Month 1: Audit your AI search presence. Search for key terms in your category using ChatGPT, Perplexity and Google AI Overviews. See how you're being described, whether you're being cited and how you're positioned against competitors. This is your baseline. You need to understand where you stand in AI-mediated search before you can improve it.

Month 2: Identify your authority assets. What do you know that's unique? What data do you have that others don't? What expertise can you demonstrate that positions you as cite-worthy? Build a content strategy around making these assets visible and accessible to AI systems. This might mean publishing research, contributing to industry publications or building proprietary datasets.

Month 3: Launch your owned distribution. Start building direct relationships with your audience. This could be a newsletter, a community, a Slack group, a podcast — whatever format aligns with how your customers prefer to consume information. The goal is to create a channel you own that doesn't depend on search algorithms or AI intermediaries.

This isn't about doing more marketing. It's about fundamentally repositioning how customers discover and choose you.

The opportunity in disruption

Here's the silver lining: Your competitors are probably asleep. Most companies are still operating on traditional SEO/GEO playbooks written for a world that no longer exists.

They’re optimizing for PageRank algorithms while the game has moved to AI trust algorithms.

The founders who recognize this shift earliest will establish positions that become increasingly difficult for competitors to challenge. In 18 months, when everyone realizes they need to be cited by AI, the sources AI trusts will already be established. The brands with authority will be entrenched.

If you move now, you’re not playing catch-up. You’re playing ahead. And in the zero-click economy, that early positioning advantage might be the most valuable asset you build.

The zero-click economy isn’t something that’s coming. It’s already here. Your customers are already making decisions about your product in AI interfaces you can’t see or control. The question is whether you’ll adapt your strategy while you’re still choosing from a position of strength, or whether you’ll be forced to react when the traffic cliff becomes undeniable.

The best time to adapt was six months ago. The second-best time is today.

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https://www.entrepreneur.com/growing-a-business/how-smart-founders-are-adapting-to-the-zero-click-economy/502221

Pensions Are No Longer

Reliable. Here are 8 Predictable Income Streams I’m Pursuing to Replace Mine.

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Key Takeaways

- The assumption that state-backed pensions are permanent and guaranteed is increasingly fragile. They depend on demographics, economics and political choices, all of which are changing.
- It’s now reasonable to rethink retirement planning and question whether the pension system will exist in its current form by the time we reach retirement age.
- Long-term financial security can be built by owning income streams that function like a pension: assets designed around unavoidable forces and predictable demand.

State-backed pensions are a relatively recent invention. Over time, pensions became normalized, and entire generations grew up assuming they were permanent and guaranteed. That assumption is now increasingly fragile.

According to Congruent Solutions, by 2050, there are projected to be 52 people aged 65 and over for every 100 people of working age, up from 33 in 2025 — meaning fewer contributors will be supporting more retirees.

At the same time, the working-age population across OECD countries is expected to decline significantly over the coming

decades, while public debt and competing government spending continue to rise. As a child growing up in the 1990s, I witnessed the collapse of a pension system firsthand, when many older people who had worked their entire lives felt they had lost what they were promised.

For those of us currently in our 30s and 40s, it is no longer unrealistic to question whether the pension system will exist in its current form by the time we reach retirement age, or whether it will be fundamentally restructured.

Pensions are not a natural law; they are a social system that depends on demographics, economics and political choices, all of which are changing. According to Tailor Brands, pension systems face an estimated $5.1 trillion unfunded liability when measured using market-based assumptions, leaving many plans less than 50% funded and raising doubts about their ability to meet long-term obligations.

If the goal is to build long-term income streams that can realistically function as a pension for my family, the entry point matters. I focus on businesses and investments that can start generating cash flow without large upfront capital. According to Durable’s 2026 small business analysis, many service-based businesses today can be started with an initial investment between $0 and $2,000 and reach paying customers relatively quickly. With that in mind, the ideas below are designed to compound quietly over the next 20 to 30 years.

To narrow this further, I evaluate potential income streams the same way long-term institutional investors do: by focusing on forces that are unlikely to reverse. Demographic shifts and large-scale technological adoption move slowly, but once they take hold, they tend to persist across generations.

I focus on two guiding principles:

1. **Looking 20-30 years ahead, instead of reacting to what is popular or profitable in the current cycle.** This time horizon allows temporary noise to fade and highlights what will still matter when today's trends are long forgotten.

2. **Identifying unavoidable forces**, such as Europe's aging population or the expanding role of AI as an intermediary in how people find information, make decisions and interact with businesses.

These are not speculative ideas, but structural shifts that are already in motion and difficult to reverse. This is already evident in the rapid transition of AI from experimentation to real-world applications. According to Answer Maniac, 78% of businesses were using AI for at least one function in 2025, up from 21% in 2020, representing nearly a fourfold increase in adoption within just five years.

The ideas below are intentionally diverse. Some are infrastructure-based, others digital or service-driven, some are abstract, but all share the same goal: predictable demand, ownership and long-term optionality.

1. Automated storage as a long-term infrastructure asset

One of the business models I'm considering as a long-term, pension-like asset for my family is automated storage spaces. The concept is simple: acquiring storage units and operating them with minimal human involvement through access control systems, digital locks and on-site card payments. Customers can pay, receive a code and access their space without any direct interaction, turning storage into a self-managed service. What makes this model compelling is the broader macro trend around storage as an asset.

According to Big Box, the global data storage market is projected to grow from $255.29 billion in 2025 to $774 billion by 2032, highlighting how storage in general is becoming a critical infrastructure layer. While physical storage differs from digital data, the underlying dynamic is the same: People and businesses continue to accumulate assets that require space. Well-automated storage facilities convert this demand into predictable, long-term cash flow with limited operational friction.

2. Automated parking systems as long-term urban infrastructure assets

Another business idea I’m actively analyzing as a long-term investment is automated, space-efficient infrastructure, such as automated parking systems. These systems solve a very concrete problem: limited urban space and rising land costs, by stacking assets vertically and operating with minimal human involvement.

The global automated parking system market was valued at $2.37 billion in 2024, which shows that this is already a functioning, monetized market rather than a theoretical concept. What makes the idea more compelling is where the market is heading next. According to Detailed Drivers, the automated parking system market is projected to reach $6.66 billion by 2030, driven by the demand for sustainable infrastructure, reduced land usage and advances in robotics and automation.

For me, this gap between today’s market value and the projected future size is exactly where long-term, pension-like investments make sense – entering infrastructure-based businesses before they become fully mainstream, but after demand is already clearly established.

3. Turning my SEO agency into a systemized asset

I’m considering restructuring my existing SEO and Digital PR agency so that it operates as a systemized business rather than a traditional service company. The focus is not on changing the services themselves, but on how clients enter, pay and interact with the agency over time. By automating client onboarding, recurring payments, invoicing and internal workflows, the business becomes far less dependent on constant manual involvement. This approach aligns closely with how modern businesses already operate.

According to Patrick Rice, the global subscription economy was valued at approximately $492.34 billion in 2024 and is projected to reach $1.51 trillion by 2033, growing at a compound annual growth rate of 13.3% between 2025 and 2033. This growth reflects a clear shift toward recurring revenue models that provide predictable income and stronger, longer-term customer relationships.

Most clients already manage multiple monthly subscriptions for software, tools and platforms, so adding a structured, recurring payment for an ongoing service no longer feels unusual or disruptive. Instead, it fits naturally into existing habits, making systemized service delivery easier to accept, easier to manage and far more sustainable over the long term.

4. Investing in a hosting company as a minority owner

Through my consulting activity, I’m helping several hosting companies with marketing strategy, positioning and growth. Rather than remaining only an external advisor, a logical next step is to invest in one or two of these companies as a

minority owner. The structure I’m interested in is intentionally simple and practical: a small ownership stake combined with a clearly defined dividend policy, ideally with monthly or annual payouts, and transparent rules around reporting, governance and the ability to sell my share if needed.

This allows me to contribute where I add the most value on the marketing side, while also owning part of a recurring-revenue infrastructure business. Hosting sits underneath nearly everything happening online, from websites and ecommerce to SaaS products and digital services. According to ScalaHosting, in light of these figures, it shouldn’t really be a surprise that the global web hosting business is worth over $108 billion.

For me, the appeal is not speculative growth, but predictable demand, recurring subscriptions and ownership structures that can be managed long term. When done correctly, a minority stake in a hosting company can function as a controllable, income-producing asset that pays dividends, benefits from long-term digital expansion and remains sellable without requiring day-to-day operational involvement.

5. Owning recurring revenue as a pension-style asset

One category of long-term, pension-like business ideas I personally believe in is owning recurring-revenue digital assets. This can be a content website, niche platform or online store that generates predictable cash flow and can be built from scratch or acquired through established marketplaces with transparent, verified financials.

Readers curious how this works in practice can explore my own experience in the Entrepreneur article “7 Lessons I Learned From Selling a 6-Figure Blogging Business,” which breaks down

how a digital asset can be built, operated and exited in a structured way.

A similar model exists in traditional financial niches built around recurring subscriptions. In financial services, this often means owning a book of customers who pay annual fees, creating revenue that belongs to the business rather than the owner’s time.

According to Myhealthpal, in the wider financial advisory space, books of business with recurring revenue often transact at around 1.9x to 3.0x annual revenue, depending on retention and quality. In both cases, the value comes from ownership: predictable income, transferable assets and long-term financial security that is not tied to constant personal labor.

6. A small, thoughtfully designed coffee space

Another business idea I’m exploring is centered around organic coffee, one of the most widely consumed drinks in the world and a daily ritual for billions of people. As quality and sourcing have become more important, coffee has shifted from being seen as a questionable habit to a more intentional one.

This shift is reflected in market data. According to Purity Coffee, the global organic coffee market was estimated at $7.92 billion in 2024 and is projected to reach $13.16 billion by 2030, growing at a CAGR of 8.7%, driven largely by a rising focus on health and wellness.

For us, this is also a lifestyle business. My wife and I are moving to a small town where good coffee spaces are rare, despite our experience traveling and spending time in well-designed cafés. The plan is to create a small, laptop-friendly coffee shop focused on high-quality organic coffee, designed

as a calm, everyday space people can return to regularly rather than a novelty destination.

7. Unpopular but essential business ideas for a fast-aging Europe

If we look ahead 20 or 30 years into the future and ask a simple question – "What will *certainly* still matter and sell well?" – the answer becomes surprisingly clear. It is 2026 today, and within two to three decades, people of my generation will be approaching retirement age. Markets will change, technologies will evolve, but one reality is almost guaranteed: Europe will continue to age. When thinking about long-term business and investment opportunities, aging societies are not something to avoid; they are something to understand and build for.

From that perspective, businesses serving older adults and people with limited mobility are not speculative bets, but structural ones. According to Skyward Medical, Europe's population aged 65+ is projected to grow from 90.5 million in 2019 to 129.8 million by 2050, while the 85+ segment is expected to more than double, increasing by over 113%. These numbers point to markets that are not shrinking or stagnating, but quietly expanding over decades.

What makes this particularly interesting is that many of these markets are still underdeveloped from a modern business perspective. Products such as wheelchairs, home-care hospital beds and electric mobility scooters are essential, yet they are often sold through outdated retail models, weak branding and one-time transactions. This creates an opportunity to build businesses that are future-proof, demand-driven and systemized around long-term needs rather than short-term trends.

8. Quiet, unattractive niches with predictable demand

Another idea I'm considering is intentionally focusing on industries that are not attractive, trendy or competitive in the traditional startup sense. The church supply niche is a strong example of this kind of market. It is not a "sexy" industry, but it is built around clear, repeatable needs. Products such as candles, ritual items and clergy robes are not impulse purchases; they are used, replaced and reordered as part of long-established routines. According to Angel Direct, there are approximately 37 million churches worldwide across more than 34,000 Christian denominations, which highlights just how fragmented yet consistently active this market is.

What makes this niche particularly interesting from a business perspective is the low level of sales competition. In many cases, building personal relationships through direct, on-site visits and ongoing contact is far more effective than marketing or advertising. Once trust is established, orders tend to repeat naturally. Over time, this creates a quiet, stable revenue stream based on long-term relationships and predictable demand rather than constant customer acquisition.

Building long-term financial security doesn't require predicting the future or chasing the latest trend. It requires paying attention to forces that are already in motion and choosing businesses that can quietly compound over time. For me, these ideas are less about quick wins and more about ownership, adaptability and alignment with how we actually live and work. If even one of the perspectives in this article helps you rethink what a "pension" can look like, then it has done its job.

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business better. Get it in your inbox.

https://www.entrepreneur.com/starting-a-business/8-predictable-income-streams-that-can-replace-your-pension/502091

I Stopped Reading Franchise Agreements as Contracts — Here's What I See Instead

Opinions expressed by Entrepreneur contributors are their own.

Key Takeaways

- A franchise agreement isn't a legal hurdle — it's a forecast of how the system will truly operate.
- Reading the agreement strategically exposes future control, economics and franchisor maturity.

Early in my career, I sat across the table from a first-time master franchise buyer who was a bit overwhelmed with the new business venture he was about to enter. The agreement in front of him was thick, technical and intimidating. He kept flipping to the back, asking how long it would take his attorney to get through it. His focus was on getting past the document, not understanding it.

I asked him a different question. I asked what he thought the agreement said about his business five years from now. He paused. No one had framed it that way before.

That conversation stuck with me. Over the years, I have reviewed hundreds of franchise agreements from both sides of the table. The strongest operators I've met were never the ones who rushed through the paperwork. They were the ones who read the agreement as a signal of how the system would behave once growth, pressure and scale set in.

That's when I stopped thinking of franchise agreements as contracts. I started seeing them as forecasts.

Most prospective franchisees treat the franchise agreement like a legal hurdle. The goal becomes getting through it rather than learning from it. That mindset misses the point. After years of building and scaling franchise systems, I've learned that a franchise agreement is less about compliance and more about prediction. It forecasts how a business will grow, how control will be exercised and how aligned the franchisor will remain as conditions change.

A franchise agreement tells you far more about the future of the system than any sales presentation or discovery day ever will. The challenge is knowing how to read it through an operational and strategic lens rather than a purely legal one.

Looking to buy a franchise but don't know where to start? Entrepreneur Franchise Advisors will guide you through the process from start to finish — for free. Sign up here.

The agreement reveals how growth is actually managed

Scalability is not a buzzword. It's a discipline. The franchise agreement quietly shows whether a franchisor has designed that discipline into the system.

Development schedules, territory definitions and exclusivity clauses reveal how thoughtfully expansion is planned. Loose territory language often indicates future encroachment issues.

Overly aggressive development requirements can indicate a growth model that prioritizes unit count over sustainability. Clear, balanced language usually reflects a franchisor that understands long-term system health.

Experience has taught me that strong franchise systems grow deliberately. The agreement should reflect patience, consistency and respect for operator capacity. Those traits rarely appear by accident.

Control clauses predict the day-to-day reality

Every franchisor talks about support. The agreement shows what control looks like when support is no longer theoretical.

Brand standards, audit rights, vendor requirements and operational mandates outline how decisions are made once the honeymoon phase ends. These clauses are not about restriction. They indicate how committed the franchisor is to protect the brand in the long term.

Well-structured control provisions balance consistency with practicality. Overly rigid language often signals future friction. Vague standards often indicate uneven execution across the system. A thoughtful agreement clearly defines expectations while allowing for operational maturity.

Leadership teams that have lived through growth understand this balance. The agreement often reflects that experience more sincerely than marketing materials.

Sign up for Entrepreneur's Franchise Bootcamp, a free, 5-day email course on how to find and invest in your first profitable franchise – no business experience required.

Financial clauses show alignment – Or the lack of it

Royalty structures, marketing fund language and fee escalation clauses deserve careful attention. These sections reveal whether the franchisor’s success depends on franchisee performance or franchisee volume.

Systems built for long-term alignment tie revenue to unit health rather than churn. Transparency around fund usage, reporting requirements and adjustment mechanisms matters more than the percentage itself.

Over the years, I’ve seen franchisees thrive in systems with financial language that was both conservative and clear. I’ve also seen frustration grow when agreements favored short-term extraction over shared outcomes. The agreement tells you which direction a system leans.

The agreement mirrors the franchisor’s maturity

Every franchise system evolves. Early-stage agreements often look different than those refined through years of growth. The key is recognizing whether the agreement reflects learning or inflexibility. Clear definitions, consistent terminology and practical enforcement language usually indicate a franchisor that has listened to operators over time.

Prospective franchisees should ask one essential question while reviewing any agreement. Does this document feel designed for where the system is going or where it started?

Reading the forecast before you commit

The franchise agreement is not a formality. It’s the most honest document a franchisor will ever give you. It shows how leadership thinks about growth, control, partnership and

accountability long after the sale is complete.

Experience has shown me that the strongest franchise relationships begin with clarity. The agreement offers that clarity to anyone willing to look beyond the signatures.

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Early in my career, I sat across the table from a first-time master franchise buyer who was a bit overwhelmed with the new business venture he was about to enter. The agreement in front of him was thick, technical and intimidating. He kept flipping to the back, asking how long it would take his attorney to get through it. His focus was on getting past the document, not understanding it.

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https://www.entrepreneur.com/leadership/why-the-franchise-agreement-isnt-a-contract-its-a/502497

This Isn’t a Dress Rehearsal — Run Your Business Like You

Only Get One Take. Here's How.

Opinions expressed by Entrepreneur contributors are their own.

Key Takeaways

- A rehearsal gives you the freedom to screw up when nobody's watching — but running a company means your audience is always watching.
- Risk is a natural part of every successful performance. You can't do anything new or noteworthy if you don't put yourself out there in spite of the possibility of failure.
- You pay the opportunity cost whether or not you succeed, so you might as well try. Even a launch that underperforms provides clarity, momentum and direction.

I've already written about meeting Steve Forbes, but I keep coming back to the advice he gave me that day: "This isn't a dress rehearsal."

For those who haven't read that other article, he was responding to a question I've asked many ultra-successful people over the years: What's the best advice you've ever received? And of all the answers I've received, this one has had the greatest impact on my life. But what does it really mean?

At first, this advice might sound like a cliché; another version of *carpe diem* exhorting us to live in the moment. And while that's certainly good advice, it's not terribly specific to running a business.

That’s what makes the dress rehearsal metaphor more useful for leaders. It takes a familiar idea and forces you to apply it to real decisions about time, risk and what you choose to pursue. Here’s how.

Running a company means your audience is always watching

A rehearsal has one specific purpose: It gives you the freedom to screw up when nobody’s watching. Even if you happen to be a Broadway actor, an opera singer at the Met or a Grammy-winning artist with a whole support team around you, a mistake made during rehearsal is hidden from the public.

In rehearsal, you can stop the show. You can go back and do things differently. If you really need to, you can step off the stage midway through a scene or song and take a break to calm your nerves.

On opening night, these options are off the table. The seats are full. The show goes on. Everything you do from that point forward is noticed, interpreted and remembered.

Performing a show resembles reality a lot more than rehearsing one. You’re going to spend most of your life doing things you can’t take back, and that people will remember. That also holds true if you’re running a business. You’re publicly tied to your company’s successes and failures, and people — including employees, customers and peers — are assessing how you handle both.

I learned that lesson in my early days as CEO at PhoneBurner, when a loosely worded FCC notice briefly resulted in a loss of carrier coverage for our dialing platform. Although I managed to find a solution within days, it was one of the highest-stakes moments of my career. I was acutely aware that our clients and team were depending on me, and that my response

would make or break their faith in my leadership and our product. You can see the outcome of that event in this article.

Risk is a natural part of every successful performance

Seen this way, business leadership may sound very scary. At times, it can be. But so is singing in front of a packed theatre. If there were no element of risk involved with either of those activities, they would be less meaningful to people.

As humans, we're impressed by novelty, and we're impressed by achievement. Risk is a necessary precondition of both: You can't do anything new or noteworthy if you don't put yourself out there in spite of the possibility of failure.

Think about it: Every live performance is new because it can never happen exactly the same way twice, even if it's a song or a play you've done hundreds of times. The same is true when you're starting a new company or releasing a new feature. Experience helps, but the circumstances are always a little different; there's always a chance that something goes wrong. You have to do it anyway if you want to succeed.

At the same time, you also can't spend your career repeating the same performance. Most Broadway musicals only run for six months to a year because audiences move on. That's why performers find new stories to tell. And it's why businesses evolve and innovate to avoid losing customers to competitors.

You pay the opportunity cost whether or not you succeed (so you

might as well try)

Consider everything that goes into putting on a show. From writing the original material to hiring talent, rehearsal, production design, venue procurement, advertising and day-of operations, the investment required when all is said and done can be astronomical.

That can create a lot of pressure. Sometimes it’s enough to convince people to quit before opening night.

But even a performance that doesn’t go as planned has value. It still allows performers to showcase their talents, generates real feedback and delivers valuable lessons for future endeavors. And although it may not fully recoup its expenses, it can still make back some of them or spawn the next opportunity. A performance that gets cancelled before opening accomplishes none of these things.

The same is true in business. If you’ve spent the hours, hired the team or committed the capital, walking away before launch isn’t the safe bet anymore. You might not make back your whole investment, but not launching guarantees an ROI of zero. Even a launch that underperforms provides clarity, momentum and direction.

Dress rehearsals matter, but you can’t live life like one. Real progress requires risk, discomfort and a willingness to move forward even when success looks like a long shot. You can only reap the rewards, whether hard-earned wins or hard-learned lessons, by taking the risk of sharing your work with others.

Sign up for the Entrepreneur Daily newsletter to get the news and resources you need to know today to help you run your business better. Get it in your inbox.

Key Takeaways

- A rehearsal gives you the freedom to screw up when nobody's watching — but running a company means your audience is always watching.
- Risk is a natural part of every successful performance. You can't do anything new or noteworthy if you don't put yourself out there in spite of the possibility of failure.
- You pay the opportunity cost whether or not you succeed, so you might as well try. Even a launch that underperforms provides clarity, momentum and direction.

I've already written about meeting Steve Forbes, but I keep coming back to the advice he gave me that day: "This isn't a dress rehearsal."

For those who haven't read that other article, he was responding to a question I've asked many ultra-successful people over the years: What's the best advice you've ever received? And of all the answers I've received, this one has had the greatest impact on my life. But what does it really mean?

https://www.entrepreneur.com/growing-a-business/why-you-need-a-one-take-mindset-to-truly-succeed-in-business/502025

Americans Are Spending Half as Much on Valentine's Day

This Year. Here’s What They’re Buying Instead.

Romance is in the air, but Americans are slashing Valentine’s Day spending by 44% in 2026. The average person plans to spend $87 on their partner, down from $155 last year, according to a CouponFollow survey of 1,005 Americans in relationships.

But here’s the twist: Americans aren’t ditching romance altogether—they’re just going old school. Sixty-one percent say their ideal Valentine’s Day gift is a romantic dinner. Another 57% want an experience like a trip or concert, and 51% of women and 39% of men want a handwritten card or letter. People are being more selective about where their money goes.

Inflation is likely the culprit. Since early 2020, cumulative inflation has risen roughly 26%, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

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https://www.entrepreneur.com/business-news/valentines-day-spending-drops-44-this-year/502710

Anthropic Just Raised $30 Billion at a $380 Billion Valuation. It’s the Second-Biggest Tech Raise Ever.

The AI funding race just hit a new milestone. Anthropic closed a $30 billion funding round at a $380 billion valuation, which is more than double what it was worth just five months ago. It’s the second-largest private tech fundraising round on record, trailing only rival OpenAI’s $40 billion raise last year.

The round was led by Coatue and Singapore sovereign wealth fund GIC, with participation from Microsoft and Nvidia.

Developing and training AI models is extremely expensive, requiring massive investments in computing resources like Nvidia’s GPUs.

The company’s AI coding tool, Claude Code, has hit $2.5 billion in annualized revenue with business subscriptions quadrupling since the start of the year. The fresh capital will support infrastructure expansion and research as Anthropic competes with OpenAI and Google, which plans to spend up to $185 billion this year on AI development.

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https://www.entrepreneur.com/business-news/anthropic-raises-30b-at-380b-valuation/502709

The Economy Isn’t Killing Your Business — Your Lack of Leadership Strategy Is

Opinions expressed by Entrepreneur contributors are their own.

This article is part of the America’s Favorite Mom & Pop Shops series. Read more stories

Key Takeaways

- Great products don’t scale companies. Systems, volume and disciplined execution do.
- Professional CEOs replace hustle and hope with routines, accountability and scalable systems.

We are currently navigating what I call the Valley of Death. In the United States alone, 94% of companies never break the $1 million revenue barrier because they lack the systems to scale their leadership and their sales. If you feel overwhelmed, buried in tasks and stagnant despite working harder, you aren’t facing a “bad market,” you are facing an

execution problem.

To survive the 2026 slump and transition from a “warrior” entrepreneur to a professional CEO, you must adopt a mindset of relentless volume and architectural precision.

Volume is the new strategy for lead generation

The biggest mistake I see in Stage 1 and Stage 2 companies is the “hope” strategy. Leaders hope their product is so good that customers will find them. But a great product is just the entry fee; it doesn’t guarantee a business. Without an aggressive distribution and sales engine, you are just a craftsman, not a CEO.

In 2026, the noise is deafening. To cut through it, you need to master what Alex Hormozi calls the “Rule of 100.” You must perform 100 primary marketing actions every single day — consistently. Whether it’s 100 cold reach-outs, $100 in ad spend, or 100 minutes of content creation, volume is the only variable you truly control.

This isn’t just about “working harder”; it’s about establishing a predictable sales system. If you don’t have 100 leads flowing into your funnel, you don’t have a scaling problem; you have a survival problem. The goal is to create “advertising” that is so valuable people would feel stupid saying no.

Looking to buy a franchise but don’t know where to start? Entrepreneur Franchise Advisors will guide you through the process from start to finish — for free. Sign up here.

The return to office and the

culture of accountability

Lead generation provides the “oxygen” (cash), but execution requires a “tribe.” We are seeing a massive shift in 2026 regarding where and how high-performance teams operate. Culture is not what you say in a handbook; it is the “creative friction” that happens when a team is aligned in person.

Tech giants have realized that scaling impact requires proximity. The era of “total remote convenience” is ending for those who want to dominate their industry. For the CEO, this means building a team that functions autonomously without you being the “hub” of every decision.

When the owner is the center of everything, the business value drops by 35%. You must step back to create value.

The 4 decisions of the professional CEO

To escape the Valley of Death, you must scale your Decision-Making. At Growth Institute, we focus on the four critical areas that differentiate a “boss” from a “leader of leaders”:

1. **People**: You cannot scale with “technicians.” You need an accountability chart where every function has a clear owner.
2. **Strategy**: Does your growth exceed your industry? A winning strategy must integrate target market clarity with a robust competitive advantage. If you only compete on price, you are a commodity.
3. **Execution:** Discipline is the bridge between goals and accomplishment. Establish a “Meeting Rhythm” (Daily, Weekly, Monthly) to ensure your “Rule of 100” is being followed without you having to ask.
4. **Cash:** Cash is oxygen. In the 2026 economic reality, you must optimize your “Cash Conversion Cycle” so you don’t

rely on credit lines to survive.

Sign up for How Success Happens and learn from well-known business leaders and celebrities, uncovering the shifts, strategies and lessons that powered their rise. Get it in your inbox.

Routine sets you free

The most difficult thing to change in a leader is their mindset. Many entrepreneurs wear their “busyness” as a badge of honor, answering tickets, managing the help desk and working holidays before they hit a turning point. But that dedication is a liability, not an asset.

Routine sets you free. By implementing a CEO System, you move from being a “Hunter” (Stage 2) who is always chasing the next meal, to an “Explorer” (Stage 4) who defines an industry.

The 2026 January Slope is a filter. It will wash away the entrepreneurs who rely on “good vibes” and “good products.” It will reward the professional CEOs who build relentless sales systems based on volume and lead their teams with disciplined execution.

Are you the CEO your company needs to survive the Valley of Death? Stop firefighting and start scaling. The drama ends when the systems begin.

Key Takeaways

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https://www.entrepreneur.com/growing-a-business/94-of-companies-never-hit-1m-heres-the-brutal-reason/502496

Read This Before You Waste Another Month Chasing the Wrong Goals — 3 Signs You Need a Hard Reset

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Key Takeaways

- Top achievers recognize and reassess unfulfilling goals, embracing the liberating power of saying “no” to opportunities that don’t align with their evolving aspirations.
- Spreading yourself too thin can drain your energy and

add stress, highlighting the importance of focus and the strategic use of “no” to maintain a path to success.
- Investment in the process and personal well-being is crucial for maintaining momentum and ensuring the sustainability of your professional aspirations.

It happens to all entrepreneurs at some point. You’ve put in the work, you’ve hit the right milestones and your résumé has professional success written all over it. Yet one question keeps popping up: Is this what I want?

At the height of my success as a realtor in Washington, there was a moment when I was being offered incredibly high-valued listings. People were calling me and offering me opportunities that I had worked so hard to get, and in that moment where one might expect me to feel victorious or excited, I felt nothing. I received a call and was offered an amazing listing, in one of the best locations in Washington and my first thought was, no. Pointblank. I do not want to do this. And I ended up outsourcing that opportunity.

I had put in so much effort to build a portfolio of listings exactly like what I was being offered and I had never felt such a strong negative reaction. I was a listing agent, and this was how I made my living – but at that moment, all I felt was burnout and stress. A moment that could’ve been seen as the completion of one of my all-time career goals wasn’t.

If that tension feels familiar, it may be a sign that you need to reassess what it is you are pursuing.

Sign up for How Success Happens and learn from well-known business leaders and celebrities, uncovering the shifts, strategies and lessons that powered their rise. Get it in your inbox.

Sign 1: Some of your goals are idealistic

It’s not an easy task, admitting when you need to drop a goal from your list. But if you keep putting effort into projects you’re ready to move on from, or keep a goal somewhere on the back burner indefinitely, that energy either goes to waste or perpetuates a problem.

During a time when I was auditing my goals, I was working with a coach who called me out on a long-term goal by asking me a powerful question. Are you willing to do what it takes to achieve this goal? I had to decide if I wanted to pretend I didn’t know the answer, or if I was ready to tell the truth. And my answer was no. I wasn’t ready to put in the effort. I had to admit, that goal wasn’t on my action list and I wouldn’t be putting effort in there.

Sometimes, in order to get what we need to get done, we have to be honest about what we can’t do. Audit your goals and be blunt.

Sign 2: You’re spread too thin across your goals

On paper, the shiny “yes” looks like progress on the road to achieving your goals, and it often is the path to new opportunities. Yes to new titles, yes to reaching new milestones, yes to recognition from the right people.

For entrepreneurs in hustle mode, it feels counterproductive to say no. That “yes” makes so much more sense and, in theory, brings you further down the path you’re on. When my son was young, I wanted to be involved in his school life. I loved being a classroom mom and being involved in his field trips and helping make those decisions. So, I said yes to becoming

co-president of the PTA.

It looked great on paper and made sense in many different ways, but what actually started to happen was that I spent my evenings mediating politics and my days stressed about situations I didn’t have control over. Eventually, it became something that stole energy from me.

“No” has the same power that “yes” does in keeping you on the path to success, and under-utilizing it as a tool often leads to loss of energy or frustration.

Sign 3: You’re not invested in the process

A sure sign that you may need to pause and reflect on your current goals is when every day starts to feel strained. From the outside, everything reads like momentum, but on the inside, the tells stack up. Calendar dread before the day begins, shallow wins, rework, missed workouts and a shorter fuse than you want to admit.

When you’re trying to build professional status, your resources are limited. You might not have anyone to delegate to, and you might be pulled in 12 different directions in a time where it feels impossible to say no. This is a sign it’s time to change that.

When I was trying to build my reputation as the go-to realtor in my area, my resources were limited and I was struggling to balance it all. I started saying “no” and in doing so realized my goals had changed.

Once you audit your goals, reinvest in what is working and where you are committed.

All signs point to the next level

All of these signs might feel like an attack at first, but what's happening is that these signs point to you being ready for more. If you're being prompted to cut goals that aren't moving forward, it means you're preparing for other goals to move to the next level. You're ready to start saying "no" to what holds you back and "yes" to what matters. Your goals are evolving not because you've failed in some way, but because you are ready for more.

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https://www.entrepreneur.com/leadership/read-this-before-you-waste-time-chasing-the-wrong-goals/500872

The Ultra-Rich Are Turning Their Homes Into Fortresses: ‘Moats, Bunkers, and $175,000 Guard Dogs’

Security is the new obsession for the ultra-wealthy, according to the *Wall Street Journal*. A Scottsdale mansion on the market for $15 million features 32 AI-powered cameras, a 100-foot moat, sour orange trees with four-inch spikes, and a safe room with a 2,000-pound door. The front door alone has 13 deadbolts.

High-profile violence, such as the 2024 ambush killing of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson and home robberies of Travis Kelce and Brad Pitt, has put the wealthy on edge. Roughly 45% of luxury homes sold in 2025 referenced privacy or security, up from 38% in 2024, according to Coldwell Banker.

Rich homeowners are shelling out between $100,000 and $1.5

million on security features that include bunkers and biometric scanners. Some are buying trained protection dogs for up to $175,000. In Florida, a condo hired a security firm that has protected U.S. presidents to design an AI-powered threat-detection system.

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https://www.entrepreneur.com/business-news/the-ultra-rich-are-

turning-homes-into-fortresses/502686

Hackers Know You’re Still on Windows 10 So Upgrade ASAP for $13

Disclosure: Our goal is to feature products and services that we think you’ll find interesting and useful. If you purchase them, Entrepreneur may get a small share of the revenue from the sale from our commerce partners.

If you’re still using the Windows 10 operating system (OS) then your computer is more exposed than you realize. As Microsoft continues phasing out support, cybercriminals already know those systems are easier targets—and they’re actively exploiting the gaps. The smartest move you can make right now is upgrading to Windows 11 Pro.

While you may be able to install Windows 11 Home, the basic version, at no cost, you won’t get remote desktop access, BitLocker device encryption, Hyper-V, or other exclusive features. Besides, at only $12.97, you won’t regret protecting yourself and your device (MSRP $199).

Stay secure *and* productive

Like many, you may be procrastinating this upgrade because you think you won’t like the new user design, but there’s a lot to love. It’s not too unlike Windows 10, and you’ll have new

productivity tools like snap layouts, an improved search function, and widgets to streamline your workdays.

Upgrading to Windows 11 also means you get Copilot, the AI assistant. Powered by a custom version of GPT-4, it’s basically like having the premium version of Open AI living in your PC for generating text, images, code, and answering questions.

Almost instantly after completing your purchase, you’ll receive an email with a download link and activation code to install Windows 11 Pro on your personal or work PC. Or, grab two license keys and upgrade both while they’re on sale. Enjoy software upgrades as long as Microsoft supports this OS.

Why this deal is worth it

Running an outdated operating system isn’t just inconvenient—it’s a real security risk. Windows 11 Pro gives you stronger built-in defenses, enterprise-level encryption, and tools designed to protect both your data and your workflow. At just $12.97 for one license key, this upgrade costs less than a single month of most subscription software and could save you from far more expensive problems down the line.

Grab a Windows 11 Pro license key on sale for $12.97 (MSRP $199). No coupon is needed.

Microsoft Windows 11 Pro

See Deal

StackSocial prices subject to change.

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