5 Ways to Build Your Side Hustle and Double Your Salary — Without Making Your Boss Mad

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Key Takeaways

- Don’t quit until your side income reliably replaces your salary for several months.
- Build your business in completely separate lanes so your employer never feels threatened.
- Early momentum comes from working double-time and filling skill gaps on the fly.

In the wake of a turbulent job market marked by high-profile layoffs at major tech firms and a surge in self-employment, more professionals are turning to side hustles as a safety net and stepping stone to entrepreneurship.

Recent data shows a jump to 64 million Americans — or 38% of the workforce — engaged in freelance work in 2023, a 4 million-person increase over the prior year, reflecting a shift in how people approach career stability.

If you’re among those considering walking away from your 9-to-5, it’s worth learning from those who have navigated that leap successfully.

As a 7-figure CEO of Dimov Tax, I’ve helped thousands of

entrepreneurs structure their businesses, reduce their tax burden and make the leap from employee to founder. I didn't plan to become a CEO.

I was a full-time accountant who started freelancing at night and one day realized my side income had surpassed my salary. I quit my job, scaled quickly and never looked back. But I did a few key things right and I've seen what happens when people skip those steps.

Over the course of my career, I've worked with thousands of people via conversations, consults and client files that keep my finger on the pulse of what actually works when you go solo.

More people than ever are exploring freelancing and business ownership. Yet myths about how and when to quit persist, and small financial or legal missteps can create outsized risk. Read on for a grounded framework, not hustle-porn, to make a smart exit.

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1. Replace your salary first

Before I quit, I set one rule: match (or beat) my paycheck with after-hours work. My full-time job paid $125,000 a year, which was about $10,000 a month. By August 2016, I was earning roughly $16,000 a month from freelancing at night. In January, I hit $25,000 per month, and that's when I knew the status quo was unsustainable.

I gave notice and went all in. This wasn't a leap of faith; it was a calculated transition powered by consistent side income. If you are thinking of quitting your 9-5 job, set a clear "replacement runway" number (e.g., your last six months' average after-tax salary) and don't resign until your side

hustle reliably meets it.

2. Build outside your employer's ecosystem

If your side business competes with your day job, or taps the same clients, you're inviting termination or worse, litigation. If you hope to set up a business on the side, be sure to protect yourself from negative consequences from your current employer.

I launched in entirely different channels, industries and client types so there were no blurred lines or conflicts of interest. That separation protected my career while I built momentum. If you have an expertise but worry your boss will be concerned about your outside venture, keep your business development in different ponds: new verticals, new lead sources, new marketing lanes.

That's how you stay loyal to your employer while you level up and how you avoid getting fired or sued. Audit your target market, offers and acquisition channels. If any overlap with your employer, redesign them until they do not.

Related: I've Been Freelancing For 13 Years — Here Are My Top 7 Strategies For Better Client Relationships

3. Be willing to work double-time (at first)

In the early days, the edge was simple: outwork everyone. Nights, weekends, "impossible" timelines, I showed up when others wouldn't. That grind created the momentum that made scaling possible once I went solo.

If you wonder if you can carve a niche for yourself by outworking everyone, decide in advance what "double-time"

looks like for you (e.g., 15 client hours on weeknights + 10 on weekends). Protect every spare hour in your calendar like your revenue depends on it, because at the beginning, it does.

4. Fill your skill gaps early

In the early days of my side hustle, I said yes to projects that I didn't fully understand, and then learned at speed. I read everything I could find, called mentors and hired outside consultants when necessary. That's how I leveled up. While you may be tempted to get caught in analysis paralysis, earning certifications or going into further debt to get additional degrees, I advise the opposite: do not wait to become "ready".

You become ready by *doing*, by asking better questions, and by paying for expertise when the gap is real. List three capabilities that would 10x your value in the next year. For each, pick a rapid-upskill path: a mentor, a short engagement with an expert, or a targeted course. Ship work that forces you to use the new muscle.

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5. Expect to do everything at first

Year one, expect to wear every hat: service delivery, sales, marketing, HR, bookkeeping and admin. In my case, within three weeks, I hired six employees; until then, it was all me. That reality check keeps you from romanticizing entrepreneurship and helps you budget time (and cash) for the boring but essential work.

Build simple weekly operating rhythms for pipeline (outreach, proposals), fulfillment (deliverables), money (invoicing, reconciliations) and leadership (goals, retros). When each rhythm hurts, hire or automate that function first.

Entrepreneurship is thrilling but not forgiving. Don’t mistake passion for preparation. Build your cushion, separate your channels and sharpen your skills. Then leap with your eyes open. The best time to start is before you need to. The smartest time to quit is after you’ve built your replacement runway.

Key Takeaways

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Every Thriving Business Owner Must Go Through the ‘Hell Zone’

There’s a magical stage of growth that every franchisee dreams of reaching. It’s the point where your business has enough scale and momentum to run without your hand on the wheel every minute of the day. Finally, you get to sit back and enjoy the ride.

Unfortunately, between the comfort of your first successful location and the stability of true scale, there lies a brutal and unglamorous stretch of growth. I call it the Hell Zone.

As a former chair of the International Franchise Association board, I’ve advised many franchisees through the Hell Zone. I’ve also experienced it myself.

My entrepreneurial journey began when I bought two KFC franchise locations. It was manageable and generally enjoyable, and the units made money. I knew every employee, every number, and every problem. Then I opened a third location, and my life became a whirlwind of chaos. Constant work. The business was too big to do everything myself and too small to afford the structure of larger organizations — area managers, HR, finance, marketing. Instead of me controlling the business, the business was controlling me.

Related: This Simple Strategy Will Help Franchisees Get Customers and Scale Faster

At the time, it felt like I was doing something wrong. But I’ve since learned that this is a normal part of multi-unit

growth (and it holds true for people outside franchising too). The Hell Zone is the phase when your growth outpaces your resources, and *you* are the only thing holding the business together. You're running two, three, maybe four locations – or juggling a handful of key clients – but you don't have the financial or operational cushion to breathe. You're scaling revenue faster than infrastructure, and every decision feels like a trade-off between short-term survival and long-term stability.

For most of us, this phase is unavoidable. The good news: It does not last forever. And if you approach it right, then you'll find incredible growth on the other side.

Here is my advice for building through the Hell Zone.

1. Understand why the Hell Zone occurs, so you can focus on solutions to move beyond it.

I believe that most multi-unit franchisees need at least $5 million of revenue before they can afford a multi-unit supervisor. This is because, for most concepts, it is difficult to pay out more than 2% of revenue for this supervision and still have an income statement that shows a return on investment. Thus, the answer is either grow revenue organically or through development, or invest early in multi-unit supervision and accept a lower return.

2. Acknowledge the pain, but don't dwell on it.

Create time to work on solutions versus getting stuck on the urgent problems in front of you. While you are in the Hell Zone, the tyranny of the urgent can become a real impediment

to growth.

3. Invest in processes early.

The systems you think you can't afford are exactly what will get you out of the Hell Zone faster. Better unit-level management, better training, better technology for multi-unit management – all of these processes allow for the entrepreneur to focus on vision and growth. Don't procrastinate on investing in processes, because either you or a future multi-unit supervisor will need these tools to manage the business regardless.

4. Be sure you have the financial and intellectual capital you need before starting to scale.

Entrepreneurs who are starved for funds often get stuck in the Hell Zone. But too often, the focus is solely on financial capital, when the entrepreneur does not have the intellectual capital (knowledge and experience) to grow the business. Your growth plan should address both.

5. Stay positive and committed to the destination.

The Hell Zone is part of the journey; it is not your destination.

If your dream is to have a larger business, stay focused on that.

A positive attitude reframes challenges as opportunities and allows your team to rally behind you as a leader.

When you emerge on the other side, you will have a team that

executes without constant oversight, systems that run without you, and growth that compounds instead of consumes. The Hell Zone is where entrepreneurs are forged. If you are in it right now, take heart — you're not failing. You're graduating.

Related: Most Franchises Fail to Scale — But The Ones That Do Succeed All Have These 3 Essential Qualities in Common.

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Why Are Some People Lucky, and Others Not?

Growing up, my mom and I had a running joke about four-leaf clovers: I always found them, and she never did. She called me “the lucky one.”

I’d find clovers on sidewalks, hiking trails, and even in fields of weeds. She’d look repeatedly but never spot one. As I grew older, this seemed to symbolize something deeper. My whole life was lucky; I was cared for, built a successful business, and even scored a deal on the first-ever episode of *Shark Tank*. My mom’s life was unlucky: She was one of 10 siblings, most of whom were put up for adoption. She was diagnosed with a life-threatening autoimmune disease, placed on the organ transplant list, and a donor match did not come fast enough to save her life.

Just days before we lost her, I found another four-leaf clover. I handed it to her in the hospital, and she looked at me with a soft smile and said, almost in a whisper, “But of course.” We were hoping, just this once, she could borrow a little of my luck.

Related: 5 Ways to Fix Your Lack of Inspiration

The experience left me with a nagging question: *Why are some people lucky and some not?* I wish I knew. But as I’m now building my second business and challenging myself in new ways, I’m starting to think about luck differently.

Here’s why. My mom came from nothing, yet she built a beautiful home and life. She supported our family and became a nurse to help others too. She worked harder than anyone I knew. In fact, even while hospitalized and waiting for the transplant, she was studying for her fourth college degree. She was convinced she’d pull through, recover, and return to serving others. Her hope was unshakable.

None of this was about luck. It was about purpose and perseverance. And it made me realize: Luck could cut the other way too. A person could grow up “lucky,” with so much given to

them, and never learn to work for or accomplish anything. Success is not really about luck. It's about showing up.

On hard days in my business, this is now what I think about. And I look at that four-leaf clover — the one I handed my mom in the hospital, which I'll keep for the rest of my life. Because although my mom never found a four-leaf clover, she had always been mine. But luck was never what really mattered.

Related: How to 'Trust Your Gut' With Confidence, According to an Expert on Intuition

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Founders Obsess Over Cash Flow — But There's a Threat That's Even More Dangerous

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Key Takeaways

- Why digital access has become an overlooked vulnerability that can cripple a business just as quickly as cash flow problems.
- The practical steps every founder should take now to protect their company from lockouts, losses, and preventable digital failures.

Cash flow problems have long been cited as the biggest challenge for entrepreneurs, and the most likely reason why a company could go out of business. While the risks associated with cash flow management certainly aren't going away, today's founders need to prepare for an equally important risk: losing digital access.

Losing digital access can ultimately prove just as devastating to your business as running out of money, keeping you from being able to access important files or manage standard business operations. This is especially true with the ever-growing number of digital resources entrepreneurs rely on to keep their business running in the first place.

By understanding key digital access risks and planning accordingly, you can protect your business just as well as if you improved your cash flow management.

Related: **Why Are Cybercriminals Going After Smaller Targets?**

Fortify your cybersecurity efforts

Cybercriminals understand just how important digital access is for most businesses – and how easy a target it can be. Ransomware attacks often try to lock entrepreneurs out of their devices, software or files, requiring a hefty ransom payment to regain access.

Without a strong cybersecurity plan in place, businesses put themselves at a higher risk of successful attacks that block access and compromise data. Taking steps to strengthen cybersecurity, such as requiring verification and authentication for all network users, keeping software and applications up to date and consistently backing up data, can all reduce the risk of a successful attack.

Of course, proper management of passwords and other login methods is also essential to protect digital access. Entrepreneurs should set (and follow) strict standards for complex passwords, as well as use more secure login methods like biometrics and push notifications.

Remember, a zero-trust system that limits digital access based on what an employee needs to access can help reduce risk, along with consistent training and security protocols. A successful phishing attack on a lower-level employee can still compromise digital access for the entire organization if its internal network isn’t fully secured. Regular security audits should be part of every digital access plan.

Master your password management

Losing track of digital assets can be as damaging as running out of money, which is why understanding basics like a crypto wallet is becoming essential for modern founders. Passwords, PINs, secret recovery phrases and other private keys help prevent unauthorized access while ensuring that you can safely access your own accounts.

For entrepreneurs, there are two key aspects of digital access that they must consider: how to keep a record of their various logins that control digital access, and how to recover login information when needed. This is especially true when most entrepreneurs use dozens of tools for everything from project management and scheduling to marketing and analytics.

These twin needs make a quality password manager essential for every entrepreneur, allowing you to store and encrypt all of your passwords. Your password manager could simply contain a spreadsheet with a full list of accounts and associated passwords, all protected by the master password. Many password managers use zero-access security and even require you to register new devices when using them.

Of course, you can also go old-school with a written document that isn’t connected to any network (cloud or self-hosted). This would require a lot more work, and the list would need to be stored in a secure location, not left out on your desk. While this may seem like overkill, some level of redundancy in storing password information is a good idea in case your primary option is lost or becomes inaccessible.

Related: Every Entrepreneur Building a Legacy Should Add This One Strategy to Their Playbook

Develop a digital succession plan

In 2019, the CEO of Canadian cryptocurrency exchange QuadrigaCX died unexpectedly from Crohn's disease. Such an incident would be tumultuous for any company, but for QuadrigaCX, it was disastrous – the CEO was the only person who had the password that provided access to $190 million in customer funds. His laptop was encrypted, and no one knew its password or recovery key. Encryption-breaking efforts failed, and the massive losses ultimately caused the company to file for bankruptcy.

It's a sobering lesson for any leader, yet it is an area that continues to be overlooked. How many entrepreneurs have a succession plan that ensures digital access if they become incapacitated? While a CEO might not want their login information to be accessible to others on a day-to-day basis, they simply can't afford a scenario where no one else can get this data if needed.

As this example clearly demonstrates, every entrepreneur should have a clearly outlined digital succession plan that ensures passwords and other essential digital resources can be accessed by other business leaders should the worst happen. Many entrepreneurs view their business as their legacy, but without accounting for digital access as part of their succession documents, that legacy won't last long.

Digital access has sometimes been viewed as an afterthought, even as the number of logins needed to handle business software, data and finances has grown exponentially. Entrepreneurs can no longer afford to treat it this way. By viewing digital access as equally important as cash flow management, entrepreneurs who become more proactive in this area will ensure the ongoing viability and stability of their company.

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It's Time to Rethink Research

and Development. Here’s What Must Change.

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Once upon a time, R&D leaders focused solely on scientific discovery. But those times have radically changed. Insights about what drives innovation show that science, business and leadership go hand in hand.

Today’s most effective innovation leaders blend technical depth with strategic foresight, sustainability awareness and collaborative leadership. R&D is not scientific research done in a bubble. Research and development is deeply interwoven with real-world results that it needs and is expected to provide. And those results have commercial, environmental and human dimensions.

Related: Investment In Research & Development: Key To a Sustainable Startup

From siloed expertise to strategic R&D leadership

The change starts at the top. Companies simply can’t afford R&D leaders who operate in isolation from the business and whose team is too disconnected from the company’s goals. Technical breakthroughs are great, but if they don’t address customer needs, align with sustainability goals or support long-term growth, they fall short.

Sustainability begins in the lab

According to a 2023 global survey by L.E.K. Consulting, 70-80% of a product's environmental impact is set during the research and development phase. That means sustainability needs to be an inherent R&D ingredient from the start and can't just be treated as an afterthought.

And yet, as the study reports, only 20% of companies actually take an innovation-led approach to sustainability, despite 71% saying they view it as a growth driver. This gap reflects missed opportunities. But more importantly, it shows the huge skills and mindset gap in how many organizations still approach R&D business leadership.

R&D is a business function, not just a technical one

It's not just about embedding sustainability in the work your scientific team is doing. The future R&D leader is going to be a business leader. You incubate technologies, run them like a P&L and then give them to the business. It's not Dexter's Laboratory, where wild experiments are being run in secret. Today's R&D lab is a venture with real business goals, financial metrics and people to lead.

Of course, that doesn't mean giving up scientific credibility. It means coupling technical rigor with strategic fit, finding ways to communicate the value of your research and connecting innovation with business goals. This hybrid mindset is essential in a world where customer needs, regulatory expectations and competitive landscapes are evolving fast.

Related: Why Your R&D Budget Should Be the Last Place You Cut

Technology is only as transformative as your people are

Today’s innovation leader also needs to be on top of emerging technologies and how to integrate them into both products and processes. Artificial intelligence, automation, robotics and all kinds of constantly evolving digital tools are reshaping how R&D operates: From design and simulation to materials discovery and testing. And the real differentiator? It’s not finding the best technological solutions for your R&D department. It’s about how you help your workforce to incorporate that technology.

Why innovation is a social process

Beyond technical know-how, enabling that kind of transformation and adaptation calls for leadership rooted in empathy and collaboration. Collaborative work begins when leaders really understand the details, listen deeply and provide constructive feedback. In practice, that looks like cross-functional conversations, open feedback loops and cultivating a team culture where people feel safe to speak up.

That philosophy reflects something deeper: Innovation is a social process, not just a technical one. The best R&D environments are ones where people feel empowered to explore, share, and even if it doesn’t work the first time, try again!

Balancing science, strategy, and people

The challenge is, of course, finding a balance between all these aspects: The science, the social and the business goals. R&D leaders must model behaviors that support transparency and experimentation, while also translating those values into systems and structures that promote openness across the board.

That’s not easy in environments still shaped by silos, legacy metrics or rigid hierarchies.

But the payoff is worth it. A 2023 academic review of R&D leadership styles found that leaders who emphasize participative and transformational behaviors, encouraging team input, aligning innovation with vision and offering individual support, drive better outcomes in terms of both performance and creativity. Conversely, directive or transactional approaches tend to limit idea generation and reduce adaptability.

Put differently: Empowering others to think creatively, work cross-functionally and take ownership is not a “soft” skill. It’s an actual competitive advantage!

Related: Why R&D Can Be Every Startup’s Not-so-secret Formula To Long-term Success

Redefining what it means to be an R&D business leader

And what that means for today’s R&D leaders is that the job is no longer just about managing projects. It’s about leading people and guiding innovation that delivers strategic, sustainable impact. It’s about building bridges between the lab, the boardroom and the marketplace, and balancing technical excellence with business fluency. And it’s about investing just as much in culture and capability as in breakthrough science.

The role has never been more complex. For those willing to embrace it fully, it’s also never been more powerful or rewarding.

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Don't Rely on Instinct to Make Hiring Decisions — Use This Smart Strategy Instead

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Key Takeaways

- Most small business owners rely on gut instinct when

hiring, but that approach becomes costly as the business grows.
- Shifting to a data-driven hiring process helps you make smarter, faster and fairer decisions by defining success metrics, tracking performance and continuously refining your hiring model for stronger long-term results.

For many small business owners, hiring starts as a gut-based decision. You meet someone, you like their energy and skillsets, and you think they'll "fit." Sometimes, that works out. But as your business grows, that kind of instinctive hiring starts to cost you in more ways than one.

And bad hires are exactly that — costly. In fact, 24% of small business owners share that they made a bad hiring decision in the last two years. At the same time, more than half of small business owners say that hiring is difficult for them.

A data-driven hiring strategy can sharpen your hiring intuition, helping you make smarter, faster decisions using clear metrics that show who will succeed in your business, not just who interviews well.

Here are my recommendations on how to refine your hiring process to be grounded in data from start to finish.

Related: How Big Data Can Help You Find and Hire the Most Elusive Talent

Step 1: Define success before you hire

The most common hiring mistake isn't picking the wrong person, but instead is not defining what success looks like for the role before you even start looking.

Instead of writing a vague job description using buzzwords ("detail-oriented team player"), identify measurable outcomes

tied to your company's goals. For example, "Respond to all client emails within 24 hours" or "Maintain client retention rate above 85%."

When you quantify expectations, you transform the hiring process from "who seems good" to "who can deliver this." It also gives candidates clarity and makes your evaluation process far more objective.

You can build this out with a success profile — a short document outlining key metrics, must-have skills and behavioral traits linked to high performance. Over time, this becomes a living database you can reference for future hires, ensuring consistency across roles and the ability to continuously learn.

Step 2: Use hiring data to shape your job funnel

Treat your hiring funnel like a sales funnel, where you track what's working and adjust accordingly.

Start with these metrics:

- **Applications per posting**: Are you attracting enough qualified applicants? If not, adjust your job titles, platform choices or salary visibility.
- **Screen-to-interview rate:** If only a few of your applicants make it past screening, your job description may be unclear or overly broad.
- **Offer-to-acceptance rate:** If your offers are frequently declined, your compensation, benefits or communication may need review.
- **Time to hire:** Long hiring cycles can signal internal bottlenecks and cause you to lose top candidates.

Tracking these over time turns your hiring process into an optimization system so you'll know where to focus your improvements.

Related: Use Data as Your Secret Weapon to Find the Best Talent and Ensure Their Success

Step 3: Measure what matters in candidate evaluation

Even the best interviewers are biased. Psychologically, we all tend to hire people who feel familiar or who say the "right" things. Data helps you step back and see who truly performs.

Start by defining objective criteria for evaluation covering measurable skills tied to the role, behavioral indicators like communication and accountability and alignment with company value as measured through case-based questions.

Use these metrics to establish structured scorecards during interviews. Each interviewer rates the same criteria on a standardized scale (for example, 1-5), and you can average the scores.

This not only removes bias but also gives you a record of why you chose a candidate, which is helpful if you ever need to revisit the decision or understand patterns in future hires.

Step 4: Track performance post-hire

Hiring data doesn't stop at onboarding. To truly be data-driven, you need to connect your hiring outcomes with on-the-job performance.

This means tracking how the candidates actually performed versus how they were rated in the interview process, and how long the great candidates stay with your company.

If you notice, for example, that candidates who scored high on “initiative” in interviews consistently perform best, that becomes a leading indicator to prioritize in future hiring. Conversely, if you find that your highest-rated interviewees are leaving within six months, it’s time to revisit your onboarding or role clarity.

The goal is to create a feedback loop between hiring data and performance data. Over time, this loop helps you predict success more accurately and refine your hiring model continuously.

Related: How Employers Can Assess Job Applicants — and Avoid Costly Hiring Mistakes

Step 5: Build systems that streamline data collection and analysis

The key to maintaining and scaling this is to make your data collection and analysis a system that’s just a part of your day-to-day. You definitely don’t need an enterprise HR platform to be data-driven either — even simple systems can go a long way.

Start by using a Google Sheet or Airtable to track applicant metrics and post-hire data. I like using this as a digital hiring scorecard template that your team completes for every interview, which then becomes a database to reference in the future.

Then, set a regular time to review your hiring data just like you would financial KPIs. Every two to three months is a great cadence to start with, and you can always do ad-hoc analysis as needed.

The key is consistency for you and your interviewing team.

Once data tracking becomes part of your hiring rhythm, it no longer feels like extra work, and it simply becomes the lens through which you make every decision.

Why data-driven hiring pays off — quickly

When you move from gut to data, you gain clarity and make better hires over time. You'll make fewer mis-hires (which can cost 30%+ of a role's annual salary), identify your strongest recruiting channels and, in the process, build a culture where performance expectations are clear from day one.

And perhaps most importantly, data-driven hiring creates fairness. Candidates are evaluated based on transparent criteria, not personality or bias, which strengthens your reputation and culture long-term. This approach helps you attract better candidates, evaluate them with confidence and retain the kind of people who drive your business forward.

Key Takeaways

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Not Seeing ROI From Your Branding Efforts? Here's How to Change That.

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Key Takeaways

- Most small businesses either overspend on branding that doesn't build real value or underspend in ways that hold them back.
- Your goal should be to build a brand that compounds in value over time, much like a smart financial investment.
- The best brands are built through consistent, measured actions that create trust, credibility and differentiation over time.

Every business owner knows that branding matters. But the hard truth is that most small and mid-sized businesses either overspend on things that don't actually build equity, or they completely underspend in ways that keep them from ever standing out.

The goal with your branding should be to build a brand that compounds in value over time, much like a smart financial investment. Here are my tips to strengthen your brand presence while keeping your ROI in mind.

Related: Good (and Bad) Branding Advice That Can Make (or Break) Your Success

1. Reframe your branding efforts as an investment with its own ROI

Before spending a dollar, it's worth reframing what brand investment actually means.

Your brand isn't just about how your brand appears visually, but more importantly, it is the sum of how people perceive you. Your brand perception directly affects your pricing power, sales velocity and client retention, so when you invest in your brand, you're building long-term equity that makes every other part of your business perform better.

But just like any investment, not every brand spend produces equal return. The key is to focus on high-impact moves that align with your revenue goals and audience.

Lastly, once you make investments, actually use what you invested in. Almost half of small businesses with brand guidelines say they don't even use them, which is the biggest waste of investment of all.

2. Start with the basics

A common (and costly) mistake is jumping straight into elaborate design or brand-building efforts before defining the basics. Before you start with anything else, you need to define your target audience, the problem you solve for them and how you stand out from the competition.

This clarity forms the foundation for every brand decision that follows. Without it, you'll waste time and money on messaging or visuals that don't connect, or worse, need to redo them in six months.

If you're still early-stage, invest in brand *strategy* before visuals. A half-day session with a strategist may run you $500-$1,000, but it can save you tens of thousands in misaligned creative work down the road.

3. Prioritize long-term assets over trends

When budgets are tight, it's easy to chase short-term wins that feel like lifelines — expecting a new logo to draw in new clients or a viral campaign to get you more visibility. These things sound shiny, but in reality, the smartest brand investments are ones that keep paying dividends for years.

Focus on assets that scale with your business, such as a brand guide and brand voice document, professional photography and a professional website that's SEO-optimized.

These are assets that will benefit your team for a long time and will be most likely to pay off in time.

Related: The Minute You Stop Chasing Trends Is When You Will Start Building a Real Business

4. Spend strategically rather than sentimentally

Many founders make emotional brand decisions like picking design elements they personally love or chasing an aesthetic that feels “premium.” It’s important to avoid choosing your brand based on your own taste and instead think about each decision strategically.

As you’re working on your brand, consider how you’re going to measure success. One way you could measure success is to make your brand something that lasts, so you don’t have to redo it or it doesn’t age as quickly. Another is how it will make you stand out against your industry competitors, so you can get the benefit of brand recognition.

As you’re evaluating brand investments, consider the strategic value of each over the medium-to-long term. If the decision doesn’t tie back to measurable business value, it’s likely not the right investment, at least right now.

5. Budget for brand maintenance as well

Brands are investments that have to be maintained consistently. Set aside a few percentage points of your annual revenue for ongoing brand upkeep. This can include updating your website for conversion or visual improvements as your business evolves — and if you do that, make sure those changes are consistent across platforms.

You can also do an audit of your client journey, pretending you’re a prospect and actually going through your sales and onboarding process to check for brand consistency.

These sorts of checks can ensure your brand doesn’t become outdated and that you don’t have to rebuild from scratch every

few years. Just like a house, if you maintain it over time, it won’t get worn down.

6. Use data to track your brand’s ROI

Branding can feel intangible, but it does have tangible impact. There are measurable indicators that show whether your brand investments are paying off. Things to consider include:

- **Website conversion and engagement rates:** How long are visitors staying on your site, and where on the site are they engaging? Are more visitors turning into leads?
- **Client retention and referrals:** Are people coming back or recommending you?
- **Follower engagement rate:** Are your audience interactions increasing on social media?

If those metrics improve after a brand investment, that’s real ROI. If not, use that data to refine where you continue to allocate funds.

Related: **How to Test the Effectiveness of Your Branding**

7. Scale your investment alongside your growth stage

In the early stage, focus on establishing a credible, cohesive brand. That might mean $2,000-$5,000 for a simple, strategic setup.

As you grow, your focus shifts to consistency, recognition and authority. Reinvest 5-10% of your annual revenue into scaling your brand presence through upgraded visuals, content and systems.

By the time you hit multi-six or seven figures, you'll likely outgrow your original assets. A full rebrand ($10,000-$25,000+) makes sense then, because you'll have data to guide it and cash flow to support it.

Every financially smart brand investment is about compounding value. The best brands are built through consistent, measured actions that create trust, credibility and differentiation over time, so avoid the temptation for things that seem like quick wins.

Key Takeaways

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al-roi-from-your-branding-efforts/499065

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10 Habits That Will Completely Transform Your Life and Business in 2026

Opinions expressed by Entrepreneur contributors are their own.

Last year, I shared *9 Habits* to help you better succeed in business, life and relationships, and many of you wrote to tell me how small shifts completely changed your energy, focus and confidence. This year, I'm taking it a step further.

In 2026, the goal isn't nonstop improvement. It's building sustainability, resilience and a healthier, happier, more productive you. Over the past year, I've deepened many of these routines and noticed more energy, strength and joy.

At 49, I'm the healthiest and fittest I've ever been, and that says a lot coming from someone who used to race triathlons and Ironman.

1. Strength-train four times per week

Muscle is longevity currency. It supports your metabolism, hormones and confidence. As we age, resistance training is the single most effective way to stay strong, mobile and injury-free. Muscle also keeps your metabolism active, your hormones

balanced and your body resilient as you age.

You can get started on an app such as Peloton or Ladder, or if you have the means, invest in a trainer who fits your goals and lifestyle. Schedule your strength training the way you schedule important calls: non-negotiable.

Related: 28 Habits for Building a Successful Life in Business

2. Go Zone 5 heart rate once per week

Dr. Stacy Sims calls high-intensity training "brain fertilizer." Pushing into Zone 5 (that super hard exertion effort that makes you breathless) improves cognition, bone density and mitochondrial function.

It teaches your body and mind to handle stress, including the stress that we as founders and leaders face daily. Sprint run, bike, ski-erg or swing a kettlebell — just hit that threshold at least once per week. (*Spoiler:* You feel amazing afterwards.)

3. Walk 30 minutes every day

Over 50% of adults in America spend about 9.5 hours per day sitting, and roughly 25% report *no* leisure-time physical activity outside their jobs. Walking is the most underrated productivity tool there is. It supports creativity, clears your mind, improves digestion, circulation and overall mood.

Many of my best ideas happen mid-walk, not mid-meeting. Swap one Zoom for a walking meeting or pace while on calls. In their recent book, *Built To Move: The Ten Essential Habits to Help You Move Freely and Live Fully,* Kelly and Juliet Starrett explain: "Walking gets everything flowing in our body. It's how we nourish all our tissues, how we decongest, how we

stimulate the body to release waste.”

Related: Your Habits Are Talking. Here’s What They’re Saying About You.

4. Protect your sleep like revenue

Sleep is the original performance enhancer. Seven to eight hours nightly fuels decision-making, emotional regulation and productivity. If you skip quality sleep, you’re essentially showing up jet-lagged to your work, your family and your health. Build a down-regulating evening routine and treat bedtime like a standing appointment with your future self.

5. Read at least 10 pages per day

AI is making our lives easier, and our minds lazier. Reading keeps you sharp, expands perspective and strengthens focus. If you’re just getting back into reading, start with 10 pages per day, and that will add up to about 12 books per year.

Choose content that interests you and, even better, content that challenges you. What you feed your mind matters as much as what you feed your body.

6. Eat real food

The cleaner your inputs, the clearer your output. Prioritize protein, fiber and whole foods and limit the packaged and processed food. When you start fueling right, your cravings and mood swings fade and your energy stabilizes. I make quick, simple protein-and-veggies meals and add flavorful condiments such as “Everything Con Chipotle” by renowned Chef and author Marcela Valladolid or the clean dipping and grilling sauces from Primal Kitchen Foods.

The good news: more restaurants and meal delivery companies

are banning seed oils, from Starbucks to Sweetgreens. Thrive Market is a great online resource if you have limited access to clean ingredients, and both Costco and Target continue to grow their offering with better-for-you options.

Bottom line: Nothing tastes better than feeling good.

7. Practice daily gratitude

Gratitude is rocket fuel for perspective. Start or end your day by listing three wins. They can range from landing a new client to catching your kid's laughter or finishing that workout.

When you train your mind to notice progress, you show up to your team, family and life in a calmer, clearer and more grounded state. Gratitude shifts your nervous system from hustle mode to harmony. And the best part, it's free.

8. Learn one new online skill

The cost of everything is rising, but knowledge multiplies. Pick one skill, such as copywriting, short-form video, coding, SEO or digital media, and invest 30 minutes a week. It builds neural connections, keeps you relevant and expands your income potential.

Before I traveled to Europe this past summer, I went all-in on a Duolingo German streak for two months. Some nights, the lesson reminder email popped up when it was the *last* thing I wanted to do, but showing up anyway built discipline and improved my German — a small nod to my Austrian roots. Curiosity is the new competitive advantage.

9. Sit in silence for 10 minutes

The hardest habit for me, yet the most transformative.

Stillness resets your breath, lowers cortisol and gives your mind space to think. We live in a world that glorifies “busy,” but silence is where the real integration happens, where ideas connect, clarity forms, and stress dissipates.

Neuroscientist Dr. Andrew Huberman calls this “non-sleep deep rest,” a way to recharge the brain’s focus circuits in minutes. Try it before bed, between meetings or after a workout. If silence feels impossible, start with a guided breathwork track. You’ll emerge clearer, calmer and more creative.

Related: 8 Reasons Sleep Is Crucial for Entrepreneurs and Leaders

10. Audit your inputs

Your environment programs you. The accounts you follow, the conversations you entertain, the food in your fridge — they all compound. If it doesn’t energize or educate you, edit it out. Growth is often less about adding and more about subtracting.

I’ve started setting time limits on scrolling and rarely check Facebook anymore, and I haven’t missed much. My husband recently deleted social media apps from his phone and has been reading more books. He is more clear-headed and productive.

Every few months, I edit my news feeds and unsubscribe from emails that don’t serve a purpose. These small shifts clear mental clutter and make room for focus, calm and creativity. I choose not to rely on tech to keep me off tech, but if you feel you need support, Brick looks interesting and one-sec has been helpful for friends.

You don’t need a massive change to feel better — just consistent patterns that support who you want to become. These small, sustainable choices, repeated over time, will transform

how you think, lead and live.

Entrepreneurs build companies one decision at a time. What if you built yourself with the same intention, starting today?

Last year, I shared *9 Habits* to help you better succeed in business, life and relationships, and many of you wrote to tell me how small shifts completely changed your energy, focus and confidence. This year, I'm taking it a step further.

In 2026, the goal isn't nonstop improvement. It's building sustainability, resilience and a healthier, happier, more productive you. Over the past year, I've deepened many of these routines and noticed more energy, strength and joy.

At 49, I'm the healthiest and fittest I've ever been, and that says a lot coming from someone who used to race triathlons and Ironman.

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Is Your AI Assistant More Frustrating Than Helpful? Here's How to Make It Truly

Useful.

Opinions expressed by Entrepreneur contributors are their own.

Key Takeaways

- To build an AI assistant that truly helps you run your business, you must ditch the “simplistic prompt” and start with a clear job brief.
- Assign a real task and expect the first draft to be flawed. Its first attempt will reveal the gaps in its understanding.
- Provide specific, actionable feedback — not a new set of rules. Then, audit the changes to prevent “instructional drift.”
- Repeat the cycle to build a genuine expert. With each cycle, the AI’s understanding becomes more nuanced and its performance more reliable.

We’ve all done it. Built a custom GPT, fed it documents and shouted out in frustration when it failed real-world tasks. It hallucinates, ignores a key rule or gives a generic, useless answer.

If that is the case for you, think about this: “The technology is up to the task. My approach isn’t.”

Most entrepreneurs are treating ChatGPT, Gemini and Claude as software to be configured … but they are a bonkers mix of super-knowledgable interns that you need to guide. Writing a static set of rules and expecting flawless performance is a HUGE mistake.

Over the last two years, I’ve built dozens of specialized AI

assistants, moving from frustratingly unhelpful tools that drown me in streams of useless text to genuinely powerful tools that help me move forward faster and more effectively than I ever imagined would be possible.

The secret to building AI assistants that are truly helpful (and a HUGE time saver) is to abandon the "one-shot" prompt and adopt an iterative coaching approach. You have to treat your AI assistant like a brilliant, incredibly fast and vastly knowledgeable new hire who has zero real work experience.

This method transforms a gimmicky chatbot into an assistant that truly helps you run your business.

Here is the exact five-step process I use.

Related: This Revolutionary Tool Will Streamline Your Sales and Workload — Here's How You Can Harness It Today.

Step 1: Ditch the "simplistic prompt." Start with a clear job brief.

When building a custom AI assistant, most entrepreneurs fall into one of two traps. The first is the one-line prayer: a vague prompt that expects the machine to read your mind. The second is the mega-manual: a single, massive prompt that tries to account for every possible scenario.

Both create an inflexible system that breaks under pressure, forcing you into a frustrating cycle of rewrites.

These methods fail because they treat the AI like a calculator, not a collaborator. The AI has no context for *why* the rules exist; it's just executing a script. True expertise, whether human or artificial, comes from understanding the principles behind the rules. You build that understanding

through practice, feedback and refinement — not by handing over an encyclopedia on day one.

The solution is to treat your AI assistant like a new hire. Your first prompt should be a clear job brief. Write this first brief with a "vanilla" version of Gemini or GPT and define the core components in a single, focused conversation.

Your brief must contain these five core components:

- **The role:** Who is the AI? (e.g., "You are a junior copywriter specializing in financial services.")
- **The goal:** Be clear about the single most important objective. What is the one thing this output must achieve? (e.g., "The goal is to create an article that persuades potential investors of our Q3 growth.")
- **Success criteria:** How will you judge the work? List two to three measurable checks the final output must satisfy. This is the AI's quality checklist. (e.g., "Success Criteria: 1. The article must mention the 34% revenue increase. 2. The tone must be formal and confident. 3. The final paragraph must include a call to action.")
- **Constraints:** Define the rules of the game. Specify the scope (e.g., "Focus only on the financial results, do not mention staffing changes") and any allowed or forbidden sources of information.
- **Output format:** Be specific about the final deliverable. Should it be bullet points, a formal report or a specific number of paragraphs? Always provide a word count.
- **Clarifications:** Empower your assistant to ask for help. Add a simple instruction like: "If any critical information is missing to meet the goal, ask me targeted

questions before you proceed."

Framing the task with this level of clarity gives the AI a framework for success as well as the "obvious" instructions. You're setting yourself up for a win from the very first interaction.

Related: **How to Train AI to Actually Understand Your Business**

Step 2: Assign a real task and expect the first draft to be flawed

Give your newly briefed assistant its first real-world assignment. Give it a real-world input it has never seen before and see what it produces.

Expect it to get things wrong. Just like a junior employee, its first attempt will reveal the gaps in its understanding. Your job is to help it improve by identifying those gaps — and providing suggestions for solutions.

Step 3: Provide specific, actionable feedback — not a new set of rules

This is where the real coaching begins. Present your critique in a structured way:

1. Remind it of the input you provided.
2. Include the output it generated.
3. Provide your critique. Be specific. For example: "The tone was excellent, but you failed to mention the key statistic about Q3 revenue, which was a critical part of the input. That statistic needs to be in the first

paragraph."

4. Ask it to rewrite its own instructions to incorporate this feedback.

For this feedback loop phase, stick to a single conversation – you are building on the AI's existing context. You're adding new rules, refining existing rules and (vitally important) teaching it *why* the old ones were not good enough. It will use the current conversation and its existing knowledge and offer you the most effective improvements to its foundational instructions.

Step 4: Audit the changes to prevent "instructional drift"

Here's the step most people miss – and it's the most important. When you ask an AI to "tweak" its instructions, it can sometimes remove or alter foundational rules in the process of incorporating your new feedback. I call this "**instructional drift**."

Don't trust the assistant to self-regulate. Do a quick audit. Compare the newly generated instructions with the previous version. If you spot a missing rule, explicitly correct the AI.

I use a simple prompt for this: "You have removed the rule about X. That is still a core requirement. Please add it back in, and then tell me what other essential instructions you may have omitted in your update."

This forces the AI to check its own work and reinforces the importance of its foundational rules. It's the equivalent of reminding a new hire, "Great, you've incorporated the new feedback, but don't forget the basics we talked about this morning."

Related: From Co-Pilot to Co-Worker: Where the AI Assistant Journey is Headed to Next

Step 5: Repeat the cycle to build a genuine expert

This iterative process of assigning, reviewing, critiquing and auditing is how you build a truly useful assistant. With each cycle, the AI's understanding becomes more nuanced and its performance more reliable.

Key point: Once you have the perfect instructions, create a new assistant. The assistant you have been working with will still contain all the inaccuracies, mistakes and back-and-forth from steps 1 to 4. That pollutes the algorithm. So start a fresh new assistant without all the "baggage." You'll thank me for this piece of advice – in my experience, "historical assistant pollution" is THE single thing that makes custom GPT/AI assistants so very frustrating.

At Kalicube, we use this very methodical training to build highly effective AI assistants (ChatGPT, Gemini, etc.) for our clients that actually improve workflow and save time.

This process works. It requires a lot of patience upfront, but the payoff is HUGE, so my advice is to persevere – the assistant you get at the end of this process will be the biggest productivity boon you have ever experienced.

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Walmart Sales Are Up. Here’s Why That Matters.

Walmart reported stronger-than-expected results heading into the holidays, with U.S. comparable sales rising 4.5 percent and online sales jumping 28 percent for the August-to-October period. The performance was solid enough for the retailer to raise its full-year sales outlook to 4.8 to 5.1 percent growth and lift its profit forecast.

The rosy results contrast with a season many analysts expect

to be sluggish. Rival companies such as Target are hurting, and Deloitte projects the slowest holiday spending growth since the pandemic as shoppers wait for steeper discounts.

Walmart’s gains show where consumers are still willing to spend: value-driven groceries, essentials, and fast, reliable e-commerce.

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The Tech Jobs Bust Is Worse Than You Think

Photo by Weiquan Lin/Getty

The jobs market in tech continues to be a wreck. Indeed's latest Job Postings Index, which soared above 200 during the pandemic boom, now sits at a dismal 67.

Data and analytics roles are feeling the squeeze the most. Job postings in that category have dropped to 60, roughly 40 percent below pre-pandemic levels and now among the toughest tech jobs to land.

More people are chasing fewer openings. Training programs have flooded the market with qualified candidates, and new AI tools are automating work that once required large teams — creating intense competition for the roles that remain.

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Costco Recalls Two Ready-To-Eat Items After Plastic Contamination Alert

Photo by Kevin Carter/Getty Images

Costco announced a voluntary recall on two popular prepared-food items: its Caesar Salad and Chicken Sandwich with Caesar Salad. The items were sold with sell-by dates from October 17 to November 9 across stores in the Midwest, Northeast and Southeast.

The recall stems from concerns that the salad dressing, supplied by Ventura Foods, may contain pieces of plastic foreign material. Customers are cautioned to not consume the product and return it to Costco for a full refund.

This alert adds to a growing list of safety actions by Costco. While no injuries linked to the items have been reported yet, Costco warns that plastic fragments may pose a risk of choking or internal injury.

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Your Disney Ticket Price May Soon Depend on the Crowd

Matt Petit/ABC via Getty Images

Disney is preparing a major shift in how it prices theme-park tickets. The company says it wants to bring dynamic pricing — the kind airlines use — to Walt Disney World and Disneyland. A successful test run in Paris gave executives confidence to move ahead.

The idea is simple. Prices move with demand. A busy day costs more. A slower day costs less. Even the timing of when you buy could change the price. It’s a big change from the fixed-price calendar fans are used to.

The rollout is still years away, but planning has started. Disney believes the system could manage crowds, smooth out demand and lift revenue as growth slows in new attractions.

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Cracker Barrel Boots Board Member but Sticks With Embattled CEO

Photo by Paul Weaver/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images

Cracker Barrel just delivered a dramatic boardroom shake-up. Shareholders voted to boot director Gilbert Dávila after the chain’s logo fiasco sent customers into revolt — but they spared CEO Julie Felss Masino, keeping her in charge despite the firestorm.

The company has been reeling since its controverseial rebrand, which ditched the beloved “Old Timer” character and sparked outrage across social media. Traffic tanked. Critics pounced. And the chain was forced into a messy retreat, ultimately restoring the classic logo.

With sales still under pressure and a bruised brand to repair, Cracker Barrel faces a tough road ahead even with a new board lineup.

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UPS Plane That Crashed Had Major Cracks in Engine Mount — Investigation Shows

Photo by Stephen Cohen/Getty Images

A cargo plane operated by UPS exploded into flames moments after takeoff in Louisville when its left engine ripped off the wing mid-roll. Investigators found fatigue cracks in the engine-mount structure, raising immediate questions about inspections and aircraft age.

The plane reached only about 30 feet before disaster struck. The detaching engine triggered a massive fireball that struck buildings and claimed at least 14 lives. Maintenance histories are now under aggressive scrutiny.

With the holiday shipping surge ahead, UPS grounded its fleet of MD-11 jets. Regulators say the crash may force industry-wide changes to inspection protocols and aircraft aging policies.

Read more

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