

The AI Agency Nobody Asks You About

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Table of Contents

1. Chapter 1: Pick One Service You Can Deliver in Under 6 Hours a Week
2. Chapter 2: Set Up Your Delivery Stack: What to Automate and What to Never Automate
3. Chapter 3: Price the Offer Before You Build It: Three Retainer Structures That Hold Up
4. Chapter 4: Deliver Month One So the Client Renews in Month Two
5. Chapter 5: Write the One-Page Scope Document That Prevents Scope Creep
6. Chapter 6: Write the Monthly Report That Justifies Your Invoice
7. Chapter 7: Find 40 Qualified Local Businesses Without Buying a Lead List
8. Chapter 8: Handle the Four Objections That Kill AI Service Deals
9. Chapter 9: Send the Outreach Sequence That Gets Replies From Cold Prospects
10. Chapter 10: Raise Your Rate on an Existing Client Without Losing Them
11. Chapter 11: Run the 20-Minute Discovery Call Using a Fixed Question Script
12. Chapter 12: Decide When to Hire, When to Subcontract, and When to Stay Solo
13. Chapter 13: Turn the Call Into a Proposal the Same Day
14. Chapter 15: Build the Client Intake Form That Makes Delivery Repeatable
15. Conclusion
16. References and Further Reading

Chapter 1: Pick One Service You Can Deliver in Under 6 Hours a Week

Here's the thing nobody tells you when you decide to start an "AI agency": the hardest part isn't the AI. The AI part is genuinely easy now. In 2026, you can get a competent draft of almost any written asset, a decent image, a transcript, a summary, a data extraction, or a workflow automation running in an afternoon. That's not the bottleneck.

The bottleneck is that most people pick a service they cannot actually deliver repeatedly, at a price someone will pay, without it eating their entire life. They pick something vague ("AI consulting"), or something enormous ("full marketing automation"), or something that sounds impressive at a networking event but requires them to be on call five days a week for a client who pays \$800 a month.

This chapter is about picking the one thing. Not three things. Not a "suite of services." One. And picking it with a specific constraint in mind: **you must be able to deliver it, per client, in under six hours a week — including the annoying parts.**

Why six hours? Because that number is the difference between a business and a second job you gave yourself. If one client takes six hours a week, three clients take eighteen. Eighteen hours a week is a serious commitment but it's survivable alongside a job, a family, or another business. At three clients paying \$1,500-\$2,500 a month — which is a realistic mid-market range for a well-scoped service in 2026, not a fantasy number — you're looking at somewhere in the region of \$4,500 to \$7,500 a month in revenue for eighteen hours of work.

I want to be honest about that estimate. Those figures are what I'd consider a reasonable range based on what small B2B services command, but they are estimates and they vary enormously by market, geography, niche, and how well you sell. Some people charge \$500 and some charge \$6,000 for what is nominally the same deliverable. Nobody can promise you a number. What I *can* tell you is the structural reason most people never get near any number: they never scope the work tightly enough to deliver it twice the same way.

The Six-Hour Rule and Why It's Not Arbitrary

When people estimate how long a client service takes, they estimate the *production* time and forget everything else. They think: "I can write four LinkedIn posts in an hour with AI." Sure. But that's not the job. The job is:

- Reading the client's Slack messages or emails and figuring out what they actually want this week
- Getting the brief, which is usually incomplete
- Chasing them for the thing they promised to send you on Monday
- Doing the actual production work
- Reviewing it, because AI output is never client-ready on the first pass
- Formatting and delivering it in whatever system they use
- Handling revisions, which almost always come
- The status update they ask for on Thursday
- The invoice, the follow-up on the invoice, and the mild anxiety about the invoice
- The monthly call where they tell you they're "rethinking the strategy"

Production might be 90 minutes. The job is five hours. If you scope your pricing against the 90 minutes, you will be furious within two months and you will start resenting the client, and then you will do bad work, and then you will lose the client. This is the single most common failure loop in small service businesses and it has nothing to do with AI.

So the six-hour rule means: **six hours of total client-attached time per week, from first message to money in the bank.** If your service can't fit in that, it's not a bad service — it's just a bad service *for you right now*, at the stage where you're a one-person operation with no team, no ops manager, and no client success person.

The Four Filters: How to Test Any Service Idea

Run every idea through these four filters. If it fails any one of them, don't start with it. You can add it later once you have cash flow and process.

Filter 1: Is the output a discrete artifact?

An artifact is a thing you hand over. A document. A set of images. A working automation. A report. A video. A cleaned dataset. A configured system.

Non-artifacts are things like "strategy," "advice," "optimization," "growth," and "support." These are real forms of value but they are terrible first services because there's no obvious moment where you're done. Without a done moment, scope expands until you're a part-time employee at contractor rates.

Test: *Can you finish a sentence that starts, "At the end of each month, the client receives ____"*? If the blank fills with a noun you could attach to an email, you pass. If it fills with an adjective or a feeling, you fail.

Filter 2: Can you produce it without needing the client's ongoing input?

This is the killer. Services that require constant client input are not six-hour services because you're not in control of your own timeline. If you need a new brief every single week, three approvals per deliverable, and access to a system they keep forgetting to grant, you have built a dependency machine.

The best small AI services have a heavy onboarding — where you extract everything you need in one concentrated session — and then run mostly self-sufficiently after that. You want a service where after week two, you could theoretically deliver a month's work without speaking to the client at all, even if in practice you check in.

Test: *What's the minimum number of client touches per delivery cycle?* Aim for one or zero. Two is workable. Three or more and you're doing account management, not delivery.

Filter 3: Does the client already have a budget line for it?

This is the difference between a sale that takes two weeks and a sale that takes four months. If a business already pays someone for something adjacent — a copywriter, a VA, a social media person, a data entry contractor, a bookkeeper's assistant, an SEO agency — then the money exists and is already mentally allocated. You are competing for an existing budget line, which is a normal commercial conversation.

If you're selling something genuinely new — "AI transformation readiness assessments" — you have to create the budget line, which means educating a buyer who didn't wake up wanting this. That's a much harder, longer, more expensive sale. Great for a mature agency. Terrible for month one.

Test: *Can you name the role or vendor whose budget you'd be replacing or supplementing?* If not, pick something else.

Filter 4: Can you show a sample before you have a client?

This filter matters more than people expect. If you can produce a genuine, high-quality example of your service for a business you don't work with — using only public information — you can sell without a portfolio, without testimonials, and without credentials. You just show the work.

Services that pass this filter easily: content, SEO briefs, competitor teardowns, ad creative, product descriptions, email sequences, data cleanup demonstrations, workflow diagrams and prototypes.

Services that fail: anything requiring access to internal systems, private data, or accounts before you can demonstrate anything.

Test: *Could you spend three hours tonight and email a stranger something so specific and useful that they'd reply?* If yes, that's your service.

Nine Services That Actually Pass All Four Filters

These aren't exotic. That's the point. Exotic services are hard to explain and hard to sell. Boring services with AI leverage underneath them are where the money is.

1. SEO content production (long-form articles, 4-8 per month)

Artifact: yes — finished articles, published or ready to publish. Client input: heavy at onboarding (brand voice, topic priorities, product details), light thereafter. Existing budget: absolutely — content is one of the most common outsourced marketing functions. Sample-able: trivially, you can write one article about their category and send it.

Time per client: roughly 4-5 hours a week for eight articles a month if your process is tight. The AI drafts; you do research verification, structural editing, internal linking, and fact-checking. That verification step is not optional and it's where most of your hours go.

2. Newsletter production

Artifact: a sent newsletter, weekly or biweekly. Client input: minimal after setup. Existing budget: yes, especially for creators, coaches, e-commerce brands, and B2B firms who started a newsletter and abandoned it. Sample-able: yes — write their next issue and send it to them.

Time: 2-4 hours a week. This is one of the best first services because the deliverable is unambiguous, the cadence is fixed, and there's a hard deadline that keeps both sides honest.

3. Product description and catalog copy for e-commerce

Artifact: written descriptions, bulk. Client input: they send you a product feed or spreadsheet — one touch. Existing budget: yes, usually paid to freelancers per description. Sample-able: pick ten products from their live store and rewrite them.

Time: this one is highly leveraged. With a good prompt chain and a spreadsheet workflow you can do hundreds of descriptions in a few hours. The risk is it's project work, not recurring — good for cash, weaker for stability. Pair it with a retainer for new-product copy.

4. Podcast and video repurposing

Artifact: per episode — show notes, timestamps, a blog post, five social clips with captions, three email snippets. Client input: they publish the episode; you take it from there. Zero ongoing briefing required. Existing budget: yes, this is a well-established freelance category. Sample-able: take a real episode of a show you don't work with and do the whole package.

Time: 3-5 hours a week for a weekly show. Transcription and first-pass clip selection are heavily automatable; final clip selection and caption polish are not.

5. Inbound lead qualification and response drafting

Artifact: qualified lead summaries and drafted responses sitting in the client's CRM or inbox each morning. Client input: access, then nothing. Existing budget: yes — this is usually done badly by a VA or not at all. Sample-able: harder, but you can demo the workflow with fake leads.

Time: 2-3 hours a week once running, mostly monitoring. This is a strong service because the value is obvious and immediate — leads get answered in minutes instead of days.

6. Competitive and market monitoring briefs

Artifact: a weekly or monthly brief covering competitor moves, pricing changes, new content, hiring signals, and relevant industry news. Client input: they name the competitors once. Existing budget: sometimes — this often comes out of a marketing or strategy budget. Sample-able: extremely — send an unsolicited one and watch the reply rate.

Time: 2-4 hours. Be careful: this can drift into "research on demand," which is unbounded. Keep the format fixed.

7. Documentation and SOP writing

Artifact: written procedures, onboarding docs, internal wikis. Client input: recorded walkthroughs or interviews — front-loaded. Existing budget: yes, ops and HR budgets. Sample-able: yes, write a generic SOP for their industry.

Time: variable, but a documentation sprint is a clean project. This is underrated because businesses genuinely hate doing it and AI is genuinely good at converting a rambling Loom transcript into a clean numbered procedure.

8. Local business content and reputation packages

Artifact: Google Business Profile posts, review responses, a monthly blog post, seasonal offer copy. Client input: minimal. Existing budget: yes — local businesses already pay for "digital marketing," often badly. Sample-able: yes.

Time: 1-2 hours per client, which means you can carry more clients. The tradeoff is lower prices — realistically a few hundred dollars a month per local business rather than thousands. Volume game.

9. Workflow automation builds

Artifact: a working automation in Make, n8n, Zapier, or Airtable that does a specific job. Client input: a discovery call and access. Existing budget: emerging, but ops budgets cover it. Sample-able: yes, via a recorded demo of a similar build.

Time: project-based, then a small maintenance retainer. Be careful with maintenance — if you build it, you own it forever unless you scope that explicitly. More on this in Chapter 2.

The Services to Avoid in Your First Six Months

I'd rather tell you what not to do than let you find out the expensive way.

Avoid: "AI strategy consulting." There is real money here and there will be more. But you need credibility you probably don't have yet, the sales cycle is long, and the deliverable is a deck, which means the client has no way to judge whether it worked. When they can't judge it, they don't renew.

Avoid: full-service social media management. It sounds like a content service. It's actually a customer service job. You'll be responding to comments, dealing with the client's opinion about a post that got 11 likes, and being blamed for algorithm changes. Content production is a service. Community management is a job.

Avoid: anything priced per-hour. Hourly pricing punishes you exactly as you get better. The whole advantage of AI-leveraged delivery is speed, and hourly billing converts your speed into a pay cut. Price the outcome or price the package.

Avoid: custom AI chatbot builds as a first service. They're fun to build and hell to support. Users ask things you didn't anticipate, the client blames you for every wrong answer, and hallucination in a customer-facing bot is a reputational risk that lands on you. Do this once you have process, contracts, and pricing that reflects the support burden.

Avoid: "we'll do whatever you need." This is not humility, it's a scope hole. Clients don't respect it and it makes you impossible to refer, because nobody can describe what you do.

How to Pick Yours: The Two-Axis Method

Draw two axes. Horizontal: **how much you already know about this domain**. Vertical: **how easy it is to reach buyers**.

Domain knowledge matters more than people admit. AI will happily produce fluent nonsense about an industry you don't understand, and you won't catch it. If you spent six years in insurance, writing content for insurance brokers is a massive edge, because you'll notice when the AI says something that would get a broker in trouble with a regulator. Someone with no insurance background will ship that error and lose the client.

Access to buyers matters just as much. You may be brilliant at repurposing podcasts, but if you don't know a single podcaster and have no plausible way to meet 50 of them, you're starting from zero on distribution. Meanwhile, if your brother-in-law runs a plumbing company and knows every trades business in the county, local business content is sitting right there.

Pick from the top-right quadrant: **domain you know, buyers you can reach**. Not the coolest service. Not the highest theoretical ceiling. The one where you have unfair advantages on both axes.

If nothing lands in the top right, take the buyer-access axis over the domain axis. You can learn a domain in six weeks of serious study. Building a network from nothing takes a year.

Scoping It: Turn the Service Into a Fixed Package

Once you've picked, write it down as a package with hard edges. Here's the template I'd use:

- **Deliverable:** exactly what, exactly how many, exactly what format
- **Cadence:** when it arrives — a specific day, not "monthly"
- **Client obligations:** what they must provide, by when, or delivery slips
- **Revisions:** how many rounds, within how many days
- **Communication:** which channel, what response time, what's out of scope