The $34 Product: Build and Sell Your First Digital Download

By Joe Giler

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Pick What to Sell: Turning What You Already Know Into a Buyable Thing

Let's start with the uncomfortable part. The reason most people never sell a digital product isn't that they lack skills, tools, or an audience. It's that they spend six weeks trying to decide what to make, get tired, and quietly stop. The deciding is the hard part. The making is comparatively easy. This chapter is about making the deciding take an afternoon instead of a season.

I'm going to be direct with you throughout this book, because the alternative — telling you this is easy and lucrative — would be a lie that costs you money. Here's the honest baseline: most first digital products sell in the single digits. Not single-digit thousands. Single-digit units. A handful of people you already know, a few strangers who found you, and then silence. That's the normal outcome, and it is not a failure. It's tuition, and it's cheap tuition compared to almost anything else you could learn from.

The people who eventually make real money from digital products are almost never the ones who nailed it on the first try. They're the ones who shipped a mediocre thing, learned what the buyers actually wanted, and shipped a better thing four months later. This book is designed to get you through that first cycle fast and cheap, so you can start the second one.

Why $34 Is the Number

The price in the title isn't arbitrary and it isn't magic. It's a deliberate position in a real pricing landscape, and understanding why it works will make every later decision easier.

Digital products cluster into rough price bands, and each band has a different buyer psychology attached to it:

- **Free to $9.** This is the impulse band. Nobody thinks. They click, they pay, they may never open the file. Conversion is high, revenue per buyer is negligible, and refund requests are rare because nobody cares enough to ask. The problem is arithmetic: at $7, you need roughly 143 sales to clear $1,000 before fees. At $34, you need about 30.
- **$10 to $29.** The "sure, why not" band. Still mostly impulse, but the buyer glances at the sales page. You need something that looks like it delivers.
- **$30 to $79.** The considered-purchase band. The buyer reads. They want to know what's inside, who you are, and whether this solves their specific problem. But they don't need permission from a spouse or a manager. This is where $34 lives.
- **$80 to $299.** The justification band. Buyers here want testimonials, a refund policy they trust, and usually some proof you're a real person with real results. First-time sellers with no audience struggle badly here.
- **$300+.** Course and coaching territory. Requires trust you haven't built yet. Skip it for now.

$34 sits at the top of the considered-purchase band without tipping into the justification band. It's high enough that thirty sales is a meaningful month and low enough that a stranger who's had a good five minutes on your website will buy without a sales call. It's also a number that reads as deliberate. $29 reads as "I picked the standard psychological price point." $34 reads as "someone decided this was worth $34." That's a small thing, but small things compound.

One more practical reason: platform fees. On most of the platforms we'll cover in Chapter 2, you're paying somewhere in the range of 5% plus roughly 30 cents per transaction, sometimes more. On a $7 product, that fixed 30 cents is over 4% of your revenue before the percentage fee even lands. On a $34 product, it's under 1%. Low-priced products get quietly eaten by fixed transaction costs. (Exact fee structures vary by platform and change over time — always verify current rates on the platform's own pricing page before you commit.)

The Only Two Things a Digital Product Has to Do

Strip away everything else and a paid digital product has exactly two jobs:

1. **Save the buyer time.** You've compressed hours of figuring-it-out into something they can consume in a fraction of the time.
2. **Reduce the buyer's uncertainty.** They were unsure how to do something, or whether they were doing it right, and now they aren't.

That's it. Not "provide value" — that phrase is so vague it's useless. Time and uncertainty. If you can't articulate which of those two your product delivers and roughly how much, you don't have a product yet. You have a topic.

Here's a test I use. Finish this sentence out loud: "This saves someone about ___ hours of ___, or stops them from worrying about ___." If you can't fill in the blanks with something specific, keep working.

Bad: "My product provides value to freelance designers." Good: "This saves a freelance designer about four hours of writing their first client contract from scratch, and stops them from worrying they've left out the scope-creep clause."

Notice the second one is boring. Boring is good. Boring means specific. Specific means someone can recognise themselves in it and pull out a card.

The Inventory: Finding What You Already Know

Most people looking for a product idea search outward — trending niches, keyword tools, "what's selling right now." That's backwards for a first product. You don't have the time or the runway to become credible in a field you don't know. What you have is a pile of accumulated, undervalued knowledge that feels ordinary to you because you live inside it.

The curse of expertise is real and it's the single biggest reason people can't find their product. Things you learned painfully three years ago now feel obvious. They are not obvious. They're obvious *to you*, and the gap between you and someone eighteen months behind you is exactly where the money is.

Set a timer for forty minutes and work through these prompts in writing. Actually write. Don't do it in your head — your head will skip the good stuff.

Prompt 1: The repeat question. What have at least three different people asked you how to do? Not "asked your opinion on" — asked how to *do*. Three separate humans independently deciding you're the person to ask is the strongest signal available to you and it's free.

Prompt 2: The rebuilt thing. What have you built more than twice from scratch because you didn't have a template? A spreadsheet, a checklist, an email sequence, a proposal, an onboarding doc, a project plan. If you rebuilt it, other people are rebuilding it too, and they'd rather not.

Prompt 3: The expensive lesson. What mistake cost you real money or real months, that you now know how to avoid? Not a philosophical lesson — a specific, avoidable, mechanical mistake. "I didn't know you had to register for sales tax in states where you have nexus" is a product. "I learned to believe in myself" is not.

Prompt 4: The unglamorous system. What do you do in a systematic way that other people do chaotically? How you triage email, how you scope a project, how you photograph products for a listing, how you keep your books, how you run a rehearsal, how you plan a menu for forty people.

Prompt 5: The translation. What do you understand that's technically documented somewhere but written badly? Enormous amounts of value sit in the gap between official documentation and human comprehension. If you can explain something that has terrible official docs, you have a product.

Prompt 6: The last twelve months. Scroll your own sent email, your messages, your browser history for the past year. What did you research obsessively? What did you spend twenty hours figuring out? You already did the work; you just didn't package it.

You should come out of this with somewhere between eight and twenty candidate ideas. Most will be bad. That's the point — you need volume before you need quality.

Filtering: The Four Gates

Now run each candidate through four gates. An idea has to pass all four. Most won't, and killing ideas quickly is the skill here.

Gate 1: Is there an identifiable buyer with a name?

Not a demographic. A role or situation you could describe to a stranger in one sentence and they'd know exactly who you meant. "Small business owners" fails. "Someone who just hired their first employee and has no idea what paperwork they legally need" passes. "People interested in fitness" fails. "A runner who's signed up for their first marathon and has twelve weeks to train" passes.

Here's the practical version of this test: could you list, right now, three specific places online where that person hangs out? A subreddit, a Facebook group, a Discord, a forum, a hashtag, a particular YouTube channel's comment section. If you can't name the watering holes, you can't reach the buyer, and a product you can't put in front of anyone is a hobby.

Gate 2: Is the pain acute, current, and expensive?

Three separate criteria and all three matter.

- **Acute** means it hurts now, not in a vague someday. Chronic low-grade annoyances don't get wallets open. Deadlines, launches, first-time-doing-this-and-scared, and "I just got told I have to do X" all do.
- **Current** means they're facing it in the next few weeks. People buy solutions to problems they have this month, not problems they anticipate having next year.
- **Expensive** means the problem costs them meaningfully more than $34 in time, money, or risk. If your product saves someone twenty minutes once, $34 is a hard sell. If it saves them a weekend or prevents a $2,000 mistake, it's trivially cheap.

Gate 3: Can you actually deliver it in under thirty hours?

Be brutal here. Thirty hours is the outer limit for a first product, and honestly twenty is better. Your first product's job is to teach you the whole cycle — build, price, list, sell, get feedback — not to be your magnum opus. Every additional week you spend building is a week you learn nothing about whether anyone wants it.

Estimate the hours, then multiply by 1.8. Everyone underestimates. If the honest number after multiplication is over thirty, cut scope until it isn't. Cutting scope usually means narrowing the buyer, not thinning the content — a thorough guide for one specific person beats a shallow guide for everyone.

Gate 4: Does something already sell in this space?

This gate confuses people, so read it carefully. **Competition is good news.** An empty market is almost never an untapped opportunity; it's usually a market where people don't pay. If nobody is selling a guide on your topic, the most likely explanation is that everyone who wants that information gets it free and is perfectly happy.

What you want to see: several products in the same general area, at various prices, with some evidence of sales. Then you want to find the gap — the audience segment or the specific angle nobody's serving well.

How to Actually Check Demand (Free, in About Ninety Minutes)

Here's a concrete research routine. No paid tools. Do this before you build anything.

Step 1: Search the marketplaces (25 minutes). Go to Gumroad's discover section and Etsy (yes, Etsy — it's a large digital-download marketplace, whatever you think of it). Search your topic and adjacent terms. You're looking for: How many products exist? What price range? What do the listings emphasise? On Etsy, listings often show review counts, which is a rough floor on sales — a listing with 60 reviews has had considerably more than 60 sales. Treat these as directional signals, not precise data.

Step 2: Search the communities (25 minutes). Find the two or three watering holes you identified in Gate 1. Search within them for your topic. What you're hunting for specifically:

- Posts phrased as "does anyone have a template/checklist/guide for..." — that's literal demand, stated in public

- Long comment threads where people are helping each other through the same problem repeatedly
- Posts where someone paid for something and complained it was too basic — that's a gap with a price tag attached
- The exact vocabulary people use. Write it down verbatim. This becomes your sales page copy later, and copy in the buyer's own words converts far better than copy in yours.

Step 3: Check the free tier (20 minutes). Search your topic on Google and YouTube as though you were the buyer. What already exists for free? If the top ten results comprehensively solve the problem in a well-organised way, you need a sharper angle. But look closely — free content is usually scattered, out of date, incomplete, or requires watching forty minutes of video to get six minutes of substance. "It's organised, current, and I don't have to assemble it myself" is a legitimate value proposition.

Step 4: The ten-person test (20 minutes). Write one paragraph describing your product as though it already exists. Send it to ten people who match your buyer description. Not friends being supportive — people in the actual situation. Ask exactly this: "Would you pay $34 for this? Be honest, I'd rather know now."

Interpret the answers carefully. "That sounds great!" means nothing. People are nice. What you're listening for is: does anyone ask a follow-up question about what's inside? Does anyone say "when will it be ready?" Does anyone say "does it cover X?" Those are buying signals. Polite enthusiasm is not.

If three or more people out of ten give you a genuine buying signal, that's strong. Zero out of ten is real information — reconsider. One or two is ambiguous; look at whether the ones who bit are the ones who best match your target.

The Product Formats That Actually Work at $34

Once you know what you're selling and who to, you need to pick a form. Format matters more than people expect, because it determines both how long you spend building and how the buyer perceives the value.

The focused guide / ebook (25–60 pages). The default, and usually the right call for a first product. Works when the buyer needs to understand a process, not just execute a task. Build time: 15–30 hours. The failure mode is padding — a 200-page guide is not worth more than a 40-page one if the extra 160 pages are filler, and buyers can tell.

The template pack. Files the buyer uses directly: spreadsheets, documents, design files, Notion setups, code snippets, contract drafts. Build time: 8–20 hours. The value is enormously higher when the templates are pre-filled with a realistic example rather than blank. A blank budget spreadsheet is worth about nothing; the same spreadsheet filled in with a plausible example business, with notes explaining each assumption, is worth $34.

The system or workflow. A documented way of doing a recurring thing, usually a guide plus the assets. This is often the highest-value format because you're selling both the thinking and the execution. Build time: 20–30 hours.

The reference / swipe file. A curated, organised collection with commentary. Prompt libraries, email templates, checklists, resource directories. The critical word is *curated*. A list of 500 things is a burden; 40 things with a note on when to use each is a product. Build time: 10–25 hours.

The audit or checklist tool. A structured way to evaluate something — a website, a contract, a workflow, a portfolio — with scoring and what-to-fix guidance. Underrated format. People love finding out where they stand. Build time: 10–20 hours.

What generally does *not* work as a first $34 product: video courses (too long to build, and buyers at $34 expect them to be short, while you'll want to make them long), community access (you have no community), anything requiring ongoing delivery from you (a $34 one-time payment cannot fund indefinite support), and software (you're not shipping software in thirty hours).

Where AI Genuinely Helps — And Where It Will Hurt You

You're reading this in 2026, so let's be plain about the elephant. Yes, you can use AI tools — Claude, ChatGPT, Gemini, whatever you prefer — to help build a digital product. No, you cannot use them to generate the product and expect it to sell.