Get Paid Before You Build

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Chapter 1: Why Your Last Three Ideas Died (And What They Had in Common)

You've had ideas. Probably more than three. Somewhere on your hard drive there's a folder called "Notes" or "Projects" or "New Stuff," and inside it are the corpses. A landing page you built over a weekend. A Notion doc with a pricing table nobody ever saw. A half-finished course outline. A domain you're still paying $14 a year to renew because canceling it feels like admitting something.

I'm not going to tell you those ideas were bad. That's the lazy diagnosis, and it's usually wrong. Plenty of terrible ideas make money and plenty of brilliant ones die quietly. The idea is almost never the variable that matters.

What killed them was the order you did things in.

Here's the thesis of this entire book, stated once, plainly, so you can decide right now whether you want to keep reading: **the single highest-leverage change most people can make is to collect money before they build the thing.** Not a waitlist. Not an email signup. Not a "would you be interested in this?" poll. Money, in your account, from a person who understands they will receive something later.

That's it. That's the whole trick. Everything else in this book is mechanics — how to ask, what to say, what to charge, what to do when they say no, how to deliver without dying, how to stay on the right side of the law and your own conscience while doing it.

But before mechanics, we need an autopsy. Because if you don't understand precisely how your last three ideas died, you'll do the exact same thing with idea number four, just faster and with better tooling.

The autopsy: what actually happens when an idea dies

Let me walk you through the standard failure sequence. I've done this myself more times than I'd like to write down. If you've been building things for any length of time, you'll recognize it.

Week 1 — The high. You get the idea. It arrives fully formed and feels obvious in a way that makes you slightly paranoid someone else is already doing it. You spend an evening researching. Nobody's doing exactly this. Your heart rate goes up. You buy the domain. This is a real, physical dopamine event and it is the single most dangerous moment in the entire lifecycle, because it feels like progress and it is not.

Week 2 — The build begins. You start making the thing. Note what you did *not* do: you did not go find a human being and ask them for money. Building is more comfortable than asking. Building is a closed loop where you control every variable. Asking involves another person who might say no, and no feels like a verdict on you personally.

Weeks 3–6 — The tooling detour. You spend a shocking amount of time on things that are not the thing. Which email platform. Which payment processor. Whether to use Framer or Webflow or just write the HTML. Logo. Colors. Whether the name is right. You research competitors obsessively, not to learn from them but because reading about the market feels like working on the market. If you're using AI tools, this phase has gotten worse, not better — you can now generate forty landing page variations in an afternoon, which means you can now spend an entire afternoon generating landing page variations.

Week 7 — The soft launch. You put it up. You post about it once, maybe twice. Maybe you tell a few friends. You get some likes. Two people say "this is cool!" Nobody buys.

Weeks 8–12 — The slow fade. You tell yourself you need to market it better. You don't market it better, because marketing it better means going back to the asking problem, and the asking problem is why you built for six weeks instead. You start having a new idea. The new idea feels cleaner. The old thing goes into the Notes folder.

Now — here's the part that should bother you. In that entire twelve-week sequence, **how many times did a real person, unprompted, with their own money, in a moment where saying no was easy and free, choose to give you money?**

Zero. And you spent twelve weeks not knowing.

The three things your dead ideas had in common

I want to be specific here, because "you didn't validate" is a useless piece of advice that gets repeated by people who have never had to sit across from someone and ask them for $400.

1. You never let anyone say no in a way that cost them something

Every dead idea in your folder had supporters. People said nice things. Your friend said "dude, I'd totally use that." Somebody on Reddit said "great idea, keep us posted."

None of those were signals. They were politeness. Saying "that's a great idea" costs a person exactly nothing — zero dollars, zero seconds of future obligation, zero risk. And here's the thing about zero-cost signals: **they don't correlate with buying behavior at all.** Not weakly. Not "somewhat." The correlation between "people said they liked it" and "people bought it" is close enough to noise that you should treat enthusiasm as literally uninformative until money moves.

This is not cynicism about human beings. Your friend genuinely thought it was a good idea when they said it. Humans are terrible at predicting their own future behavior, especially their future spending behavior, and especially when the person asking is standing right there being hopeful at them. Every honest person who has run a survey and then run an actual launch knows the gap between the two numbers is enormous.

What you needed was a moment where a specific person, with specific money, in a specific instant, had to choose. That moment produces information. Nothing else does.

2. You built the version of the thing that was fun to build, not the version someone would pay for

Look at what you actually made in those six weeks. I'd bet money it was disproportionately the part you enjoyed.

If you're a designer, your dead product had a beautiful interface and no clear pricing. If you're a developer, it had a genuinely elegant backend and a landing page that said

"Streamline Your Workflow" — which means nothing to anyone. If you're a writer, you had 14,000 words of a course and no idea who it was for or what it cost.

This isn't laziness. It's the most natural thing in the world. You optimize toward the work that gives you feedback you can control. But the market doesn't grade you on the part you enjoyed. It grades you on whether you solved a problem someone was already actively trying to solve, badly, with something else, right now.

3. You made "launch" a single event instead of a slow, boring accumulation

Almost every dead idea had one launch moment. One post. One email. One "hey everyone, I made a thing."

That's not how anything sells. One post to an audience that isn't primed, doesn't know you for this, and has no urgency produces roughly nothing, and then you interpret "roughly nothing" as a verdict on the idea when it's actually a verdict on the distribution.

Presale-first inverts this. Instead of one launch to a cold crowd, you have thirty conversations, and each one is a data point, and by the time you'd normally be "launching" you already know your price, your objections, your ideal customer's exact words, and — critically — whether anyone will pay.

Why building first feels safer (and why that feeling is a trap)

Let's be honest about the psychology, because "just go ask people for money" is easy advice that ignores why nobody follows it.

Building first feels safer for four reasons, and each one is a real feeling built on a false premise.

"I need something to show them." The premise is that people buy things they can see. The reality is that people buy *outcomes* they believe in, from *people* they trust, at *prices* that feel proportionate to the pain. B2B enterprise software has been presold off a slide deck and a conversation for forty years. Books get sold on proposals. Buildings get presold from floor plans. You need clarity, not a demo.

"I'd feel like a fraud selling something that doesn't exist." This one deserves respect, because there's a real ethical line in here and we'll spend a whole chapter on it. But the line isn't "does it exist yet." The line is: *did you tell them the truth about what they're buying and when they'll get it, and can you refund them instantly if you fail?* If yes, you're running a presale, which is a completely normal and ancient commercial arrangement. If no, you're running a scam. The distinction is disclosure and refundability, not completion.

"Rejection means the idea is dead." No — rejection is the raw material. Chapter 2 is entirely about this. A no contains more usable information than a yes, and most people throw it in the bin.

"If I build it really well, the selling will take care of itself." This is the most seductive one and the most expensive. It's the belief that quality is a substitute for distribution. It isn't. There are extraordinary products with no customers and mediocre products with waiting lists, and the difference is almost always that somebody did the unglamorous work of talking to humans about money.

The three real costs of building first (with actual numbers)

Let's put figures on it. These are illustrative, but they're built from realistic 2026 costs — you can swap in your own numbers.

Cost 1: Time. Say you spend six weekends and ten weeknights on v1. That's roughly 70–90 hours. If you value your time at even $40/hour — modest for anyone with a skill worth selling — you've spent $2,800–$3,600 of your own labor to learn something you could have learned in nine conversations.

Cost 2: Cash. Realistic 2026 build-first spend for a small digital product or SaaS-ish thing:

- Domain: $12–$20/year
- Site builder or host: $0 (Netlify/Cloudflare free tiers, GitHub Pages) up to ~$30/month (Webflow, Framer, managed WordPress)
- Email platform: $0 up to ~1,000 subscribers on several free tiers; $25–$50/month once you're past that

- Payment processing: $0 upfront on Stripe, Lemon Squeezy, Paddle, Gumroad — they take a cut per sale, they don't charge you to have an account. **There is no reason to pay a monthly fee to accept money in 2026.**
- AI tooling: $0 if you're disciplined about free tiers; $20–$60/month if you're not
- Design assets, fonts, stock: $0–$200 if you get precious about it

Call it $150–$700 for a build-first cycle. Not ruinous. But multiply by three dead ideas and you've spent real money to learn nothing.

Cost 3 — the expensive one: conviction. Each dead idea makes the next one harder to start. You get quieter about your projects. You stop telling people. You start building in secret so the failure is private. That's the actual damage, and it compounds. Two or three cycles of this and people just stop shipping entirely.

Presale-first is not primarily a business tactic. It's a way of not burning your own belief in yourself on experiments you never actually ran.

What "presale" actually means — and what it doesn't

Let's define terms tightly, because the word gets used loosely and the loose version is where people get in trouble.

A presale is: a transaction where a customer pays now, with full knowledge that the product does not yet exist in finished form, in exchange for a clearly described deliverable on a clearly stated timeline, with a stated refund policy.

A presale is not:

- **A waitlist.** Free signup. Costs nothing. Predicts almost nothing. Useful for warming an audience, worthless as validation.
- **A "pre-order interest" form.** Same problem. "Click here if you'd buy this" is a survey wearing a costume.
- **Selling vaporware.** If you take money while implying the thing already exists, you've crossed from presale into misrepresentation. That's not a gray

area.

- **Crowdfunding, necessarily.** Kickstarter and similar platforms are one delivery mechanism for a presale, but they add rules, fees, and public-failure risk. You don't need a platform to presell. A Stripe payment link and an honest email will do it.

The commercial world runs on presales and always has. Publishers pay authors advances against unwritten books. Construction firms presell units off plans. Agencies get paid deposits before work starts. Enterprise software is routinely sold against a roadmap. The only place presales feel exotic is in the world of solo creators, and that's a cultural quirk, not a law of nature.

The Idea Autopsy: a real exercise, do it now

Don't skip this. It's the foundation for everything in Part 2 onward.

Open a document. List your last three dead or dormant ideas. For each one, answer these eight questions honestly. Not the version you'd tell a friend — the actual version.

1. **What was the idea, in one sentence, in plain language?** If you can't do it in one sentence without jargon, that's finding #1 already.
2. **Who specifically was it for?** Not "small businesses." Not "creators." A specific person you could name or describe in enough detail that you'd recognize them in a room.
3. **What were they doing about this problem before you showed up?** Every problem worth solving has an incumbent solution, even if the incumbent is "a messy spreadsheet" or "paying an assistant" or "suffering." If you can't name what you were replacing, you didn't have a problem — you had a preference.
4. **How many people did you ask to pay you?** Actual number. Not "I told people about it." How many times did you name a price to a specific human?
5. **How many said yes?**
6. **How many said no, and did you ask them why in a follow-up?**

7. **How many hours did you spend building versus talking to potential buyers?** Write both numbers. Most people's ratio is somewhere between 20:1 and infinity:1.
8. **What's the first thing you'd do differently?**

Now look across all three. I'll predict what you find, and I'd be surprised to be wrong on more than one:

- Question 4 is a small number or zero on all three.
- Question 3 is vague on at least two.
- Question 7 shows a build-to-ask ratio that's embarrassing.
- Question 2 gets vaguer the more you look at it.

That's the pattern. It's not a talent problem or an idea problem. It's a sequencing problem, and sequencing is fixable in a week.

The counterexample you should take seriously

I promised no hype and no fake case studies, so let me handle the obvious objection honestly rather than pretending it doesn't exist.

"But plenty of huge products were built before anyone paid." Absolutely true. Many well-known companies built first — sometimes for years — with no revenue and no presale. Some had venture funding that let them absorb the risk. Some were founded by people who could afford a year of no income. Some were network-effect products where the value genuinely doesn't exist until there are users, so presale is structurally impossible.

That's real, and I'm not going to pretend otherwise. Presale-first is not a universal law. It's a risk-management strategy, and it's the correct one when:

- You're funding this yourself
- You can't absorb 6–12 months of building with zero income
- The value of the thing doesn't depend on a critical mass of other users
- You can describe the outcome clearly enough that someone can evaluate it