

The First Sale Checklist: 12 Things to Check Before You Spend a Cent

The lessons I paid for the hard way, from search engines, marketplaces and ad platforms, so you can skip the tuition.

Inside:

1. Check the math before you pick an offer (checks 1 to 4)
2. Check the ground you build on (checks 5 to 8)
3. Check the offer and the road ahead (checks 9 to 12)
4. Bonus: the 4 questions I ask before I buy any course

Cal

Retired firefighter of 25 years. Built, sold, lost and rebuilt businesses on the side the whole time.

Before you start, a quick word from me

I spent 25 years as a firefighter. On the side, I sat at a desk in an unheated basement under exposed insulation, buying course after course and trying to build something online. A lot of it failed. Some of it worked very well.

I bought into a wholesale candle company with two partners, and it failed within a year when the economy collapsed in 2009. I had a private label product line on Amazon until Amazon reclassified it as hazmat and froze my inventory. Not long ago, a Microsoft Ads account I opened for a course was shut down within a month.

Every one of those hurt. Every one of them taught me something that is on this list. None of these checks will make you rich by Friday, and anybody who tells you otherwise is selling something. What they will do is keep you from paying for the same mistakes I did.

Cal

Print it

Tick each box with a pen. If you cannot tick one, stop and fix it before spending anything.

Keep it open

Run every new offer through it, not just your first one.

Check the current rules

Platforms change terms often. Confirm anything marked "check" against the program's own page.

Check the math before you pick an offer

Most beginners pick an offer because they like the product. Pick it because the numbers can actually work.



CHECK 01

Do the click math on paper first

Your commission per sale has to be bigger than what it costs you to get a buyer. A low-priced item at a small percentage can pay you less than a single paid click costs.

EXAMPLE OFFER	PRICE	COMMISSION	YOU EARN PER SALE
Physical product on a retail site	\$30	3%	\$0.90
Digital training program	\$47	50%	\$23.50
Your offer	_____	_____	_____

Do this: Divide what you earn per sale by how many visitors it might take to make one sale (start by assuming 100). That is the most you can afford per visitor. In the examples above, that is under a penny versus about 23 cents.



CHECK 02

Read the cookie window

A cookie is a small note saved on the buyer's browser when they click your link. The cookie window is how long after that click you still get credit for the sale. People rarely buy on the first visit, so a lower percentage with a long window can beat a higher percentage that only lasts a day.

Do this: Find the cookie length in the program's terms before you join. Where you have a choice, favor 30 days or longer.



CHECK 03

Count the refunds and the payday

If a buyer gets a refund, your commission usually goes with it. Many networks also hold commissions for weeks or months before paying out. The sale you see today may not be in your bank account until well after the bills it was supposed to cover.

WHAT I'VE LEARNED

When my websites were doing well, I made one decision that saved me: we lived on my firefighter salary only. The online money paid for extras and vacations. When those sites went down, it hurt, but the mortgage still got paid.

Do this: Write down the refund window and the payout schedule. Do not count any commission toward bills until it has actually cleared.



CHECK 04

Know Amazon's 180-day rule before you sign up

New Amazon Associates have 180 days from applying to refer three qualifying sales. If you miss it, the application is withdrawn and your existing links stop earning. Commission rates on many physical products are also only a few percent, which takes you right back to Check 1.

WHAT I'VE LEARNED

My partner and I built an Amazon brand into a top 1,500 seller. We also watched Amazon switch off listings selling over 100 units a day for three or four days at a time, for reasons that did not hold up. Those shutdowns cost us tens of thousands of dollars. It is a great marketplace. It is not your marketplace.

Do this: Join only once you already have a place sending you visitors, so the 180-day clock is not running on an empty store.

PART 2 · CHECKS 5 TO 8

Check the ground you build on

Every platform you use is somebody else's property. Build like a renter until you own something.



CHECK 05

Do not buy traffic first

Paid ads magnify whatever you already have. If your offer and your page do not convert yet, ads just make you lose faster. Ad platforms can also suspend accounts with little explanation.

WHAT I'VE LEARNED

I had sworn off courses that depend on ads. Then I tried one built around Microsoft Ads anyway. The account was shut down within a month. Some lessons I apparently need to learn twice.

Do this: Prove the offer gets clicks and sign-ups with unpaid traffic first. Then set a hard test budget, write it down, and stop when you hit it.



CHECK 06

Check the platform's link rules this month

Social platforms change how they treat links all the time. In late 2025, Facebook began a limited test that capped some business Pages and professional profiles without a paid Meta Verified subscription at two organic posts with links per month. Links in comments were still allowed. It was a test, not a universal rule, and it may have changed since.

Do this: Before you plan a posting strategy, read the platform's current rules on links. Never build a plan that only works if one platform keeps its rules the same.



CHECK 07

Treat search traffic as rented, not owned

Google traffic is wonderful while you have it. One update can take it away. Google's 2023 helpful content update wiped out most of the traffic on many affiliate sites.

WHAT I'VE LEARNED

I had one website where the first 30 search results for my main keyword were either my site or articles about it. Then the Panda and Penguin updates hit, and all my sites went from page one to not showing up in the first five pages. Everyone I knew in SEO was panicking at the same time.

Do this: List every source sending you visitors. If one source is more than half, start building a second one now, while things are good.



CHECK 08

Start your email list on day one

An email list is the one audience you can take with you. An email provider can still restrict an account, but the list itself can be exported and moved to another provider. Google, Amazon and Facebook will never hand you their customer lists.

WHAT I'VE LEARNED

The biggest mistake I made online was not keeping and nurturing the email lists I had 25 years ago. If I were starting over today, the list would come first and everything else would come second.

Do this: Put an email sign-up in front of your very first visitor. Then write to those people like neighbors, not leads.

PART 3 · CHECKS 9 TO 12

Check the offer and the road ahead

Once the math and the ground check out, look at who you are up against and how you will know it is working.



CHECK 09

Read the gravity score the right way

On networks like ClickBank, gravity reflects how many affiliates have recently earned a commission on an offer. It tells you an offer sells. It also tells you how crowded the field is. A sky-high score means you are competing with a lot of experienced people for the same buyers.

Do this: Skip the very top of the chart. Look for offers in the middle that show steady sales without a stampede of competitors.



CHECK 10

Put a bridge page in front of the offer

A bridge page is a short page of your own that sits between your post or ad and the seller's page. It lets the reader meet you first, explains why you are recommending the product, and gives them a chance to join your email list before they ever leave.

Do this: Keep it short: who you are, the problem, why this product, one button. Add your email sign-up. That way even a visitor who does not buy today is not lost for good.



CHECK 11

Go narrow, then go direct

Start in a small corner the big sites ignore. Once you have real sales to show, go talk to the people behind the product. Proof gives you leverage to ask for better terms.

WHAT I'VE LEARNED

A vendor once took a \$20,000 deposit from us and stopped answering. When the factory contacted me looking for their payment, we worked it out and I ended up dealing with the manufacturer directly. We sold thousands of that product, and the savings from cutting out the middleman ended up far larger than the \$20,000 we had lost.

Do this: After your first steady sales, email the affiliate manager. Share your numbers honestly and ask what it takes to earn a higher rate.



CHECK 12

Disclose up front, then set a review date

Tell readers you may earn a commission, and put that note before your first link, not buried at the bottom. It is the right thing to do and it is required in the U.S. Then decide in advance how long you will test before you change something.

WHAT I'VE LEARNED

It is a lot like fishing. If nothing is biting, you do not quit and you do not keep casting the same lure into the same spot all day. You change the spot, the bait or the speed, one thing at a time, until something hits.

Do this: Write your spending cap and a review date (4 to 6 weeks out is reasonable) on this page. If clicks and sign-ups are flat by then, change one thing: the angle, the page or the traffic source.

MY TEST PLAN

My spending cap _____

Review date _____

If it's flat by then, I'll change _____

Bonus: the 4 questions I ask before I buy any course

I have bought a lot of courses over the years. These questions would have saved me a small fortune.

- 1 Does it fit who I am?** I have learned to skip programs that depend on being highly creative, cold calling or sitting at a screen all day watching charts. Pick a model that suits how your brain works.
- 2 Is "beginner friendly" actually true?** I recently returned a course that promised a finished product in 3 days, when you could not even watch all the required videos in 3 days. I almost never return anything.
- 3 Are the steps clear enough to follow?** I do not mind paying more for clear, step-by-step instructions. About 15 years ago I paid around \$3,000 for an Amazon private label course that the "experts" bashed. That course turned lots of people that I know into millionaires.
- 4 Does the seller rely on hype?** If the pitch says big money, very fast, with AI doing all the work, walk away. I would rather make less money than mislead anyone, and I look for people who think the same way.



Turn your 12 checks into a real plan for your first sale

You now know the checks most beginners skip. The next step is putting them to work on an actual offer, with a clear set of steps to follow.

Quick Sales Formula is the program I recommend for that step.

- ✓ Keep this checklist beside you as you work through it, so every choice still passes the 12 checks.
- ✓ Run the Check 1 math on every offer you look at, so you only chase offers that can pay for a visitor.
- ✓ Start your email list as you go. It is the one place you own when platforms change their rules.

Get Quick Sales Formula

I may earn a commission if you buy through this link, at no extra cost to you.

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