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BUILT TO SELL, NOT TO SUCCEED?

The Shopify Store Trap

How Prebuilt Stores, Partner Commissions, and Misaligned Incentives Leave Beginners Paying the Price

SHORT SUMMARY BOOKLET | AUDIO COMPANION

By Ellen Whitmore

The central idea

A polished online store can be delivered in days. A profitable business must still find customers, earn trust, and survive the numbers. This companion explains the difference in plain English.

INSIDE THIS BRIEFING

The true cost of setup • Partner incentives • One-year domain retention • Why stores struggle • Profit mathematics • A thirty-day test • A buyer's checklist

Reading edition with a separate, narration-ready text script.

OPENING: THE STORE IS OPEN. WHERE ARE THE CUSTOMERS?

Imagine buying a beautiful online store. It has a polished logo, attractive product photos, a professional home page, and a checkout that works. You send the link to friends. You announce that you're finally in business.

Then the days pass. A few visitors arrive. Nobody orders. The website looks successful, but the business isn't earning anything. Meanwhile, subscriptions and app charges keep coming.

That is the central problem behind Built to Sell, Not to Succeed? A ready-made website is not the same thing as a ready-made business.

This short companion explains the most important lessons from the book. You'll learn how the money flows, why a finished store may not attract buyers, what the numbers really mean, and how to make a smarter decision before you spend another dollar.

This is not an argument that Shopify itself is a scam. Shopify is a legitimate commerce platform, and many merchants and developers use it well. The concern is the sales pitch that turns a website-building service into the promise of an income-producing business, without providing the pieces that make sales possible.

SECTION ONE: A STOREFRONT IS NOT A BUSINESS

Think about a shop on a busy street. People walk past the windows every day. An online store has no street outside it. Visitors don't magically appear just because the owner clicked Publish.

Someone must give customers a reason to visit, to trust the seller, and to choose that product instead of dozens of alternatives. Someone must also work out whether the sale will actually make money.

A store builder can deliver a theme, a logo, a catalog, payment settings, and a functioning checkout. These are real services. But they

do not prove that anyone wants the products, or that advertising costs will leave a profit.

Ask a basic question: Am I buying a website, or am I buying help building a viable business? Those are two different purchases, and the contract should say which one you are getting.

A real operating plan identifies a specific customer, a problem worth solving, a product that makes sense, a competitive advantage, an affordable way to reach buyers, and enough money left after costs to continue. If the seller talks only about the appearance of the store, the most important conversation hasn't happened.

SECTION TWO: WHO GETS PAID FIRST?

A beginner may pay a store-building company before making the first sale. The platform can earn a subscription payment while the store stays active. App vendors can earn monthly charges. Advertising companies collect money for clicks, even if those clicks do not become customers.

The new owner may be the only participant whose income depends on the store actually making a profit.

That payment structure isn't automatically dishonest. Builders deserve payment for work they complete. A platform can properly charge for software and hosting. The problem appears when a seller implies that payment for setup includes the harder job of proving demand and winning customers, but offers little help after launch.

Consider a two-thousand-five-hundred-dollar store package. That amount is an illustration, not the price of every prebuilt store. If someone has three thousand dollars available and spends twenty-five hundred on the site, only five hundred remains for samples, monthly charges, testing, and marketing. The business can be underfunded before it begins.

A prettier website will not repair a missing budget. The smartest first investment may be research and a modest test, not an expensive storefront.

Before paying, ask what the provider receives up front, what they might receive later, what support they will provide after launch, and what happens if you get no sales. Put those answers in writing.

SECTION THREE: FOLLOW THE PARTNER COMMISSIONS

There is another part of the picture that beginners may never hear about: partner incentives.

Shopify openly publishes ways qualifying partners can earn money. A developer may charge a client an agreed store-building fee and may also qualify for separate compensation through Shopify. Under one set of partner terms introduced in August twenty twenty-six, qualifying arrangements can include twenty percent of the eligible monthly base subscription or platform fee, plus one tenth of one percent of eligible net online merchandise volume, subject to program conditions and a limited earning term. Other partner arrangements follow different rules.

These percentages do not apply to every store or every partner. A separate two-thousand-five-hundred-dollar referral payout exists in certain qualifying higher-tier arrangements. It is not a standard commission on an ordinary beginner's store.

The important principle is simpler than the rules. A builder can sometimes benefit from a store being launched and kept active even when the merchant has not earned a profit.

The existence of a commission is not evidence that a builder acted improperly. But it is a financial relationship a customer deserves to understand. If a provider recommends a particular platform, add-on, or upgrade, you can ask whether that recommendation also pays the provider.

Good professionals will answer. They can explain what they earn, what they deliver, and where their responsibilities end. The buyer shouldn't have to discover that relationship after signing a contract.

SECTION FOUR: THE DISTURBING ONE-YEAR NUMBER

A historical investigation published in twenty twenty-two examined Shopify store domains tracked by a data provider. It reported that about thirty-six percent of a twenty nineteen group remained on Shopify after a year. For twenty twenty, it was about thirty-four percent. The twenty twenty-one figure was estimated at thirty-two percent, with an incomplete observation period.

Those numbers are concerning. But they do not mean that sixty-six percent of Shopify businesses definitively failed, or that only a third were profitable. The study tracked whether domains remained on the platform. Some merchants could have moved, rebranded, consolidated stores, or closed an experiment. Domain retention is not the same as business survival or profit.

Still, the numbers raise a question worth asking: If many new stores leave the platform within a year, are beginners being sufficiently prepared for the demands of running an online business?

A serious seller of turnkey stores should talk about that uncertainty before collecting thousands of dollars. A serious buyer should assume that a launch can fail and protect the money needed to learn.

SECTION FIVE: THE THREE THINGS A PREBUILT STORE CANNOT BUY

The first missing ingredient is attention. Customers need to discover the store. Search engines, social media, referrals, marketplaces, and advertising may help, but each requires a strategy. Advertising can generate traffic without generating sales. Posting products on a beautiful website is not a marketing plan.

The second ingredient is trust. Why would someone order from an unfamiliar shop? They may want authentic product photographs, clear delivery times, straightforward returns, reliable customer support, and signs that a real business stands behind the offer. A polished theme helps, but trust has to be earned.

The third ingredient is economic breathing room. Dropshipping avoids buying inventory in advance, but it does not eliminate supplier mistakes, shipping delays, refunds, or customer complaints. Print-on-demand can reduce inventory risk, but production, shipping, and advertising may consume most of the selling price. These business models can work. They are not shortcuts around the mathematics.

A particularly risky offer is a generic catalog sold to many beginners as a collection of winning products. The same product photos and descriptions may appear on countless shops. If the customer can buy the identical item from an established seller, why choose the newcomer?

The answer must be more than, because my website looks professional.

SECTION SIX: THE FORTY-DOLLAR PROFIT TEST

Here's an example that every prospective store owner should understand.

You sell a product for forty dollars. The product itself costs sixteen dollars. You cover five dollars of shipping. Payment and other transaction-related costs total one dollar and fifty cents. You allow another one dollar and fifty cents for expected returns and replacements.

Before paying for marketing, sixteen dollars remains from that sale.

Now suppose it costs twenty dollars in advertising to bring in each buyer. You have lost four dollars on that order before covering your monthly subscriptions, software, setup costs, or your own time.

More orders would not fix that problem. More orders at the same economics would simply create more losses.

This is why gross sales are not profit. A seller boasting about thousands in sales may still be losing money once costs are counted. Return on advertising spend is useful, but it doesn't tell the whole story unless you know the margin.

Now think about a two-thousand-five-hundred-dollar setup fee. If each completed order contributes ten dollars after variable costs, it would take two hundred and fifty orders just to recover that fee. Monthly expenses would still need to be covered.

Before investing, write down the selling price, product cost, shipping, payment fees, expected refunds, advertising cost per customer, monthly charges, and startup investment. If the numbers don't work on paper, they won't improve simply because the storefront is attractive.

SECTION SEVEN: THE SMARTER THIRTY-DAY APPROACH

A better launch begins with evidence, not decoration.

During the first week, choose a specific buyer and a small selection of products. Study three competing offers. Read customer complaints and reviews to understand what people actually value. Order a sample, if appropriate. Calculate the cost and likely contribution from one sale. Set a spending ceiling.

During the second week, build only what you need for a small, honest test. Explain the offer clearly. Display realistic delivery and return information. Make sure the checkout works. Don't buy a collection of apps just because someone recommends them.

During the third week, bring the offer to a real audience through one or two channels. That could mean targeted content, conversations with potential buyers, a relevant marketplace, or a modest advertising experiment. Record where visitors came from and what they did.

In the fourth week, look at the results. If nobody visits, you have a reach problem. If interested visitors leave immediately, you may have an offer or trust problem. If customers try to buy but don't finish, examine price, delivery costs, or checkout friction. If you make sales but lose money, fix the unit economics before scaling.

At the end, choose whether to continue, revise, or stop. An honest stop decision can save more money than an elaborate redesign.

SECTION EIGHT: IF YOU ALREADY PAID

If you purchased a store that isn't selling, start with the facts. Collect your contract, invoices, advertising promises, email messages, support requests, and a complete list of recurring charges. Compare what was promised with what was actually delivered.

A store that fails to produce sales is not automatically proof of a scam or a broken contract. But services promised and not delivered are a different matter. Clear records help you decide whether to request a remedy, challenge a charge through an appropriate channel, or simply change your approach.

Take control of your accounts. Make sure you own your domain and have access to your store's billing, products, and customer data. Don't rely on a provider who may stop responding.

And if you decide to close, cancel carefully. Review the platform's current deactivation instructions. Check app subscriptions, third-party services, domain renewal, and any outstanding invoices. Save records and the business information you may need later. Deactivating the store may not cancel every service billed outside it.

The original setup fee is already spent. Don't keep paying new charges merely because you wish that money had produced a different result. Make the next decision using today's evidence and tomorrow's costs.

SECTION NINE: FIVE QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE YOU BUY

First: Who is my specific customer, and why would that person choose this product from me?

Second: What will it cost to acquire a customer, and how much money is left from a typical order after every variable expense?

Third: Exactly what is included in the store-building contract, and what happens after the website goes live?

Fourth: What continuing commissions or referral payments might the provider earn from the platform, apps, or suppliers?

And fifth: If the store makes no sales for three months, how much cash will I have spent, and what is my plan for stopping or changing course?

If you can't answer these questions, don't let an impressive demonstration rush your decision.

CLOSING: BUY THE KNOWLEDGE BEFORE THE STOREFRONT

There are successful Shopify businesses, and there are responsible people who build them. But beginners deserve to know what they're purchasing. The product on an invoice may be a website. The product they hope to achieve is a business. Confusing the two can be expensive.

A store is only one tool in the process. The real work is choosing the right customer, finding a credible offer, getting attention, earning trust, and making enough on every order to survive.

If you're exploring an online business, Decision Atlas AI can help you investigate opportunities, compare options, think through costs, and plan your next steps. Visit decisionatlasai.com to explore the tools and guides.

The central lesson of Built to Sell, Not to Succeed? is worth remembering long after this recording ends:

A finished storefront is not a finished business. And a receipt is not a result.

Written by Ellen Whitmore. This has been the short audio companion to Built to Sell, Not to Succeed?

Reader’s Quick-Action Sheet

This checklist accompanies the audio. It is intended for readers who want a decision tool they can use immediately.

Before buying a prebuilt store

Write down your customer, the product’s distinctive benefit, your maximum budget, and the actual cost of one sale. Ask what the builder delivers after launch and what commissions they receive.

Before increasing advertising

Confirm that each additional order contributes money after product, shipping, transaction charges, expected returns, and the cost of acquiring that customer.

Before agreeing to monthly services

List the platform plan, every paid app, domain renewal, outside software, and recurring advertising commitment. Record each renewal and cancellation method.

If you already paid

Compare the contract with actual delivery; save receipts, messages, and access details. Request missing promised work in writing. Decide whether another month of spending is justified.

If you choose to close

Save important records, review Shopify's current deactivation guidance, check outside-billed subscriptions and domains, and confirm outstanding invoices.

Source Notes

The partner-payment discussion summarizes Shopify's published partner compensation and client-management guidance. Terms depend on program category and qualifying dates: help.shopify.com/en/partners/partner-program/how-to-earn

The historical 2019–2021 one-year domain-retention figures are from a 2022 Globe and Mail / Store Leads investigation. They measure domains remaining on Shopify, not confirmed business failure or profitability.

For store deactivation and billing, see Shopify Help Center: help.shopify.com/en/manual/your-account/manage-orgs-and-stores/manage-pricing-plan/deactivate-store

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