From Stable to Startup: Canter Into Commerce

Helping Equine Creatives Build Sustainable Businesses

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The Dual Engines of Commerce

Fausto Sarmiento: The Strategy Engine

Jacob Sizemore: The Structure Engine

AMERICA'S SBDC KENTUCKY

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SBA U.S. Small Business Administration

Funded in part through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Small Business Administration. All opinions, conclusions or recommendations expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of SBA.

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The Equine Creator Economy is Booming—But Structure is Lagging

The Opportunity: Equine niche opportunities are expanding rapidly across publishers, brands, and digital media, yet many talented creatives are operating without structural protection.

Diagnosing Your Operational State

	The Hobby	The Side Hustle	The Formal Business
Intentionality & Income	Sporadic income, shooting for fun	Supplemental income, taking requests	Primary income, intentional client acquisition
Financial Structure	Personal account only	Mixed funds, messy tracking	Dedicated business accounts, clean books
Risk & Protection	No legal protection	High personal liability risk	Shielded by LLC and strong contracts
Growth Potential	Capped by free time	Bottlenecked by admin chaos	Scalable and structured for hiring

A winning business theory sits at the intersection of desire, capability, and logic.

Desirability
Do customers actually want it?

Feasibility
Can I reliably provide it?

Viability
Should I offer it? Is the risk worth the reward?

True customer discovery relies on observable facts, not assumed opinions.

Customer discovery is about FACTS.	
Bad Practice (Don't Ask)	Good Practice (Do Ask)
Do you like [X]?	When was the last time you bought [X]?

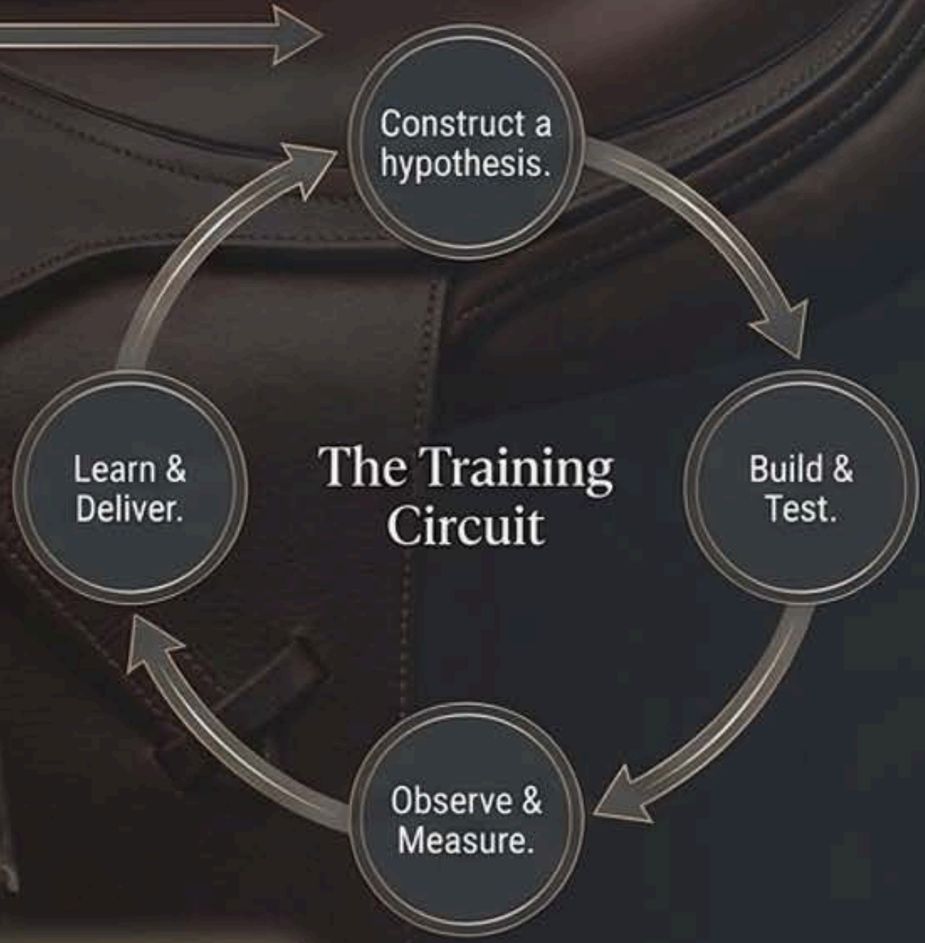
Money: Increase/Decrease Margins

Percentage: Measure efficiency shifts

Time: Save Time / Manage Time

Developing the right tool at the right time is priceless. Use this profile to stay current.

Mitigate risk by systematically aligning your product to customer realities.



Core Maxim: Reduce uncertainty and risk: start small and increase investment over time.

Master the value proposition through disciplined observation and continuous testing.

1.

Uncover the Facts

Discard opinions. Map the exact jobs your customers are doing and strictly quantify their pains and gains in time, percentages, and money.

2.

Engineer the Fit

Design tangible pain relievers and gain creators that directly attach to your customer’s documented reality.

3.

Train the Model

Treat your business as a scientific theory. Construct hypotheses, start small, and aggressively test to reduce risk before scaling investment.

Team or Company Name:

The Business Model Canvas

Date:

☐ Primary Canvas

☐ Alternative Canvas

Key Partners

Who are our Key Partners?

Who are our Key Suppliers?

Which Key Resources are we acquiring from partners?

Which Key Activities do partners perform?

Key Activities

What Key Activities do our Value Propositions require?

Our Distribution Channels?

Customer Relationships?

Revenue streams?

Key Resources

What Key Resources do our Value Propositions require?

Our Distribution Channels? Customer Relationships?

Revenue Streams?

Value Proposition

What value do we deliver to the customer?

Which one of our customer's problems are we helping to solve?

What bundles of products and services are we offering to each Customer Segment?

Which customer needs are we satisfying?

Customer Relationships

What type of relationship does each of our Customer Segments expect us to establish and maintain with them?

Which ones have we established?

How are they integrated with the rest of our business model?

How costly are they?

Channels

Through which Channels do our Customer Segments want to be reached?

How are we reaching them now?

How are our Channels integrated?

Which ones work best?

Which ones are most cost-efficient?

How are we integrating them with customer routines?

Customer Segments

For whom are we creating value?

Who are our most important customers?

Cost Structure

What are the most important costs inherent in our business model?

Which Key Resources are most expensive?

Which Key Activities are most expensive?

Revenue Streams

For what value are our customers really willing to pay?

For what do they currently pay?

How are they currently paying?

How would they prefer to pay?

How much does each Revenue Stream contribute to overall revenues?

Source: www.businessmodelgeneration.com

The Structure Matrix: Sole Proprietor vs. LLC

Sole Proprietor

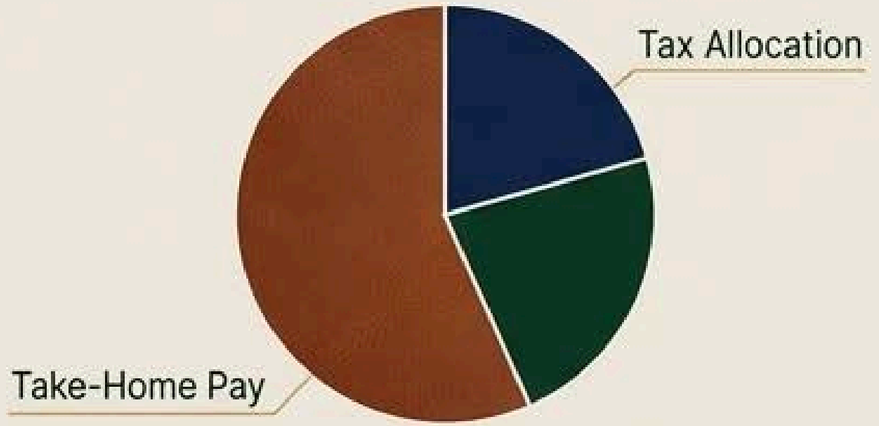
- **Ease of Setup:** Automatic, free.
- **Personal Liability:** Zero protection; personal assets at risk.
- **Tax Complexity:** Simple schedule C.

LLC (Limited Liability Company)

- **Ease of Setup:** Requires state filing, minor fees.
- **Personal Liability:** Strong protection; separates business from personal.
- **Tax Complexity:** Pass-through taxation, manageable with basic bookkeeping.

When to Switch to an LLC: Upgrade when you have consistent paid work, increasing contract volume, heightened liability exposure at events, or plan to hire subcontractors.

Tax Mechanics 101 for Creatives



The Rules of the Road

- **Self-Employment Tax:** Understand that you are responsible for both the employer and employee portions of Medicare/Social Security.
- **Quarterly Estimates:** The IRS expects payments four times a year, not just in April.
- **Income Tracking:** Use accounting software to maintain a real-time view of profit margins.

The Golden Rule: Set aside 25-30% of every incoming payment in a separate tax savings account immediately.

The Creative's Tax Deduction Map

Equipment depreciation and gear rentals.

Editing software subscriptions, internet, and business cell phone usage

Mileage to horse shows, lodging, and travel expenses for event coverage

Marketing materials, magazine advertising, and portfolio hosting.

Partial home office deductions and client meeting expenses.

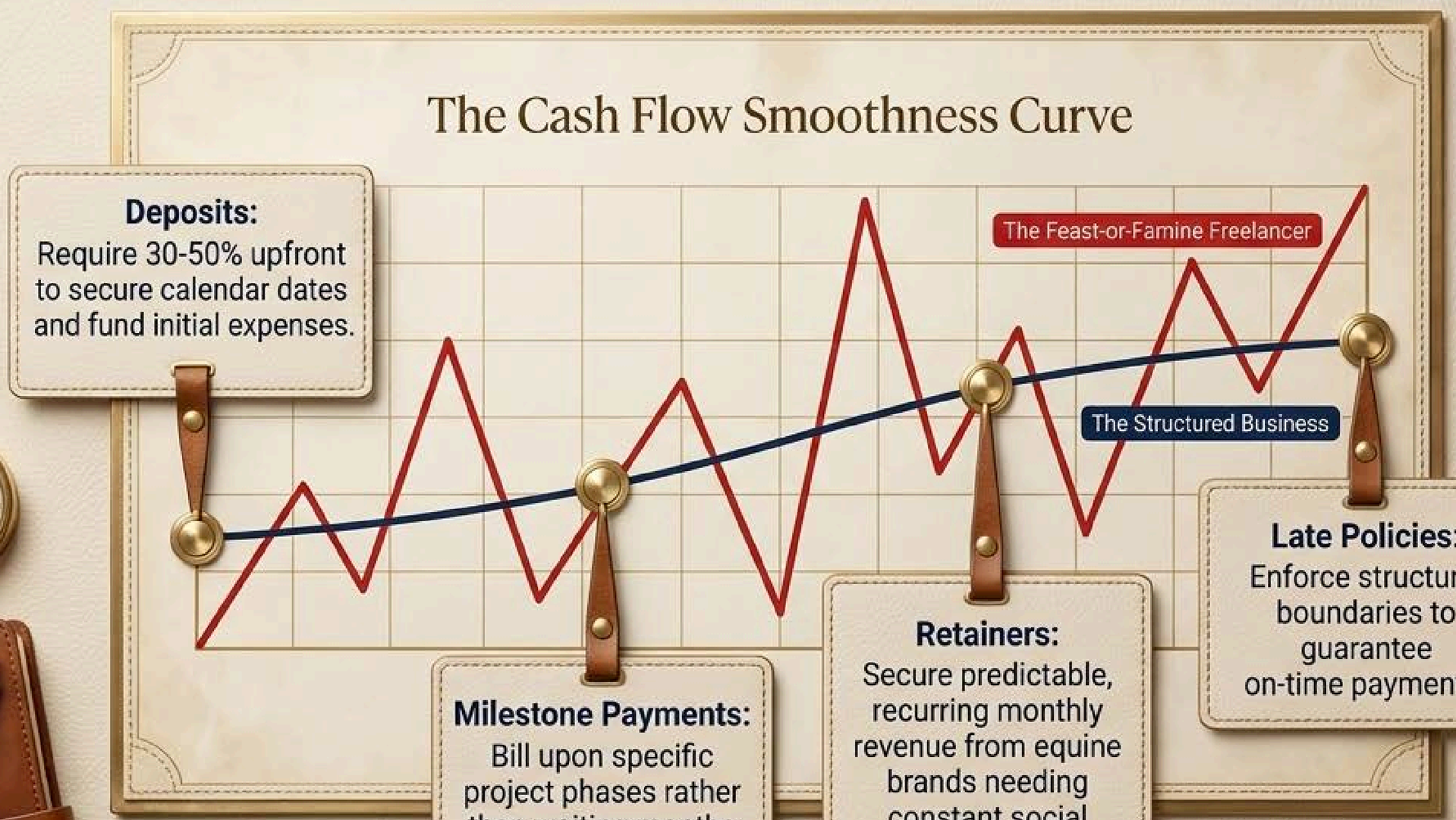
Revenue Models & Pricing Power

Revenue Diversification

Expand beyond one-off shoots with retainers, content subscriptions, and image licensing.

Warning:
Underpricing damages industry standards and leads straight to creative burnout.

Smoothing the Income Curve



Deposits:
Require 30-50% upfront to secure calendar dates and fund initial expenses.

Milestone Payments:
Bill upon specific project phases rather than waiting months for final completion.

Retainers:
Secure predictable, recurring monthly revenue from equine brands needing constant social media content.

Late Policies:
Enforce structural boundaries to guarantee on-time payments.

The Ironclad Foundation Checklist

Contract Basics for Equine Creatives

Scope of Work: Precisely define what is (and isn't) included in the deliverable.

Usage Rights: Clarify who owns the work and where the client is legally allowed to publish it.

Warning: Operating without a contract guarantees miscommunication and invites unpaid invoices.

Payment Terms & Deposits: State exactly when payment is due to protect cash flow.

Revisions: Cap the number of edits to prevent endless scope creep.

Building Social Proof & Industry Authority

Key Growth Strategies

- **Association Involvement:** Leverage networks within breed associations and industry groups to build reputation.
- **Strategic Partnerships:** Collaborate with other equine professionals (e.g., a photographer partnering with a web designer).
- **Curated Portfolios:** Show exactly what you want to sell. Only display high-end sport horse work if you want high-end sport horse clients.
- **Testimonials:** Systematically collect and display client reviews upon project completion.

Synthesis:
From Weekend Shooter to Scalable LLC

1. The Catalyst

Starts casually shooting local horse shows on weekends. Income is sporadic.

2. The Upgrade

Secures a consistent publication client. Registers an LLC and opens a dedicated bank account to protect personal assets.

3. The Boundary

Implements ironclad contracts and requires 50% upfront deposits, ending cash-flow anxiety.

4. The Value Shift

Uses clean bookkeeping to realize hourly shooting is unprofitable. Transitions to value-based retainers for equine brands.

5. The Result

A sustainable, scalable creative enterprise driven by strategy and protected by structure.

The Starting Gate: Your Next Steps

- Define your niche and build a clear value proposition (Strategy)
- Formalize your structure to protect your work (Compliance)
- Maintain organized financial systems to fuel growth (Finance)

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Your creativity is an asset. Treat it like a business.