

FREE GUIDE · ILLEGAL TO KNOW

The Dropshipping Starter Guide

A complete, honest walkthrough of starting a dropshipping store — from picking a product to your first profitable ad — without the hype.

What's inside: niche & product research, supplier vetting, store setup, pricing math, marketing on a real budget, fulfillment, the mistakes that kill new stores, and a 30/60/90-day launch plan.
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1. What Dropshipping Actually Is (and Isn't)

Dropshipping is a retail model where you sell a product through your own store, but the item ships directly from a supplier or manufacturer to your customer — you never touch inventory. You handle marketing, customer service and pricing; the supplier handles warehousing and fulfillment. The margin between what the customer pays you and what the supplier charges you is your profit.

It is a real business model, not a scam — but it is also not passive income. The "set it up and watch the money roll in" version sold in ads doesn't match reality. Here's the honest version of what it takes:

- **Capital:** plan for \$500–\$1,500 to properly test 3–5 products with paid ads before you find a winner. Testing on \$0 is possible with organic content, but slower.
- **Time:** expect 10–20 hours/week for the first 2–3 months — research, store setup, ad management, customer service, content creation.
- **Timeline to signal:** most stores need \$100–\$300 in ad spend *per product* before you can honestly tell if it's a winner or a dud. Judging after \$20 tells you nothing.
- **Failure rate:** most first products don't work. That's normal, not a sign you're doing it wrong — it's a numbers game where you test, kill fast, and move on.

If a course or guru promises guaranteed profit with no ad spend and no learning curve, that's the red flag — not dropshipping itself.

2. Choosing a Niche

You have two viable starting approaches. Neither is objectively better — pick based on how you plan to market.

Approach A — General store, trending products

You run a broad store and test unrelated "winning products" as they trend — common with paid-ad-driven stores that rely on impulse buys and video ads. Faster to start, but harder to build a brand or repeat customers.

Approach B — Niche store, cohesive brand

You pick one audience (e.g. "dog owners," "home baristas," "golfers") and sell multiple products to that same audience over time. Slower to start, but you build retargeting audiences, email/SMS lists and repeat customers — meaningfully cheaper to market to over time.

Niche evaluation criteria — score any niche idea against these:

- **Passionate, identifiable audience** — can you name 3 Facebook groups, subreddits or hashtags where this audience already hangs out?
- **Recurring or expandable purchases** — will this customer buy a second or third product from you, or is it a one-and-done impulse buy?

- **Not oversaturated on ad platforms** — search the niche + "ad" on TikTok/Instagram; if every account is running the identical product, margins are already being squeezed.
 - **Reasonable shipping** — small, light, non-fragile, not battery-restricted (batteries trigger extra shipping rules and higher return risk).
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3. Product Research

Run every candidate product through this 7-point filter before you list it:

■ **Solves a real problem, or has genuine "wow" factor**

If you can't explain in one sentence why someone stops scrolling for it, skip it.

■ **Landed cost between \$5–\$25**

Leaves room for a 3–5x retail markup after ad spend and platform fees.

■ **Retail price you can defend at \$25–\$75**

Below \$25, ad costs eat the margin; above \$75, conversion rate on cold traffic drops sharply without a lot of trust-building.

■ **Not easily found in a local Walmart/Target**

If it's on a shelf 10 minutes away for the same price, you lose on convenience and price both.

■ **"Video-able"**

Can you show it doing something surprising or satisfying in a 15-second clip? This is what makes an ad or organic post work.

■ **Low return/complaint risk**

Avoid sizing-dependent apparel, anything electronic with a high DOA rate, or anything fragile without solid packaging.

■ **Evergreen lean, not a pure fad**

Fads can work but die fast — check Google Trends for the search term over 5 years; a flat or rising baseline is safer than a single spike.

Where to actually find products

- **TikTok / Instagram ad libraries** — Meta Ad Library (free, ads.facebook.com/ads/library) shows every ad an account is currently running; TikTok's Creative Center shows trending ads by region.
- **AliExpress Dropshipping Center** — shows order volume trends per product, directly inside AliExpress.

- **Amazon Movers & Shakers / Best Sellers** — validates real consumer demand outside the dropshipping bubble.
 - **Google Trends** — sanity-check any product name or category before committing budget; avoid anything on a steep, recent decline.
 - **Your own frustrations** — the highest-converting products are often ones that solve an annoyance you or people around you actually have.
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4. Vetting Suppliers

Common supplier sources

- **AliExpress** — largest catalog, easiest to start, but shipping is 7–20 days unless the listing specifically offers a US/EU warehouse option.
- **CJdropshipping / Zendrop / Spocket** — dropshipping-focused platforms with faster (often US-based) warehouses, private-label options and better customer support than raw AliExpress.
- **Domestic/agent sourcing** — once a product proves itself, a sourcing agent can get you better pricing, quality control and 3–7 day shipping from a US or EU warehouse — worth pursuing after your first 20–30 sales, not before.

Red flags to walk away from

- No reviews, or reviews that are all 5-star and generic-sounding.
- Supplier is slow or evasive when you ask direct questions before ordering a sample.
- Price is dramatically below every competitor selling an identical item — often a sign of a knockoff or bait-and-switch listing.
- No clear return/replacement policy for damaged or DOA items.

Before you list anything

- 1 Order a sample yourself. Check real build quality, real shipping time, and what the unboxing experience actually feels like.
 - 2 Photograph or film it yourself if the supplier photos look stocky/generic — original content converts better and won't get flagged as reused ad creative.
 - 3 Confirm the supplier can sustain your target volume — ask directly what their current stock level is before you scale ad spend.
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5. Setting Up Your Store

Platform choice

Shopify (\$ per month, easiest, most app/theme support) is the default choice for most new stores. WooCommerce (free plugin on your own WordPress + hosting) is cheaper long-term but requires more technical setup. If you're unsure, start on Shopify — the time you save troubleshooting plugins is worth the subscription while you're still validating products.

Pages your store needs before your first ad runs

- **Shipping policy** — realistic timeframes, stated clearly. Vague or missing shipping info is one of the top cart-abandonment and chargeback triggers.
- **Return/refund policy** — specific, and matched to what your supplier actually allows — don't promise a policy your supplier can't back up.
- **Privacy policy & Terms of Service** — legally necessary in most jurisdictions once you collect emails or run ad pixels (Meta/TikTok require these to approve your ad account).
- **About page** — a few real sentences on why the store exists; builds more trust than most people expect.
- **Contact page** — a real support email at minimum, ideally a contact form.

Product page structure that converts

- 1 **Title:** clear and literal, not clever. "Adjustable Posture Corrector Brace" outperforms a cute made-up brand name for cold traffic.
- 2 **Above the fold:** your best lifestyle or in-use image/video, price, and a single clear "Add to Cart" CTA — no scrolling required to buy.
- 3 **Bullets = benefits, not specs.** "Relieves lower-back strain after long shifts" beats "Made of neoprene."
- 4 **Social proof** — reviews (even seeded honestly from your own samples/first customers), UGC-style photos/videos.
- 5 **FAQ block** — pre-answer the 4–5 questions every buyer has (sizing, shipping time, compatibility, warranty).
- 6 **Honest urgency only** — real stock counts or real limited-time offers. Fake countdown timers erode trust once noticed and are against several ad platforms' policies.

6. Pricing & Unit Economics

The margin that matters is what's left *after* ad spend, not just after product cost. Work the math before you commit to a price:

Worked example

- Landed product cost: \$8
- Payment processing (~3%): \$0.90 on a \$30 sale
- Retail price: \$30

- Gross margin before ads: $\$30 - \$8 - \$0.90 = \21.10
- Target cost-per-purchase from ads: aim to keep it under 30–40% of that gross margin while testing — so under ~\$7–8 per sale here
- If your actual cost-per-purchase during testing is \$18, the product isn't dead — but at this price point, with this cost, it isn't currently profitable. Either the price, the creative, or the targeting needs to change before you scale spend.

Rule of thumb while testing: don't judge a product as "proven" until it has sold profitably across at least \$100–\$300 of ad spend and multiple creatives — one lucky \$20 sale is noise, not signal.

7. Marketing on a Real Budget

Organic (works with \$0 ad budget, costs time instead)

- Post 1–3 short-form videos a day on TikTok/Instagram Reels/YouTube Shorts showing the product in use, unboxings, or the problem it solves — consistency matters more than production value.
- Seed 10–20 micro-influencers (1k–50k followers) a free unit in exchange for an honest post — a templated but personalized DM works better than a mass copy-paste.
- Engage genuinely in niche-relevant communities (Reddit, Facebook groups) — value first, mention your store only when directly relevant and allowed by the group's rules.

Paid ads (Meta / TikTok) — a testing framework

- 1 Start with \$20–\$50/day total budget split across 3–5 ad creatives (different hooks/angles of the same product).
- 2 Let each creative run at least 48–72 hours or ~\$50–100 spend before judging — early data is noisy.
- 3 Kill creatives with a cost-per-purchase more than ~2x your target; keep the same creative running as a control while testing new hooks against it.
- 4 Once a creative is profitable at \$20–50/day, scale spend gradually (20–30% increases every 2–3 days) rather than jumping 5x overnight — sudden jumps usually crash performance.

Retention (compounds over time)

- Collect email + SMS at checkout and via a discount pop-up (10% off first order in exchange for an email is standard).
 - Send a short abandoned-cart sequence (1 hour, 24 hours, 72 hours after abandonment) — this alone often recovers 5–15% of otherwise-lost sales.
 - A simple post-purchase flow (order confirmation → shipping update → "how's it working out" check-in with a review request) costs nothing and builds the review base your product pages need.
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8. Fulfillment & Customer Service

- Process orders daily — delays here directly cause "where is my order" tickets and chargebacks.
 - Push tracking numbers to customers automatically the moment the supplier provides them (most Shopify apps handle this).
 - Answer support messages within 24 hours — response speed is one of the biggest levers on both review sentiment and chargeback rates.
 - Have a real refund policy and actually honor it — a refund is far cheaper than a chargeback, which can also risk your payment processor account if they happen too often.
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9. Mistakes That Kill New Stores

- **Judging a product too early.** Killing a product after \$20–30 in spend, before you have real signal.
 - **Picking an already-dead trend.** Copying a product you saw everywhere last month — by the time it's obvious, ad costs on it are usually already inflated.
 - **No policies published.** Missing shipping/return info is one of the most common causes of chargebacks and ad account flags.
 - **Ignoring shipping time on the page.** If delivery is 2–3 weeks, say so up front — surprise delays are the #1 driver of "scam" complaints and disputes, even when the product itself is fine.
 - **Undisciplined ad spend.** No kill criteria, no budget cap, letting an unprofitable ad set run for days out of hope rather than data.
 - **Quitting the business, not just the product.** Most successful stores tested several products before finding one that worked — the skill compounds even when a specific product doesn't.
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10. Your 30/60/90-Day Launch Plan

Days 1–30 — Foundation

- 1 Pick your niche approach (general vs. focused) and shortlist 5–10 candidate products against the 7-point filter.
- 2 Order samples of your top 2–3 candidates; while waiting, build your store (policies, About/Contact, product pages).
- 3 Set up your ad accounts (Meta Business Suite / TikTok Ads Manager) and pixel — do this early, verification can take days.
- 4 Launch your first product with organic content + a small paid test (\$20–30/day).

Days 31–60 — Signal & Iterate

- 1 Kill or scale based on real cost-per-purchase data, not gut feel.

- 2 Test 2–3 new creative angles on whichever product shows early promise.
- 3 Set up your abandoned-cart and post-purchase email/SMS flows.
- 4 Start collecting real reviews from actual buyers.

Days 61–90 — Scale What Works

- 1 Gradually scale ad budget on your winning creative/product combination.
 - 2 Introduce a second complementary product to increase average order value.
 - 3 Reach out to a sourcing agent if volume justifies moving off AliExpress shipping times.
 - 4 Review your unit economics monthly and cut anything that isn't paying for itself.
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Quick-reference free tools

- Meta Ad Library — ads.facebook.com/ads/library
- TikTok Creative Center — ads.tiktok.com/business/creativecenter
- Google Trends — trends.google.com
- AliExpress Dropshipping Center — inside your AliExpress seller/buyer dashboard

This guide is educational and general in nature — always confirm current platform policies (Meta, TikTok, your payment processor) and your local consumer-protection and tax obligations before launching, as these change over time and by jurisdiction.