

A WORKS CO. MANUAL · NO. 07

The Etsy Print-on-Demand Works

How to build a print-on-demand shop that profits after every Etsy fee — and lasts past the algorithm.

The Etsy Print-on-Demand Works

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WHAT THIS MANUAL IS — AND IS NOT

This manual is a detailed account of how a print-on-demand business on Etsy works, written with care and published in good faith. It is information, not professional advice. Read these points before you list a single product:

- **The numbers are honest examples, not promises.** Prices, base costs, fees and incomes reflect the UK market in 2026 and the worked examples we built. Print-on-demand is competitive and often saturated, and most new shops earn very little. Your results will depend on your niche, your designs, your effort and your persistence. Nobody can guarantee you an income, and we do not.
- **You are responsible for the intellectual property of your designs.** Sell only original artwork you own the right to sell. Never use a trademarked or copyrighted name, character, logo, slogan or image — an IP complaint can have your shop suspended or closed with no appeal. When in doubt, do not use it.
- **Follow Etsy's policies, including disclosure.** Etsy requires production-partner disclosure for print-on-demand, and its rules on AI-assisted content are evolving. Read Etsy's current seller policy and disclose what it requires — a shop that hides how its products are made has a fragile future on the platform.
- **Online platforms report seller income to HMRC.** Keep clean records and declare your income above the £1,000 trading allowance. Verify any figure that matters — VAT thresholds, tax rules, Etsy's fees — with HMRC or a qualified professional before relying on it; specifics change.
- **POD margins are thin — price for profit after all fees.** The platform and the printer take most of the sticker price. Price every product to clear a real profit after the base cost and every Etsy fee, including a possible Offsite Ads hit, or you will sell at a loss without noticing. This manual is guidance, not legal, tax or financial advice; you are responsible for checking your own obligations and trading lawfully.

Suppliers and products are named because working sellers use and rate them, not as paid endorsements. Where The Works Co. may earn a commission on a recommendation, it costs you nothing and never decides what we recommend.

UPDATES AND THE REFUND PROMISE

Updates and new editions are included in your purchase — the current edition is always at theworksco.co.uk/library. And if this manual is not what you hoped, email refunds@theworksco.co.uk and we will refund you in full, the same day. No questions, no friction. Keep the files.

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BEFORE CHAPTER ONE

Your first weekend.

You do not need to read the whole manual before you make a start. This page is the shortest honest path from here to a shop that is actually live — the chapters fill in everything else as you need them. Be realistic: sales build slowly, and that is normal.

1 Saturday morning

Pick a niche you actually know something about — a hobby, a job, a community you belong to — not 'anything that sells'. A plain 'designs for people obsessed with one dog breed (or allotments, or primary-school teachers)'. Then check it is neither hopelessly saturated nor a legal minefield: search Etsy for your idea and scroll — if the first pages are a wall of near-identical shops, go narrower and more specific; and never build on a trademarked character, brand or slogan you do not own the right to sell.

3 Saturday afternoon

Set up a design tool you are comfortable in — a Canva-class editor is plenty to start — and design one product properly. Not ten rushed ones. One. Make the artwork original: your own layout, your own type, your own idea for your niche. A single considered design you are proud of teaches you more than a batch of thin ones, and it is the thing a buyer is actually paying for.

5 Sunday afternoon

Write one fully SEO-optimised listing for your design. Front-load the title with the words a buyer would actually type, use all thirteen tags with real buyer phrases, write an honest description that says exactly what it is and who it is for, and upload clear, realistic mockups. Then price it so it still profits after every fee — run the maths twice, once clean and once with a 15% Offsite Ads hit, and only publish if it clears £6–£15 either way. Then publish it.

2 Saturday midday

Open a free print-on-demand account with a Printful- or Printify-class partner. This is what prints and ships your products; there is no cost until a customer actually buys. Have a look at the product catalogue and the UK/EU base costs, and note which products fit your niche — you do not need to decide everything today, just get the account open and look around.

4 Sunday morning

Open your Etsy shop. It takes an afternoon: a shop name that sounds like a real brand in your niche, the basics filled in, and — importantly — the production-partner disclosure Etsy requires for print-on-demand set correctly from the start. Do not skip that; a shop that hides how its products are made has a fragile future on the platform.

6 Sunday evening

Do not expect a sale tonight, or this week. Etsy search takes time to find and rank a new listing, and the first sale often comes weeks in, not days. Use the evening to plan the next few designs in the same niche, because the shops that work are built on a real catalogue, not one lucky listing. Then close the laptop — you have opened a real business, and the slow part is normal.

IF YOU ONLY READ FOUR CHAPTERS

Chapter 2 (is this for you) · Chapter 3 (setting up the shop) · Chapter 6 (Etsy SEO & listings) · Chapter 10 (pricing & margins). Everything else will be waiting when you need it.

THE ONE-WEEK TARGET

A real Etsy shop open with three to five well-made listings live — original designs, full SEO, honest mockups, priced to profit after every fee. Not a sale yet: a shop that exists, indexed and findable. The sales follow the catalogue, and the catalogue is the work of the weeks ahead.



PART ONE

Foundations

The trade, the money, the setup.

01

CHAPTER 1 · PART ONE

The Print-on-Demand Opportunity

Why this trade. Why now. What is possible.

It is a wet Monday in Sheffield, just gone seven. Ellie is standing at the kitchen counter waiting for the kettle, phone in one hand, the other reaching for a mug. She opens the Etsy app the way some people check the weather. Three orders came in overnight. A personalised dog-dad t-shirt, an A3 line-drawing poster of the Peak District, and a mug with a quiet joke about teachers on it. She did not get up at three in the morning to print anything. She did not box anything, queue at the Post Office, or buy a single item of stock. Her print-on-demand partner already has the three orders, will print them today, and will post them straight to the three customers. Ellie's job this morning is to sip her tea and glance at the numbers. After the base cost of each item and Etsy's fees, those three orders will clear her somewhere around £10 profit each. Roughly £30 before she has properly woken up.

That is the shape of this business when it works. It is not magic, and it is not money for nothing. Ellie designed those products, wrote the listings, and spent months learning how Etsy search decides who gets found. But the mechanics underneath, the printing and posting and customer admin, run without her. This chapter is about why that model exists, who it suits, who it does not, and what a realistic first year actually looks like. We will be honest with you throughout, because the honest version is the only version worth paying for.

What print-on-demand on Etsy actually is

The idea is simple once you see it. You create designs. You list them on Etsy as products: t-shirts, mugs, posters, tote bags, sweatshirts, and the like. When someone buys, the order goes to a print-on-demand supplier who prints that single item and ships it directly to the customer. You never hold stock. You never touch the product. You do the creative and commercial work; the supplier does the manufacturing and logistics.

Here is the supply chain in one breath. A customer finds your listing in Etsy search, likes it, and buys. Etsy notifies your connected POD partner, a Printful, Printify, or Gelato-class supplier. That partner prints the item, packs it, and posts it to your customer's address. You see the order, the sale, and your profit. For UK sellers we will keep saying this: prefer a partner with UK or EU fulfilment, because it means faster delivery, cheaper postage, and far less mess with import VAT than shipping from overseas.

What you have, in effect, is a product business with the warehouse, the printing press, and the dispatch desk all rented by the unit. You pay for manufacturing only after a customer has already paid you. That is the heart of why the risk is so low.

It is worth being precise about what you are and are not responsible for, because new sellers often misunderstand the deal. You are responsible for the design, the listing, the SEO, the marketing, the pricing, and the customer service: answering questions, handling the occasional reprint, keeping your shop's policies clear. The POD partner is responsible for the physical product: printing it to a consistent standard, packing it, and getting it to the door. If a print comes out wrong, a good partner reprints it; that is part of what their base cost buys you. Your name is on the shop, so the customer experience is still yours to own, but the heavy lifting of manufacturing and dispatch is genuinely off your plate.

Why the start cost is near zero

Most businesses fail before they begin because the up-front cost is frightening. A shop needs a lease, a café needs an oven, a clothing brand needs a pile of stock that may never sell. Print-on-demand has almost none of that.

Opening a POD account is free. Listing a product on Etsy costs about £0.16, roughly twenty US cents, per listing. Design tools run from free up to about £10 to £15 a month if you want the better ones. There is no inventory to buy, because nothing is printed until it sells. Add it up and a realistic start-up cost in 2026 sits somewhere between £50 and £300. That range is mostly listing fees and a design subscription, not stock.

Compare that with the downside if it does not work: you are out a few tens of pounds and some evenings, not your savings. Few legitimate product businesses let you test the water this cheaply.

COACH MOMENT

Do the per-item maths before you fall in love with an idea. A t-shirt that retails at £20 might cost £9 from your POD partner. Etsy takes its listing fee, a 6.5% transaction fee, payment processing of about 4% plus £0.20, and, when Etsy's own advertising drove the sale, an Offsite Ads cut of 12 to 15%. After all of that you might keep £7 to £8. That is a real profit, but only if you price for it from the start. Never set a price by feel. The Pricing & Margin Calculator (Toolkit file 04) exists precisely so you never guess.

Why now, and why Etsy

Three things make 2026 a sensible moment to start, and one of them cuts both ways.

First, Etsy is a genuine global marketplace with millions of buyers who arrive already wanting to spend. These are people searching for a gift, a personalised item, a design for a hobby they love, or something for an occasion. You are not begging strangers on social media to care. You are answering a search someone typed on purpose. That buying intent is the single most valuable thing Etsy gives you.

Second, the POD supply chain has matured. UK and EU print partners are faster and more reliable than they were, product quality is better, and connecting a supplier to your Etsy shop is a guided, same-afternoon job rather than a technical ordeal. The whole stack, covered properly in Chapter 4, is built to be plugged together by a non-technical person.

Third, AI has made the design and admin work dramatically quicker. You can research a niche, draft listing titles and tags, and generate original artwork in a fraction of the time it used to take. Our 95-prompt AI library is built around exactly this. The catch, and we will keep returning to it, is that AI speeds things up for your competitors too. The barrier to starting has dropped for everyone, which is why originality and good SEO matter more now, not less.

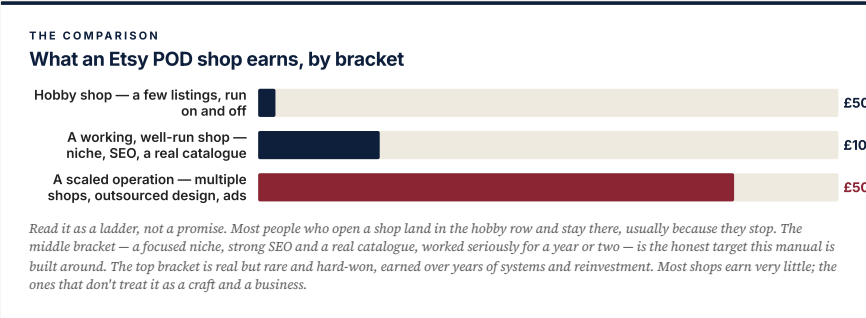
The honest part: most shops earn very little

We would be doing you a disservice if we let the breakfast-orders scene stand without this paragraph. Print-on-demand on Etsy is competitive and, in the broad and obvious categories, often saturated. Most new shops earn very little. Margins are thin. A generic design dropped into a crowded category will be buried on page forty of the search results and sell nothing, no matter how proud of it you are. Success comes from a genuine niche, strong SEO, a real volume of listings, designs that people actually want, and the persistence to keep going through quiet months. There is no version of this where you upload ten lazy designs and the money arrives. The sellers who do well treat it as a craft and a business, because that is what it is.

Hold those two truths together. The model is real and the risk is low. And most people who try it half-heartedly make almost nothing. Both are true at once.

The three income brackets

So what can you actually earn? Here are honest UK figures for 2026. Read them as a ladder, not a promise.



Type of shop	What it looks like	Realistic yearly income
Hobby shop	A handful of listings, weak or no SEO, run on and off	£500 – £5,000
A working, well-run shop	A focused niche, good SEO, a real catalogue, consistent effort	£10,000 – £40,000
A scaled operation	Multiple shops or niches, outsourced design, paid ads	£50,000 – £150,000+ (rare and hard-won)

Most people who open a shop land in the first row and stay there, often because they stop. The middle row is achievable for someone who treats this seriously for a year or two: it is the realistic target this manual is built around. The top row exists, and a few people genuinely reach it, but it is uncommon and it is earned through years of work, systems, and reinvestment. We would rather you aimed at the middle and got there than dreamed of the top and quit in month three.

The model that actually works

If there is one mental model to take from this chapter, it is this. The business is not one perfect product. It is **many good listings + strong Etsy SEO + repeat and seasonal ranges**.

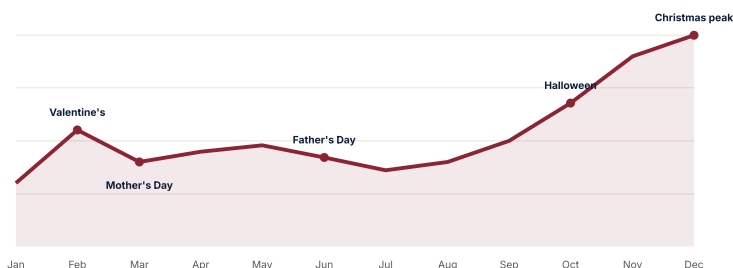
Many listings, because Etsy is a search engine and every well-made listing is another door into your shop. A shop with eight listings is nearly invisible. A shop with a few hundred focused, well-tagged listings has hundreds of chances to be found.

Strong SEO, because a listing nobody can find is worth nothing. Getting found is so important, and so often done badly, that Chapter 6 is the longest in the book. It is the make-or-break skill.

Repeat and seasonal ranges, because the customers come back and the calendar is predictable. Etsy has a very strong Q4 and Christmas peak, with smaller reliable spikes around Valentine's Day, Mother's and Father's Day, and Halloween. Designing those ranges in advance, while everyone else scrambles late, is one of the most reliable ways to earn. A Christmas design listed and indexed in August has weeks for Etsy search to learn it and rank it before the buyers arrive; the same design uploaded in mid-December is competing for attention from a standing start, against listings that have a head start of months.

THE SALES YEAR

Etsy demand is not flat — it has a shape



The whole year bends toward the fourth quarter: a very strong Q4 and Christmas peak, with smaller, reliable spikes at Valentine's, Mother's and Father's Day, and Halloween, and quiet stretches in between. A Christmas design listed and indexed in August has weeks for search to learn it before the buyers arrive; the same design uploaded in December starts from behind. The operator plans the year backwards from these peaks — building each range eight to ten weeks early, not in the panic of the season itself.

None of these three levers works alone. A hundred listings with poor SEO stay invisible. Perfect SEO on a product nobody wants sells nothing. A brilliant seasonal range with no year-round catalogue behind it leaves you earning for six weeks and waiting for the other forty-six. The shops that work pull all three at once, steadily, and let them compound.

MENTOR MOMENT

Volume without focus is just noise. Early on, the temptation is to list anything and everything across every category, hoping something sticks. It rarely does. The shops that work pick a niche they understand, the funny-dog-owner crowd, Peak District walkers, primary-school teachers, and build depth there. A hundred listings inside one tight niche will out-earn a thousand scattered across twenty. Pick your patch first. Chapter 5 is where you choose it properly.

Who this suits, and who it does not

Honesty lists, because the wrong fit wastes your money and our reputation.

This suits you if you:

- Are creative, or genuinely willing to learn design. You do not need to be an artist, but you do need to make things people want.
- Can be patient through slow early sales. The first few weeks are usually quiet. That is normal, not failure.
- Enjoy iterating. The shops that win are run by people who look at what sold, make more of it, and quietly drop what did not.
- Are comfortable with the admin: SEO, fees, a bit of tax, basic record-keeping.
- Will keep going after a flat month rather than concluding it does not work.

This probably does not suit you if you:

- Want fast money. This is a build, not a windfall.
- Will not do the design and SEO grind, the part that is actual work.
- Are tempted to use other people's brands, characters, or copyrighted art. That is the single biggest way to get your shop shut down, and we cover it hard in Chapter 3. Design original work or do not start.
- Give up after one quiet month.

There is no shame in reading those lists and deciding it is not for you. Chapter 2 turns this into a proper self-assessment so you can decide before you have spent a single evening on it.

How to use this manual, the Toolkit, and the Prompt Library

You own three things, and they work together.

The manual is the thinking. It takes you in order from setting up legally and correctly, through building products and getting found, to pricing, scaling, and the long-term view. Read it roughly in sequence the first time. Chapters 3, 6, and 10, set-up, SEO, and pricing, are the ones to return to most.

The 15-file Excel Toolkit is the doing. It turns the manual's advice into worksheets you fill in: a self-assessment scorecard, a listing and SEO tracker, a pricing and margin calculator, quality standards, a 90-day checklist, and more. When a chapter points you to a Toolkit file, open it and use it rather than keeping the plan in your head.

The 95-prompt AI Library is the speed. It gives you tested prompts for researching niches, generating design ideas, drafting SEO-friendly titles, tags, and descriptions, and building seasonal ranges, all in a way that respects the intellectual-property rules. Used well, it turns hours of work into minutes.

A fair word about the £47 you paid. If, after reading this far, the whole thing sounds like more work than you want, we would genuinely rather you spent that £47 on a coffee with someone you love than on a manual for a business that was never going to be yours. Our refund is same-day and friction-free: email refunds@theworksco.co.uk, keep all the materials, no questions. Updates are free for life. We make that offer because we would rather you decided honestly now than resented us later.

What success looks like in one year

Let us end where we are most likely to be doubted, by being unglamorous about it.

Picture Ellie twelve months from that wet Monday. She is not rich. She did not quit her job in a blaze of glory. What she has is a Sheffield shop with around two hundred listings inside one niche she knows well. She has a steady trickle of reviews, a handful of designs that reliably sell, and a Christmas range she built back in August that earned more in six weeks than the rest of the year combined. She is somewhere in the lower middle bracket, a few hundred pounds most months, more in Q4, and she can see how the next two hundred listings get her further. She spends a few focused hours a week on it: designing, listing, refreshing SEO, watching the numbers.

That is what a good first year looks like. Not a fortune. A real, low-risk product business that pays for itself and grows if you keep feeding it. If that is the version you want, the rest of this manual is the map. The next chapter helps you decide, honestly and before you have invested much, whether it is genuinely for you.

That was Chapter 1.

The other twenty chapters, the Excel toolkit and the AI prompt library are in the full bundle.

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