HUSTLE VAULT PLAYBOOK SERIES · 2026 EDITION

Earned, Not Bought.

The Hand-Earned Backlinks Field Guide: how small brands win local press mentions, podcast spots, partner pages and real customer reviews, one honest ask at a time.

20 chapters | 11 copy-paste templates | Tracking sheet | 30-day plan

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Earned, Not Bought

The Hand-Earned Backlinks Field Guide

Hustle Vault Playbook Series
2026 Edition · First published November 24, 2026

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All examples of outlets, people and results are invented for teaching.

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How to Use This Guide

This is a working manual. You are not meant to read it once and shelve it. Read Part I in one sitting, pick one channel from Part II, and start the 30-day plan in Part V the same week.

Every chapter ends with a short **Do This Today** box. If you only have twenty minutes, skip to that box and do the task.

The guide is built around a real set of small brands run by one owner:

- **Sun Custom Designs** (suncustomdesigns.com): print-on-demand apparel and custom pet portrait products.
- **Custom Pet Portrait Studio** (custompetportraitstudio.com): made-to-order pet portraits.
- **Legacy Ready Family** (legacyreadyfamily.com) and its **Final Wishes Planner**: family legacy and end-of-life planning tools.
- **The Kitchen-Table Family Home Plan Workbook**: a family home-planning workbook that is still in production and not yet on sale.
- **Hustle Vault** (hustlevault.app): pay-per-use AI tools and playbooks for people starting or growing a small business.
- **Brick Life Coach** (bricklifecoach.com): affirmation journals, mindset products and a weekly newsletter.
- **Ledger Credit** (myledgercredit.com): credit report repair services.
- **ProofFinder Pro** (prooffinder.vercel.app): a Native American ancestry records search.

If you run a different business, swap your own brand into any example. The method does not change.

A Note on the Examples

Every outlet, podcast, partner, person and result in the worked examples is **an example made up for teaching**. None of them

is a real contact, and none of them is a claim that a link was earned. Where a name appears, such as "a county animal shelter (example)" or "a side-hustle show (example)", treat it as a placeholder for the real one you will find in your own research.

This guide contains no traffic figures, ranking results or success rates. Anyone who promises you a number of links or a ranking position in advance is guessing, or selling something.

The Ground Rules

Hand-earned links only stay valuable if they are honest. Five rules run through every chapter:

1. **Never buy a link that passes ranking credit.** If you pay for placement, the link must be marked as paid (for example `rel="sponsored"`), and you should expect it to carry no ranking value.
2. **Never pay for, trade for or filter reviews.** Ask every customer the same way, and accept what they write.
3. **Never promise outcomes you cannot control.** This matters most for credit repair, but it applies to every pitch.
4. **Never pretend to be someone you are not.** Use your real name, your real role and your real business in every message.
5. **Make every ask easy to say no to.** People who feel respected say yes more often later.

Part I: Foundations

Chapter 1. What a Hand-Earned Link Is (and Is Not)

A backlink is a link from someone else's website to yours. Search engines read links as a rough signal that another person found your page useful enough to point to. People read them the same way: a link from your town's newspaper, a podcast's show notes or a trusted partner's resource page sends visitors who already have a reason to trust you.

A **hand-earned** link is one you get because a real person, acting on their own judgment, decided your page deserved it. You earn it by doing something worth mentioning and then telling the right person about it, politely and one at a time.

The Three Things That Make a Link Worth Having

Before you chase any link, ask three questions:

1. **Would a real reader click it?** A link inside a story about your town's small businesses can send customers. A link buried in a footer list of hundreds of sponsors usually will not.
2. **Is the page relevant to what you do?** A local pet rescue linking to a pet portrait studio makes sense. A random gambling blog linking to the same studio does not, and may do harm.
3. **Would you be comfortable if the linking site's owner described exactly how the link happened?** If the honest description is "they paid us and asked us to hide it", walk away.

If a link passes all three, it is worth your time even if it carries a `nofollow` tag. Plenty of good links do. Their value is the people who click them and the trust they build, not only a search signal.

What This Guide Does Not Cover

- **Paid link placements, link exchanges at scale, private blog networks and "guest post packages".** Google's published spam policies describe buying or selling links that pass ranking credit, and excessive link exchanges, as link spam. They are not worth the risk to a small brand.
- **Automated outreach blasts.** Sending the same template to hundreds of strangers burns your domain's reputation and your own.
- **Fake personas, fake reviews and fake "news" sites.** These are not shortcuts. They are liabilities.

The Hand-Earned Loop

Every channel in this guide follows the same five-step loop:

1. **Have something worth linking to.** A useful page, a local story, a real expert opinion, a free tool.
2. **Find the one person who would care.** Not "the media". One reporter, one host, one partner.
3. **Make a short, specific, honest ask.** Tell them what you have, why it fits their audience and what you are asking for.
4. **Follow up once, kindly.** Then let it go.
5. **Thank them, record it and stay in touch.** Most good links come from the second or third conversation with the same person.

> **Do This Today:** Open a blank document and write one sentence for each of your brands that finishes this line: "A stranger would link to us because..." If you cannot finish the sentence, Chapter 2 is your starting point.

Chapter 2. Build Linkable Assets Before You Ask

Nobody links to a home page that only says "Shop now." People link to pages that help their own readers. Before you send a single pitch, make sure each brand has at least one page that answers a real question better than anything else you have.

We call these **linkable assets**. They do not need to be large. They need to be useful, accurate and easy to cite.

Six Kinds of Linkable Asset That Work for Small Brands

1. **Free printables and checklists.** A one-page checklist that someone can print or save. Libraries, community groups and bloggers link to these readily.
2. **Plain-language guides.** "How to read your credit report", "What to write in a letter to your grandchildren". Explain one thing well.
3. **Local resource pages.** A page listing local services related to your field, such as pet adoption groups or senior centers. These earn links from the organizations listed.
4. **Small free tools.** A calculator, a quiz, a template generator. Even for a paid tool, a free page that explains the method in plain language can be linkable.
5. **Behind-the-scenes stories.** How a pet portrait is made, how a print-on-demand shirt is produced. Reporters and podcast hosts like process.
6. **Original observations.** Something you learned from your own work that you can state honestly. Only use numbers you actually collected and can show.

Linkable Asset Ideas by Brand

Brand	Asset idea (example)	Who might link to it
Sun Custom Designs	"How to Pick a Pet Photo That Prints Well on a Shirt": a visual guide	Pet bloggers, rescue groups, local pet shops
Custom Pet Portrait Studio	A free "Pet Memorial Ideas" page for families who lost a pet	Veterinary clinics, pet loss support groups
Legacy Ready Family	Free Final Wishes Planner page with a printable checklist	Libraries, senior centers, hospice volunteer groups, estate-planning blogs
Kitchen-Table Workbook	A free sample worksheet: "Ten Questions Every Family Should Answer About Home" (pre-launch)	Parenting blogs, financial literacy groups, church family ministries
Hustle Vault	"How to Check a Business Idea in One Evening" guide using the idea-check method	Small business centers, side-hustle newsletters, community college entrepreneurship programs
Brick Life Coach	Free printable affirmation sheets or coloring pages	Teachers, wellness bloggers, library programs
Ledger Credit	"How to Get and Read Your Free Credit Reports" plain-language guide	Credit unions' education pages, nonprofit financial counselors, library financial literacy programs
ProofFinder Pro	"Where Native American Records Live": a guide to record types and archives	Genealogy societies, public libraries, family history bloggers

These are ideas, not finished pages. Build one per brand before starting outreach for that brand.

The Linkable Page Checklist

Before you point anyone at a page, check it against this list:

- The title says exactly what the page does.
- The first paragraph answers the main question without a sales pitch.
- There is a clear author or business name, and a date it was last checked.

- It works on a phone.
- Any download works without a sign-up wall, or the sign-up is clearly optional.
- Nothing on the page promises results you cannot control.
- There is one quiet, honest link to your product. Not five.

Do This Today: Choose the brand with the clearest linkable-asset idea from the table and write the first paragraph of that page.

Chapter 3. The Outreach Toolkit

Outreach is a small craft. Do it like a careful letter writer, not a marketer with a list.

Set Up Once

- **A real sending address on your own domain**, with your name. "yourname@yourbrand.com" beats "info@" or a free webmail address for most pitches.
- **A simple signature**: name, role, brand, one link, one phone number if you want calls.
- **A tracking sheet** (see Part V). One row per person, never per "list".
- **A one-paragraph bio** for each brand, written in the third person, that a reporter or host could paste as is.
- **Two or three photos** per brand: a headshot and product or process photos you own the rights to.

Find the Right Person

For each target, find:

1. Their name and role.
2. Something specific they made recently: an article, an episode, a page.
3. Why your idea fits their readers or listeners.

If you cannot find all three in five minutes, move on to the next target.

Write the Message

Keep first messages under 150 words. Use this shape:

1. **Their thing** (one sentence): show you actually read, listened to or looked at it.
2. **Your thing** (two sentences): what you have and why it fits.

3. **The ask** (one sentence): exactly what you want, stated plainly.
4. **The easy exit** (one sentence): make it fine to say no.

Subject lines should be plain and specific: "Local story idea: pet portraits for shelter animals", not "Exciting opportunity!!!"

Follow-Up Rules

- One follow-up, five to seven business days later, as a reply in the same thread.
- Add one new piece of value: a photo, a short quote, a new angle.
- If there is still no answer, stop. Mark the row "closed, no reply" and try again in three to six months only if you have something new.

Respect the Basics of Email Law and Courtesy

Personal, one-to-one outreach is not the same as a marketing campaign, but treat it with the same honesty:

- Use your real name and business, with an accurate subject line.
- Include a way to reach you and honor any "please don't contact me" reply at once.
- If a message's main purpose is to promote your business, the U.S. CAN-SPAM rules for commercial email apply: accurate sender details and subject line, a valid physical postal address and a working way to opt out. When in doubt, include them.
- Never add someone to a newsletter because they replied to a pitch.

> **Do This Today:** Write your one-paragraph bio for two brands and save them in a file called "press-bios".

Part II: The Four Core Channels

Chapter 4. Local Press Mentions

Local news outlets, neighborhood blogs, community newsletters and regional magazines need a steady supply of stories about real people nearby. A small business with a genuine local angle is useful to them. A business with only a product launch usually is not.

What Counts as a Local Story

Editors look for at least one of these:

- **People:** a local owner with an unusual path, a family business, a veteran-owned or first-generation business.
- **Place:** something tied to your town, county or region.
- **Timing:** a holiday, a season, an anniversary, a local event.
- **Help:** something that serves the community, such as a free workshop or a donation drive.
- **Surprise:** something people would not expect, such as a portrait studio that paints shelter animals to help them get adopted.

"New website launched" is not a story. "Local studio paints portraits of long-stay shelter dogs" might be.

Build Your Local Media List

Spend one focused hour building a list of 15 to 30 outlets:

1. Search "[your town] news", "[your county] patch", "[your town] community newsletter", "[your region] magazine".
2. Check your local library's and chamber of commerce's event and news pages.
3. Note local TV morning shows and community radio stations; many have a "community calendar" or "local business" segment.

4. Find hyperlocal newsletters and community websites run by residents.
5. For each outlet, find the person who covers business, community or lifestyle, plus the general news tip address.

Add every outlet to your tracking sheet with the beat, the contact route and one recent story that is similar to yours.

Find the Angle for Each Brand (Examples)

- **Sun Custom Designs:** "Local designer turns customers' pet photos into wearable art; owner explains how print-on-demand lets a one-person shop compete." Seasonal hook: gifts for pet owners in November and December.
- **Custom Pet Portrait Studio:** Offer a free portrait for a local shelter's longest-stay animal to feature in its adoption post. The story is the dog, not the studio. Make the offer with no strings attached.
- **Legacy Ready Family:** "Local family legacy resource offers a free Final Wishes Planner; how families can start the hard conversation over the holidays." Pair with a free library workshop.
- **Hustle Vault:** "Local entrepreneur builds low-cost AI tools for people starting a side business; shares a free method for testing a business idea in one evening."
- **Brick Life Coach:** A free mindset or journaling session at a library or community center in January, when people set goals.
- **Ledger Credit:** A free, education-only "How to read your credit report" talk at a library or community center. No sales pitch in the room, and no promises about outcomes.

The Press Pitch, Step by Step

1. **Pick one outlet and one person.**
2. **Write the headline you hope they would write.** If it sounds like an ad, rewrite it.

3. **Write three facts** that make the story real: who, what, when or where.
4. **Offer something concrete:** photos, a quote, an interview time, a demonstration.
5. **Send the short pitch** (Template 1 in Part V).
6. **Follow up once** (Template 2).

If They Run the Story Without a Link

Many outlets mention a business without linking. That is still a good result. Wait a week, then send a short thank-you that also asks, politely, whether they would add a link so readers can find the free resource mentioned in the story (Template 6). Some will, some will not. Do not push.

Press Releases: Use Sparingly

Paid newswire distribution rarely earns real editorial links, and many syndicated copies carry `nofollow` links. A well-written release posted on your own site's "News" page is still useful as a reference you can link to from pitches. Send it to individual reporters as part of a personal note, not as a mass blast.

> **Do This Today:** Build the first ten rows of your local media list for one brand.

Chapter 5. Podcast Guesting

Podcasts need guests every week. Many hosts publish show notes with links to each guest's website. One good conversation can bring listeners who stay with you for years.

Choose Shows That Fit

Look for shows where your brand helps the host's listeners:

Brand	Show topics to search (examples)
Sun Custom Designs / Custom Pet Portrait Studio	pet owners, rescue and adoption, small creative businesses, print-on-demand sellers
Legacy Ready Family / Final Wishes Planner	caregiving, aging parents, estate planning basics, grief and remembrance, genealogy
Kitchen-Table Workbook (after launch)	family finances, homeownership, parenting, faith and family
Hustle Vault	side hustles, solo entrepreneurs, AI for small business, starting a business on a budget
Brick Life Coach	mindset, journaling, personal growth, women in business
Ledger Credit	personal finance basics, first-time homebuyers, financial literacy
ProofFinder Pro	genealogy, family history, Native American history and research methods

Start with smaller and mid-size shows. They are easier to book, the hosts often reply personally, and their audiences can be very loyal.

Vet Each Show in Ten Minutes

- Listen to the first ten minutes of one recent episode.
- Check that the show is still publishing.
- Check whether the show notes include guest links.
- Note one specific moment from the episode to mention in your pitch.

- Check whether the show charges guests to appear. If it does, any resulting link is a paid placement and should be treated as one. This guide focuses on shows that do not charge.

Build a Guest One-Sheet

A one-sheet is a single page a host can scan in thirty seconds. Include:

- Your name, photo and one-line bio.
- Three topic ideas, each with a working title and three bullet points.
- Two or three questions the host could ask.
- Links to any past interviews or talks.
- Your website and a free resource listeners can use.

See Template 4 in Part V.

Offer a Free Resource Built for Listeners

Give the host a reason to put your link in the show notes. A short page made for that episode's listeners works well, for example "/podcast" or "/listeners", with the free checklist mentioned on the show. Do not gate it behind a purchase.

On the Day

- Use a decent microphone and headphones and a quiet room.
- Bring stories, not slogans. Hosts invite back guests who are generous with useful detail.
- Mention your free resource once, near the end, when asked where people can find you.

After the Episode

1. Thank the host within 24 hours.
2. When the episode goes live, share it on your own channels and link to it from your site's "As heard on" or "Interviews" page. This helps the host too.

3. If the show notes are missing your link, send a polite note asking whether it can be added.
4. Record the episode, date and link in your tracking sheet.

Do This Today: Find five podcasts for one brand and listen to ten minutes of one episode from each.

Chapter 6. Partner and Resource Pages

Many organizations keep pages titled "Resources", "Helpful Links", "Community Partners" or "Recommended Vendors". These pages exist to send readers somewhere useful. If your page truly helps their readers, asking to be included is a reasonable request.

Two Kinds of Partner Link

1. **Real partner links.** You already work with the organization: a supplier, a venue, a referral partner, a charity you support. Ask to be listed on their partners page, and list them on yours if it is genuinely useful to your readers.
2. **Resource page links.** You do not work together, but your free resource fits their page. You are asking them to add a helpful link for their audience.

Both are fine. What is not fine is a large network of "you link to me, I link to you" swaps that exist only for search engines.

Find Resource Pages

Use searches like these, adjusted for each brand:

- `"pet loss" resources` + your region
- `"helpful links" estate planning` + your county
- `"financial literacy" resources library`
- `genealogy "useful links" society`
- `small business resources` + your town or chamber

Look for pages that are maintained (recent dates, working links) and run by real organizations: libraries, nonprofits, schools, clinics, associations.

Partner Ideas by Brand (Examples)

- **Sun Custom Designs / Custom Pet Portrait Studio:** local pet groomers, dog trainers, veterinary clinics, pet supply shops, rescue groups. Offer something useful to their clients, like the "pick a printable pet photo" guide.
- **Legacy Ready Family / Final Wishes Planner:** estate-planning attorneys, funeral homes, hospice volunteer programs, senior centers, public libraries and genealogy societies. The free planner is the asset to offer.
- **Kitchen-Table Workbook:** housing counselors, homebuyer education programs, family ministries and parenting groups. Before launch, offer the free sample worksheet only.
- **Hustle Vault:** small business development centers, library business programs, makerspaces, community college entrepreneurship clubs.
- **Brick Life Coach:** wellness centers, women's networking groups, school counselors (for appropriate printables), libraries.
- **Ledger Credit:** housing counseling agencies, credit-union education pages, reentry programs and nonprofit financial coaches. Offer the free education guide; do not ask them to endorse the paid service.
- **ProofFinder Pro:** genealogy societies, library local-history rooms, family history bloggers. Approach tribal or cultural organizations only with humility; they owe you nothing, and some may not want to link to commercial tools at all.

The Partner or Resource Ask

Use Template 5 in Part V. Key points:

- Mention their exact page by name and URL.
- Explain in one sentence why your resource helps their readers.
- Point to the specific page you would like listed, not your home page.

- Offer to fix a broken link you noticed on their page, if there is one. Being helpful first is never a trick when the help is real.

Broken Link Help

If you find a broken link on a resource page, tell the page owner even if you have nothing to offer. If you do have a page that serves the same purpose as the dead link, mention it as one option. Never claim your page is the "updated version" of someone else's work.

> **Do This Today:** Find three resource pages for one brand and record them in your tracking sheet.

Chapter 7. Real Customer Reviews

Reviews and links are cousins. Reviews on Google, Etsy, Amazon and other marketplaces usually do not create links to your website, but they do three things that lead to links:

1. They build the trust that makes reporters, hosts and partners say yes.
2. They give you real customer words to quote, with permission, on your own pages.
3. Happy customers who run blogs, newsletters, clubs or businesses sometimes write about you on their own sites, with a link, without being asked.

The Rules You Must Follow

These are not optional. Penalties for fake or manipulated reviews can include removed reviews, suspended shop accounts and government enforcement.

- **Ask every customer the same way.** Do not ask only the customers you think are happy. Filtering who gets asked (often called "review gating") is against Google's review policies and many platforms' rules.
- **Never pay for a review**, and never offer a discount, gift or giveaway entry in exchange for one. The U.S. Federal Trade Commission's rule on consumer reviews and testimonials, in effect since October 2024, bans fake reviews and bans incentives tied to a review saying something positive (or negative). Google and most marketplaces go further and do not allow incentives for reviews at all.
- **Never write reviews yourself** or ask friends, family or employees to review your business as if they were customers.
- **Never suppress or threaten** customers who leave negative reviews.

- **Follow each platform's own rules.** For example, Etsy and Amazon limit how sellers may contact buyers and forbid incentives for reviews or pressure about what to write. Use their built-in request tools where they exist.
- **Testimonials on your own site** must be real, accurate and used with permission. If someone received something free or has a business relationship with you, disclose it next to the testimonial.

Rules change. Before you start, read the current review policy for each platform you use.

A Simple, Honest Review Habit

1. **Deliver first.** A review request only works after a good experience.
2. **Ask once, at the right moment:** after delivery, after the customer has had time to use the product.
3. **Use neutral wording.** "Would you share your honest experience?" not "Please leave us five stars!"
4. **Make it easy:** one direct link to your review page.
5. **Reply to every review**, good or bad, politely and briefly. Never share private customer details in a reply.
6. **Learn from criticism.** Fix what is fixable, and say so.

Where Each Brand Asks (Examples)

- **Sun Custom Designs:** Etsy's own review flow (follow Etsy's messaging rules, and never offer incentives or ask for a particular rating); a Google Business Profile, if the business has one; a neutral note in the Shopify order follow-up.
- **Custom Pet Portrait Studio:** a neutral follow-up email after delivery with a direct link to its review page (for example a Google Business Profile, if it has one), sent to every customer.
- **Legacy Ready Family:** a simple feedback form or a reply-to email sent to every user; ask permission before quoting

anyone, and never quote anything that reveals family or health details.

- **Kitchen-Table Workbook:** once it is live, rely on Amazon's own systems. Do not ask family or friends to review it, and read Amazon's current rules on advance reader copies before sending any free copies.
- **Brick Life Coach:** a note in newsletter emails inviting honest feedback, sent to everyone on the list.
- **Ledger Credit:** ask every client the same neutral question after their file is closed, whatever the outcome. Never offer a fee reduction for a review, never quote results, and never publish client names or details without written permission. Client information stays private.

From Reviews to Links

Once you have honest reviews:

- Add a "What customers say" section to your linkable assets (with permission).
- Mention your public review profile in press and podcast pitches as social proof.
- When a customer with a blog or business tells you they love your work, thank them. If they ask how they can help, it is fine to say "If you ever mention us, a link to our site helps people find us." Never make it a condition of anything.

Do This Today: Write one neutral review request for one brand and decide exactly when, in the customer's journey, it will go out.

Part III: More Ways to Earn Links by Hand

Chapter 8. Community Links: Chambers, Associations, Events and Scholarships

Your community already has websites that list local businesses. Getting onto the right ones is slow, but each listing is earned by being a real participant.

Chambers of Commerce and Business Associations

Most chambers and business associations list members in an online directory, often with a link. Membership usually costs money, so treat a membership as a business decision first: join only if you will attend events, meet people and use the benefits. The listing link is a side effect, not the reason.

Before joining:

- Look at the directory. Are listings linked? Is the site maintained?
- Ask what else members get: events, referral groups, workshops, newsletters.
- Ask whether members can share news or offer talks.

Trade and Professional Associations

Associations in your field may have member directories, "find a provider" pages or blogs that accept member stories. Examples by field:

- Pet portrait and apparel: local artisan guilds, maker fairs and craft markets.
- Family legacy planning: genealogy societies, caregiver networks.

- Credit education: housing counseling networks and financial-education coalitions. Check eligibility rules carefully; many accept only nonprofits.
- Coaching: local women's business groups and wellness networks.

Local Events and Sponsorships

Sponsoring a 5K, a school fundraiser or a shelter adoption day can be a good way to support your community. Be clear-eyed about the link:

- A sponsor logo link is a paid relationship. If it appears, the organizer should ideally mark it as sponsored. Do not ask them to hide that.
- The real value is in-person goodwill, photos and stories you can share honestly.
- A local story about the event, written by a reporter, is an earned mention. The sponsorship itself is not.

Volunteering and Speaking

Offer a free talk to a library, a community center, a school career day or a senior center:

- Hustle Vault: "Testing a business idea before you spend money."
- Legacy Ready Family: "Starting the final wishes conversation."
- Brick Life Coach: "A ten-minute daily journaling habit."
- Ledger Credit: "How to read your credit report", education only.
- ProofFinder Pro: "First steps in Native American family history research."

Organizers often post event pages that name and link to the speaker. Keep the talk educational. Do not turn it into a sales pitch.

Scholarships: Only If You Mean It

Some businesses create small scholarships mainly to get links from school websites. Many schools now ignore or remove these, and search engines treat scholarship schemes created only for links skeptically. Only offer a scholarship if:

- You actually want to fund students and can pay it every year you advertise it.
- The rules, the judging and the winner announcement are real and public.
- You would still do it if no school ever linked to you.

If any of those is false, skip it.

> **Do This Today:** List three local organizations where one of your brands could give a free, education-only talk.

Chapter 9. Answering Journalist Source Requests

Reporters and writers often post requests for expert sources: "Looking for a small business owner who uses AI tools", "Need a pet owner who commissioned a custom portrait". Answering these quickly and well can lead to a quote with a link or a mention.

Where Requests Appear

- Source-request newsletters and platforms (services in this space change hands and change rules often, so check which are active and what they cost before signing up).
- Social media hashtags such as #JournoRequest on X.
- Writer communities and LinkedIn posts from freelance journalists.

Start with free options. Do not pay for a premium plan until you have answered requests for a month and know whether your topics come up.

What a Good Answer Looks Like

- Reply within a few hours. Many writers pick from the first useful answers.
- Answer the exact question first, in two to four sentences that could be quoted as is.
- Add one specific example from your own work. Never invent one.
- Give your name, title, business and website in one line.
- Offer a photo or a short call if they need more.
- Stay inside your knowledge. If a request asks for a lawyer, a financial adviser or a doctor and you are not one, do not answer.

See Template 9 in Part V.

Special Care for Finance and Family Topics

- **Ledger Credit:** never promise that negative items can be removed or that a score will go up. Explain processes and consumer rights in general terms. Encourage readers to get their free reports from AnnualCreditReport.com and to check facts themselves.
- **Legacy Ready Family:** you are not giving legal advice. Say so when a question touches wills, trusts or estates.

> **Do This Today:** Follow one source-request feed for a week and note which questions match your brands.

Chapter 10. Unlinked Mentions and Link Repair

Some of the easiest links to earn are ones you have already partly earned.

Unlinked Mentions

Someone wrote about your business but did not link to it. To find these:

1. Search your exact brand names in quotes, such as "Sun Custom Designs" and "Hustle Vault".
2. Exclude your own sites from the search (`-site:yourdomain.com`).
3. Check your social media notifications and tags.
4. Set up free alerts for your brand names.

When you find one, send a short thank-you (Template 6). Thank them first. Ask for a link second, and only if a link would genuinely help their readers.

Broken Links to Your Own Pages

If you have moved or renamed pages, other sites may be linking to addresses that now show an error. Check your site's 404 reports or your search console's links reports, and either restore the page, redirect the old address to the closest matching page, or ask the linking site to update the link.

Wrong or Outdated Details

Directories and listings sometimes show an old address, an old name or a wrong website. Ask them to correct it. This matters

especially when a brand has been renamed, such as ProofFinder becoming ProofFinder Pro.

Do This Today: Search for each of your brand names in quotes and record any page that mentions you without a link.

Part IV: Brand Playbooks

Each playbook below takes one brand through the whole method: the linkable asset, the best two or three channels, one worked example and the pitfalls to avoid. Every outlet, person and result in these examples is invented for teaching.

Chapter 11. Sun Custom Designs and Custom Pet Portrait Studio

What These Brands Offer

Sun Custom Designs sells print-on-demand apparel, including products featuring customers' pets. Custom Pet Portrait Studio makes custom portraits of pets. Both live in the pet-owner world, where people love to share and link to stories about animals.

Linkable Assets

- **"How to Pick a Pet Photo That Prints Well":** examples of good and poor photos (light, angle, focus), and what to do if your only photo is blurry.
- **"Pet Memorial Ideas":** a gentle page for families who lost a pet, with non-commercial ideas first and products mentioned only at the end.
- **"Behind the Portrait":** a step-by-step look at how a portrait goes from photo to final file.

Best Channels

1. **Partner pages:** groomers, trainers, vets, pet shops and rescues.
2. **Local press:** shelter-animal and holiday-gift angles.
3. **Reviews:** platform-compliant review habits on Etsy, Shopify and Google.

Worked Example (Invented)

The setup: A county animal shelter (example) posts adoption profiles every week. One dog has been waiting a long time.

The move: The studio offers, with no conditions, to make a free digital portrait of that dog for the shelter's adoption post. The shelter is free to use it or not, credit the studio or not.

The result to hope for: The shelter shares the portrait and, on its own, thanks the studio with a link. A local reporter covering adoption events might later mention the effort. None of this is certain, and the gift is the point either way.

Follow-up: After a few weeks, send the shelter the "Pet Memorial Ideas" page and ask if it would fit their resources page for adopters and families.

Pitfalls

- Do not use a client's pet photo in marketing without their permission.
- Do not claim your products are "official" or "licensed" with any brand or team you are not licensed by.
- On Etsy, follow Etsy's messaging and review rules; never offer incentives for reviews or ask for a particular rating.

Chapter 12. Legacy Ready Family and the Final Wishes Planner

What the Brand Offers

Legacy Ready Family helps families organize and share their legacy, including the Final Wishes Planner, which helps people write down their wishes before a crisis.

Linkable Assets

- **The Final Wishes Planner page**, with a free printable checklist.
- **"How to Start the Final Wishes Conversation":** scripts for talking with parents or adult children, in plain language.
- **"What to Gather Before You See an Attorney":** an organizing checklist that makes clear it is not legal advice.

Best Channels

1. **Resource pages:** libraries, senior centers, hospice volunteer programs, caregiver support groups.
2. **Podcasts:** caregiving, aging parents, grief and remembrance shows.
3. **Talks:** a free library workshop on starting the conversation.

Worked Example (Invented)

The setup: A public library (example) has a "Caregiver Resources" page with links to local services. Two of its links are broken.

The move: Send the librarian a short note: point out the two broken links, mention the free Final Wishes Planner checklist as something patrons might find useful, and offer a free one-hour talk in the library's spring program.

The result to hope for: The librarian fixes the links, considers adding the planner and books a talk. The talk's event page names and links to the speaker.

Pitfalls

- Never describe the planner as a legal document or a substitute for a will.
- Do not collect or share family or health details in testimonials.
- Describe only features that are live on the current product page.

Chapter 13. The Kitchen-Table Family Home Plan Workbook (Pre-Launch)

Where It Stands

The workbook is in production and **not yet on sale**. Pre-launch is the best time to build relationships, as long as you never say or imply it is available.

Linkable Assets for Pre-Launch

- **A free sample worksheet**, such as "Ten Questions Every Family Should Answer About Home", on a simple landing page.
- **An optional email sign-up** to hear when the workbook is released. Make it optional. The sample should work without it.

Best Channels

1. **Resource pages:** homebuyer education programs, housing counselors, parenting and family ministries.
2. **Podcasts:** family finance and parenting shows, booked for after launch.
3. **Local press:** a launch-week story about a local family home-planning resource.

Worked Example (Invented)

The setup: A community nonprofit (example) runs a homebuyer readiness class and lists free resources for families.

The move: Offer the free sample worksheet as a handout for the class. Say clearly that the full workbook is not out yet.

The result to hope for: The nonprofit adds the free sample to its resources page. When the workbook launches, you send a short note to say it is available, without asking for anything more.

Pitfalls

- Never write "available now", "order today" or a price until the book is actually live.
- Do not ask friends or family to review it on Amazon after launch.
- Read Amazon's current rules on advance copies before giving any away.

Chapter 14. Hustle Vault

What the Brand Offers

Hustle Vault offers pay-per-use AI tools and playbooks for people starting or growing a small business, such as tools to check a business idea and turn skills into an offer.

Linkable Assets

- **"How to Check a Business Idea in One Evening":** a free written method that works with or without the tools.
- **This guide.** A free guide is itself a linkable asset for small business resource pages.
- **Plain explainers** for each tool, describing the method, what it does not do and what it costs.

Best Channels

1. **Resource pages:** small business development centers, library business programs, entrepreneurship clubs.
2. **Podcasts:** side-hustle and solo-founder shows.
3. **Source requests:** writers asking how small businesses use AI.

Worked Example (Invented)

The setup: A community college entrepreneurship club (example) keeps a "Free Tools for Student Founders" page.

The move: Email the club's faculty adviser, mention the page by name, and suggest the free "check a business idea" guide for students. Offer to run a free 30-minute workshop for the club.

The result to hope for: The adviser adds the free guide to the page and maybe books a workshop.

Pitfalls

- Do not promise income, "passive income" or results from any tool or playbook.
- Be clear about which tools are free and which are paid, with current prices.

Chapter 15. Brick Life Coach

What the Brand Offers

Brick Life Coach shares affirmation journals, mindset products, printable coloring pages and a free weekly newsletter.

Linkable Assets

- **Free printable affirmation sheets and coloring pages.**
- **"A Ten-Minute Daily Journaling Habit":** a short how-to with prompts.

Best Channels

1. **Resource pages:** libraries, wellness centers, teachers' resource lists (for age-appropriate printables).
2. **Podcasts:** mindset, journaling and personal growth shows.
3. **Talks:** January goal-setting sessions at libraries or community centers.

Worked Example (Invented)

The setup: A wellness blog (example) publishes a list of "free printable journaling pages".

The move: Send the author a short note with one specific comment on their list and offer the free affirmation sheets as an option for a future update.

The result to hope for: The author adds the printables at the next update. Many will not reply, and that is normal.

Pitfalls

- Coaching is not therapy. Do not describe the products as treating anxiety, depression or any condition.
- Do not make income or life-outcome promises.

Chapter 16. Ledger Credit

What the Brand Offers

Ledger Credit (myledgercredit.com) provides credit report repair services. Credit repair is a regulated field. In the United States, the Credit Repair Organizations Act (CROA) and related state laws limit what credit repair companies may say and when they may charge. Every piece of outreach must stay inside those limits.

The Non-Negotiables

- **Never promise results**: no "we will remove", no "raise your score by", and no promise of any particular outcome or payback.
- **Never imply** that accurate, timely negative information can be removed.
- **Lead with consumer rights:** people can dispute inaccurate information themselves for free, and can get free credit reports at AnnualCreditReport.com.
- **Client data stays private.** No client names, files, scores or stories in pitches, examples or testimonials without written permission, and even then share as little as possible.

Linkable Assets

- **"How to Get and Read Your Free Credit Reports":** a plain-language guide.
- **"What a Credit Report Dispute Is (and Is Not)":** explains the process and the consumer's own rights.

Best Channels

1. **Resource pages:** housing counseling agencies, credit-union education pages, reentry and workforce programs. Offer the free education pages only.

2. **Talks:** education-only library sessions.
3. **Source requests:** only questions about process and consumer rights, never about outcomes.

Worked Example (Invented)

The setup: A library (example) runs a monthly "Money Basics" series.

The move: Offer a free, education-only session on reading a credit report. No sales table, no sign-up sheet for services, no promises. Provide the free guide as the handout.

The result to hope for: The library's event page names the speaker and links to the free guide.

Pitfalls

- Do not pitch outlets with stories about specific clients' results.
- Do not answer source requests about "how to fix bad credit fast".
- Have compliance wording reviewed before any public page goes live.

Chapter 17. ProofFinder Pro

What the Brand Offers

ProofFinder Pro is a search tool for Native American ancestry records.

Linkable Assets

- **"Where Native American Records Live":** a guide to record types, archives and how to request records.
- **"First Steps in Native American Family Research":** a research-method guide for beginners.

Best Channels

1. **Resource pages:** genealogy societies, library local-history rooms, family history bloggers.
2. **Podcasts:** genealogy and family history shows.
3. **Talks:** library genealogy clubs.

Worked Example (Invented)

The setup: A county genealogy society (example) lists "Online Research Tools" on its website.

The move: Send a short note that names the page, explains what the tool searches and what it does not, and offers the free "First Steps" guide as a resource.

The result to hope for: The society reviews the tool and adds it to its list if it fits.

Pitfalls

- **Tribal enrollment and citizenship are decided by each tribal nation.** Never suggest that a records search proves eligibility for enrollment or benefits.
- Approach tribal and cultural organizations with respect and without a sales ask.

- Be accurate about the record sources and their limits.

Part V: Templates, Tracking and the 30-Day Plan

Chapter 18. Copy-Paste Outreach Templates

Each template is a starting point. Replace everything in [square brackets], cut anything that does not fit, and read it aloud before sending. If it sounds like a form letter, rewrite it. All names and outlets in the samples are invented.

Template 1: Local Press Pitch

```
Subject: Local story idea: [short, specific headline]

Hi [First name],

I enjoyed your recent piece on [specific story]. I think
your readers might like a related local story.

[One or two sentences: who, what, where, and why now.]

I can provide [photos / a short interview / a demonstration]
this week or next. Here is the page with the details:
[link to the specific page].

If it isn't a fit for [outlet name], no problem at all, and
thank you for reading.

[Your name]
[Role], [Brand]
[Phone, optional]
```

Sample (invented): "Local studio paints portraits of long-stay shelter dogs" sent to the community editor of a town news site, offering photos from the shelter's adoption day.

Template 2: Polite Follow-Up (Reply in the Same Thread)

```
Hi [First name],

Just bringing this back to the top of your inbox in case
it's useful. Since I wrote, [one new detail: a photo, a
date, a quote].

If it's not a fit, I completely understand.

[Your name]
```

Template 3: Podcast Guest Pitch

```
Subject: Guest idea for [Show name]: [topic in five words]

Hi [Host first name],

I listened to your episode with [guest or topic], and
[specific moment] stuck with me.

I run [Brand], where I [one-line description]. I'd love to
talk with your listeners about [topic], including:

- [Point one]
- [Point two]
- [Point three]

I'll also make a free [checklist / guide] for your listeners
at [link].

My one-sheet is here: [link]. If the timing isn't right, no
worries, and thanks for the show.

[Your name]
[Brand] | [website]
```

Template 4: Guest One-Sheet Outline

```
[YOUR NAME]
[Role], [Brand]
[One-line bio]
[Headshot]

TOPICS
1. [Working title]
   - [Bullet]
   - [Bullet]
   - [Bullet]
2. [Working title]
   - [Bullet]
   - [Bullet]
   - [Bullet]
3. [Working title]
   - [Bullet]
   - [Bullet]
   - [Bullet]

QUESTIONS A HOST COULD ASK
- [Question]
- [Question]
- [Question]

FREE LISTENER RESOURCE: [title] at [link]
PAST INTERVIEWS: [links, or leave off if none yet]
CONTACT: [email]  |  [website]
```

Template 5: Partner or Resource Page Ask

```
Subject: A resource for your [page name] page

Hi [First name],

I was reading your [page name] page ([URL]) and found it
really useful. [Optional: I noticed the link to (resource)
seems to be broken. It now goes to an error page.]

I run [Brand], and we made a free [resource title] for
[audience]: [link]. It covers [one-line summary], with no
sign-up needed.

If you think it would help your [patrons / members /
clients], you're welcome to add it. If not, no problem, and
thanks for keeping such a helpful list.

[Your name]
[Role], [Brand]
```

Template 6: Unlinked Mention Thank-You

```
Subject: Thank you for mentioning [Brand]

Hi [First name],

Thank you for including [Brand] in [article or post title].
It was a lovely surprise.

If it would help your readers find [the resource you
mentioned], here's the direct page: [link]. Totally up to
you, of course.

Thanks again,
[Your name]
```

Template 7: Review Request Email (Send to Every Customer)

```
Subject: How did your [product] turn out?

Hi [First name],

Your [product] was delivered on [date]. We hope it's what
you pictured.

If you have a minute, we'd be grateful for your honest
review here: [direct review link]. Good, bad or in between,
it helps us and helps other customers.

If anything isn't right, just reply to this email and we'll
help.

[Your name]
[Brand]
```

Rules for this template: send it to every customer at the same stage; never add a discount, gift or contest; never ask for a particular star rating; and on marketplaces such as Etsy or Amazon, use the platform's own tools and rules instead of this email.

Template 8: Review Request Card (Package Insert or Printed Note)

```
Thank you for your order.
We'd love your honest feedback.
Share your experience at: [short link or QR code]
Questions or problems? Contact us at [email].
```

Before putting any insert in a marketplace order, check that platform's rules on package inserts.

Template 9: Journalist Source-Request Reply

```
Subject: Re: [Request title]: [your one-line answer]

Hi [First name],

[Direct answer to the question in two to four quotable
sentences.]

[One honest, specific example from your own work.]

[Your name], [Title] of [Brand], [website]
Happy to jump on a quick call or send a photo if useful.
```

Template 10: Chamber or Association Listing Request

```
Subject: Directory listing for [Brand]

Hi [First name],

I'm a member of [organization] (member since [month/year]).
Could you please add or update our directory listing?

Business name: [Brand]
Website: [URL]
Short description: [one or two sentences]
Category: [category]

Thank you for your help.

[Your name]
```

Template 11: Free Talk Offer (Library or Community Center)

```
Subject: Free [topic] session for your [program name]

Hi [First name],

I saw that [library / center] runs [program]. I'd be glad to
offer a free, education-only [45-minute] session on [topic]
for your patrons. There's no sales pitch; I'll bring a free
handout, [handout title].

Possible dates: [two or three options]

If it isn't a fit this season, no problem at all.

[Your name]
[Role], [Brand]
```

Chapter 19. The Link Tracking Sheet

Track every conversation in one sheet. A spreadsheet is enough. Use these columns:

Column	What to record
Date found	When you added the target
Brand	Which of your brands this is for
Channel	Press, podcast, resource page, partner, review, community, source request, unlinked mention
Organization	Outlet, show or site name
Contact	Person's name and role
Contact route	Email, form, social
Their recent work	The specific story, episode or page you will mention
Our asset	The page you will point them to
First contact	Date sent
Follow-up	Date sent (one only)
Status	Not started, sent, followed up, replied, won, declined, closed (no reply)
Live URL	The page where the mention or link appears
Link type	Followed, nofollow, sponsored, no link
Notes	Anything to remember for next time

Sample Rows (Invented)

Brand	Channel	Organization	Status	Link type
Custom Pet Portrait Studio	Partner	County animal shelter (example)	Replied	No link yet
Legacy Ready Family	Resource page	Public library caregiver page (example)	Sent	—

Brand	Channel	Organization	Status	Link type
Hustle Vault	Podcast	Side-hustle show (example)	Followed up	—
Ledger Credit	Community talk	Library "Money Basics" series (example)	Not started	—

Weekly Review (15 Minutes)

Every week, look at the sheet and ask:

1. Which follow-ups are due?
2. Which conversations turned into a mention or a link, and what made them work?
3. Which assets get the most interest, and which brands need a better one?
4. Who should get a thank-you note?

Chapter 20. Your 30-Day Action Plan

This plan assumes about one hour a day, five days a week. Pick **one brand** for the first 30 days. When the month is done, start again with the next brand.

Week 1: Get Ready

- **Day 1:** Choose the brand. Write the "A stranger would link to us because..." sentence.
- **Day 2:** Choose one linkable asset from Chapter 2 and outline it.
- **Day 3:** Write the asset page.
- **Day 4:** Check it against the Linkable Page Checklist and publish it (with the site owner's approval).
- **Day 5:** Set up the tracking sheet, your bio, your signature and photos.

Week 2: Build Your Lists

- **Day 6:** Build ten rows of local press targets (Chapter 4).
- **Day 7:** Find ten podcasts and vet five (Chapter 5).
- **Day 8:** Find ten resource or partner pages (Chapter 6).
- **Day 9:** Search for unlinked mentions and broken links (Chapter 10).
- **Day 10:** Write your review request and decide when it goes out (Chapter 7).

Week 3: Make Your First Asks

- **Day 11:** Send three resource-page asks (Template 5).
- **Day 12:** Send two podcast pitches (Template 3).
- **Day 13:** Send one local press pitch (Template 1).
- **Day 14:** Send unlinked-mention thank-yous (Template 6).

- **Day 15:** Offer one free talk (Template 11).

Week 4: Follow Up and Learn

- **Day 16 to 18:** Answer any source requests that fit (Template 9), and send any due follow-ups (Template 2).
- **Day 19:** Send three more resource-page asks.
- **Day 20:** Do the weekly review. Thank everyone who replied, whatever they said.

Days 21 to 30: Keep the Habit

- Spend 30 minutes a day on outreach and 30 minutes improving the asset based on what you learned.
- Never send more than you can personally follow up on.
- At the end of day 30, write three lines: what worked, what did not, what to try next. Then pick the next brand.

Appendix A. The Honest Outreach Checklist

Check every message before you send it:

- ☐ I am using my real name, my real business and an accurate subject line.
- ☐ I mention something specific the recipient made.
- ☐ I am pointing to a specific useful page, not just my home page.
- ☐ I make no promises about results, rankings, income or outcomes.
- ☐ I am not offering money, gifts or favors in exchange for a link or a review.
- ☐ Any paid placement is disclosed and marked as sponsored.
- ☐ No customer or client private information appears anywhere.
- ☐ For credit topics: no outcome promises, no claims that accurate information can be removed.
- ☐ For legacy and planning topics: I am not giving legal advice.
- ☐ For ancestry topics: I make no claims about tribal enrollment or eligibility.
- ☐ I have made it easy for them to say no.
- ☐ I will follow up once, at most.

Appendix B. Plain-Language Glossary

- **Backlink:** a link from another website to yours.
- **Anchor text:** the clickable words of a link.
- **Followed link:** a link with no special tag, which search engines may count as a signal.
- **Nofollow, sponsored, UGC:** link tags that tell search engines not to treat the link as an endorsement (`nofollow`), that it is paid (`sponsored`) or that it is in user-generated content (`ugc`).
- **Linkable asset:** a page useful enough that people want to link to it.
- **Resource page:** a page that lists helpful links for a particular audience.
- **Unlinked mention:** a mention of your business with no link.
- **Review gating:** asking only happy customers for reviews, or filtering who gets asked. Prohibited by many platforms.
- **One-sheet:** a one-page summary a podcast host or event organizer can read quickly.
- **Source request:** a journalist's public request for expert input.

About This Guide

Earned, Not Bought is part of the Hustle Vault Playbook Series. It was written for small business owners who want links they can be proud of. It contains no paid placements and no affiliate links.

This guide is educational. It is not legal, financial or tax advice. Platform rules and laws change; check the current rules of each platform and, for regulated businesses, consult a qualified professional.

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