TESTING A MAIN-STREET IDEA: POP-UPS, MARKETS AND PRE-ORDERS

Try your food, shop, service or salon idea in real life before you sign a lease or buy equipment.

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AT A GLANCE

- Main-street businesses can test cheaply with **pop-ups, markets, shared spaces, pre-orders and home-based services**.
- A test gives you **real sales numbers**, customer feedback and a list of fans before you take on rent.
- Check **permits and food rules** before you sell, even for a one-day event.

Why it matters

A lease, a buildout and equipment can cost tens of thousands of dollars and lock you in for years. Testing first shows which products sell, at what price, to whom and on which days. Landlords and lenders take you more seriously when you bring real numbers.

Ways to test

Option	How it works	Good for
Farmers markets and weekend markets	Rent a booth for a day	Food, crafts, retail
Pop-ups	Borrow or rent space in another business for a day or a month	Restaurants, retail, beauty
Shared or commissary kitchens	Rent kitchen time by the hour	Food and catering
Booth or chair rental	Rent one chair or room in an existing salon or studio	Beauty, barber, wellness
Pre-orders	Take orders and payment before producing	Bakeries, holiday goods, custom items
Mobile or home service	Go to the customer	Cleaning, detailing, repairs, tutoring
Selling through other stores	Place products in a shop on consignment or wholesale	Packaged goods, crafts

Step by step

1. **Check the rules.** Ask your city or county about permits, temporary food licenses and health rules. Many places have "cottage food" rules for some foods made at home. See **B-05 Licenses and Permits: Finding What You Need**.
2. **Pick one or two test formats** that fit your idea.
3. **Set a target**: for example, sell 60 items per market day, or book 15 clients in a month.
4. **Track everything**: sales by item, by day and by time; what people ask for; what didn't sell.
5. **Collect contacts** with a sign-up sheet or QR code, so your first customers follow you.
6. **Run the test for at least 6 to 8 weeks** to see patterns.
7. **Decide** what to change, and whether you're ready for a permanent space.

> EXAMPLE
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> **Marisol** wanted to open a taquería. She rented a commissary kitchen and ran a Friday-night pop-up at a local brewery for 10 weeks. She learned her birria sold out every week while two other items barely sold. She collected 600 email and text sign-ups. When she applied for a lease and a small loan, she brought 10 weeks of sales records and her customer list.

What your test should tell you

- Your **best sellers** and the price people happily pay
- Your **busiest days and times**
- Your **real costs** per item

- Whether customers **come back**
- How many customers you'd need in a permanent location to break even. See **M-08 Costs, Margins and Break-Even**.

Common mistakes

- **Skipping permits.** Fines or a shutdown can end a test early.
- **Testing too briefly.** One great or bad day isn't a pattern.
- **Not collecting contact info.** Your first fans are your launch audience.
- **Testing a menu or product line that's too big.** Focus on what you'd sell most.

Your checklist

- ☐ Check permits and food or health rules
- ☐ Choose one or two test formats
- ☐ Set a sales target and a test length
- ☐ Track sales by item, day and time
- ☐ Collect customer contacts
- ☐ Calculate the customers you'd need in a permanent space

Key words, explained

Word	What it means
Pop-up	A temporary shop or restaurant.
Commissary kitchen	A shared commercial kitchen you rent by the hour.
Cottage food law	Rules allowing some foods to be made at home and sold.
Consignment	A store sells your product and pays you after it sells.

Where to go next

- **L-08 Opening a Physical Location (Main Street)**
- **B-13 Renting Your First Space: Leases Explained (Main Street)**
- **P-01 Restaurants and Food Service**

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