LICENSES AND PERMITS: FINDING WHAT YOU NEED

The city, county, state and industry licenses businesses commonly need, and how to find yours.

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AT A GLANCE

- Most businesses need at least one **general business license**, plus licenses for their **industry** and permits for their **location**.
- Rules depend on **where you operate and what you do**. A food business needs very different permits than a consulting business.
- Start with your **city or county business office**. Many have checklists or a one-stop website.

WATCH OUT

Licensing rules differ by city, county, state and country. This guide is general. Confirm requirements with the agencies where you operate.

Why it matters

Operating without required licenses can lead to fines, shutdowns, voided insurance and trouble with lenders and landlords. It's one of the first things investors and lenders check.

Common licenses and permits

Type	Who usually issues it	Common for
General business license	City or county	Most businesses
Sales tax permit	State tax agency	Businesses selling taxable goods
Professional or trade license	State licensing board	Contractors, electricians, cosmetologists, barbers, real estate, health professions
Food service or health permit	County health department	Restaurants, food trucks, caterers
Liquor license	State and local agencies	Bars, restaurants serving alcohol
Zoning approval or certificate of occupancy	City planning or building department	Physical locations
Home occupation permit	City or county	Home-based businesses
Sign permit	City	Outdoor signs
Fire department permit	Local fire department	Some locations and events
Federal licenses	Federal agencies	A few industries, such as alcohol, firearms, transportation and broadcasting

Step by step

1. **Start local.** Visit your city or county's business licensing office or website.
2. **Check your state's licensing board** for your profession or trade.
3. **Check zoning before you sign a lease.** Make sure your business type is allowed at that address. See **B-13 Renting Your First Space: Leases Explained (Main Street)**.
4. **Ask your local small business center** (in the US, an SBDC) for a free review.
5. **Make a list** of every license, its cost, and its renewal date.
6. **Display licenses** where required, and calendar renewals. See **O-13 Compliance Calendar**.

> EXAMPLE
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> **Marisol's** taquería needed a city business license, a county health permit, a sales tax permit, a sign permit, a fire inspection, and a certificate of occupancy for the space. Her pop-ups also needed temporary food event permits. She kept them all in a spreadsheet with renewal dates.

> KEY POINT
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> Check zoning and permits **before** signing a lease. Some spaces can't legally be used for restaurants, salons or certain trades without costly changes.

Common mistakes

- **Assuming one license covers everything.**
- **Signing a lease before checking zoning.**
- **Forgetting renewals.**
- **Working outside your license**, such as a stylist without the required state license.

Your checklist

- ☐ Visit your city or county licensing website
- ☐ Check your state's licensing board for your industry
- ☐ Confirm zoning for your location
- ☐ List every license with cost and renewal date
- ☐ Put renewals on your compliance calendar (O-13)

Key words, explained

Word	What it means
Zoning	Local rules about what kinds of businesses can operate where.
Certificate of occupancy	Approval that a building is safe and legal for a use.
Home occupation permit	Permission to run certain businesses from home.

Where to go next

- **B-13 Renting Your First Space: Leases Explained (Main Street)**
- **O-11 Staying Legal: Ongoing Filings and Deadlines**
- **I-08 Testing a Main-Street Idea: Pop-Ups, Markets and Pre-Orders**

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