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The Definitive Guide for First-Time Salon Owners

How First-Time Business
Owners Can Do It All,
From Beauty Branding
to Service Menus





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Welcome to the Salon Industry!

So you've finally decided to open a beauty business of your own — perhaps a hair boutique, nail salon, or massage clinic. Have you secured some capital? Excellent! Now all you have to do is find a location, recruit quality staff, buy equipment, build a website, create a brand, decide on core values, research scheduling and management software, build a marketing strategy, try not to become the main character on social media, find community partners, and...

Okay, maybe there's still lots of work ahead.

The list of things a first-time business owner needs to cover is daunting, but I promise you're not the first to tackle this challenge. My business partner and I were right where you are when we decided to open **'Cure Studios** in East Austin. We had to tackle an obstacle **or five** before even considering opening our doors to the public. And that was in the middle of a pandemic.

The good news is, you don't have to go it alone — I'm going to offer some industry expertise to help you get started. This guide will go over everything a first-time beauty business owner needs to build a brand, lock down equipment, and open the doors to a successful and sustainable salon or spa.



Rachel Daily

Co-Owner and Founder of 'Cure Studios
Senior Product Manager at Boulevard

Company Culture: Getting the Brand Back Together

"There was never a point where I said, 'I would love to own a business.' I wanted an ethical way to do my nails, and it didn't exist. And the more crowdsourcing I did about it, the more it resonated with women in fashion. Eventually, the direction for the business and the brand became clear!"

Rachel Daily

Before you start developing a business, you need to make some decisions about your brand. And I'm not just talking about a brand logo — owners need to define the traits that make them distinct from every competitor in the area. More specifically, how do you make your customers feel? Because the highest-quality beauty treatment isn't going to have much impact if there's no difference between your salon's experience and the shop around the block.

Defining a brand identity early is crucial because it informs many of the decisions you'll be making later in this guide. Branding is a big part of what you're selling, and I promise you, clients can tell when brand identity and reality don't match.

With this in mind, think about your brand from the following angles:

Audience: Most successful brands start with extensive market research. Understanding your target audience makes it easier to build a brand experience that appeals to their lifestyle and interests. If you want to specialize in sustainable products, for example, understanding the extent to which the local community prioritizes sustainability can teach you a great deal about what would attract them to your location.

Personality: If your brand was a person, what would they be like? Kind? Sincere? Artistic? Sophisticated? Cozy? Find a combination of adjectives that match the tone you want to strike.

Values: What does your business care about? Social justice? The environment? Inclusive experiences? Brainstorm a series of actionable values that your salon strives for. You don't need to market these values constantly, but they should always inform how you treat customers, train employees, and manage the business behind the scenes.

Ask everyone what they think: The branding stage is crucial, so don't be afraid to get feedback on how everything feels. Friends, family, industry peers, and potential customers will all have perspectives on whether a particular concept resonates with them. You might be onto something if they're excited to book an appointment.



Real Estate: Location, Location, Location

When starting a new salon, choosing a location can make or break your launch strategy. It's not just about cost — the right site can increase your foot traffic, set a baseline for pricing, and ensure your target demographic knows where to find you. Each possible storefront introduces countless factors that may influence your business model in unexpected ways.

Of course, once you know what you want, closing the deal is its own challenge. Details like zoning regulations and lease agreements are what make understanding commercial real estate a skill. Unless you used to manage business properties in another life, finding a commercial real estate broker is a must since they can help cover all the bases.

Finally, knowing how a location meets your needs as a beauty specialist is important. For example, massage clinics need individual rooms for each client, but nail salons tend to prioritize a wide-open space. Both locations will also need their own storage rooms, break areas, and functioning bathrooms. If money is tight, distinguish between what you need at launch and the “nice to haves” your operation will grow into.

As you hunt for locations, keep the following details in mind:

Visibility: Is the storefront visible to both drivers and pedestrians? Is there any space for signage you can use to your advantage?

Accessibility and convenience: Can your target demographic easily reach your location? (Not to be confused with wheelchair accessibility, which is also important!)

Regulations: Commercial real estate comes with a host of legal regulations that vary depending on your industry, state, and district. Which rules apply to your location?

Urban or suburban: Locations within an urban core tend to have higher foot traffic. On the other hand, while neighborhood locations have less walk-in traffic, they can be a bigger hit with loyal residents. Which experience reflects your brand?

Nearby businesses: You're probably not the first business owner to consider this area. Are other companies located nearby? How about competitors?



"Real estate is tough. We had an exciting location we wanted to lease, but it used to be an old dry cleaner. It literally couldn't get a clean water sample — there were too many chemicals in the area. We could proceed legally, but ethically it went against everything the brand stood for. So our storefront ended up being 1,000 square feet smaller than we hoped."

Rachel Daily

Recruitment: Hiring Your All-Star Team

"Do not sleep on the new talent graduating from beauty school programs. Sometimes the veteran with years of experience isn't motivated to try and fit in with the rest of the team — but the newcomer might. You can teach skills, but you cannot teach enthusiasm or perspective."

Rachel Daily

Salons are relationship businesses, so it's essential to hire a team to support all kinds of clients. Unfortunately, every other business owner is trying to do the same thing! Recruiting beauty professionals who are highly skilled, fully licensed, and a joy to work with is surprisingly challenging when you have to compete for their attention — especially for first-time business owners who are used to working alone.

Thankfully, hiring the right people is still possible if you keep the following points in mind:

Recruit early: Start recruiting right now. Yes, even if you're not opening your doors for months. Beauty professionals are rarely ready to start working when you need them, especially if they're traveling from out-of-state and need to update their licenses. The more time you have to get onto everyone's radar, the more likely you will find the ideal candidate.

Recruit everywhere: Sadly, beauty business owners don't get to find all of their talent from a single location. You'll need to recruit from LinkedIn, Indeed, Monster, social media, beauty schools, newspapers, and job boards — put feelers out everywhere.

Learn to cold contact: Since most of the talent you're recruiting isn't on channels like LinkedIn, you may need to get proactive. Start researching beauty professionals through Instagram, review their work, and cold contact them to ask if they'd be interested in working with you. If the value proposition is good, you might find some of your best talent this way!

Learn to market yourself: Owners should get in the habit of marketing their brand to potential employees just as much as potential customers. What makes your beauty business valuable — not just in terms of pay, but benefits, company culture, or other factors? Don't be afraid to put yourself out there and share what makes you unique as an employer.

Be active in the beauty community: The beauty community is relatively small, so it helps when applicants can recognize your brand. Find ways to become involved at local events, beauty schools, and college programs. A stylist who was impressed with your presentation to their class is more likely to view you in a positive light.

Onboarding: Training and Tribulations

“Onboarding is a conversation, not a checklist. Instead of rushing through each procedure on the first day, after a few days of on the job experience, ask the new arrival if they feel trained. If not, what are the gaps? Where can we lean in more? After all, you can't say you're onboarded if you can't remember how to enter the security code into the building's back door.”

Rachel Daily

If you've worked in the beauty industry for any length of time, you probably know that employee attrition is a bit ridiculous. While there's not much hard data, the little we have confirms our suspicions: Most salon team members don't stay with a salon **for more than three years.** You might hope for your company to beat the odds, but as a business owner, you also need an onboarding process that matches with this industry reality.

However, seamless onboarding is much harder than it sounds. You must simultaneously bring each nervous trainee up to speed as quickly as possible without overloading them with excessive information or unrealistic expectations. Thankfully, several tried-and-tested beauty industry approaches make the process far easier:

Be compassionate: First and foremost, owners need to approach new team members empathetically. Your new hire isn't their usual self on day one — they're an incredibly nervous version of their best self trying to absorb all the information around them. And you've probably been right where they are. Make that your North Star and onboarding will be smoother for everyone.

Be present: It doesn't matter how much you're paying an employee or how rock-solid your business plan might be. New hires have no reason to feel connected to your brand or vision. That requires trust, and the best way to start earning trust is by onboarding them in person on day one. If you can't care enough to show them the ropes, why should they put the effort in for you?

Put lessons in writing: New team members need to absorb a ton of information on their first day, so why not give them tools to make it easier? Create a training manual detailing work processes, policies, and other rules for employees to review as necessary. This manual can also be a handy reference guide if they need to double-check anything during a shift.

Set expectations: The most important thing leaders can do when onboarding is set clear expectations. Employees must know if there is a dress code, what “on time” means, or how to request time off without forcing everyone else to scramble. By establishing these expectations early, “behavioral issues” will occur less frequently. And if they do, you can refresh their expectations by referring to the training manual.

The Service Menu: What's Your Happy Meal?

When you're launching a beauty business, putting together a menu is a task in frustration. How can you develop services when you're still locking down the brand? If you're struggling here, take a step back and ask yourself:

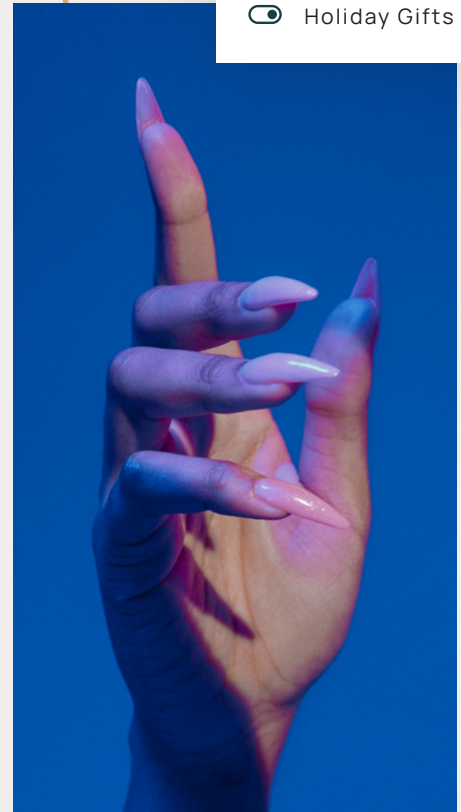
What is your brand's "Happy Meal"?

Whether you're running a salon or spa, a high-end city storefront, or a small-scale suburban location, it doesn't matter. Every beauty business needs a core service that is simple, low-cost, and appeals to most customers. This bread-and-butter, steady-revenue source will make future business expansions possible. You can even use it as an opportunity for feedback or to poll clients about future services.

Once your primary service is locked down, the next step is creating mid-tier options. These services are a little higher quality than the "Happy Meal," but they also aren't going to bankrupt your clients. They might revolve around holidays, birthdays, back-to-school season, or other annual events.

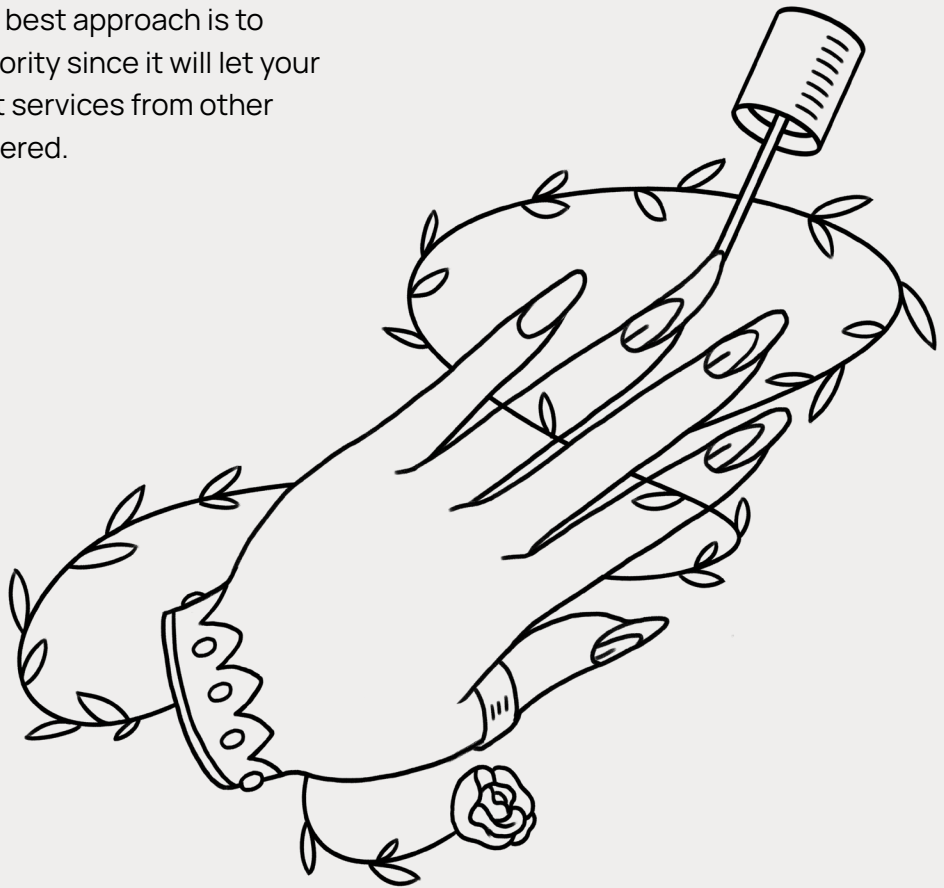
Finally, think about the luxury options. These special occasion services are reserved for weddings, anniversaries, or annual pampering sessions. Clients who choose these options are paying a premium to spend hours with your employees, so they expect to emerge looking absolutely stunning.

- ☐ Manicures
- ☐ Pedicures
- ☐ Removal Only
- ☐ Nail Art
- ☐ Body Care
- ☐ Memberships
- ☐ Holiday Gifts



As you work through this process, don't forget to consider your staff. Do they have a signature cut, style, or color treatment that's not currently on the menu? Well, why not? Play to your team's strengths whenever possible; not only will it please your clients, but it will also help your staff feel more personally connected to your business.

Thinking about your services in these terms doesn't only make it easier to prepare a menu. It's also invaluable when it's time to think about promotion. Most new customers will focus on basic services to get a feel for your operation. Meanwhile, a marketing strategy that lets big spenders know about your premium treatments can lead to a big payday, even if they occur less frequently. The best approach is to make customer education a priority since it will let your existing customers know about services from other tiers which they haven't considered.



Buying Equipment: Shop So Your Employees Don't Drop

"Finding the right design and layout for our space was crucial to our brand. We took considerable time and resources building the 'perfect' beautiful space, encapsulating everything we wanted. Our nail consultant did a walkthrough two days before opening and said most of our furniture wouldn't work. We nailed the look but not the ergonomics. We found an alternative, but talk about a panic moment!"

Rachel Daily

Beauty business owners will need to do a lot of shopping before they open their doors. Along with each employee's equipment and workstation, you'll need to consider cleaning supplies, computing equipment, lobby seating, break room furniture, lighting fixtures — perhaps literally the kitchen sink!

The good news is many guides and blog posts — some produced by Boulevard! — can help you craft your shopping checklist. But whether you're running a nail salon or a spa retreat, owners should always keep the following principles in mind:

Never take shortcuts: If you take nothing else from this guide, remember this: Do not. Take. Shortcuts! Even if it means paying a premium on equipment. When you buy discount furniture that breaks within months, you'll double your cost trying to replace it. Even worse, it will impact your employees' work and damage the customer experience. Yes, it's an expensive investment, but it's better to delay your opening day than buy the wrong equipment.

Try before you buy: You can find an item that looks perfect in photographs but is a nightmare in reality. For example, that brand-perfect seating might not work ergonomically for a nail technician who needs to sit in it for eight hours a day. If you can test out the equipment, you'll be better positioned to determine whether it works as intended and provides a sound ergonomic experience for your staff.

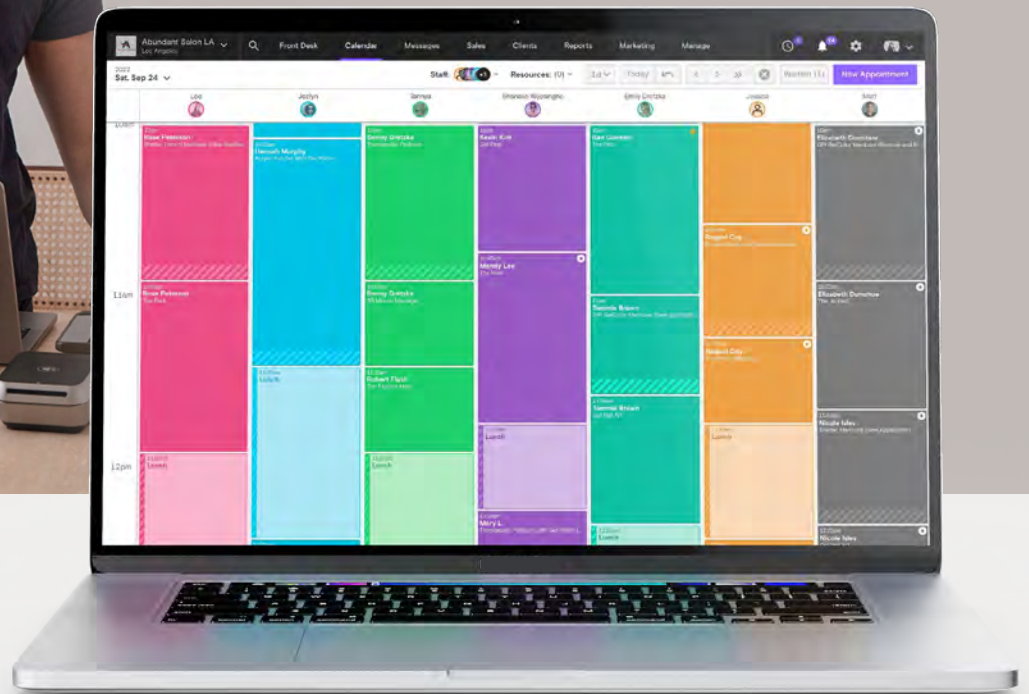
Measure everything: Before your beauty business launches, you'll need to pack a lot of supplies into a minimal space. Break out the measuring tape and account for everything within a room's layout — I'm talking table heights, cabinets, and other fixtures. Your employees will be grateful when they aren't bumping into furniture and don't need to stretch to reach their supplies.

Consider a consultant: On all fronts, it really helps to have an expert look over everything to ensure it's in order — before you open. This could be a veteran business owner, an interior designer, or even a beauty consulting firm. It's expensive but could ultimately be more profitable over the long term.



"As an owner, you think you're running the business, but you're not. You still have to eat, sleep, and take care of emergencies. Technology runs your business. And if you set it up correctly, clients can book appointments at any hour, receive an intake form, and expect a personalized experience before walking through your door."

Rachel Daily



Small Businesses Still Need Strong Tech

Why, why, why are there still beauty professionals booking appointments with pens and paper? While it's a significant investment for any new business, the right tech stack does the work of four or five people. Technology takes all the business-y parts of running a salon, like inventory management, accounting, email marketing, and payroll, and simplifies each process. That frees up an immense amount of time that can be spent working with clients, planning new services, and much more.

Of course, the key phrase is “the right tech stack” — general business management software tends to overlook the nuances of the beauty industry. So whether you have an all-in-one solution or assemble specialized software, there are a few things to look for:

Self-booking: In the age of smartphones, clients are more likely to book an appointment through an app than to call your number. Your booking solution needs to offer access to all the necessary tools, such as services, prices, and recommended dates. Owners should expect to customize these visuals to reflect their brand or additional design features such as a product sales page.

Customer intake: It takes time for beauty professionals to become familiar with a new client. We don't know their pronouns, allergies, or even what kind of music they might want to listen to during a session. Beauty tech can help by automatically texting an intake form to each new client, ensuring that employees have all the information they need to deliver an excellent experience before check-in.

Calendar optimization: Most clients who book a daytime visit are taking time away from work to attend the appointment. They'd rather be making money, so delays will not make them happy. An optimized calendar accounts for the appointment time and associated tasks, such as transition or finishing time. By accounting for these details, your team can more readily attend to the client and their needs.

Custom reporting tools: The service model for a hair salon will be completely different than a nail business or massage clinic — so your reporting tools should be tailored to your specific business model. Any beauty management software worth its price tag should offer templates that can be customized to reflect individual needs while still delivering an in-depth analysis of everything from performance to finances.

Take your client experience to the next level with software that was built to intelligently address every step of their journey. [Book a demo](#) to see how Boulevard makes the most of your business for clients and staff alike.

About Boulevard



Boulevard offers the first and only client experience platform purpose-built for appointment-based, self-care businesses.

Boulevard empowers business owners and professionals alike to deliver personable, enjoyable experiences to their clients through online appointment scheduling, messaging, and payments that are simple, elegant, and reliable. A privately held company founded in 2016, Boulevard has earned the trust of thousands of salons and spas across the nation by delivering the world-class technology and genuine, human, personable service they deserve.

Self-care businesses powered by Boulevard typically enjoy:

16%

More services
booked

71%

Fewer no-shows
& late cancels

18%

More retail
value

24%

More gratuity
from clients

GET A FREE DEMO

* Average impact T+90 days after switching to Boulevard