Easy Affiliate Marketing

An Honest Beginner's Guide

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Second edition, 2026. Rewritten from scratch.

This guide contains affiliate links. I earn a commission if you buy through them, it doesn't change what you pay, and it doesn't change what I recommend.

Commission rates, platform policies, and program terms cited here were accurate in July 2026 and change frequently. Verify anything you plan to build on. Nothing here is legal, tax, or financial advice.

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Read This First

I published my first affiliate link in 2009. A shared hosting company paid me about sixty-five dollars, and I stared at the number like a law of physics had been repealed in my favour. Someone I'd never met had read something I wrote and bought something I suggested.

It also gave me a completely wrong idea about how fast this works.

For the next three years my affiliate income averaged somewhere between twelve and two hundred dollars a month. I was publishing several times a week. I was doing everything the guides said to do. The problem wasn't effort, and it took me an embarrassingly long time to work out what it was.

That's why this guide exists, and why the first edition of it, written years ago, has been thrown away rather than updated. The old version opened by telling you affiliate marketing was "the easiest to learn" and that you could "start making huge money in quick time." Both of those are the kind of thing you write when you're selling optimism, and neither is true.

Here's what's actually true. Affiliate marketing is a real business that a person can start with almost no money. It also takes eighteen months to two years before it produces anything meaningful, most people quit before then, and the ones who quit are usually doing everything right except waiting.

This guide is short on purpose. It covers what affiliate marketing is, how the money moves, what has changed recently and badly, what to do in your first ninety days, and the specific mistakes that cost people their first year. If you want the full treatment, including my own performance data and the parts that make me look bad, that's in *The Affiliate Bloggers System*. This is the version that fits in an afternoon.

One thing before we start. In the last eighteen months, Google changed what it rewards, Amazon rewrote its terms twice, and people started asking AI assistants what to buy instead of searching. Every one of those changes pushed in the same direction: toward people who have actually used the things they recommend, and away from people who haven't. That's the whole strategy now, and it's the best news this industry has had in years.

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What Affiliate Marketing Actually Is

Strip away the vocabulary and it's this: a company pays you for producing a customer it wouldn't otherwise have had.

You have attention and credibility with a group of people. A company has a product and a budget for finding customers. Instead of spending that budget on ads people ignore, the company spends part of it on you, and only pays when the introduction works.

That's the whole model. Everything else is implementation.

Who's involved

The merchant sells something and wants more sales.

You, the affiliate, recommend it to people who trust you.

The network sits in the middle, running the tracking, attribution, and payment. Awin, impact.com, CJ, PartnerStack. Some companies skip the network and run their programs themselves.

The customer buys, usually without noticing any of this happened, and pays exactly the same price they would have anyway.

That last point matters and beginners often get it wrong: your commission comes out of the company's marketing budget, not out of your reader's pocket. You are not making things more expensive for the person who trusts you. That's worth understanding clearly, because it's the reason this arrangement is ethical when it's done honestly.

How the tracking works

The link you share carries an identifier that says the visitor came from you. When someone clicks it, a cookie or a server-side token records that. If they buy within a certain window, the network credits you.

Two things follow from this, and both bite beginners.

The window is finite. Amazon's is 24 hours. Some programs give you 30, 60, or 90 days. If your reader takes three weeks to decide and the window was a day, you sent them and you don't get paid.

Tracking fails more than you'd think. Browsers block cookies, people read on a phone and buy on a laptop, privacy tools intervene. A meaningful fraction of the sales you genuinely caused never register. Nobody sends you a notification about this, which is why it's worth knowing up front.

Why companies pay for this

Two reasons.

It's the cheapest customer acquisition available, and the risk sits with you. An ad costs money whether it works or not. A commission costs money only after revenue has landed.

And a recommendation from someone a buyer already trusts converts at a rate no advertisement can touch. The company isn't paying for your traffic. They're paying for your credibility, borrowed for the length of one purchase decision.

> *You're renting out your credibility. That's the product. Which means the day you stop being credible, you have nothing left to sell them, and no amount of traffic replaces it.*

What it isn't

It isn't passive income. It's leveraged income, which is different. A page you write once can earn for years, and that's real. But products change, links break, programs close, and rankings decay. The work and the payment are separated in time; the work does not stop.

It isn't fast. Assume eighteen months to two years before it produces anything meaningful. Anyone giving you a shorter number is either selling you something or had an advantage they're not mentioning.

It isn't a way to avoid having anything to say. The entire mechanism depends on someone trusting your judgment. If you don't have judgment about anything yet, that's the thing to build first.

Chapter Checklist

- ☐ Write down, in one sentence, the group of people you could plausibly be credible to.
- ☐ Write down what you'd be able to tell them that they couldn't easily find elsewhere.
- ☐ Accept an eighteen-month timeline before you start, or don't start.

2

How the Money Actually Works

Affiliate revenue is four numbers multiplied together, and because they multiply, a weakness anywhere zeroes the whole thing.

$$\text{Revenue} = \text{Traffic} \times \text{Click-through rate} \times \text{Conversion rate} \times \text{Commission}$$

Traffic is how many people reach your page. **Click- through rate** is the fraction who click your affiliate link. **Conversion rate** is the fraction of those who buy. **Commission** is what you're paid when they do.

A worked example

A page gets 200 visits a month. Eight percent click your link. Four percent of those buy. The commission is $40.

$200 \times 0.08 \times 0.04 \times \$40 \approx \$26$ a month.

Now double any one of them and you get about $52. They're mathematically identical levers, and they are enormously different in difficulty. That asymmetry is the entire game.

Which levers you actually control

Ranked by how much control you have, least first.

Commission is set by the merchant, and as of 2026 it can be halved with a fortnight's notice. Amazon did exactly that.

Conversion rate is mostly the merchant's checkout, pricing, and brand. What you influence is whether the person arrives ready to buy, which is a question about which search you targeted, not about your writing.

Traffic is the hardest and slowest, takes months to years, and it's the one everybody attacks first.

Click-through rate is genuinely yours. Where the recommendation sits on the page, whether the reader knows what to do next, whether you gave them a reason to act. It's the smallest lever, the only one you fully own, and the one people spend the least time on.

> *Build this so that the two levers you don't control can each halve without ending you. That means not depending on one program, and not depending on one page.*

The uncomfortable part about traffic

Here's a number from my own site, because I'd rather you hear it now than discover it in year two.

Over twelve months, I have 1,162 pages that exist to sell something. Between them they got 4,581 clicks from search. That's about four clicks per page per year, and the average page sits on the third or fourth page of Google.

I've been doing this since 2009 and I know what I'm doing. Most of my commercial pages produce approximately nothing.

The lesson isn't that this doesn't work. It's that **the bottleneck is not how much you publish**. A page at position 30 earns exactly what a page at position 90 earns, which is zero. The only difference is how much of your life you spent on it.

So the question before you write anything is not "will this be good." It's "can this realistically reach the top few results for something someone types with a credit card open, and am I the person who can make that version exist?"

Intent beats volume, decisively

A page with 300 visits a month from people typing a product name plus "review" will out-earn a page with 30,000 visits from people looking for a definition.

The searches that indicate someone is about to spend money:

- "[product] review" and "is [product] worth it"
- "[product X] vs [product Y]"
- "best [category] for [specific situation]"
- "[product] alternatives" and "[product] competitors"
- "[product] pricing" and "how much does [product] cost"

The searches that indicate someone is not: "what is [category]," "how does [thing] work," "[category] explained." These are worth writing about eventually. They are not where you start.

Chapter Checklist

- ☐ Multiply out the revenue equation for a page you're considering, using realistic numbers rather than hopeful ones.
- ☐ Write down which of the four variables is your weakest.
- ☐ List five searches your future readers would type while deciding to spend money.

3

What Changed, and Why the Old Advice Is Wrong

Most affiliate marketing advice you'll find was written for a web that stopped existing about eighteen months ago. Four things happened, and you need to know about them before you take anyone's advice, including the advice in older versions of this guide.

Google raised the cost of publishing empty pages at scale

Two separate policy movements, and the second is the one that matters to you.

Google's **site reputation abuse** policy targets publishing content on someone else's domain to borrow its ranking power. If you're building your own site about your own subject, this isn't aimed at you.

Scaled content abuse is. Google defines it as producing many pages primarily to manipulate search rankings rather than help people. The examples include pages generated, transformed, or stitched together at scale while adding little value. The method is not the point. The purpose and the result are.

Here's the part people get wrong. **This is not a blanket penalty for using AI.** Google's published guidance says appropriate use of AI or automation is not against its rules. Using either one to flood search with low-value pages can be.

First-hand testing is not a formal checkbox in the spam policy. It is, however, one of the clearest ways a review can add information that a specification page and a hundred copied summaries do not have. Use AI where it helps. Do not use it to invent the experience your reader came for.

Amazon rewrote the deal

Effective 14 April 2026, and it matters if you were planning to start with Amazon, which most beginners do.

A new 180-day fulfilment limit requires a purchased product to be shipped, streamed, or downloaded and paid for within 180 days of the *purchase*. It does not turn the normal referral window into 180 days. The standard session still ends after 24 hours, or sooner under the conditions in the current policy, while an item added to the cart during that session can still qualify when ordered within 89 days.

Paid ads linking to Amazon are disqualified. That is broader than the old prohibited-keyword rule. It is not a ban on buying traffic to your own useful page and letting the reader choose to click an Amazon link there. What you cannot do is make the advertisement itself the referral link, including through an automatic redirect.

Content requirements became more explicit. If your original content uses third-party material, Amazon now requires significant "commentary, analysis, or transformation" that adds value. The public clause does not create a special ban on AI-written text. Scraping or lightly rewriting product copy was a bad strategy before this wording appeared and remains one now.

One easily misread change applies to Amazon's onsite creator program. Onsite commission now applies only to a Direct Qualifying Purchase of the same ASIN variant as the linked product detail page. That is not a rewrite of ordinary offsite Associates attribution.

Amazon can change category rates and promotions separately. Check the rate card in your own account rather than accepting a book, screenshot, or social post as current.

What that means for you as a beginner: **Amazon is a fine place to put a link to a specific cheap item you actually use. It is no longer a business model.**

People started asking AI what to buy

AI answer engines now answer a visible share of commercial and informational questions. The referral traffic is still small on most sites, and its conversion rate varies too much by audience to borrow from a market-wide study.

For you this is two things at once. If you write content that explains what things are, an assistant now answers that and your reader never arrives. If you write content containing information nobody else has, assistants cite you, and being cited puts you in front of a buyer at the moment of decision.

One practical note: being cited by one assistant tells you little about another. They retrieve, rank, and cite sources differently, so measure each one separately.

Machines started buying things

The newest and least settled. ChatGPT's Instant Checkout launched in late 2025 and Google announced a competing protocol in January 2026. An AI assistant can now complete a purchase inside the conversation.

Nobody has answered the question of who gets paid when the machine does the buying and there's no click. I don't know how it resolves, and neither does anyone selling you a course about it.

The one thread through all four

Google targets scaled pages made for ranking rather than readers. Amazon requires added value when third-party material is used. AI engines need sources with useful information. Agentic systems will need to consult somebody.

Four different systems, one practical advantage: original judgment is harder to replace than a rewritten specification sheet. First-hand use is the strongest way to produce it when you're reviewing a product.

> *The platforms didn't conspire to make life harder for affiliates. They independently started filtering for the thing that always separated a good affiliate from a bad one.*

> *For the first time in this industry, the durable strategy and the honest one are the same strategy.*

Chapter Checklist

- ☐ Read Amazon's current policy and change notice before relying on any summary, including this one.
- ☐ Plan to write about products you can actually get your hands on.
- ☐ Don't build a business where Amazon is the main source of income.

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Choosing What to Write About

This decision gets made in an afternoon and you live with it for years, so it's worth an afternoon of actual thinking.

The usual advice is a Venn diagram: passion, profit, expertise, pick the overlap. Fine as far as it goes. Here's a version you can act on, with a fourth test that 2026 made non-negotiable.

Four questions

1. Can you develop genuine, testable expertise here? Not "do you like it." Can you get to a position within a year where you know things a diligent outsider couldn't assemble from public sources? That usually means access: you use the products, you work in the industry, or you have a reason to run experiments.

2. Do people spend money making decisions in it? Not "is there search volume." Volume for "what is a VPN" is enormous and worth nothing.

3. Can you be credible to the people who buy? You might know a great deal about a subject and be unable to establish it, because you don't have the photos, the vocabulary, or the standing.

4. Is it AI-durable? The new one, and the one that eliminates a lot of otherwise-sensible choices.

The durability test

Ask this: *for the purchase decisions in this category, is the deciding information something a machine can synthesise from public text, or does it require someone to have done something?*

Low durability example: "best free PDF converters." Every deciding fact is on the vendors' websites. An assistant produces a complete, accurate answer in three seconds. There's no version of your page that beats it, because your page would contain the same facts. This category is finished as an affiliate proposition and it doesn't matter how well you write.

High durability example: "managed hosting for a small agency running forty client sites." The deciding information is what happens under real load, how support behaves at 2am when a migration breaks, and which marketing claims survive contact with actual work. Nobody has written this down. Somebody has to have done it.

> *The durable niches are ones where the deciding information is expensive to produce and cheap to verify. Expensive to produce means a machine can't synthesise it. Cheap to verify means a reader can tell you're not making it up.*

Try it before you commit

The practical version, which takes twenty minutes.

Write down the five questions your future readers would ask before buying. Put each one to an AI assistant. Read the answers honestly.

Then, for each answer, write down what's missing: what would somebody who had actually used these products for a year add? Be specific. "It doesn't mention that the migration tool silently drops custom post types" is the kind of answer you want. "It lacks personal experience" is not.

If you can't fill that column for at least three of the five, this isn't a viable niche in 2026, and it's much better to learn that today than in eighteen months.

If you can fill it, you've just written your first three article briefs, and each of them is a page with a reason to exist.

Getting the size right

Too broad is the classic beginner error, and the one I made for three years. "Technology." "Personal finance." You never build authority on anything, every article competes with a specialist, and there's no reason for anyone to come back.

Too narrow is rarer and more frustrating: you do everything right and there simply isn't enough demand.

The right size has a specific property: **you could plausibly become one of the five most useful sources in the world on it within two years, and those five sources are collectively serving enough purchase decisions to support you.**

That scales with what you'll actually put in. Pick the size that matches your real hours, not your hoped-for ones.

Describe it as a person, not a subject

The single most useful move: write your niche as a sentence containing a human being.

Not "WordPress." Not even "WordPress hosting." Instead: "small agencies running client WordPress sites who need staging and per-site backups without hiring an operations person."

That sentence tells you what to write, who to write it for, which products fit, and what evidence you need. The word "WordPress" tells you none of those things.

Chapter Checklist

- ☐ Write your niche as a sentence with a person in it.
- ☐ Ask an assistant the five main buying questions and read the answers honestly.
- ☐ For each, write what a real user would add. Aim to fill at least three.
- ☐ Check that you can actually get access to the products, and what that will cost you per year.

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Choosing What to Recommend

Beginners join every program they can and mention whatever fits. It's the wrong approach, and not primarily for ethical reasons: every product you add costs you maintenance, dilutes your authority, and most of them will earn nothing.

Aim for five products you know cold. Not fifty you've skimmed.

Four questions, answered before you look at the rate

The order matters. Once you know what something pays, your brain will construct a justification.

Would you recommend this with no commission? If the honest answer is no, stop here.

Have you actually used it, the way your readers will? Not a trial. Not a demo. Used, on real work, for a meaningful period, in the configuration your readers will use.

What do real users say where the company can't moderate? Support forums, subreddits, one-star reviews. You're looking for the pattern in complaints. Every product has them; what matters is whether they're about the thing being hard or the company being dishonest.

Would you be embarrassed if it failed for a reader? Imagine the email in six months: "I bought this because of you, and here's what happened." If any version of your reply starts with an excuse, the product is out.

WATCH OUT

There is no commission rate that compensates for failing one of those. Set that rule now, while it's abstract, because you will not reason your way to the right answer during a quiet month with an attractive offer in front of you.

Then the money

Recurring beats one-time by more than it looks. A $60 one-time commission against $8 a month sounds close. If the customer stays twenty months, the recurring one is worth $160. If they stay ten, it's $80. So ask the program: what's your average customer lifetime? It's a normal question and the answer changes the decision. A program that won't tell you has told you something.

Watch for capped recurring. "Recurring for 12 months" is a one-time commission with worse cash flow.

The window matters as much as the rate. A 40 percent commission with a 24-hour cookie can pay less than 15 percent with 90 days, depending on how long your readers take to decide.

Price point. Cheap products convert well and pay nothing. Expensive ones pay well and convert rarely. For most beginners the workable range is products between roughly $50 and $500, or subscriptions between $20 and $100 a month: considered enough that people research, cheap enough to decide in one sitting.

One main pick per category

For each category in your niche, recommend one thing. Not three.

This feels less helpful and it's the opposite. A reader arrived with a decision to make; handing them five options with pros and cons hands the decision back. What you're selling is judgment, and judgment means picking.

It also converts better, because the reader doesn't have to do secondary research to break the tie.

Add an alternative only when there's a specific, statable condition under which your main pick is wrong. "If you're on a Mac and need native builds, use X instead." That's a decision tree with a default, not a list.

Two things that go in regardless

The best free option. Every category has one and a lot of your readers should use it. Leaving it out is the most visible way to look like you're only in this for the commission, and readers spot it instantly.

The best product with no affiliate program. If it's the right answer, it goes in, named, linked to its own site.

You will lose money on that second rule. You'll lose much more by being the kind of site where the right answer can't appear.

> *If you've never recommended against something you'd have earned well from, you've never given anyone a reason to believe you would. That's the single strongest trust signal available and it's free.*

Where the programs are

Briefly, as of mid-2026:

Awin (which absorbed ShareASale) for consumer and retail products. The widest catalogue for independent publishers.

PartnerStack for business software. The best recurring commissions in this business live here.

impact.com for larger brands, with a stricter approval bar.

CJ Affiliate for major retail and financial brands.

In-house programs for a lot of the best software, hosting, and education products. Better rates because there's no network fee, and no recourse if something goes wrong. Fine when the company is established enough that its reputation is a hostage.

Amazon for cheap physical items inside content you'd have written anyway. See Chapter 3 for why it's no longer a foundation.

Before you apply

Most rejections come from applying too early. Have a site with real content in the subject, an about page with a real person, a privacy policy and a disclosure page, working contact details, and something you can say about traffic.

Then, in the "how will you promote" box, write something specific. "I will write reviews and share on social media" is what everyone writes. This works better:

> I run a site about WordPress performance for small agencies, publishing about two tested comparisons a month, currently around 12,000 monthly organic visits with hosting comparisons as the top pages. I'd be recommending your product in the managed hosting category alongside X and Y.

Apply to three programs you'll actually build around, not thirty.

Chapter Checklist

- ☐ Shortlist five products, maximum.
- ☐ Answer the four quality questions on each before looking at rates.
- ☐ Ask each program for average customer lifetime and refund rate.
- ☐ Identify the best free option and the best non-affiliate option in each category.
- ☐ Get the cookie window and attribution model in writing.

6

Your First Pages

Don't publish thirty pages in your first six months. You have no authority yet, none of them will rank, and you'll have spent the six months manufacturing inventory.

Build one cluster properly instead.

What a cluster is

Take one purchase decision your audience makes, and write everything it requires. For "a small agency choosing where to host client sites," that's roughly:

- A comparison of the realistic options for that specific buyer.
- A review of your main recommendation.
- A review of the strongest alternative.
- A how-to for the problem that starts the search (migrating client sites without downtime).
- A troubleshooting piece for the symptom (client sites timing out because the host oversold the box).
- Something original: a benchmark, a test, a number nobody else has published.

Six pages, all serving one decision, all linked to each other. That's what topical authority looks like from outside, and it's what ranks.

Six connected pages beat thirty unconnected ones, and they're less work to maintain.

The gate before you write anything

One line, written before you start:

What will this page contain that the current top five results don't?

Go and read those five results properly. If you can't answer that line concretely, don't write the page. This single check would have prevented most of my eleven hundred pages at position 36.

The shape of a page that converts

The verdict, in the first 150 words. What you recommend, who it's for, who it isn't for, and your strongest piece of evidence. Four sentences.

This feels wrong if you like building an argument. Override that. A meaningful share of your readers have already done their research and arrived to check one thing against one source. Making them scroll for it taxes exactly the people most likely to buy.

Then the reasoning, ordered by what matters to the decision. Not a product tour. Nobody needs the company's history.

Evidence next to the claim it supports. A screenshot at the bottom of the page proves nothing in particular.

The real price. The tier they'll actually need, the renewal price if it differs, what's excluded, what the add-ons cost. Pricing pages are designed to obscure this, and telling the truth about it is disproportionately valuable.

What goes wrong. Every product has a failure mode. A reader who learns it from you and buys anyway won't resent you. One who learns it afterwards will.

How to reverse it. Refund window, cancellation process, whether the data exports. This is the most under-supplied information in the whole genre and it directly reduces the risk of acting on you.

Clear calls to action. Specific language. "Start the 14-day trial" beats "Learn more," because it says what happens next.

WATCH OUT

> Don't put an affiliate link in your first two paragraphs, and don't put more links in a page than the argument justifies. Both read as extraction rather than recommendation, and readers who feel extracted from don't come back.

Proof: the thing that decides everything

Given Chapter 3, this is the part that matters most, and it's a process rather than an intention.

You cannot add first-hand evidence during editing. You can only capture it while using the product, or not have it. Which means proof is a decision you make weeks before you write.

Open a folder per product before you start using it. Then screenshot and take notes whenever:

- Something surprises you, good or bad.
- Something breaks, or an error appears.
- You have to look up how to do something.
- You see a number: usage, performance, cost, a limit.
- Support does something notably good or bad.
- You catch yourself thinking "that's annoying."

That last one is the highest-yield trigger and the easiest to ignore. The small irritations are exactly what proves you were there, and they vanish from memory within days.

Three cheap tests worth doing

The support test. Send a real question through the normal channel. Record when you sent it, when they replied, and whether the reply solved anything.

The cancellation test. Try to cancel. Note how hard it is and whether your data is exportable. Do this before recommending any subscription. It is remarkable what you learn.

The limits test. Find where it breaks: the row limit, the traffic ceiling, the point where it gets slow. Vendors never publish this and buyers badly want to know.

Three hours per product, and between them they answer the three questions buyers most want answered.

The check before you publish

Point at the thing in this page that could only be here because I used the product.

Not gesture at. Point at: this screenshot, this number, this paragraph.

If you can't, either go and capture it, or use the product properly for a month, or don't publish. There is no fourth option, and the sites that pretended there was are the ones that lost 40 to 90 percent of their traffic in 2026.

Chapter Checklist

- ☐ Pick one purchase decision and list the six pages it needs.
- ☐ For each, write the line about what it adds that the top five don't. Kill the ones you can't answer.
- ☐ Create a proof folder before you start using anything.
- ☐ Run the support, cancellation, and limits tests on your main product.
- ☐ Apply the publication gate to every commercial page.

7

Getting Found

You've written six good pages. Nobody has read them. This is the normal and demoralising middle of the process.

Search, realistically

Search is still the largest source of affiliate revenue and it takes longer than anyone tells you. Assume six to twelve months before your first page reaches a position where people click.

Three things actually matter for a beginner.

Target queries where you can win. "Best WordPress hosting" is a war between funded media companies. "WordPress hosting for an agency running forty client sites" is a query where the person who has actually done that wins. Specific beats broad, and specific converts better anyway.

Read the results before you write. Fifteen minutes on the top five results tells you more than any keyword tool: what type of page ranks, whether they contain first-hand experience, when they were last updated, and what they all miss. That last one is your page's reason to exist.

Build the trust furniture. A real about page with a real person. Author bylines on commercial pages. Working contact information. A privacy policy. A disclosure page. All cheap, all frequently missing, all things Google explicitly looks for on pages that could cost someone money.

Link your pages to each other

The cheapest lever available and the one beginners skip.

Nobody links to a review. External links go to information: your benchmark, your tutorial, the post where you explained something clearly. But your money is on the reviews and comparisons.

Internal links move authority from one to the other. Every supporting page links to the money page, in a sentence, in the body text, where a reader would naturally want it. Not in a footer.

Do this as you publish. Retrofitting it across two hundred pages later is miserable.

AI search

New, small, and worth ten minutes of attention.

AI assistants now handle maybe an eighth of informational searches, and the traffic they send converts unusually well. Whether you get cited depends on properties you control:

Self-contained answers. Each section should open with a sentence that makes sense to someone who read nothing else. "As we saw above, the difference is significant" can't be quoted by anything.

Specifics. Numbers, dates, prices, versions, named conditions. Vague claims are hard to attribute and rarely cited.

Conditions. "X is best for Y" beats "X is best," because the assistant is usually answering a question with constraints in it.

Information nobody else has. If your page restates what the vendor says, there's no reason to cite you over the vendor.

You'll notice these are all things good writing does anyway. That's the pleasant part: there's no separate discipline to learn.

Start the email list now

Before you have anyone to send to. This is the advice people ignore and later wish they hadn't.

Every other channel is rented. Search rankings can be removed by an algorithm update, and were, for a lot of people, in March 2026. Email is the only thing you own.

The lead magnet decides who you get. "Free ebook: 50 Blogging Tips" attracts people who like free things. "The migration checklist I use for client sites, including the five things that break every time" attracts people who are about to migrate a site, which means people who are about to choose a host.

The test: does wanting this thing correlate with being about to spend money?

Send useful things more often than promotional things. Roughly three to four useful emails per promotional one. The useful ones aren't filler; they're where the relationship gets built, and they're what makes the promotional ones land.

Don't send "new post" notifications. It's the lowest-performing email format there is, because it asks the reader to do work for your benefit. If the post is worth their time, put the substance in the email.

One other channel, and only one

You have capacity for search, email, and about one more thing done properly. Two things done properly beats six done badly, because most channels have a floor below which you get nothing at all.

Pick based on where your buyers actually gather, and on whether the content is a by-product of work you're already doing. Recording your screen while you run the Chapter 6 tests produces video from work that's already scheduled. Answering questions in a community your buyers use produces research. Posting article links to social media produces nothing, on any platform, ever.

> *The best second channel is the one that produces content as a by-product of something you'd do anyway. Anything requiring a separate production pipeline costs far more than it looks like it does, and that's the cost that kills it in month four.*

Chapter Checklist

- ☐ Target specific, narrow queries rather than broad ones.
- ☐ Read the top five results before writing anything.
- ☐ Add an about page, bylines, contact details, and a disclosure page.
- ☐ Link every supporting page to its money page, in the body text.
- ☐ Start an email list with a lead magnet that selects for buyers.
- ☐ Pick exactly one additional channel and commit to a year.

8

Rules, Disclosure, and Not Getting in Trouble

I'm not a lawyer and this isn't legal advice. It's the operator's summary, so you know what to ask about.

The good news: nearly every rule here reduces to "don't mislead people about your relationships or your experience," which is what you should be doing anyway.

Disclosure

If there's a material connection between you and a product, you must disclose it, clearly, where the endorsement appears. Commission is unambiguously material. So are free products, discounts, and business relationships.

Placement. Near the endorsement, before or at the affiliate link. Not in the footer. Not on a separate page. Not below the fold. A disclosure the reader meets after the link has failed.

Language. Plain. This works:

> I earn a commission if you buy through the links on this page. It doesn't change what you pay, and it doesn't change what I recommend.

This is the standard boilerplate and it's weak:

> This post may contain affiliate links.

"May" is evasive when you know perfectly well. "Affiliate links" is a term a lot of ordinary readers don't reliably understand. And it almost always appears in small grey text at the top of a template, which readers skip.

Prominence. Same size and colour as your body text.

Repetition. Every time the endorsement appears. On a long page with links in several sections, one at the top isn't enough.

WATCH OUT

> Check where your disclosure actually renders on a phone. A line that sits above the fold on a laptop often sits below three other elements on mobile, and mobile is where most of your commercial traffic reads. Take the screenshot; don't assume.

Program requirements are extra, not instead

Amazon specifies required disclosure wording and enforces it. Get the current text from the operating agreement and use it in addition to your own plain-language disclosure, not instead of it.

Other programs increasingly specify language too. Read the terms.

Claims have to be true and supported

Disclosure isn't the only obligation. Objective claims need evidence at the time you make them.

"This made my site four times faster" requires that you measured it, with a method you could describe. "30-day money-back guarantee" has to be true today, not when you wrote it. Prices need a date and a check. If a result was unusual, say it was unusual.

Your proof folder from Chapter 6 is your evidence record. You're already keeping it; the compliance benefit is free.

The AI question

Unsettled, so here's what's clear and what isn't.

Clear: Meta requires advertisers to declare AI-generated ad creative, and New York requires disclosure of AI-generated "synthetic performers" in commercial advertising from June 2026.

Reported but unverified: several industry sources describe an FTC expectation of disclosing AI involvement alongside the paid relationship, with substantial per-incident penalties. I haven't been able to confirm that against a primary FTC source, so I'm not going to repeat the number as fact the way a lot of published content does. Check it yourself before relying on it.

Defensible regardless: never present machine-generated content as first-hand experience. That's not a new rule about AI. It's the existing rule that an endorsement must reflect your actual experience. If you write "I tested this" about something you didn't test, who typed the sentence is irrelevant.

Data and email

If you collect email addresses or run analytics, you have obligations under GDPR, CCPA, and their equivalents.

The minimum: a privacy policy that describes what actually happens, real opt-in rather than pre-checked boxes, one-click unsubscribe honoured immediately, and cookie consent where required. Note that your affiliate links usually set third-party cookies, and in consent-required jurisdictions that needs covering too.

Sectors where you need real advice

Financial products, insurance, health, legal services, and anything involving children have specific rules a general summary can't cover, and the penalties aren't the kind you learn from. If your niche is one of these, get actual advice before you publish.

> *Every obligation here is satisfied as a side effect of doing the work honestly and writing down what you did. There's no separate compliance system to build, only the habit of recording evidence you should be gathering anyway.*

Chapter Checklist

- ☐ Put a plain-language disclosure before the first affiliate link on every page.
- ☐ Check its rendered position on a phone.
- ☐ Get Amazon's current required wording if you're in that program.
- ☐ Confirm every objective claim on your site is backed by evidence you hold.
- ☐ Write a privacy policy that describes what actually happens.
- ☐ Make unsubscribe one click and immediate.

9

The First-Year Mistakes, and What to Do This Week

Every mistake here is one I made or watched someone make closely enough to know how it ends.

The eight that cost the most

Publishing volume into an empty site. Thirty money pages in six months, before you have any authority, so none of them rank. Build one cluster completely instead.

Writing about products you haven't used. The one this whole guide argues against. It was always worthless and it's now actively dangerous, because the platforms test for it.

Targeting informational keywords. Then being surprised the traffic doesn't buy. Volume is not intent.

Refusing to recommend. Ending with "it depends on your needs." The reader came for judgment. Handing the decision back is a failure to deliver the thing they came for.

Pasting raw affiliate URLs. Put every affiliate destination behind a link on your own domain, from day one. The first time a merchant restructures their URLs you'll be editing forty posts by hand, and when a program closes you won't be able to find every mention.

Not setting up sub-IDs. Nearly every program lets you append a tracking parameter identifying the source page. It isn't retroactive. Every month without it is a month of revenue you can never attribute to a page.

No email list. Started too late, by everyone, always.

Quitting at month nine. The single most common ending. The timeline is eighteen months to two years, and month nine feels like proof it doesn't work while looking identical to month nine of something that does.

What a realistic first year looks like

So you can tell whether you're on track or actually failing.

Months 1–3. One cluster: five to eight pages, all with first-hand evidence. About page, disclosure, contact, bylines. Link manager and sub-IDs set up before your first link. Revenue: zero.

Months 4–6. Second cluster. Pages start appearing in search results, mostly at positions nobody sees. Email list started. First commissions, in the range where you'll be tempted to conclude it doesn't work. Revenue: nothing to a few tens of dollars a month.

Months 7–9. A few pages reach the second half of the first page of results. This is the first real signal, and it'll come from one or two pages rather than from the average. Revenue: perhaps a hundred a month, very unevenly.

Months 10–12. One page crosses into positions where clicks actually happen, and it probably produces more than everything else combined. Revenue: low hundreds a month, if things went well.

That's a year of consistent work for an outcome most people would find disappointing, and it is a completely normal trajectory. I'm printing it because the alternative timeline, the one in the marketing, is what makes people quit at month nine while doing everything right.

What to do this week

Concretely, in order. This is the whole guide compressed into actions.

1. Write your niche as a sentence with a person in it.
2. Put your five main buying questions to an AI assistant and write down what a real user would add to each answer. If you can't fill three of them, pick a different niche now.
3. Shortlist five products, and answer the four quality questions on each before looking at commission rates.
4. Set up a link manager and route every affiliate link through your own domain.
5. Configure sub-IDs on every program that supports them.
6. Create a proof folder for your main product and start capturing before you write anything.
7. Write one page brief, including the line about what it adds that the current top five results don't.
8. Set up the email list and a lead magnet that selects for buyers.
9. Add the about page, disclosure, and contact details.
10. Put a date in your calendar eighteen months from now, and decide in advance that you're not evaluating this before then.

The thing that doesn't change

Everything in Chapter 3 changed in the last eighteen months, and something else will change next year. Underneath all of it, one thing has held since 2009.

Somebody has a decision to make and not enough information. If you can genuinely help them make it well, there's a business in that. The mechanism by which you get paid for it is an implementation detail that has already changed several times.

Every enforcement action and policy update in this guide is a platform trying to work out who is actually doing that and who is imitating the shape of it. They keep getting better at telling the difference. That's inconvenient if you were imitating, and it's straightforwardly good news if you weren't.

> *Be genuinely useful to people spending money, prove it, and stay findable. That's been the whole job for seventeen years. Everything else is the current implementation, and it'll be out of date again before you know it.*

This works if you treat it as a long project with people at the other end of it. It doesn't work as a scheme. It never has, and 2026 has made that unusually literal.

Chapter Checklist

- ☐ Work through the ten actions above this week.
- ☐ Write down the date eighteen months from now and what you'd need to see by then.
- ☐ Decide, in advance, that you won't evaluate before that date.

Where to Go Next

This guide covers the ground. If you want the full treatment, it's in *The Affiliate Bloggers System*, which is the same material at about eight times the length, with my own twelve months of performance data in it, including the numbers that undercut the argument I'm being paid to make.

What's in the longer book that isn't here:

- The full trust equation, and how to diagnose which part of it your pages are failing.
- Amazon after the April 2026 reset, in detail, including when it still makes sense.
- Where AI belongs in the workflow and where it will quietly ruin you, with the actual prompts.
- Proof and evidence capture as a production discipline.
- Winning AI search, at the passage level.
- Tracking and attribution, including how to measure what your programs are losing.
- How to make pages you already have earn, which is where most of the return is.
- Agentic commerce, and what to do while nobody knows how it resolves.
- Templates, checklists, a network directory, and a glossary.

Available at gauravtiwari.org.

A Note on the Numbers

The performance figures in this guide come from one of my own sites, from its Search Console data for 1 July 2025 to 22 July 2026, with legacy streaming and gambling pages excluded from every cut. Those pages carry large traffic, have nothing to do with affiliate publishing, and would have flattered every number here.

Platform policies were current in July 2026. Amazon has revised its operating agreement twice in eighteen months. Check the primary source before you build on any of it.

Two claims are flagged in the text as secondary-sourced and unverified: the FTC penalty figure and the AI-disclosure framing in Chapter 8. Treat both as directional.

About the Author

Gaurav Tiwari has been building on the web since 2008 and publishing affiliate content since 2009, when a shared hosting company paid him sixty-five dollars and gave him a completely wrong idea about how quickly this would work.

He is a WordPress core contributor, the founder of Gatilab, and the author of several books on writing, research, and the technical craft of publishing. He has an M.Sc. in Mathematics and taught competitive-exam students before he built websites, which is why this guide explains things in the order you need them rather than the order they happened.

He writes at gauravtiwari.org.

If this guide was useful, send it to someone who's stuck where you were. That's the only thing I'd ask.