How the founder built Puff Count into a $40K/month exit

A no-code quit-vaping app that turned organic TikTok into a one-million-user business and a clean exit

Dated June 7, 2026 · Consumer mobile · United States · Stripe · puffcount.com

TL;DR

One founder with zero coding skills mined viral TikTok formats to acquire a million users for a $40K/month subscription app, then sold it to a consumer-app studio.

MRR AT EXIT	DOWNLOADS	LIFETIME USERS	PUFFS LOGGED
~$40K / mo	800K+	1M+ *	~99M
APP STORE RATING	**PAYWALL CONVERSION**	**INITIAL BUILD COST**	**EXIT**
4.3 / 5	20-25%	< $5K	Late 2024

** Per the broker case study (1M+ lifetime users); the App Store listing and the founder cite 800K+ downloads. Figures are founder- or broker-reported and not independently audited.*

Executive Summary

The conventional wisdom says you need to be a technical founder to build a software business. Puff Count is the counterexample that should reset that prior. The founder wrote no code, designed nothing, and ran the company as a near-solo operator with a fully outsourced team. The product, an iOS app that tracks vape puffs and nicotine intake to help users taper toward quitting, reached roughly $40,000 in monthly recurring revenue at scale (the broker's case study cites more than one million lifetime users; the App Store listing and the founder's exit announcement cite more than 800,000 downloads) before a brokered exit to a consumer-app studio in late 2024.[1]

The load-bearing claim of this playbook: **distribution, not code, was the entire game, and the founder treated marketing as 95% of the work.** That is a direct quote from the founder, and the company's history validates it. For the first four to six months Puff Count earned essentially zero revenue. Nothing about the product changed when revenue arrived. What changed was that the founder cracked organic TikTok, reverse-engineering already-viral vaping content into entertainment-first videos with a two-second call to action at the end. One video reached 8.3 million views and drove tens of thousands of downloads on its own.[2]

The numbers that frame the rest of this teardown, with their sourcing stated plainly: approximately $40K MRR at exit (independently reported by multiple maker-economics profiles); self-reported scale figures of 800,000-plus downloads and, per the broker, 1M-plus lifetime users (note that these come from different surfaces and bases and are not reconcilable to a single audited count); roughly 99 million puffs logged on the company's own in-app counter; a 4.3 out of 5 App Store rating across about 2,400 to 2,500 reviews; a hard-paywall conversion rate the founder put at 20% to 25%; and a sub-$5,000 cost to build the first version.[3] The app launched into the aftermath of the 2019 to 2020 United States youth-vaping epidemic, when 27.5% of high school students reported current e-cigarette use and a young, smartphone-native audience was actively looking for a way out.[4]

> **The core lever.** A non-technical founder can out-distribute technical competitors by treating content as a research-and-replication discipline, not an art. Puff Count won on the strength of one repeatable insight: study what is already viral in your category, recreate the format, and bury the pitch in the last two seconds.

This is also a story with honest blemishes. The same hard paywall that drove conversion is the single largest source of negative reviews, and third-party analytics describe the post-acquisition app as struggling on retention.[5] The youth-vaping market that powered the launch has been shrinking since 2019.[4] Read this as a distribution-and-exit playbook, not a product-love story. The replicable assets are the TikTok engine, the outsourced operating model, and the disciplined, fit-driven sale.

Part 1: The Product

A quit-vaping app launching in the early 2020s was entering a category that already existed and mostly failed to grow. The reason most cessation tools stall is that they ask the user to do something hard (stop) before they have done something easy (notice). Puff Count inverted that order, and the inversion is the whole product.

The shift was to make the core action a single tap. Every time the user takes a puff, they tap a large on-screen counter. That one mechanic produces the daily, weekly, and monthly usage graphs, the nicotine-intake estimates (computed from World Health Organization and smokefree.gov reference data), the trigger recognition, and the adaptive daily limits that taper a user toward a chosen quit date.[6] The positioning is explicitly anti-cold-turkey, marketed as a "proven-to-work" gradual-reduction plan rather than a willpower test. A built-in social feature, "Quit with your Friends" or "Quit Buddies," lets users connect and track each other's progress, which doubles as a retention loop and a word-of-mouth channel.[7]

The build itself is the most replicable part of the product story. It is iOS-only, built in React Native, and runs on iPhone with extended compatibility to Mac and Vision hardware, but with no native Android or web app.[8] The first version cost under $5,000: user interface via 99designs contests where designers submitted competing mockups, and development via Upwork contractors (the founder preferred Eastern European developers, paid per project rather than hourly to cap the budget).[9] The monetization stack was equally off-the-shelf: Superwall for paywall configuration and price A/B testing, RevenueCat for subscription analytics, AppsFlyer to attribute installs back to ad creative, and Mixpanel plus Amplitude for in-app

behavior.[10]

Monetization is freemium with an auto-renewing subscription, and the pricing has moved over time. A 2024 snapshot showed $3.99 per month, $23.99 per year, and a $74.99 lifetime tier. By 2026 the App Store SKU list had shifted upward and added short-cycle plans, including a weekly subscription that reviewers cite at roughly $9.99 and annual tiers as high as $59.99 to $89.99.[11] That upward repricing, most of it after the 2024 ownership change, is also the source of the product's clearest weakness: the aggressive paywall and an onboarding flow that hides the subscription cost until after account setup are the top complaints in the review base, and a representative reviewer notes that a free tally-counter app achieves the same outcome.[12] **The product is a commodity mechanic wrapped in superior distribution and conversion design.** That is not an insult. It is the entire thesis. The implication for a founder is that defensibility here never came from the feature set, so any imitator who matches the distribution can match the business, a vulnerability the rest of this playbook returns to.

Part 2: The Founder

The most useful fact about the founder is what they were not: not an engineer, not a designer, not a first-time lucky winner. By the time Puff Count existed, the founder had already cycled through multiple online business models with little success and had built two prior apps, which matters because the Puff Count method was learned, not stumbled into.

The shift in the founder's career was the realization that mobile apps were an under-exploited distribution surface and that the founder's actual skill was marketing, not making. The founder studied advertising and marketing in college, taught themselves the rest, and is explicit about the division of labor: "I don't design anything. I don't develop anything. I just have the idea and I know how to put a team together."[13] Puff Count was built in a college dorm room during the founder's junior year, after the founder and their friends got hooked on vaping and the founder recognized the damage to health and wallet and saw that no tool existed for this specific, newer habit.[14]

The prior apps are the tell. One was an early puzzle game built in high school that went viral. The other was a simple word game named "Wordle" that the founder had shipped years before the unrelated web-based Wordle became a global phenomenon in January 2022. When that web game exploded, the founder's pre-existing app, which had dwindled to one or two downloads a day for roughly four years, suddenly absorbed a windfall of confused inbound traffic, more than 200,000 downloads in a week. Rather than keep the accidental revenue, the founder donated the proceeds, with editorial reporting documenting a $50,000 gift to an Oakland tutoring nonprofit.[15] That episode taught the founder, in the most vivid way possible, how much latent distribution a mobile app can capture when attention aligns with it. Puff Count was the deliberate attempt to manufacture that alignment instead of waiting for it.

The exit closes the arc. Roughly four years after building the app, the founder engaged a brokerage to sell it, with two stated goals: move quickly, and preserve the app's positive impact. The reason was a reallocation of attention to a new business-to-business startup. The deal was structured to be seller-light, with the broker running diligence so the founder could keep building the next thing.[16] The implication for readers is a specific,

unsentimental model of founder identity: the founder treated the app as an asset to be built cheaply, grown through a repeatable channel, and sold when attention was better spent elsewhere, not as a life's work to be defended indefinitely.

Part 3: Market & Strategy

Timing is the part of this story that cannot be replicated on demand, and it deserves to be stated plainly rather than romanticized. Puff Count launched into a market at peak anxiety. In 2019, 27.5% of US high school students and 10.5% of middle schoolers reported current e-cigarette use, and the EVALI lung-injury outbreak reached 2,602 hospitalized cases and 57 deaths by early January 2020.[17] A large, young, smartphone-native population was being told, loudly and from every direction, that it had a problem.

The strategic shift was to compete on distribution and user experience rather than clinical authority. The vaping-cessation category was already crowded with apps pursuing different philosophies: evidence-based behavioral-science programs, clinically-positioned multi-day courses claiming millions of users, daily-pledge sobriety loops, and community-driven trackers.[18] The published evidence base for the entire category is thin, and independent reviews have assessed these apps as a group and found limited proof of efficacy.[19] Puff Count did not try to win that fight. It won by being the simplest possible mechanic (tap to count, watch the number fall) attached to the lowest-cost acquisition channel available, organic short-form video aimed precisely at the demographic that was both vaping and living on TikTok.

The honest counterweight is that the addressable market has been contracting. By 2024, current youth e-cigarette use had fallen to 1.63 million students, or 5.9%, down from 7.7% the prior year and far below the 2019 peak.[20] That decline is good for public health and ambiguous for the business: it tightens the core US youth funnel even as young adults and international users remain. **A founder copying this playbook should treat category timing as a depreciating asset and plan the exit accordingly, which is, notably, what this founder did.** The prediction that follows: any quit-vaping app relying primarily on US youth demand should expect its cheapest organic-acquisition window to keep narrowing through 2027 as both prevalence and platform novelty decline, making an earlier sale worth more than a later one.

Part 4: Growth & Financials

Most app post-mortems bury the growth engine in vague talk about going viral. Puff Count is valuable precisely because the founder described the engine as a procedure, and the procedure is the asset.

The shift that turned a zero-revenue hobby into a $40K/month business was a repeatable content-research loop, not a single lucky hit. The founder's documented method: search the category term on TikTok, save every most-viral video into a spreadsheet, and dissect each one for its hook, its value, and how it was shot. Then recreate the winning formats with original footage, keeping the video entertainment-first and compressing the pitch into a two-second call to action at the end, because "no one wants to watch a sales video on TikTok."[21] The same signal that validated the market (vape content was already going viral) supplied the

raw material for the content. Validation ran through Sensor Tower and Google Trends to confirm demand, but the founder calls the TikTok virality scan the most important step.[22]

The evidence that this was a system and not an accident sits in the outliers and the cumulative reach. A single video hit 8.3 million views and drove tens of thousands of downloads (a figure stated directly in the founder's documented account). The app's brand TikTok presence is reported in a third-party build analysis at roughly 120,000 followers and more than 50 million cumulative views (those account-level totals are not independently confirmed here), and recurring curiosity formats (taking a vape apart, dropping one in water) were reused deliberately.[23] Paid ads existed but only as an amplifier: the founder put proven-organic creative behind spend rather than guessing, summarized as "if the video does well organically, you can put them on paid ads and click the spend-my-money button."[24] Influencers were tried and de-prioritized as expensive and unaccountable.[25]

Distribution was only half the unlock. The other half was a monetization change the founder describes as transforming the business overnight. Early on, a skippable paywall let users explore first, and most never came back to pay. Switching to a hard, unskippable paywall that forced a free-trial commitment before any feature unlocked pushed conversion to 20% to 25%. An extensive onboarding survey, reported in a third-party build analysis to have been designed with help from a behavioral scientist, front-loads the user's emotional investment (that same analysis puts the majority of subscriptions, on the order of two-thirds, occurring during onboarding, a figure not independently confirmed), and prices were A/B-tested from about $4 up to $12 to find the highest lifetime value.[26] The governing rule was simple: as long as customer acquisition cost stays below lifetime value, spend.[27]

The financial shape at exit: approximately $40,000-plus MRR; self-reported scale of 800,000-plus downloads and, per the broker, 1M-plus lifetime users; about 99 million puffs on the company's own counter; a 4.3 out of 5 rating across roughly 2,400 to 2,500 reviews. The operation ran on a fully outsourced team with low fixed cost, which is why a $40K/month topline supported an attractive sale.[28] The exit itself was brokered: per the broker's case study the app was listed three separate times before the right buyer landed, a Paris-based consumer-app studio that had pivoted from gaming into utility apps and had raised €4.5 million (the raise and the gaming-to-consumer pivot are independently confirmed in French trade press).[29] The sale price and multiple are not publicly disclosed; the broker and the founder both characterize the eventual multiple as exceeding the earlier rounds, a self-reported claim from the parties to the sale.[29] The implication for founders: the conversion lever (hard paywall plus invested onboarding) was worth more to enterprise value than any feature, and patience on the sell side (three listings, not a fire sale) captured a higher multiple.

> **The near-death number.** For four to six months Puff Count made essentially nothing, and the founder says only in the last six or seven months of a four-year life did the app produce strong monthly revenue. The lesson is not "be patient" in the abstract. It is that the product was finished long before the distribution worked, and the founder kept iterating on channel and paywall rather than on features.

A caveat that belongs in the financials, not buried elsewhere: the third-party download estimates for recent months (on the order of a couple thousand downloads per month) reflect a post-peak app, and post-acquisition

analytics flag paywall-driven churn.[30] The aggressive monetization that maximized near-term MRR appears to have traded against long-term retention and sentiment. That tension is real, and a buyer paying a multiple of current MRR inherits it.

Part 5: The Replicable Playbook

Strip away the specifics of vaping and a clean, transferable operating manual remains. Here is what a non-technical founder can actually steal.

1. Pick a category where the audience is already creating viral content about the problem. Puff Count did not create demand for anti-vaping content. It noticed that vape videos were already exploding on TikTok and treated that as both market validation and a content supply chain.[31] The replicable test: before building, confirm your target users are already producing and consuming viral short-form video about their pain.

2. Treat content as research and replication, not inspiration. The single most copyable artifact in this story is the spreadsheet of viral category videos, decomposed into hook, value, and shooting style, then recreated with original footage. Entertainment first, a two-second call to action last.[32]

3. Build cheap and outsource everything you cannot do. A sub-$5,000 MVP via 99designs (design) and Upwork (development), a React Native codebase, and an off-the-shelf monetization stack (Superwall, RevenueCat, AppsFlyer, Mixpanel, Amplitude) mean the founder never needed to write code or raise money.[33] The constraint forces focus: with no engineering team to feed, the founder's only job was distribution and conversion.

4. Make the core action a single tap, then sell the insight back to the user. The product's job was to make an invisible habit visible. One tap produces the data; the data produces the motivation; the motivation produces the subscription. Low product surface area, high behavioral payload.[34]

5. Use a hard paywall behind an emotionally invested onboarding. The largest single revenue unlock was not a feature but a flow: force a free-trial commitment before any value, after an onboarding that makes the user articulate their problem. That moved conversion to 20% to 25% and put roughly 65% of subscriptions in onboarding.[35] Read the counterweight too: that same flow is the top driver of negative reviews, so this lever trades retention and goodwill for conversion.[36]

6. Run paid only behind proven organic. Do not gamble on cold creative. Let organic performance pick the winners, then amplify them with spend, governed by the single rule that acquisition cost must stay under lifetime value.[37]

7. Sell when your attention is worth more elsewhere, and be patient on the multiple. The founder treated the app as an asset, not an identity: listed it three times, waited for a strategic buyer who valued the niche, preserved the mission in the deal, and redeployed to a new venture.[38]

> **The honest asterisk.** This playbook reproduces a distribution and monetization machine, not a durable moat. The mechanic was commoditized, the market is shrinking, and the monetization that maximized sale price strained retention. The right way to copy Puff Count is to copy the engine and the exit discipline, then point them at a category whose timing is still on the way up rather than past its peak.

The strongest counterargument to this entire playbook is that it is survivorship bias dressed as method: thousands of founders run TikTok formats and never reach $40K MRR, and the founder also happened to carry rare prior pattern recognition from an accidental viral windfall. That is fair, and it is why the falsifiable claim here is narrow rather than grand. A non-technical founder who (a) enters a category with pre-existing viral short-form content, (b) ships a single-tap MVP for under $5,000, and (c) puts a hard paywall behind an invested onboarding should be able to reach positive unit economics (acquisition cost below lifetime value) without raising capital. The prediction: that combination, executed in a category with rising rather than falling demand, produces a sellable cash-flowing app within 18 to 24 months. Puff Count is one confirming instance, not proof. It is, however, a uniquely well-documented one.

Notes

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