

YOUR FIRST SALE • CASE STUDY

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# From Cubicle to Consultant

How a Burned-Out Project Manager Found Her First Nonprofit Client in 13 Days

Service Business

Protagonist: Dana Whitfield

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# The Background

Dana Whitfield had spent eleven years managing complex IT rollouts for a midsize insurance company in Columbus, Ohio. She was good at her job — really good. She'd earned two promotions, a corner-adjacent desk, and a reputation as the person who could untangle any stalled project. But by her thirty-eighth birthday, the Sunday-night dread had turned into an all-week companion. She wasn't burned out on the work itself; she was burned out on what the work was for. Spreadsheets tracking claims-processing software upgrades didn't exactly light a fire in her chest.

Outside the office, Dana volunteered with a local food bank, helping them organize a capital campaign. She noticed something that surprised her: the food bank's executive director and two-person staff were drowning in projects — a database migration, a new volunteer portal, a grant-funded community kitchen buildout — but had zero project management structure. They ran everything off sticky notes, group texts, and sheer willpower. When Dana casually set up a shared task board and a simple timeline for the kitchen project, the director nearly cried with relief.

That moment stuck with Dana. She started wondering: how many small nonprofits were in the same boat? They had the mission, the passion, and often the funding — but nobody to keep the trains running on time. She didn't want to build an agency or hire a team. She just wanted to use her skills for organizations she actually cared about, and she wanted to see if anyone would pay her for it.

## Finding the Idea

Dana's idea didn't arrive in a flash of inspiration. It crept up on her over weeks of paying attention. She used what The \$100 Startup calls the convergence test — looking for the intersection of what she was good at (project management), what she enjoyed (working with mission-driven organizations), and what people would actually pay for (getting their stalled projects unstuck). All three circles overlapped in one place: freelance project management consulting for small nonprofits.

She spent one evening sketching out what she could offer. Not a vague 'consulting' service — she'd seen too many consultants deliver binders full of recommendations that gathered dust. Instead, she'd offer something concrete: a four-week 'Project Rescue' engagement where she'd come in, assess a stalled or chaotic project, build a clear plan and timeline, set up lightweight tools, and coach the team through the first two milestones. It was a 'give them the fish' approach — she wouldn't just advise, she'd actually roll up her sleeves and get the project moving.

The beauty of it was that she didn't need to learn anything new. She already had the skills. She didn't need expensive software — free tiers of project management tools would work fine. She didn't need an office. She just needed a way to find her first client and prove the concept before

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she did anything dramatic like quit her day job.

## Finding Customers

Dana knew her potential customers weren't browsing freelancer marketplaces. Small nonprofit executive directors were busy people who relied heavily on their networks. So she started where the trust already existed. She made a list of every nonprofit connection she had — her food bank contacts, people she'd met at volunteer events, friends who worked in the nonprofit sector, and her LinkedIn connections at local foundations. The list came to twenty-three people.

She didn't pitch them. Instead, she sent a short, personal email to each one: 'Hey, I'm exploring the idea of helping small nonprofits get stalled projects back on track. I'm curious — is project management something your organization struggles with? Would you be open to a 15-minute conversation so I can learn about your challenges?' Eleven people responded. Eight agreed to a call. Those conversations were gold. Dana heard the same pain points over and over: grant deliverables falling behind schedule, technology upgrades that dragged on for months, event planning that devolved into chaos. Three of the eight said some version of 'If you offered this, I'd hire you tomorrow.'

Dana also discovered something she hadn't expected: two of her contacts forwarded her email to other executive directors they knew. Without even asking, her list grew from twenty-three to thirty-one. She wasn't marketing. She was having conversations. And the conversations were doing the selling for her.

## Building the Offer

Armed with what she'd learned from those eight conversations, Dana sat down to build her actual offer. She resisted the urge to create a massive menu of services. Instead, she followed the one-page business plan approach — keeping everything simple enough to explain in sixty seconds. Her offer was a single package: the 'Project Rescue' engagement. Four weeks. One stalled project. A clear outcome: the project would be unstuck and the team would have a system to keep it moving after she left.

She defined exactly what was included: an initial two-hour assessment meeting, a written project plan with timeline and milestones, setup of a free project management tool (she chose Trello for its simplicity), weekly one-hour check-in calls, and unlimited email support for the four weeks. She also defined what wasn't included — she wasn't going to do the project work itself, manage staff, or handle anything outside the one project scope. Setting boundaries early felt uncomfortable, but

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she knew from her corporate life that scope creep was the enemy of actually getting things done.

For her startup costs, she bought a domain name (\$12 on Namecheap) and ordered 250 simple business cards from Vistaprint (\$28 with shipping). She also signed up for a free Calendly account so people could book those 15-minute discovery calls without the back-and-forth of email scheduling. Total investment: \$40. She briefly considered building a website but decided it could wait. Her LinkedIn profile was strong enough for now, and she updated her headline to read 'Project Management Consultant for Nonprofits.'

## Pricing

Pricing was the hardest part. Dana's corporate salary worked out to about \$45 per hour, and her first instinct was to charge something similar. But then she thought about it differently — the way The \$100 Startup suggests — by focusing on the value to the client, not the time she'd spend. A nonprofit with a \$50,000 grant-funded project that was three months behind schedule risked losing the grant entirely. Getting that project back on track wasn't worth \$45 an hour to them. It was worth thousands.

She landed on \$1,500 for the four-week Project Rescue engagement. It was high enough to signal that she was a professional, not a volunteer, but low enough that a small nonprofit could say yes without a board vote. She decided to offer a 'founding client' rate of \$1,200 for her first three clients, which gave her an honest reason to create urgency without being pushy. She also required 50% upfront and 50% at the two-week mark, which meant she'd get paid before the engagement was even finished.

## Going Live

Dana didn't do a big launch. She didn't have a website to launch, a social media campaign to run, or a mailing list to blast. What she had was a clear offer, a fair price, and a list of people who'd already told her they were interested. Her 'brand' was simply her name, her LinkedIn profile, and a two-page PDF that described the Project Rescue service. She spent a Saturday afternoon creating the PDF in Google Docs — nothing fancy, just a clean description of what was included, who it was for, and two testimonial quotes from her food bank volunteer work.

She also wrote a short email template she could personalize for each prospect. It wasn't salesy. It opened with something specific from their earlier conversation ('You mentioned your volunteer database migration has been stalled since March...'), described the Project Rescue service in three bullet points, stated the founding client price, and ended with a simple call to action: 'Would it make

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sense to set up a 30-minute call to see if this is a fit?' No pressure. No countdown timers. No 'limited spots available' language — even though the founding client rate genuinely was limited.

She hit send on the first three emails on a Tuesday morning before work. Then she put her phone in a drawer and tried to focus on her day job. It didn't work — she checked her inbox approximately forty-seven times before lunch.

## First Sales

The first response came in four hours. Rachel, the executive director of a small arts education nonprofit, replied with two sentences: 'This is exactly what we need. Can we talk Thursday?' Dana nearly fell out of her desk chair. The second response came the next morning — a polite 'not right now, but can I keep your info for later?' The third person didn't respond at all, which stung more than Dana expected.

The Thursday call with Rachel lasted forty-five minutes instead of thirty. Rachel's organization had received a \$35,000 grant to build an after-school arts program, but they were four months in and hadn't even secured a venue. The grant timeline gave them two more months before they had to report progress. Rachel was losing sleep over it. Dana walked her through exactly what the four-week engagement would look like, answered her questions, and quoted the \$1,200 founding client rate. Rachel said she needed to check with her board treasurer but thought it would be fine.

Two days later — thirteen days after Dana had first sent her exploratory emails — Rachel sent a signed agreement and a check for \$600 (the 50% deposit). Dana's first sale was made. She sat in her car in the parking lot after work, staring at the deposited check photo on her phone, and allowed herself exactly ninety seconds of disbelief before texting her sister: 'I think I just started a business.'

## The Results

Within the first sixty days, Dana completed two Project Rescue engagements and had a third scheduled. Her total revenue was \$3,900 — \$1,200 from Rachel's founding rate, \$1,200 from a second founding client (a referral from one of her original email recipients), and \$1,500 from her first full-price client. She was doing all of this on evenings and weekends while still working her corporate job. It wasn't sustainable long-term, but it was proof. Real people were paying real money for a service she'd invented at her kitchen table.

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By month four, she'd served six clients, generated \$8,400 in revenue, and had raised her rate to \$1,800 per engagement. Her client acquisition cost was effectively zero — every new client came from referrals or her LinkedIn network. She gave notice at her corporate job at the five-month mark. Her total startup investment never exceeded \$95 (she eventually bought a \$55 website template to go with her domain and business cards). She wasn't getting rich, but she was getting free — and she was doing work that actually mattered to her.

## Key Takeaways

- 1.** You don't need to learn new skills to start a business — Dana used the exact same project management abilities she'd been using for eleven years. The difference was who she used them for and how she packaged them.
- 2.** Conversations beat marketing. Dana's first three clients all came from personal conversations, not ads, social media, or a website. Asking 'What do you struggle with?' is more powerful than saying 'Here's what I sell.'
- 3.** A single, clearly defined offer is easier to sell than a menu of options. 'Four weeks, one project, \$1,500' is a sentence anyone can understand — and repeat to a friend.
- 4.** Price for value, not for time. Dana's hourly rate worked out to roughly \$75-100 per hour — nearly double her corporate salary — because she priced based on what the outcome was worth to the client.
- 5.** Starting on the side reduces risk dramatically. Dana didn't quit her job until she had five months of evidence that people would pay. The side-hustle phase wasn't glamorous, but it was smart.
- 6.** Scope boundaries aren't just operational — they're a selling point. Clients liked knowing exactly what was included and what wasn't. It made the engagement feel professional and safe.

# How This Story Maps to Your 14 Days

Here's how Dana Whitfield's journey illustrates each day of the Your First Sale program.

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- Day 1** Dana's journey began with honest self-reflection — recognizing that her project management skills were genuinely valuable, even though they felt 'ordinary' to her after eleven years.
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- Day 2** The convergence of Dana's skills, her passion for nonprofits, and real market demand created a clear business concept. She didn't force it — she noticed where the three circles overlapped.
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- Day 3** Dana's customer discovery was simple and personal: twenty-three emails asking about pain points, not pitching a solution. Listening came before selling.
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- Day 4** The responses to Dana's outreach revealed a pattern — the same problems kept coming up. She used those patterns to refine who her ideal client was: small nonprofits with grant-funded projects and no PM support.
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- Day 5** Dana built her offer around a specific, tangible outcome ('your stalled project will be unstuck in four weeks') rather than a vague promise of 'consulting help.'
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- Day 6** Her MVP required almost nothing to build — a PDF description, a Calendly link, and an updated LinkedIn headline. She resisted the urge to build a full website before she had a single client.
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- Day 7** By pricing at \$1,500 (and offering a \$1,200 founding rate), Dana anchored to client value rather than her own hourly rate — a mindset shift that doubled her effective earnings.
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- Day 8** Dana's brand was simply her name and her reputation. She didn't need a logo or a color palette — she needed clarity about what she offered and who it was for.
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- Day 9** Her two-page service PDF was her entire 'website.' It was clean, specific, and easy to forward — which turned out to be its most important feature.
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- Day 10** Dana chose not to build a website before her first sale. This saved time and forced her to sell through relationships rather than hiding behind a 'build it and they will come' strategy.
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**Day 11** Her launch was three personalized emails sent on a Tuesday morning. No fanfare, no countdown, no social media blast. Just direct outreach to people who'd already expressed interest.

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**Day 12** Dana's follow-up call with Rachel succeeded because she listened more than she pitched. She asked about the stalled grant project and let Rachel talk through her frustrations before presenting the solution.

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**Day 13** The sale closed thirteen days after Dana first reached out. The key was removing friction — a simple agreement, a clear price, and 50% upfront billing that made it easy for Rachel to say yes.

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**Day 14** Dana's reflection revealed that her biggest asset wasn't her PM skills — it was her willingness to start small, listen carefully, and treat her first client like a partnership rather than a transaction.

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