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Bootstrapping A [Profitable] \$15K/Month Simple Newsletter SaaS With No Experience



Justin Duke



Published: May 25th, 2023

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Justin Duke

Founder, **Buttondown**

\$15K

REVENUE/MO



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FOUNDERS

1

EMPLOYEES

Hello! Who are you and what business did you start?

My name is Justin Duke! I run **Buttondown**, a newsletter software for the rest of us. I started Buttondown five years ago, while I was an engineer at Stripe, and grew it as a side project for many years until it became large enough for me to work on it full-time.

I built it to scratch my itch — all of the other email tools out there were either super-heavy (like Mailchimp or ConvertKit) or wanted to own your entire blogging presence like Medium or Substack. There wasn't anything that just let me drop in a `<form>` tag into my blog and automatically send out emails, so I built something just like that on a hunch that other people shared my use case.



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Today, tens of thousands of customers use Buttdown to power everything from niche blogs about French real estate to YC-backed pre-launch startups. It's been a huge pleasure to see that, contrary to popular opinion, you can dig into a specific use case and build for yourself and see that resonates with others.

What I thought would maybe cap out as a nice little \$1,000/month side project has ballooned into a business that pays my salary and grew over \$1,000/month last month alone!



What's your backstory and how did you come up with the idea?

The worst thing an engineer can say to themselves is “I bet I can build a better version of this in a weekend”....and that's exactly how I started Buttdown because I was sick of using [Tinyletter](#), a very similar product.

I had no experience with sending emails or even running a SaaS, but it seemed like a fun experiment — and of course “one weekend” turned into a month, and then it turned into an entire career.

But I think the fact that I started building it not because I thought it was a smart product but because I wanted to use it was important. There's a lot of room in the world for incremental improvements to things, especially if you're sufficiently opinionated about what those opinions should be.

Take us through the process of building the first version of your product.

Buttdown was very much a nights-and-weekends project for the first few years; it takes a lot of up-front effort to launch a SaaS, especially one in such a competitive space where there are a lot of table stakes.

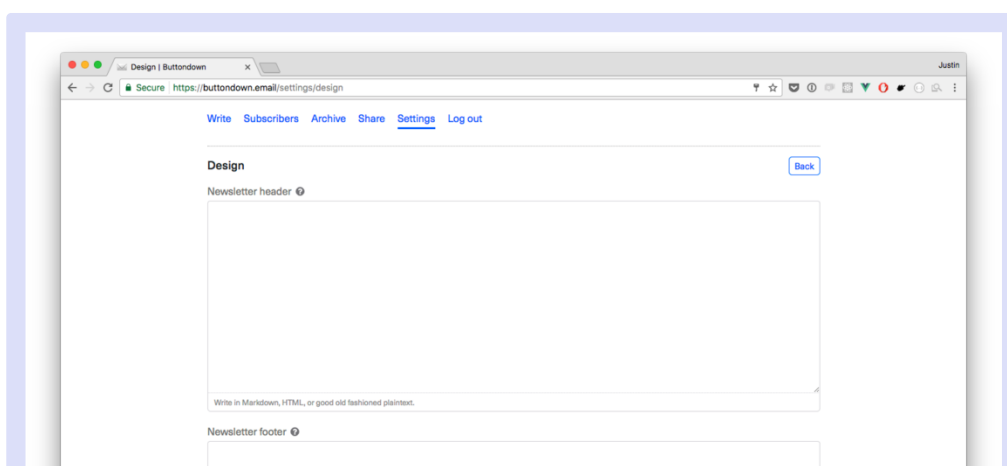
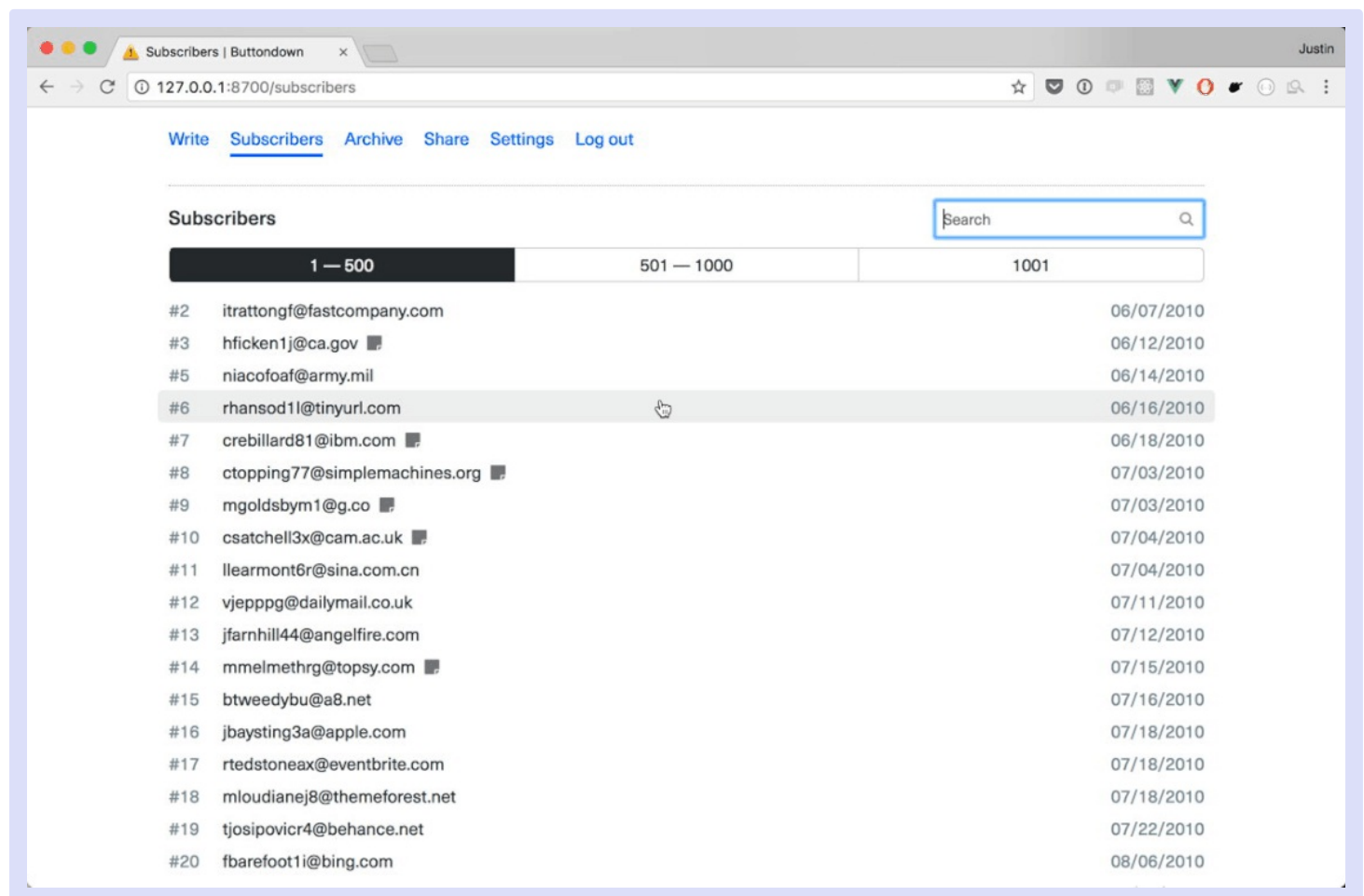
Thankfully, I had a good selection of similar apps to understand what those table stakes were

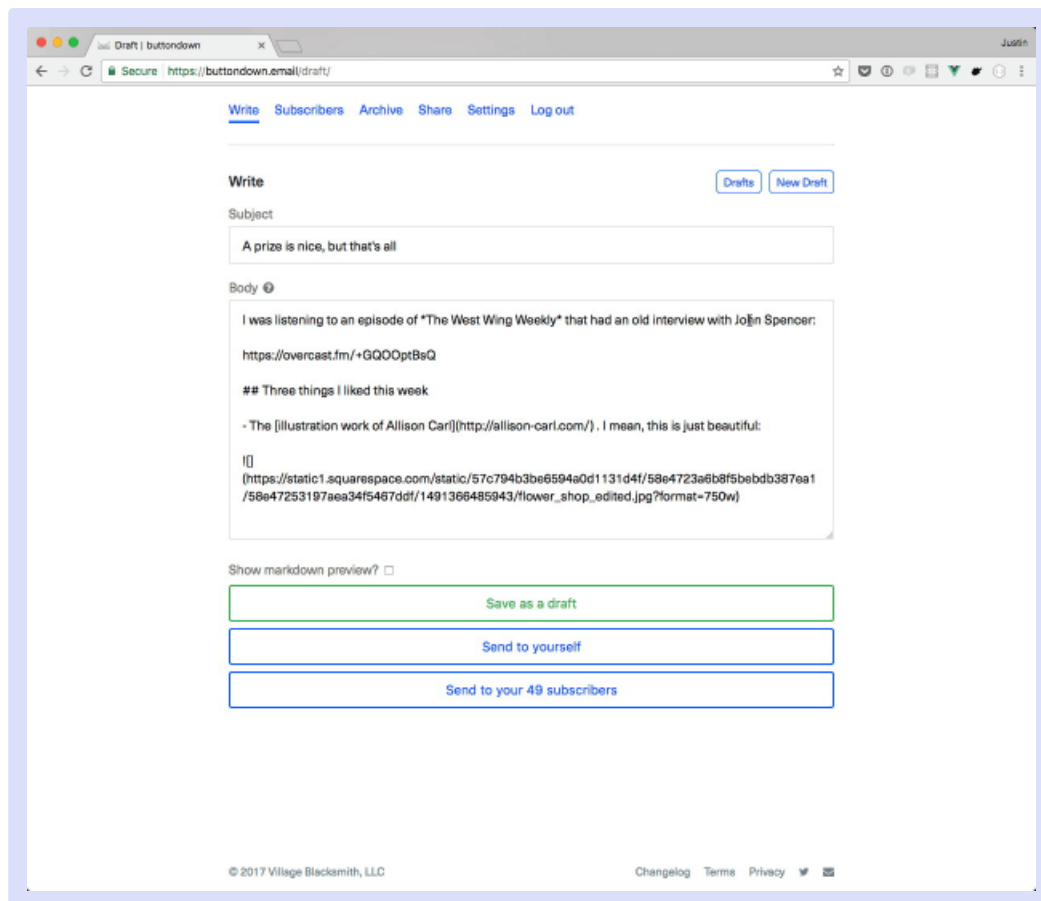
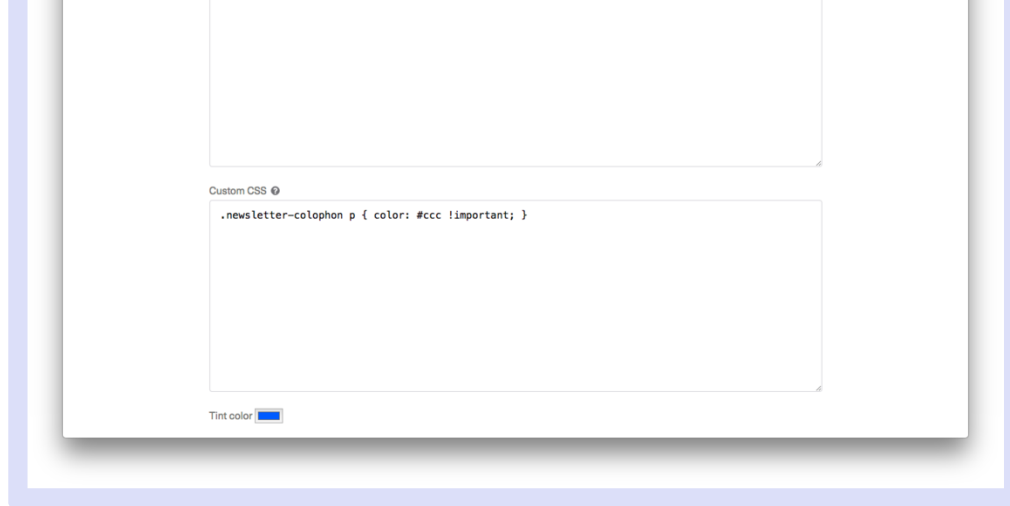
there were a lot of evenings spent in my competitor's workflows to understand what worked well and what worked poorly with their approaches. (This is something I still do!)

Even then, there's a huge swath of decisions you have to make in the early goings of a SaaS: branding and color scheme, technical stack, initial core features, voice, API contracts, the list goes on.

By default — a decision I still try to opt towards — is to do less and to be extremely surgical with what I built. (Two very influential essays for me as an engineer are [Choose Boring Technology](#) and [Build Less](#).) I eschewed flavor-of-the-month frameworks in favor of ones that I was experienced with (Heroku, Django, Vue, Sass); I stuck with system default fonts instead of trying to find the perfect font face.

This is even reflected in the interface! Buttdown's initial interface was very minimalist (see below), with an emphasis on what I cared about most: performance, Markdown, and “getting out of your way”. The app has grown much more powerful and complex since, but I'm still oddly proud of these initial screens even if they represented a much less mature vision.





Describe the process of launching the business.

Before I launched Buttdown, I put a lot of stock into the idea of a “launch” — I felt like I had read a lot about how that was a make-or-break moment and a lot was riding on its success.

The reality was... not quite. I posted on HN and Product Hunt and hit the front page on both, but it wasn't some meteoric success. I got around thirty thousand unique, out of which only came around five hundred registered users and maybe ten paying customers.

I probably could have put a bit more time and consideration into those launches — there's, for instance, a pretty well-worn playbook about launching on PH and coordinating with friends to get upvotes, having a bespoke welcome message, that sort of thing — but I don't think it matters that much in the grand scheme of things. What mattered was getting some traffic & validation and expanding the sphere of visibility outside of the few people who followed me on Twitter.

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...wasn't an overnight success by any means, but it was enough — enough to validate that some people found the messaging and positioning resonant and that I could build on that initial traffic.

“ I get to spend my days building interesting, opinionated software, and being compensated by users who find it valuable enough to pay me.

Since launch, what has worked to attract and retain customers?

I feel like Buttondown is slightly atypical in that it's an inherently viral SaaS: almost every email and hosted web archive has a “powered by Buttondown” CTA in the footer, which means my customers do most of the attraction and retention.

I also honestly haven't figured out any sustainable marketing channels besides the traditional ones: Twitter, blogging, drip emails. I try to be very active and transparent across all three (you'll notice on Buttondown's blog that the tone is extremely playful and casual, which users love), but it took some time to get over what felt like the repetitive nature of marketing: it seems like you can be annoying when you're tweeting, blogging, and emailing the same content, but the reality is that most users ignore all of the channels except one so you're doing a disservice to them by not being repetitive!

How are you doing today and what does the future look like?

We're profitable and growing! I'm paying my salary and that of two part-time freelancers who help me with support and writing.

One of the funny things about organic growth is that all of the coefficients stay the same, but the raw numbers start to get much bigger: Buttondown has grown ~5% MoM almost every month for the past five years, and back in 2019 that was very unsatisfying (a “good month” was getting a single new customer) and now it means a “good month” is adding a thousand or so in MRR.

2023 has been my first year working full-time on the product, and I've got two main goals:

1. Develop a mechanism for reinvesting cash back into the business to accelerate growth.
This quarter I'm experimenting a bit with Google Ads; if that doesn't work, I think there will be more creative options in store.
2. Increase ARPU by moving slightly upmarket, adding support for automation and more workflow-heavy features like that.

Beyond that, the joy of running an independent software business is that I don't have any exogenous pressure to change things — I get to spend my days building interesting, opinionated software, and being compensated by users who find it valuable enough to pay me.

Through starting the business, have you learned anything particularly helpful or advantageous?

The two biggest lessons I've learned are:

The two biggest lessons I've learned are:

1. **Don't get cute with pricing.** When I first launched Buttdown, I had both a usage-based pricing model and a feature-based pricing model; this mapped cleanly onto my unit costs and I thought did a really good job representing the value to users, but people found it confusing and off-putting to the point where I eventually just shifted to a more conventional SaaS pricing model.

(Here's a pro tip: *if customers email you because they don't understand how much they're going to have to pay, it's a bad sign.*)

1. **Agility is a superpower.** The number of customers I've gained just through sheer speed and responsiveness has been a huge surprise to me. I've stolen users from Fortune 500 companies because they are so sick of the rot and friction that exists at companies that think they've won — if you can talk to a customer on Monday and have their feature implemented by Tuesday, you gain so much goodwill it's ridiculous.

What have been the most influential books, podcasts, or other resources?

I think most of my go-to recommendations are somewhat cliché at this point — [Patio11's blog archives](#), [The Mom Test](#), [The Phoenix Project](#), and so on. I would honestly recommend reading and consuming less content as opposed to more: it's hard to separate signal from the noise, and there's just a huge amount of noise in the SaaS space (especially from people who make more money selling their advice than they do apply it.)

Advice for other entrepreneurs who want to get started or are just starting out?

The three biggest pieces of advice I could give someone who's on the verge of starting a software business are:

1. **Build something that you'll be happy with even if you're the only user.** Building out a complex piece of software is onerous, stressful, time-consuming, and even lonely. The thing that kept me toiling away on Buttdown even when there were only a handful of users and I had to spend my evenings on 'grunt work' like dealing with author weird edge cases in iCloud addresses was a real sense of pride and faith in the decisions I was making because even if it wasn't a huge hit, I liked using it. This intrinsic motivation took me far!
2. **Be diligent about separating "one-way" decisions from "two-way" decisions.** The conventional advice is not to worry too much about your choice in tech stack or initial pricing or things of that nature. That conventional advice is correct, but there are still some decisions that you end up making early on in a product — like the name, say, or patterns in an externally-facing API — that are pretty much set in stone. Those are the ones you should think hard and long about!
3. **Be patient.** Everything takes more time and energy than you think it will. Success doesn't happen overnight; it's a marathon of marathons, not a sprint.


Are you looking to hire for certain positions right now?


I'm looking for technical writers! (If you're a college undergrad or recent grad interested in working on your own time and learning more about the indie SaaS side of things, this may be a great fit for you!) You can check out the job description [here](#).

Where can we go to learn more?

You can learn more about Buttndown by checking out the [main site](#) or [Twitter](#). And I'm at justin@buttndown.email if you ever want to talk shop.

If you have any questions or comments, drop a comment below!



Justin Duke, Founder of Buttndown


Pat Walls, Founder of Starter Story

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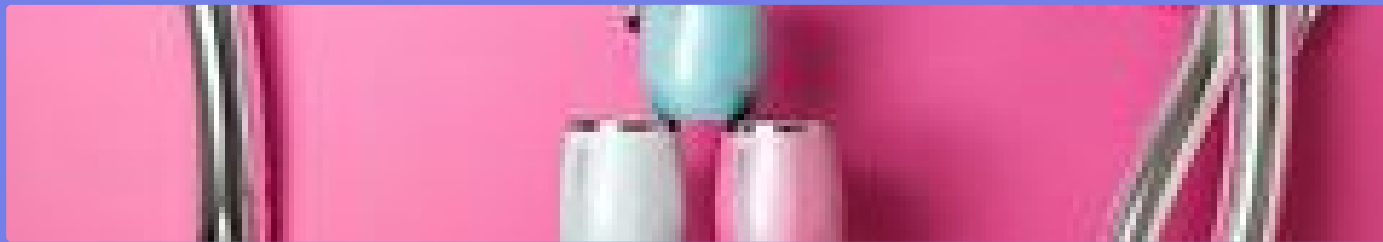
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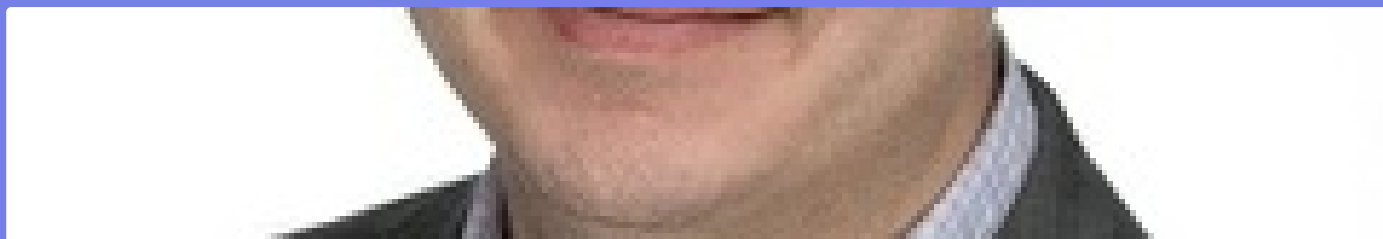
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Scott

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Chad

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It's about taking action every day.



Samping

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