How to find a business to buy in Cincinnati

Most buyers start on the listing sites. Many good businesses are offered to a short list of buyers first, and some are never listed at all. This is where the rest of the market is, and how to get in front of it.

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The short answer. Most buyers start on the listing sites, and that's a fine place to start. It's only part of the market, though. Many businesses are offered to a short list of likely buyers before they ever reach a website, and some are never listed at all. The buyers who find a business in Greater Cincinnati usually do four things. They decide exactly what they're looking for, tell the area's business brokers, reach out to owners of businesses they'd like to own, and let the lawyers, accountants and bankers they know hear what they want.

Answers up front

- **Where are Cincinnati businesses for sale listed?** On national listing sites such as BizBuySell, BizQuest and BusinessesForSale.com, and on brokers' own websites.
- **Is everything for sale on those sites?** No. A business is often shown first to buyers the owner and broker already have in mind, and many good businesses never get listed.
- **What should I do before I start looking?** Write down your buy box, which is the kind, size and location of business you want, your role and how much cash you can put in.
- **Should I contact business brokers?** Yes, several of them. Tell each one what you're looking for and ask to be on their buyer list. Most brokers represent the seller and are paid by the seller, unless you hire one on a retainer to search for you.
- **Can I approach an owner whose business isn't for sale?** Yes. Start with businesses you already know. Many owners will talk. Expect them to want full value, and consider using an intermediary once the talks get serious.
- **Who else hears about businesses for sale?** Lawyers, accountants, bankers and SBA lenders, plus groups like the Chamber and ACG Cincinnati.
- **Who actually buys?** Fewer people than start looking. Decide what you want, line up the money and set yourself deadlines.
- **How long does a search take?** Plan on a year or more from the first search to closing. Buyers who are organized and financed move faster.

Where are businesses for sale in Cincinnati listed?

The national listing sites carry most publicly advertised small businesses. BizBuySell is the largest. BizQuest and BusinessesForSale.com carry many of the same listings and a few others. Most brokerage firms also post their listings on their own websites, sometimes before they reach the national sites. Larger companies, usually with a few million dollars of earnings or more, are more often marketed privately to private equity firms and other professional buyers than posted on a public site.

The local numbers give a sense of scale. BizBuySell's Insight Report for the third quarter of 2026 counted close to 2,000 listings for the Cincinnati-Middletown metro area, which reaches into Northern Kentucky and Southeast Indiana, with a median asking price of $375,000. BizBuySell doesn't say how it counts them, and the same business can show up more than once, so treat that as a rough sense of scale. For all of 2025, brokers reported 39 closed sales in the Cincinnati market to BizBuySell, at a median of 249 days on the market. Those closings are only the sales reported to that one site, so they undercount the real number. Even so, the gap between what's listed and what's reported sold is wide.

Set up email alerts on the sites and check them often. Good businesses can sell quickly. Read each listing with some care, because the sites have problems that the listings don't announce.

- **The earnings figure may not mean what you think.** Cash flow, owner's benefit, seller's discretionary earnings, adjusted net and EBITDA are all used, and they don't measure the same thing. Ask early what the number includes.
- **The same business shows up more than once,** on several sites and sometimes at different prices.
- **Descriptions are vague on purpose.** A good listing protects the seller's identity. Ask anyway, and don't rule a business out from a few lines of text.
- **"All cash" is often an opening position.** Unless a listing says the seller won't finance under any conditions, ask.
- **Some listings are stale.** Ask whether a business is still available before you spend time on it.

Why the listing sites are only part of the market

When an owner decides to sell, the broker and the owner usually start with the buyers most likely to want the business. When Main Street Exit Partners takes on a listing, the owner and the broker work through who the ideal buyer might be before anything is posted. That list usually starts with competitors in the area and any employees who might want to buy. It adds suppliers or customers who might want to own the next step in their chain, and anyone on the broker's buyer list who fits. Only after that does the business go onto the websites for anyone to see.

Buyer-side writers disagree about what this means for the sites. Walker Deibel, in *Buy Then Build* (2018), tells buyers to skip the internet and rely on relationships, because he believes a listing reaches the websites only after the broker's own buyers have passed on it. Richard Parker's earlier

course for buyers (2007) tells them to search every site often, because good listings sell fast once they're posted. Both can be true. A business that suits an obvious buyer may sell before it's listed. A business whose best buyer is a stranger needs the wide reach of the sites. A buyer should be on both sides of that line, watching the sites and known to the people who decide who hears first.

Start with a buy box

Owners and brokers take a buyer seriously when the buyer can say in a sentence or two what they want. That description is called a buy box. It covers the kind of business, the size of earnings, where it can be, whether you'll run it yourself, how much cash you can put in, and when you want to own it. The Buy a Business page walks through each of those.

A narrow buy box helps a buyer in a second way. One Cincinnati buyer said this fall that a couple of brokers he'd worked with sent him every deal they had, whether or not it fit what he'd asked for, and he found it a waste of time. The buyers who put real thought into their criteria could tell a broker the type, size and location of business they wanted, and got better matches for it. A clear buy box is also what lets a broker call you first when the right business comes along.

How to work with business brokers

Contact several brokers in the area. Tell each of them what you're looking for and ask to be added to their buyer list. Brokers in Greater Cincinnati each have their own listings, so working with only one shows you a small slice of the market.

Expect each broker to ask about three things before they share much. They'll want to know who you are, what you're looking for, and whether you have the money to close. Before you see a business's name or financial statements, you'll usually sign a nondisclosure agreement and complete a buyer profile covering your background and financial capacity. Have a statement of your available cash and a word with a lender ready, since proof of funds comes up early.

When a listing interests you, contact the broker directly with a short note on who you are and what you're looking for, and send the signed forms back the same day. Brokers get many one-line inquiries from listing sites and answer the buyers who follow up first. One Colorado broker, Glen Cooper, writes that 40 to 60 percent of inquirers never return the forms at all, which is his own count. One individual buyer this fall had already lined up an SBA lender and agreed that a broker could tell owners, without naming him, that a buyer was looking. That's the kind of buyer a broker calls when something fits.

Don't rule out a listing on its asking price alone. Prices often look out of line with the earnings until you've seen what the earnings figure includes. Ask the broker what else they have like it, sold or for sale, and have your own attorney read anything before you sign it, the nondisclosure agreement included.

Know who the broker works for. In most small business sales, the broker represents the seller and is paid by the seller. A good broker will still answer your questions and move a deal along, but their

duty runs to the owner. A buyer can also hire a broker or advisor to work for them, usually under a retainer or a retained search agreement. In that case the buyer pays, often a monthly fee, a fee at closing or both. Read the agreement and ask exactly how they're paid before you sign it. The guide to what a business broker does explains the seller's side of the process you'll be dealing with.

Finding businesses that aren't for sale

Some of the best acquisitions start with a business that was never listed. When Grady was chief financial officer of a national distributor, most of its acquisitions began this way. The company already knew which competitors in its markets it wanted to own. When it wanted to enter a new market, it researched the larger players there and picked out the ones that might fit. Then it either asked a local broker to make the approach or reached out to the owners directly. Potential sellers would often contact the company on their own, because they knew how the model worked and liked that its employees would have the opportunity to buy into the new ownership group.

Start with businesses you already know. Many small businesses are bought by someone with a connection to them, such as a key employee, a supplier, a customer or a competitor. If you already own a business, the owners of similar businesses nearby may be your best targets. One Cincinnati-Dayton route-service owner looking to buy this fall wanted exactly that, smaller businesses on the same kind of routes.

A buyer of a smaller business can also work the way the distributor did.

- **Pick the industry and the area,** then make a list of the businesses in it. Trade associations, industry directories, Google Maps and the Ohio Secretary of State's business search all help.
- **Find the owner.** The county auditor's website shows who owns a business's building, and the Secretary of State shows a company's statutory agent.
- **Write or call, and say plainly who you are.** Explain that you want to buy and run a business like theirs, give your timing, and ask whether they'd ever consider selling. Most will say no. Some will say not now, and a few of those will call back later. Keep a list and follow up.

Two cautions from the buyer-side writers. Owners who haven't talked to a broker often have a high idea of what the business is worth, and Deibel describes owners of companies under $5 million in revenue asking for twenty times earnings. And once an owner is interested, Deibel recommends bringing in an intermediary to walk the owner through value and keep the talks moving. A broker who has prepared the owner for a sale often makes the deal easier for the buyer too, which is part of why owners use a business broker. Some buyers go further and ask a broker to make the first approach to a short list of named companies on their behalf.

Referrals and reputation

The professionals around business owners often hear about a sale first. Let them know what you're looking for. That includes business lawyers, accountants, bankers and Small Business Administration (SBA) lenders. Groups where owners and advisors meet are worth joining too, such as the Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber and the Cincinnati chapter of the Association for Corporate

Growth (ACG Cincinnati). Trade shows and industry association meetings in the field you want are worth the time, since owners and their advisors go to them. Tell friends and business contacts as well, unless that would cause trouble with your employer.

Reputation brings deals too. Berkshire Hathaway is the best-known example of a buyer that owners call because it has a name for looking after a business's people and history. A smaller buyer can build the same kind of name. Say what you'll do for the employees and the customers, do it, and let owners hear about it from people they trust.

Be a buyer owners take seriously

Many more people look at businesses than ever buy one. Parker estimates that 90 percent of people who start a search never buy, his own figure. Some never decide what they want. Others find something wrong with every business and wait for a better one, and after a year or so they give up. Parker's advice to them is blunt. The perfect business doesn't exist, and if it did, you couldn't afford it.

Owners and brokers can tell the difference quickly. A serious buyer has a written buy box, has talked to a lender or knows where the money is coming from, sets aside regular time for the search, and answers within a day or two. They ask for information, read it and decide. When a business doesn't fit, they say so and tell the broker why. Those reasons help the broker narrow the buy box and know what to send next time, much as telling a real estate agent what was wrong with a house gets you closer to the right one. Professional buyers expect to look at many businesses for every one they buy, so a few that don't work out is part of the search.

How long does a search take?

Plan on a year or more. Parker's course and Deibel's book each set a six-month goal from start to closing, and Parker says that's less than a third of the time most buyers take. A listed business can also take months to sell once it's on the market. Reported Cincinnati sales in 2025 sat on the market a median of 249 days. A buyer who searches steadily, answers brokers quickly and has financing lined up before finding a business moves faster when the right one appears.

Finding the business is the first step. After that comes the nondisclosure agreement, the seller's information package, a meeting with the owner, a letter of intent, due diligence and closing. Meet the owner and see the business before you decide. Parker puts it simply. You can't buy a business from a listing. The guide to how a business sale works, step by step shows how much happens between the first conversation and the closing, from the seller's side.

In short

- The listing sites show part of the market. Watch them, and read every listing with care.
- Many businesses are offered first to likely buyers, so be known to the brokers before the right business comes up.
- Write a narrow buy box and share it with brokers, advisors and lenders.

- Contact brokers directly when a listing interests you, and return their forms quickly.
- Be a buyer who decides. The perfect business doesn't exist.
- Reach out to owners of businesses you'd like to own, starting with ones you already know, and expect them to want full value.
- Have your cash and your lender ready before you find the business.

Main Street Exit Partners represents owners selling their businesses. When an owner is getting ready to sell, one of the first steps is looking for buyers who have already said what they want. If you'd like to be considered, tell us what you're looking for on the Buy a Business form. If you're an owner thinking about a sale, the five stages of a business exit show where to begin, or talk with a business broker in Cincinnati.

Questions buyers ask about finding a business

Where do you find a list of businesses for sale?

The largest public lists are on BizBuySell, BizQuest and BusinessesForSale.com, which let you filter by area, industry and price and set up email alerts. Most brokerage firms also list their businesses on their own sites. Those lists show only what's been advertised, so also ask the area's brokers to add you to their buyer lists and reach out to owners of businesses you'd like to own.

How many businesses are for sale in Cincinnati?

No one keeps a complete count. BizBuySell's Insight Report for the third quarter of 2026 counted close to 2,000 listings for the Cincinnati-Middletown metro area, with a median asking price of $375,000, but it doesn't say how they're counted, and it includes only businesses advertised on that site. Many others are sold privately through brokers' buyer lists or direct talks with owners, so the real number of businesses changing hands is higher than any website shows.

Should a buyer use a business broker?

A buyer should work with several. Brokers hold most of the listed businesses in the area and often call the buyers on their lists before a business is posted online. Most brokers represent the seller, though, so their duty runs to the owner. A buyer who wants someone on their side can hire a broker or advisor on a retainer or retained search agreement, and pays that person directly.

Sources

Walker Deibel, *Buy Then Build: How Acquisition Entrepreneurs Outsmart the Startup Game* (Lioncrest Publishing, 2018), chapters on finding deals and direct outreach.

Richard Parker, *How to Buy a Good Business at a Great Price* (Diomo Corporation, 2007), the search plan and the problems with internet listings.

Glen Cooper, *Glen Cooper on Business Brokerage: What Works & What Doesn't*, 2nd ed. (2025), on the share of inquirers who return a buyer's forms.

BizBuySell, *Insight Report*, third quarter 2026 (published October 2026), Cincinnati-Middletown listings and Cincinnati closed sales for 2025.

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