

# INMATES TO ENTREPRENEURS



*This article was adapted from Write your business plan (sba.gov)*

# ALTON LUKAS



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Inmates to Entrepreneurs

Inmates to Entrepreneurs' free video course "Starter U: How to Start, Run, and Grow a Business" is available online and on Edovo's tablets in correctional facilities across the U.S. The organization also provides online classes throughout the country.

**For more info about Inmates to Entrepreneurs:**  
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Alton Lukas learned landscaping as part of an alternative sentencing program for people charged with non-violent crimes. “I was on million-dollar properties, and I was the one maintaining them,” says Lukas. “It came with a big responsibility to do things correctly.”

In the '90s Lukas had been incarcerated for a string of robberies that supported his addiction. After release he spent several years working in landscaping. Then at 36 he wrote a basic business plan at his kitchen table, keeping expenses low by buying second-hand lawnmowers and tools from pawn shops and classified ads. The equipment set him back about \$850. Earlier he had bought a truck with a \$4,000 down payment.

That truck became Lukas's most effective form of marketing. Passers-by saw perfectly pruned trees and lush lawns. In the driveway sat a truck adorned with a large magnet bearing his company's name.

Lukas's first customer was a friend who hired him to mow his aunt's yard. Soon the aunt's neighbors began to call. At first, he focused just on homes. Over time, he landed jobs with companies that own multiple properties. Today that commercial work comprises about half of his sales. Some of those businesses even let him cart off the branches he cuts which has developed into a healthy sideline selling firewood.

Eight years after starting Sunflower Landscaping Lukas took a course from the non-profit Inmates to Entrepreneurs, which strengthened his understanding of subjects like marketing, pricing, and finance. As a result, he feels prepared to grow, although he is not sure he wants to. Growing would require hiring employees, something he has done in the past. But shouldering responsibility for their mistakes—accidentally letting a dog out of the yard or hitting a fence with a mower—“kind of turned me off,” he says. These days he works alone, bringing on day laborers when necessary.

Despite the demands of entrepreneurship, Lukas never takes shortcuts. “Everybody kept telling me, ‘Don't file taxes. Keep it under the table,’” says Lukas. “I was like, ‘no. I want to do this right.’” And although in the beginning he worked long days, “I would still go to [12-step] meetings,” he says. “A big part of my business was staying clean and sober.”

Lukas' past has occasionally cost him work. When giving estimates, he has watched prospective clients check him out on their phones, then turn him down. But many of his long-time clients don't know about his record. One customer of almost a decade found out for the first time when he was interviewed by a local news program while working at her home. “We were even closer after that,” he says. “She invited me to her church.”