

stripe

# Scaling AI

Firsthand lessons from ElevenLabs,  
Runway, Leonardo AI, and more

# Monetizing AI products

Today’s AI companies are achieving key revenue milestones even faster than the generation of fast-growing SaaS innovators that preceded them—and selling to international markets from Day 1.

According to Stripe’s [recent analysis of the AI economy](#), top AI startups are reaching \$1M in annualized revenue in a median of just 11.5 months, more than 25% faster than the fastest-growing SaaS companies. They also sell in twice as many countries as SaaS companies did in their first years on Stripe.

These companies are creating an entirely new economic paradigm built on a foundation of rapid innovation and extraordinary market demand. But translating that demand into revenue isn’t as simple as the top companies’ pace to \$1M might suggest, for 2 main reasons:

 **Pricing requires nimble experimentation:** “How do we price this thing?” AI founders face novel challenges with pricing, as every user interaction incurs significant compute costs. To solve this, many are implementing hybrid models that pair a predictable subscription with flexible, usage-based components. The primary challenge then becomes defining “use” in a way that makes sense to customers. AI companies need to be able to price—and reprice—quickly to start monetizing and keep up their profit margins.

 **Billing complexity increases with scale:** As billing needs grow more intricate with scale, building and maintaining billing infrastructure can require more and more engineering time. As companies such as ElevenLabs and Leonardo AI scaled to hundreds of thousands of users, they faced a significant choice: divert engineers to billing, or keep them focused on their core AI models.

To navigate these monetization challenges, founders benefit from insights from those who have already charted the course. That’s why this guide offers a look behind the scenes with some of today’s fastest-growing AI businesses: Runway, Decagon, Browserbase, ElevenLabs, Hex, and Leonardo AI. See the strategies and tools they used to turn their vision into a global revenue engine—and how they built the financial infrastructure to achieve massive global scale quickly.

**runway**

 Decagon

 Browserbase

**IIElevenLabs**

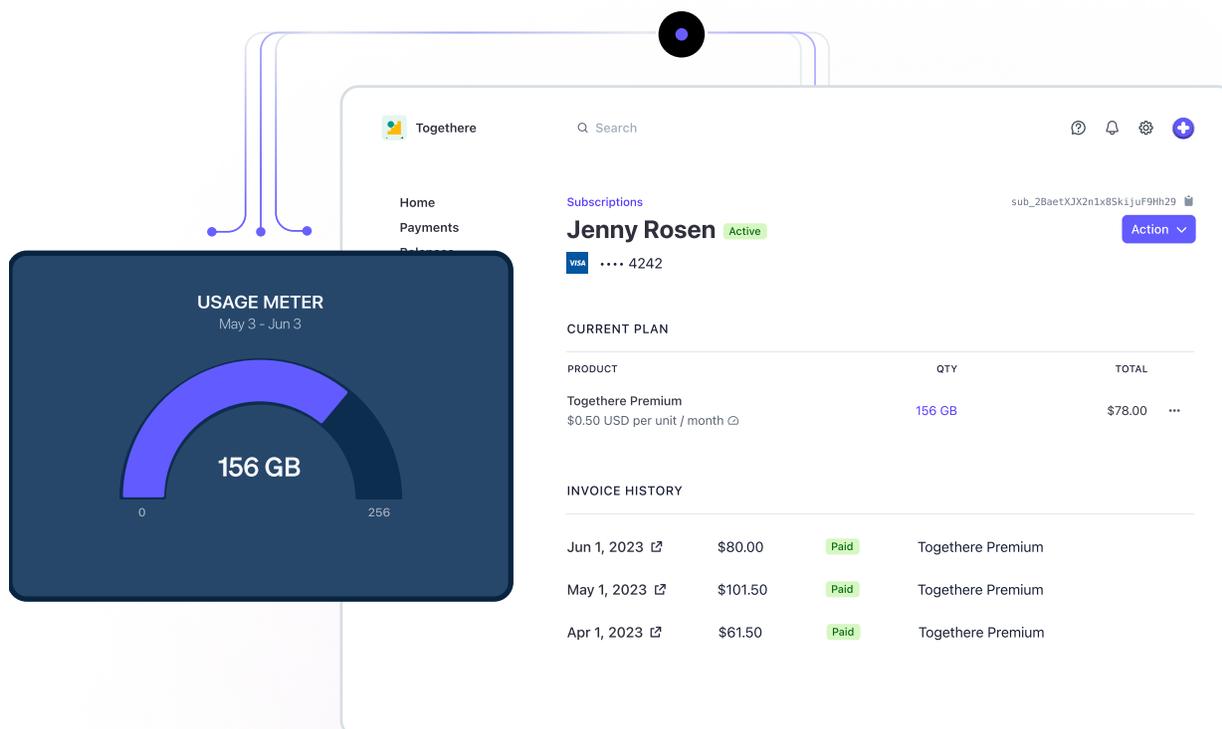
**HEX**

 Leonardo.Ai

# Launching fast with a flexible foundation

For any AI business, monetization isn't a simple, one-time decision—it's a continuous, high-stakes process of discovery driven by two distinct pressures. First, the cost imperative: unlike traditional software, AI products have significant variable costs tied to usage. Metered billing is often necessary just to ensure positive unit economics. Second, the value equation: because many AI services are novel, their market prices aren't yet established, forcing companies to constantly experiment with pricing models to discover what the market will bear.

With pricing operating as an ongoing experiment, founders need the flexibility to test new models quickly, and devise complex hybrid and outcome-based pricing structures that may have never been tried before. Inflexible third-party billing engines can stand in the way, but building in-house—with limited engineering resources—is rarely a sustainable solution.



## Runway monetizes a complex hybrid model

New York-based **Runway** is a global AI research and media company that builds foundational AI models and creative tools for the world's top film studios, agencies, and brands. Runway needed a way to monetize its sophisticated tools with a flexible model that combined per-seat access with per-credit usage, without distracting their team from core product development.

Runway launched its pricing models in just a few minutes using Stripe's no-code solutions. With the complex logic prebuilt, it was able to add eight new payment methods to support a global user base—all while preserving valuable developer time. Since launch, the flexibility of Stripe's billing infrastructure has helped Runway easily launch new subscription tiers, including an unlimited usage option.

[Read the full case study.](#)

“ Stripe has been with us from the beginning. It helped us generate our first dollars of revenue and helped enable our growth since 2018.”

—Cristóbal Valenzuela, Cofounder and CEO, Runway

### Key results



Monetized a complex model combining both per-seat and per-credit billing



Minutes to integrate Stripe Billing at launch



Added new payment methods with no code required

# Decagon automates quote-to-cash in one week

San Francisco–based **Decagon** provides conversational AI agents that offer intelligent, context-aware, and seamless customer support. It trains its agents to respond to complex issues and execute multistep workflows, while also providing greater transparency than with traditional support agents on how the AI actually makes decisions.

As an early-stage startup, Decagon needed to respond quickly to customer feature requests. When a customer asked that Decagon empower its agents to handle subscription cancellations and refunds, a single engineer was able to use Stripe’s Billing APIs to deliver a fully functional agentic workflow for that customer in just one week. This allowed the Decagon team to focus on building their product and talking to customers instead of managing payments.

[Read the full case study.](#)

“ There are a lot of workflows that would not be possible if we did not integrate with Stripe. As a company, we move very quickly, and Stripe has enabled us to move quickly on the payments front as well.”

—Gram Liu, Member of Technical Staff, Decagon

## Key results



Implemented first fully agentic billing workflow in 1 week with 1 engineer



Reduced customer support operational costs by 65% for 1 business customer

# Browserbase speeds time to market

San Francisco–based **Browserbase** gives developers a platform for hosting and managing the “headless,” GUI-free, cloud-based browsers that AI agents need to interact with websites. The company’s entire business is built on a usage-based model that requires accurately tracking millions of real-time sessions from Day 1—a complex system that would have taken months to build from scratch.

Browserbase launched with Stripe Billing to create a bundled monthly subscription plus a usage-based model: a base plan includes a set number of browser session hours, while additional hours are pay as you go. Usage data is automatically ingested and payments processed without the need for dedicated billing engineers. As a result, Browserbase was able to charge customers much earlier in its lifecycle as a business. It was also able to conduct pricing experiments that drove real results, including a free-tier plan that increased customer sign-ups by 17% in just 1 month.

[Read the full case study.](#)

“ Stripe accelerated our time to market, reduced our costs, and just made our lives a whole lot easier. It lets us focus on finding product-market fit, not building billing infrastructure.”

—Paul Klein IV, Founder and CEO, Browserbase



## Key results



Launched and now manages subscriptions with 0 dedicated billing engineers



Drove a 17% increase in new customer sign-ups within 1 month of launching a new plan

# A founder's playbook: Launching fast

01

## Treat pricing as a product to be iterated on.

The market value for novel AI products is still being defined. To find what works, companies are increasingly exploring different ways of measuring value, including [usage-based billing, outcome-based pricing, and prepaid credit models](#).

The ability to quickly launch new pricing tiers or test different usage limits is a significant competitive advantage. A flexible billing infrastructure allows you to treat your pricing like a feature you can constantly improve, helping you find product-market fit faster.

02

## Focus on your product, not your billing stack.

The time your engineering team spends building a billing system is time they aren't spending on improving your model, building new features, or talking to customers. Your unique value comes from the problems you can solve for customers—not your invoicing system. As Decagon's story shows, offloading this complex, noncore work allows you to move faster and dedicate your most valuable resources to what truly differentiates your business.

03

## Choose a system that fits your strategy, not the other way around.

Your monetization model should not be limited by your tools. Whether it's a complex hybrid model such as Runway's or a high-volume, usage-based system such as Browserbase's, you need flexible infrastructure that can handle the involvement your business requires from Day 1.

This flexibility ensures your business model can evolve as you discover what works best for your specific AI offering.

# Cutting “operational drag” with billing and revenue automation

Stripe’s [Indexing the AI economy report](#) found that not only do AI startups hit key revenue milestones much faster than their SaaS peers, but that this speed is accelerating with each new generation of AI companies: younger ones are growing about three times faster than their “older” AI peers.

Median months to revenue milestones by year founded



This pace of growth means that a manual billing process that is manageable one week can become a devastating bottleneck the next. The resulting “operational drag” on revenue realization—time spent on handling manual invoicing, chasing failed payments, or managing engineering tickets for the billing system—can stall a company during its most foundational growth phase. Automated financial infrastructure scales alongside demand.

“At ElevenLabs, it’s like you’re in a car race,” [said Luke Harries of ElevenLabs](#). “You’re trying to do normal engineering, or product or growth, and you’re racing against everyone else... It’s absolutely crucial to move quickly, ship fast. And that’s why we need to partner with a company like Stripe, to constantly adapt our business model.”

# ElevenLabs scales to a unicorn with one engineer

**ElevenLabs** is the global leader in AI audio research and technology, building cutting-edge AI audio tools for enterprises, developers, and creators. To support its hyper growth to hundreds of thousands of subscribers, the company needed a billing system that could be implemented and scaled rapidly without diverting a large engineering team to the task.

As ElevenLabs surged to a \$3 billion valuation in just 2.5 years, Stripe Billing was integral to monetizing its expanding subscriber base. Adding enterprise-level services as it grew, such as a fully-fledged audio production studio and dubbing service, required only simple adjustments to its billing setup. When it observed customers using its Text to Speech and Speech to Text features to build AI agents, ElevenLabs built its Conversational AI voice—integrated with Stripe APIs—to help customers get into production faster with agents that can process subscription sign-ups, issue refunds, and more. After all this expansion and growth, all of ElevenLabs' billing functionalities are still managed by just one engineer.

[Read the full case study.](#)

“ If we had to do all the subscription infrastructure in-house to handle all our different geographic regions, I'd expect we'd need a full engineering team dedicated purely to payments.”

—Luke Harries, Head of Growth, ElevenLabs

## Key results



Scaled to a unicorn with just 1 engineer managing billing



Now supports hundreds of thousands of subscribers



# Hex automates 500 million billing events

Hex’s platform combines collaborative analytics and data science tools with powerful AI capabilities to help clients turn data into actionable insights. As the AI boom led some customers’ usage of Hex’s computing resources to surge, the company’s original seat-based subscription model no longer made sense. It needed to automate a way to bill customers precisely for their consumption of high-cost computing resources, but projected that the effort to build the infrastructure would be harder than building the feature itself.

By implementing usage-based billing with Stripe, Hex was able to roll out its new self-serve model in eight weeks, saving several months of engineering time. Within months, Hex had easily processed more than 500 million usage-based billing events, proving the system could handle its massive scale without creating a disjointed experience for users. Billing thresholds—triggered when customers reach a certain level of compute spend—ensured that customers fully understood their usage levels and reduced the likelihood of large, unpaid bills for Hex.

[Read the full case study.](#)

“ Stripe is a flexible, easy-to-partner-with platform. The ease of transitioning to Stripe’s usage-based billing meant we could move quickly and keep focusing on building a great product for our customers.”

—Barry McCardel, Cofounder and CEO, Hex



## Key results



Processed more than 500 million usage-based billing events



Saved several months of developer time

# Leonardo AI builds an engine for global scale

Leonardo AI's image generator enables users to create production-quality visual assets quickly and consistently. The company needed a billing system that could manage its complex subscription tiers and scale massively to support its rapid growth to 189 countries—all without pulling engineers off the core platform or hiring outside strategists.

Its Stripe-powered billing infrastructure has been able to support Leonardo AI's growth to \$10 million in annual recurring revenue. By further automating revenue and finance processes with Stripe, it recovered more than 40% of failed payments using Smart Retries and saw a 2.15% increase in its payment success rate from other authorization optimizations.

[Read the full case study.](#)

“ Stripe has great SDKs, APIs, and documentation. It saved us a lot of hours—we went from being a free platform to a revenue-generating global platform in a matter of weeks.”

—Chris Gillis, Cofounder and COO, Leonardo AI



## Key results



Scaled to 18+ million creators in more than 100 countries



Recovered 40% of failed payments with Smart Retries



Achieved a 2.15% increase in payment success rate

# A founder's playbook: Building for growth

## 01

### **Prepare for accelerated growth.**

AI businesses can experience sudden, massive spikes in usage and user acquisition that are unlike what we've seen in other business models. Your infrastructure needs to be able to handle not just today's volume, but a potential 100x increase next month without a resource-intensive infrastructure overhaul. This was key for Leonardo AI, which chose a platform built for reliability and massive scale before expanding to its now-18+ million creators.

## 02

### **Scale your team's impact.**

The more functions you can automate as your user base grows, the greater impact you can achieve with your existing team. Instead of waiting to build while you hire additional employees, smart, proactive automation lets you preserve capital and maintain the speed and agility needed to outmaneuver larger competitors. That's how ElevenLabs was able to scale its complex billing operations with just one engineer.

## 03

### **Bill according to what your customers use and value.**

When you offer seat-based subscriptions, you're making educated guesses about how (and how much) your customers will use your product. The most successful AI businesses are measuring and billing for this usage directly, so revenue stays in line with cost to serve even as usage scales in unpredictable ways. Hex charges for the compute resources customers consume; Browserbase charges by the number of browser session minutes. But to meter and bill at this specificity, especially as billable events scale to the hundreds of millions, robust infrastructure is necessary.

# Your partner for the road ahead

What each of these founding teams discovered was that building with billing and payment tools specifically designed for AI's unique challenges gave them significant advantages in time to market and operational efficiency.

The innovators of the AI economy are showing that the infrastructure decisions made in a company's earliest days have outsized impacts on their ability to scale quickly when opportunity strikes. With its foundation in place, ElevenLabs is now expanding its marketplace to more countries and payment methods, while Leonardo AI (now part of Canva) is well-positioned for enterprise expansion. As the AI landscape continues to evolve, the financial infrastructure these companies built early on continues to adapt with them.

## What's next?

- **Dive deeper into the products helping to power the AI economy:** See how you can launch subscriptions, create complex **usage-based models**, and test new pricing strategies without custom engineering.
- **Talk to an expert:** Planning your monetization strategy or preparing to scale globally? Contact our team to design the right infrastructure for your business.
- **Start building today:** Ready to launch? Create an account and start building on the platform trusted by the next generation of AI leaders.
- **Apply to Stripe Startups:** Stripe's startup program helps venture-backed startups build, iterate, and scale faster. Once approved, founders in the program can access fee credits, and tap into expert insights and a focused community to help them build and grow faster.

# Solving for scale across the full stack

**Stripe Billing** is just the start. See how AI leaders use the full breadth of Stripe's integrated solutions to solve other key challenges.



## Leonardo.Ai

### The challenge

Managing sales tax and VAT during rapid global expansion

Minimizing the impact of fraud for a rapidly growing global user base—without diverting engineering resources

### The Stripe solution



Stripe Tax



Stripe Radar

### Key result

Automated tax collection in more than 100 countries

Automated fraud detection and simplified chargeback disputes, requiring minimal team intervention

## IIElevenLabs

### The challenge

Building a marketplace and paying out creators globally

### The Stripe solution



Stripe Connect

### Key result

Paid out over \$4 million to voice actors on its platform

## runway

### The challenge

Streamlining accrual accounting and revenue compliance

### The Stripe solution



Stripe Revenue Recognition

### Key result

Made monthly accounting closes more efficient, saving the finance and accounting teams valuable time