We Built Our Own Lightweight Version of Salesforce for $47/Month.

Here's exactly how. And what it means for content operations.

$47/mo	$2K/mo	~30 hrs	0
Platform Cost	SaaS Equivalent	Build Time	Code Written

The Challenge

Coastalview Advisory (CVA) needed to track eight data streams from a single platform: website analytics, LinkedIn performance across three accounts, ad spend, lead attribution, pipeline status, assessment funnels, qualitative intelligence, and AI-powered marketing analysis. The firm also needed a CRM, but enterprise CRM pricing didn't match the way an advisory firm sells.

The conventional SaaS stack (HubSpot + Salesforce + Sprout Social + dashboard tool + Zapier) would have cost $2,000/month, plus implementation. CVA built a fully integrated platform for $47/month.

The Platform: Lighthouse

Lighthouse is a marketing analytics platform with an integrated CRM, built on simple, accessible tools:

Component	Role	Cost
Google Sheets (16 tabs)	Central database for all marketing data	$0
Make (6 scenarios)	Automated pipelines: GA4, DepthCheck, webhooks, AI	$29/mo
Vercel Web App	9 modules: entry, uploads, pipeline kanban, Claude Insights	$0
Looker Studio	Executive dashboards, KPI scorecards, trend charts	$0
Claude API	AI-powered analysis with full data context	$18/mo

How It Was Built

The person who built Lighthouse has 20+ years in media, content operations, and consulting leadership. He has never written production code. He doesn't know JavaScript.

Lighthouse was built using **Claude Code** (an AI coding agent from Anthropic that takes instructions in plain English) and a free plugin called **Superpowers** that made the process far less intimidating. Instead of requiring technical specs, Superpowers walks you through what you're building conversationally: what matters most, what could go wrong, what the priorities are. Then it creates a plan. Then it builds.

Total build time: approximately **30 hours**. Some longer sessions, but mostly an hour here and there between client work. Not a dedicated sprint. Work done in the margins of running a business.

> **The most important technical skill in this build was not JavaScript. It was knowing exactly what the dashboard needed to do.**

The CRM That Shouldn't Exist

Advisory firms don't sell the way enterprise CRMs assume. The pipeline is high-value and relationship-driven, not high-volume. Salesforce at $300/month for that model felt like paying for infrastructure designed for a completely different kind of business. HubSpot's free tier would have introduced another platform, another login, another data silo. But "we don't have a CRM" didn't feel responsible for a firm advising clients on operational discipline.

So the CRM was built into Lighthouse. Same data layer. Same interface. Every lead is tracked from source to close. Pipeline kanban with drag-and-drop stages. Full source attribution back to the campaign or interaction that generated each opportunity.

This is arguably **better architecture** than the conventional approach. In a typical setup, analytics data lives in one platform, lead data in another, pipeline data in a third. Connecting them requires integrations and middleware. In Lighthouse, there is no integration because there is no separation.

The AI Advantage SaaS Can't Match

Every SaaS platform is bolting on AI. Salesforce has Einstein. HubSpot has AI assistants. And almost universally, the experience is mediocre compared to going directly to Claude or ChatGPT.

Because CVA owns its data layer, it connected Lighthouse directly to Claude. Every piece of marketing data feeds into CVA's project workspace in Claude with **full operational context**. When the firm asks for analysis, strategic recommendations, or pattern recognition, Claude has real business data. Not a generic chatbot. An actual AI assistant working with actual operational data.

> **When you own the data, you choose the AI. When you rent the platform, the vendor chooses it for you.**

Iteration Is Free

Traditional development locks you into specs. Every change requires a ticket, a scope conversation, and a timeline adjustment. With AI-assisted development, iteration costs nothing.

23 modifications were made to Lighthouse after the initial build. In a traditional engagement, that's 23 tickets and a budget overrun. With Claude Code, each change took under a minute. **The twentieth version cost the same as the first.**

Results: First 90 Days

14,200+	1,847	$564/yr	97.7%
Auto Data Points	Make Executions	Total Annual Cost	Cost Reduction

	Annual Cost	Setup	Switching Cost
Conventional SaaS	$24,360	4-6 weeks + implementation	High (vendor lock-in)
Lighthouse	**$564**	~30 hours, incremental	Low (all data portable)

What This Means for Content Operations

Lighthouse was built for a boutique advisory firm. But the pattern scales to any content-intensive organization. If you run a content operation (in-house team, independent agency, media company, production studio), consider how many platforms you're renting for workflows you could own:

→ **The CRM your pipeline doesn't justify** but your business needs the discipline of tracking every opportunity from source to close

→ **The production tracker bent into shape** because you bought Asana or Monday for general project management, then spent months customizing it for content workflows it was never designed for

→ **The client approval workflow** duct-taped across email, Slack, and a shared folder because no single tool does it the way your business actually works

→ **The freelancer rate cards and capacity tracking** managed in someone's head or a spreadsheet nobody else can read, directly impacting margin visibility

Every one of those can now be built as a custom tool, designed around exactly how your operation works. No engineering team. No vendor evaluation. No six-month implementation.

Key Takeaways

1. Domain expertise is the new engineering requirement. The person closest to the problem can now build the solution.

2. Iteration is free, and that changes everything. Products get refined until they're right, not until the budget runs out.

3. When you own the data, you choose the AI. SaaS locks you into their AI. Own the data layer and you connect the best model available.

4. The schema is the IP, not the platform. When every row is exportable, you migrate a CSV, not renegotiate a vendor contract.

5. Start with fundamentals, scale with confidence. Validate your operating model before investing in expensive infrastructure.

> **We've entered a post-SaaS era for small and mid-size content companies. Building custom tools that meet your exact needs, for a fraction of the cost, in a fraction of the time, is about to be the new normal. The only thing standing between your team and a custom-built toolset is knowing what to build and the willingness to try.**

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