Getting Started with AI in 2026: A 5-Step Framework for SMBs
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In this article you will find:
- A non-technical 2026 framework for small and mid-sized business owners to begin using AI in 2026
- Details on the 5 steps: Explore, Examine, Execute, Extrapolate, Expand
- Practical explanation complete with examples, prompts and KPI thought starters

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New Year, New Opportunity

You did it. You (and your business) survived the holiday season. 2026 has begun.

Regardless of your circumstances, now is the opportune time to dedicate yourself to improving your knowledge and business with the emerging AI technology.

Those of you already using it have one, very distinct advantage – experience. That experience will allow you to make better business decisions, allowing you to strategically grow your business. That will only compound over time through faster turnaround, lower costs, greater customer engagement and better decisioning.

The good news for those not started or early in your journey: you don't need a big transformation plan to start. You need a repeatable process.

The following is a 5-step framework to help you gain momentum on your AI journey this year. This won't be technical or attempt to boiling the ocean.

The 5-Step Framework: Explore → Examine → Execute → Extrapolate → Expand

1) Explore: Try AI for Yourself

Before you can evaluate AI for your business, you need firsthand experience. Not a webinar. Not a headline. A few hours, days or weeks of real use.

Think of this step as building "AI literacy" the same way you continue to build smartphone literacy – by actually using your phone discovering new features and apps.

Where to start:
Use a reputable chat tool (like ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, Perplexity) for everyday thinking tasks:

summarizing, drafting, brainstorming, outlining, comparing options, and writing. Just choose one.

Important guardrail
If you're experimenting in a business context, do not share sensitive or proprietary information. Avoid customer names, addresses, payment info, contracts and anything you'd be uncomfortable seeing on a billboard. Also check your privacy settings to ensure you are not allowing your data to improve the model.

Prompts to try (safe + practical)
Use these with *non-sensitive* details:
- **Personal productivity**
  - "I have 30 minutes today. What are the highest ROI tasks I can do to move my week forward if my goals are: [list goals]?"
  - "Turn these bullet points into a clear email with a professional tone: [paste bullets – no confidential info]."
  - "Create a meeting agenda for a 45-minute weekly leadership meeting for a business with these priorities: [general priorities]."
- **Business thinking (sanitized)**
  - "Create a customer FAQ outline for a business that offers [general service]. Keep it friendly and concise."
  - "Draft 3 versions of a follow-up text/email after a service appointment to encourage reviews and repeat business."

What you're looking for in Explore
Not perfection. You're learning what AI is good at: first drafts, structure, options, summarization, pattern recognition and idea generation.

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2) Examine: Choose a Use Case Based on Your Business Strategy and Goals

Now, ignore everything you did in Step 1!

AI is a tool meant for accomplishing goals. This is where many organizations go wrong and do AI just for the sake of doing AI. With this approach it fails because they're unable to tie it back to their strategy or goals.

Instead, in this step, you're going to clearly articulate your 2026 goals.

Start with outcomes (not technology)
Pick 1–3 goals you care about most in 2026. For example…
- Increase qualified leads without increasing ad spend
- Improve customer response time and follow-up consistency
- Increase conversion rates or average order value

- Speed up onboarding and training

Identify your business levers

Most SMBs are driven by a handful of levers:
- Demand generation: leads, inbound inquiries, referrals
- Conversion: turning interest into booked work/sales
- Capacity: how much your team can deliver
- Quality: consistency, errors, rework
- Retention: repeat customers, reviews, renewals
- Cash flow: billing speed, collections, forecasting

Next, converge your understanding of AI from Step 1, finding potential areas to leverage AI use cases. If you're still uncomfortable or need more ideas, you may seek external help, but here are some ideas for consideration:

- Front office / customer experience
  - Drafting replies to common customer questions
- Marketing
  - Weekly social content plan based on promotions and seasonality
  - Turning customer questions into blog posts and FAQs
- Operations
  - Turning Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) into checklists and training docs
  - Creating draft project plans based on action items
- Sales
  - Call notes summaries; next step emails
  - Objection-handling scripts (aligned to your brand voice)
- Finance / Admin
  - Categorizing recurring admin tasks and building automation checklists

To ensure you're prioritizing, you can use a simple decision framework: Impact × Ease

Score each use case 1–5:
- **Impact:** If this works, how much does it move revenue, cost, time or risk?
- **Ease:** How quickly can you implement with your current people and systems?
- **Confidence:** Do we have the data, process clarity and baseline benchmarks to try it?

Your goal in Examine

Select *one* use case that's high-impact enough to matter and easy enough to start this quarter.

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3) Execute: Run a Real Pilot with a Hypothesis and KPIs

This is where "AI curiosity" becomes business value.

Instead of "we're implementing AI," you'll run a pilot like a disciplined experiment.

Write a simple hypothesis

Examples:

- "If we use AI to draft and standardize proposal language, we will reduce proposal turnaround time by 30% and improve close rate."
- "If we introduce AI-assisted follow-up templates, we will reduce lead leakage and increase booked appointments by 10%."
- "If we use AI to create training checklists, we will reduce new hire ramp time by 20%."

Choose 2–4 KPIs (keep it simple)

Pick metrics that you can actually track without a new system.

Common AI pilot KPIs for SMBs include…

- Time saved per week (owner time, admin time, team time)
- Response time to inquiries
- Number of follow-ups completed
- Customer satisfaction signals (reviews, repeat rate, NPS-lite feedback)
- Error/rework rate
- Throughput (jobs completed per week)

Define a baseline and a time box

- Baseline: "Today it takes us 3 days to get proposals out."
- Time box: "We'll run this for 4 weeks."
- Owner: "Who is accountable for running it and reporting back?"

Tangible pilot examples (non-technical)

- A service business builds a library of AI-assisted estimate templates for the top 10 job types; using Gen AI to populate content from context.
- A professional firm uses AI to convert meeting notes into a standardized client update email; details also go into CRM.
- A retailer uses AI to generate a content calendar and weekly product copy for multiple platforms.
- A restaurant group uses AI to draft responses to common reviews and feedback categories (human-approved before posting).

While executing the pilot, be sure to monitor and track against KPIs.

Rule of thumb:

If you can't track it, it's not a pilot – your decision will be based on a feeling.

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4) Extrapolate: Use Results for Next Step Action

After the pilot, don't just ask "Did we like it?" Ask: "What did we learn and does this align to where we want to go?" At this stage, it's important to be aware of the circumstances and

parameters you worked within. If the outcomes fell within the acceptable range, consider moving forward. If not, don't label it a failure – take into account your learnings and adapt.

Evaluate both qualitative and quantitative outcomes
- Quantitative: time saved, conversion change, response time, volume handled
- Qualitative: staff adoption, customer sentiment, consistency, stress reduction

Estimate future value
Ask questions around scaling…
- If we saved 3 hours/week in one department, what happens if we roll it out to three departments?
- If follow-up consistency improved, what is the revenue impact of fewer lost leads?
- If response time improved, what is the conversion lift worth annually?

Identify costs and constraints
- Subscription costs
- Training time
- Process changes
- Data readiness (Do we have SOPs? Clear policies? Consistent inputs?)
- Risk controls (privacy, approvals, customer-facing review)

Output at the end of Extrapolate
A one-page summary of…
- Scope of the use case
- What was the hypothesis
- What changed (qualitative and quantitative)
- What it's worth to scale (current and projections)
- What it costs (current and projections)
- What is needed to make it sustainable

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5) Expand: Scale What Works and Learn Fast from What Didn't

Here's the mindset shift: You won't learn anything without trying.

Some pilots will fail. That's not a reason to stop. It's evidence you're running real experiments.

When a pilot "fails," diagnose it with a simple post-mortem. It could be one, or several, of these issues:
- Tech: The tool wasn't capable or reliable enough
- Data: Inputs were inconsistent, incomplete or messy
- Process: No one owned the workflow; approvals weren't defined
- People: Wrong stakeholders involved; adoption was low; training was light
- Measurement: KPIs weren't clear; baseline was missing

Then decide one of the paths forward…
- Adjust and rerun
- Switch tools
- Change the use case
- Move to the next experiment

The key advantage in 2026
Businesses that build an "experiment muscle" will compound learning and that learning becomes operational advantage.

Closing Thought: 2026 Rewards the Doers
AI in 2026 isn't about replacing people. It's about reducing friction, so your people can do higher-value work. The risk isn't that AI will instantly disrupt your business. The risk is that competitors will use it to become faster, more responsive, and more consistent – while you keep fighting the same bottlenecks with the same tools.

If you take nothing else from this: **Don't aim for perfection. Aim for momentum.**

Explore. Examine. Execute. Extrapolate. Expand.

Have questions or comments? You can reach the author at lucas@alterra-advisory.com or visit alterra-advisory.com

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