

How Small Businesses Are Using AI

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Small businesses want to know if AI can help solve their pain points.

Every week or so, there seems to be a new advancement in artificial intelligence (AI), and small business owners need to decide if they should integrate it into their operations. They're not concerned with the long-term hype but are questioning the short-term impact AI could have. Can it solve their pain points? Their concerns include:

- Will AI increase productivity?
- Where in my company will it make the biggest impact?
- Can it affect customer metrics?
- How do I deploy it?

To learn more about how small businesses are using AI and what impact it's having I talked to Dylan Sellberg, the director of product AI at HubSpot, a company that works with over 200,000 small business clients.

How small businesses are using AI

Rieva Lesonsky: Does AI actually help small businesses increase productivity?

Dylan Sellberg: Historically, small business growth relied on having more resources. Today, AI is helping small businesses grow without needing to add more. Generative AI allows small companies to scale their output with fewer resources. For example, businesses can use AI tools to draft marketing copy, social media posts, and blog articles, and it can automate time-consuming tasks such as answering simple customer questions, handling data entry, and managing scheduling. This reduces the workload on staff, allowing them to concentrate on the more complex and creative aspects of their jobs.

Lesonsky: Where is AI having the biggest impact on a small business?

Sellberg: Currently, AI is making the most significant impact on go-to-market teams across marketing, sales, and service. These teams are critical for small business growth because they're responsible for bringing products and services to market, ensuring adoption, and generating revenue.

For example, in customer service, AI-powered chatbots provide 24/7 support, meeting the instant-gratification expectations of today's consumers while allowing reps to focus on more complex or strategic questions. These chatbots can handle a wide range of inquiries, from answering frequently asked questions to assisting with product recommendations. For example, a small online retailer can implement a chatbot to help customers with product searches, order tracking, and returns, significantly improving customer satisfaction and reducing the burden on customer service representatives.

Implementing AI in a small business

Lesonsky: How do small businesses best train their employees to deploy AI?

Sellberg: Here are a couple of examples:

- Start with a problem and focus on a specific use case: Instead of getting caught up in the AI hype, identify a specific business problem that AI can solve. For instance, if your business struggles with managing customer inquiries, start by implementing a chatbot solution.
- Be willing to experiment: Deploying AI solutions requires an experimental mindset. Encourage your team to test different AI tools and approaches, learning from each attempt. As the technology evolves and your team becomes more proficient, you'll find more effective ways to integrate AI into your operations. For example, you might start with a simple AI tool for automating email responses and gradually move to more sophisticated applications like predictive analytics for sales forecasting.

Lesonsky: What's the approximate cost for a small business to start using AI?

Sellberg: The cost of implementing AI can vary widely, but starting with little to no expense is possible. Many free AI tools are available, offering value to businesses without initial costs.

AI benefits and concerns

Lesonsky: I understand that you think the development of AI is similar to major innovations brought about by the internet. Can you explain?

Sellberg: AI's transformative impact is akin to that of the internet, which revolutionized how businesses operate. The internet allowed businesses to reach a global audience and operate with unprecedented efficiency. Similarly, AI has the potential to revolutionize business operations by enabling companies to scale and grow with fewer resources. For example, AI can automate complex tasks, provide deep insights through data analysis, and enhance customer interactions through personalized experiences. Just as the internet enabled businesses to operate entirely online, AI could enable a small team to manage a vast, global operation with minimal human intervention.

Lesonsky: Are your clients eagerly embracing AI or are they still reluctant?

Sellberg: Growth-oriented business leaders see the value of AI and want to implement it, but not everyone feels that same urgency. Many are aware of AI's potential but are preoccupied with their current operations. When embracing AI is easy, businesses typically become enthusiastic adopters. They quickly recognize AI's efficiencies and competitive advantages and expand its use across various functions, from marketing and sales to customer service and operations. For example, HubSpot AI users say it helps them spend less time on manual/admin tasks (81%) and more time on the most important parts of their roles (71%).

Lesonsky: The controversy surrounding AI seems to stem from the use of document-creating apps like Gemini and ChatGPT. How do clients navigate using those tools to create marketing materials without being derivative or accused of plagiarism?

Sellberg: Navigating using AI for content creation requires a balanced approach. We recommend that businesses use AI-generated content as a draft. This practice helps ensure the content is authentic and resonates better with the target audience. For example, a marketing team might use AI to generate ideas and structure for a campaign, but then refine the content to include unique brand messages and creative elements.