

byImprint Research

2nd edition · Presentation revised · 21 September 2026

The State of the Small Business Surface

These are loud years for quiet businesses. The dog walker, the tattoo studio, the cleaning company, and the wedding florist have not changed what they do. What changed is the machinery between them and their next customer. This briefing reads that machinery the way byImprint reads a single business: from the outside, with sources attached, and with a bias toward what an owner can fix on a Monday.

June briefing with a September chapter on the owner's week. Source facts and interpretations corrected 20 September 2026; no new collection.

Editions

1st edition · June 2026

The first three parts: search, reviews and how customers choose a business.

2nd edition · September 2026

Adds a fourth part on the owner's week.

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The publisher name changed to byImprint Research. Research findings and collection dates are unchanged.

15 September presentation before corrections.

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Corrects source sample sizes, population qualifiers, survey wording and the interpretation of tool-reported search volume. This is a correction to the existing research, not a new collection.

Original PDF presentation.

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This typesetting update does not change the corrected research.

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At a glance

The seven shifts

Search is becoming answers	AI summaries now sit on roughly a fifth of US Google searches, and they keep the click. The list of blue doors that local websites were built for is quietly being replaced by a single spoken-for answer. 68% of US Google searches ended without any click in early 2026.
The profile is the new front door	Customers meet the Google profile, the map card, and the photo strip before any homepage. In one small-market field read, a keyword tool reported zero for several exact local phrases; the profile still carries a visible first impression. 0 estimated monthly searches reported by the tool for “tattoo shop” + town across a three-town BC corridor.
Assistants join the buying journey	ChatGPT crossed 800 million weekly users, and consumers have started asking it for plumbers, groomers, and studios. A business now needs to be legible to a reader that never sees its design. 45% used AI tools for local business recommendations in the past year, up from 6%.
Reviews became infrastructure	Nearly every consumer reads reviews for local businesses, and the bar keeps rising: the share who require four stars or better jumped thirteen points in a year. Ratings now work like building codes. 68% will only use a business rated four stars or higher, up from 55% a year earlier.
Silence now reads as an answer	Nine in ten consumers expect owners to respond to reviews, most within the week. An unanswered complaint is no longer neutral; it is read as the business’s official position. 89% expect owners to respond to reviews; 81% expect it within a week.
The owner is the marketing department	Half of small businesses have nobody dedicated to marketing, and most owners give it under five hours a week on budgets below a thousand dollars a month. Every shift above lands on that desk. 50% of small businesses have no marketing staff; 70% of owners spend under 5 hours a week.
The gap between intent and surface	Put the six shifts together and a structural gap opens: what the owner means the business to be, and what profiles, reviews, and answer engines actually show. The gap is wide, and invisible from inside. 7 leaks surfaced when byImprint audited its own public surface before selling the method.

01 / Research

Three forces remaking how small businesses get found

These are loud years for quiet businesses. The dog walker, the tattoo studio, the cleaning company, and the wedding florist have not changed what they do. What changed is the machinery between them and their next customer. This briefing reads that machinery the way byImprint reads a single business: from the outside, with sources attached, and with a bias toward what an owner can fix on a Monday.

The first force is the answer engine. Search spent twenty years as a list of doors; it is becoming a concierge that answers directly. By March 2025, roughly one in five US Google searches produced an AI-written summary, and when one appeared, users clicked a result on only 8 percent of those searches, against 15 percent without one. Across early 2026, 68 percent of US Google searches ended without any click. The shelf where a small website used to be found is shrinking.

The second force is quantified trust. Reviews stopped being reading material and became infrastructure: 97 percent of consumers read them when researching local businesses, and the threshold is climbing fast. In successive, independent consumer surveys, the share who said they would only use a business rated four stars or better rose from 55 to 68 percent. Recency rules: three quarters seek reviews written within the last three months.

The third force is the capacity squeeze. Half of small businesses have no one dedicated to marketing; the owner is the department. Seventy percent of owners give marketing less than five hours a week, and only 18 percent of surveyed small-business decision-makers globally say they are very confident their marketing is effective. The work this briefing describes lands on the busiest desk in the building.

What follows. Seven shifts across three parts, each argued from named, dated sources. A fourth part on the week behind the surface: what the owner's desk already carries, and why so little of it has changed. Then a fifth part on the work itself: what byImprint does about all of this, and what it refuses to promise.

02 / Research

The premise of this briefing

Every small business now has two storefronts: the door on the street and the surface online. Customers reach the second one first, and the owner almost never sees it.

03 / Research

Search is becoming answers

AI summaries moved from experiment to furniture in under two years. By March 2025 they appeared on roughly one in five US Google searches, and tracking across 2025 saw their share of queries swing as high as one in four. When a summary is present, behavior changes sharply: users click any conventional result far less often, and they end the session on the results page far more often.

For a local business this is not an abstract publishing problem. The summary is assembled from whatever the public surface supports: the profile, the reviews, the site's extractable facts. A weak surface does not just rank lower now; it gets paraphrased thinner.

Local businesses lived on the click: page two was invisible, page one paid the rent. The new economics are harsher. Even a first-position result loses most of its clickthrough when an answer sits above it.

Feed the answer instead of fighting it. The summaries are assembled from what the public record supports: clear extractable facts, consistent naming, plain service descriptions, and live reviews. A surface the answer engine can quote is the closest thing to shelf space the new results page offers.

Supporting evidence

18% of US Google searches produced an AI-written summary in March 2025, in a study of 68,879 unique searches. Pew Research Center, 2025

With a summary on the page, users clicked a traditional result on 8% of searches, against 15% without one. Pew Research Center, 2025

The share of tracked queries triggering an AI Overview swung from 6.5% in January 2025 to a peak of 24.6% that July. Semrush tracking study, 2025

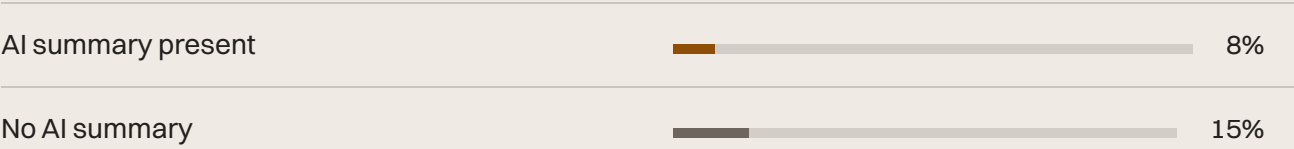
68% of US Google searches in early 2026 ended without any click. SparkToro analysis of Similarweb panel data, 2026

Exhibit 1

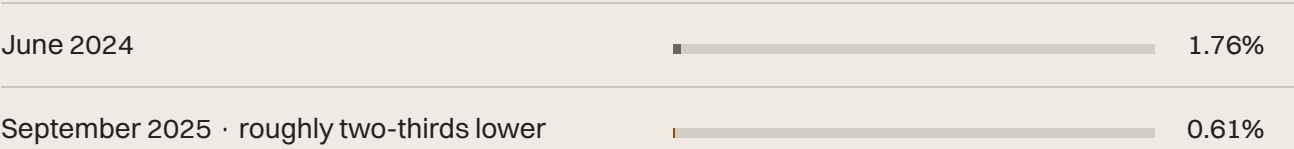
When the answer is on the page, the click stays home.

Measured click behavior on US Google searches, with and without an AI summary present

Share of searches where users clicked a traditional result · Pew, March 2025



Organic clickthrough on queries showing an AI Overview · Seer Interactive client dataset



68%

of US Google searches ended without any click in January through April 2026. The session increasingly starts and finishes on Google’s own surface.

Clickthrough sources: Pew Research Center, July 2025 (browsing data from 900 US adults; 68,879 unique Google searches in March 2025); Seer Interactive AIO clickthrough study, September 2025 update.

Zero-click source: SparkToro analysis of Similarweb’s US desktop and mobile web panel, January-April 2026.

Cite: byImprint Research, The State of the Small Business Surface 2026, 2nd edition (September 2026), corrected 20 September 2026, Exhibit 1. byimprint.com/surface-2026#section-9.

04 / Research

The profile is the new front door

Checking on local businesses is now a weekly habit for 80 percent of consumers, and the place they do it has moved. The Google profile quietly absorbed the functions a website used to own: hours, prices, photos, proof, booking, directions, questions. Customers decide inside that interface, which means a business's most-trafficked surface is one the owner may not have opened since the day it was claimed.

In one small-market field read in British Columbia, a keyword tool reported zero estimated monthly searches for a handful of exact trade-plus-town phrases. That result is a caution against treating keyword estimates as the whole market. It does not prove that nobody typed those queries or establish where any unmeasured discovery occurred.

Owners budget for websites and post on social, while the surface that meets the most new customers, the profile, goes unowned. It updates itself: reviews arrive, photos age, hours drift wrong after a holiday, and nobody is assigned to notice.

Treat the profile as the front door: read it monthly as a first-time visitor, keep photos current, answer what arrives, and make hours and booking the most accurate facts the business publishes anywhere.

Supporting evidence

A keyword tool queried in May 2026 for a three-town mountain corridor reported 0 estimated monthly searches for “tattoo shop” plus each town name, and 0 for “best tattoo shop” variants. A reported zero is a tool output, not proof of absent demand. byImprint field data, 2026

97% of consumers read online reviews when researching local businesses, and the place they read them is overwhelmingly the profile itself. BrightLocal, 2026

After searching, 67% of consumers often or always go on to read the business’s reviews, and 56% check that its published information is correct. BrightLocal consumer search behavior study, 2025

Discovery is fragmenting around the profile: 83% of consumers use search engines to find local businesses, but 73% also use social platforms and 58% navigation apps. SOCi Consumer Behavior Index, 2025

Exhibit 2

Some exact local queries register as zero.

Tool-reported monthly search-volume estimates, geo-phrased queries, Sea-to-Sky corridor BC · pulled May 2026

“tattoo shop pemberton bc”	0
“tattoo near me whistler”	0
“best tattoo shop whistler”	0

Proof: real photographs of the work	Trust: ratings and recent reviews
Buyer path: working call and booking links	Recency: current hours and updates

A reported zero means the tool did not surface measurable volume for those exact phrases. It does not establish that demand is absent or show where any unmeasured searches occur.

Source: byImprint field data, search-volume pull May 2026, anonymized engagement; BrightLocal Local Consumer Review Survey 2026.

Cite: byImprint Research, The State of the Small Business Surface 2026, 2nd edition (September 2026), corrected 20 September 2026, Exhibit 2. byimprint.com/surface-2026#section-11.

05 / Research

Assistants join the buying journey

Assistant use crossed from novelty to habit in roughly a year. The instinct to “ask” rather than “search” is spreading into local decisions: recommendations for trades, studios, and services that used to start in the search bar. The assistant answers from the same public record this briefing keeps pointing at: profiles, reviews, structured facts, readable pages.

Two properties make this reader different. It compresses: a business becomes two sentences. And it cannot be charmed: photography and layout do not survive the trip, only facts and reputation do. What it can extract is what it will say.

No one can guarantee placement inside an AI answer, and this document will not pretend otherwise. What can be controlled is the record the answer is drawn from.

Supporting evidence

45% of US consumers used ChatGPT or similar tools for local business recommendations in the past year, up from 6% the year before. BrightLocal, 2026

ChatGPT passed 800 million weekly users in October 2025, fielding roughly 2.5 billion prompts a day by mid-2025. OpenAI figures, 2025

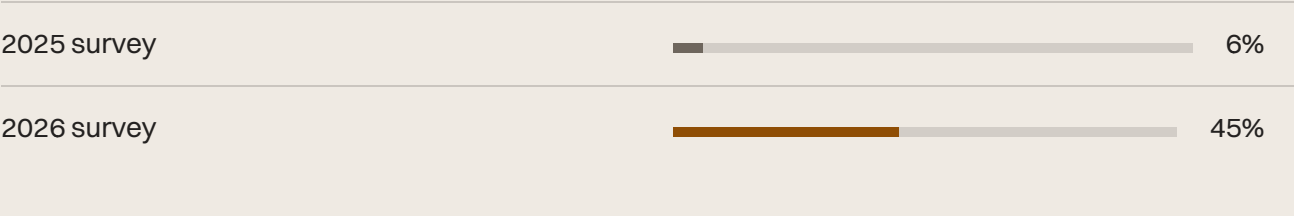
Traffic to US retail sites from generative AI sources rose 1,200% between July 2024 and February 2025, and kept compounding into 2026. Adobe Analytics, 2025

Exhibit 3

Asking an AI about local businesses went from fringe to mainstream in one year.

Share of US consumers who used generative AI tools for local business recommendations in the past year

Used generative AI for local recommendations



+1,200%

growth in generative-AI referral traffic to US retail sites, Jul 2024 to Feb 2025 (Adobe)

+393%

further year-over-year growth in Q1 2026 (Adobe, as reported)

Bars are proportional to the share of respondents. The 2026 edition was fielded to 1,002 US consumers in February 2026.

Source: BrightLocal Local Consumer Review Survey 2026; OpenAI usage figures as reported October 2025; Adobe Analytics, March 2025.

Cite: byImprint Research, The State of the Small Business Surface 2026, 2nd edition (September 2026), corrected 20 September 2026, Exhibit 3. byimprint.com/surface-2026#section-13.

01 Consistent name, place, and trade across every public mention

02 Plain-text answers to the questions buyers ask: services, prices, area served, how to book

03 Review text and ratings, which carry both reputation and vocabulary

04 Structured data that machines parse without guessing

06 / Research

Reviews became infrastructure

Reading reviews is now near-universal behavior, and the casual reader is becoming a systematic one: the share who always read reviews before choosing a local business rose by twelve points in a single year. Half of consumers extend reviews the same trust they give personal recommendations.

The threshold is moving with the habit. Four stars used to be comfortable; it is becoming the floor. And the ledger is priced: the classic Harvard study of restaurant revenue puts a single star of rating at 5 to 9 percent of revenue. The number on the map card is a line item.

A 4.3 average with fresh reviews now outperforms a 4.8 earned three years ago and left to age. Recency weighting means reputation is a flow, not a stock: it must keep arriving to keep counting.

Build the ask into the work itself: the follow-up message after the job is the single highest-yield piece of marketing copy most local businesses will ever write. Aim for a steady trickle, not a campaign burst, and never buy what must be earned. Fabricated reviews are the one shortcut consumers actively punish.

Supporting evidence

97% of consumers read online reviews when browsing for local businesses; 41% now always do, up from 29% a year earlier.
BrightLocal, 2026

49% trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations from people they know. BrightLocal, 2026

Google remains the most-used platform for evaluating local businesses through reviews, used by 71% of consumers. BrightLocal, 2026

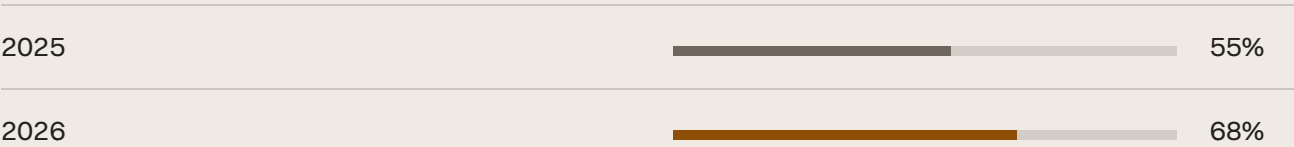
A one-star improvement in a restaurant's rating corresponds to a 5 to 9% change in revenue. Harvard Business School, 2016

Exhibit 4

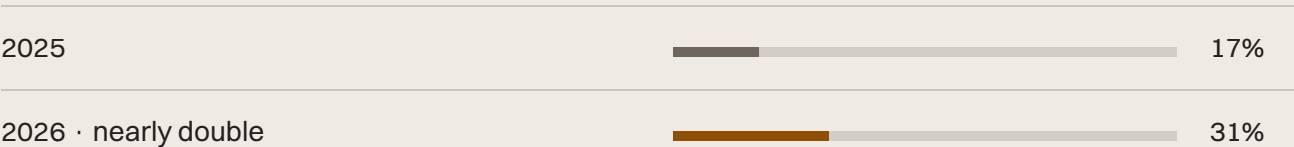
The rating threshold is rising, fast.

Share of consumers who will only use a local business at or above
a given star rating · successive independent surveys, not the
same tracked panel

Will only use a business rated 4.0 stars or higher



Will only use a business rated 4.5 stars or higher



74%

seek reviews written in the last three months

32%

narrow that window to the last two weeks

Source: BrightLocal Local Consumer Review Survey 2026
(representative panel of 1,002 US adults) and 2025 edition (a
separate representative panel of 1,026 US adults); Michael Luca,
“Reviews, Reputation, and Revenue: The Case of Yelp.com,”
Harvard Business School working paper, revised 2016.

Cite: byImprint Research, The State of the Small Business Surface 2026, 2nd edition
(September 2026), corrected 20 September 2026, Exhibit 4. byimprint.com/surface-2026#section-16.

07 / Research

Silence now reads as an answer

Expectations crossed a line: responding to reviews moved from courtesy to baseline service, with most consumers expecting an answer inside a week. The audience for each reply is not the reviewer; it is every future customer scrolling past, watching how the business behaves when praised, and when cornered.

This is the cheapest trust lever on the surface. It costs minutes, compounds for years, and most local competitors still do not do it.

Response behavior is public, permanent, and read in aggregate. A profile where every review gets a considered answer performs a quality the business cannot claim about itself: attentiveness, demonstrated rather than promised.

Write for the room, not the reviewer. Thank the praise specifically, answer the complaint factually and once, and let the record show a business that shows up. Fifteen minutes a week covers most local volumes.

Supporting evidence

89% of consumers expect owners to respond to their reviews, and 81% expect that response within a week. BrightLocal, 2026

80% say they are likely to use a business that responds to all of its reviews; 42% are unlikely to use one that responds to none. BrightLocal, 2026

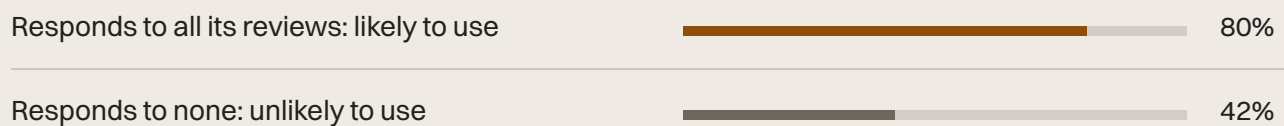
53% expect a response to a negative review within a week; one in three expects it within three days. ReviewTrackers, 2022

Exhibit 5

Answering reviews is the cheapest trust the surface sells.

Consumer expectations and stated behavior around owner responses

Stated likelihood of using a business, by response behavior



89% of consumers expect a response to the reviews they write.

Source: BrightLocal Local Consumer Review Survey 2026;
ReviewTrackers Online Reviews Survey, 2022. Conversion context:
PowerReviews (2023) measured a 108.6% conversion lift among e-commerce shoppers who interact with ratings and reviews; offline analogues are directional, not measured.

Cite: byImprint Research, The State of the Small Business Surface 2026, 2nd edition (September 2026), corrected 20 September 2026, Exhibit 5. byimprint.com/surface-2026#section-18.

08 / Research

The owner is the marketing department

The segment is enormous and structurally under-resourced for this work: 36.2 million small businesses in the US alone, employing almost half the private workforce and creating nine of every ten net new jobs. Most run their public surface on scraps: a few hours a week, a few hundred dollars a month, no specialist in the building. Among surveyed Canadian owners already using digital channels, two-thirds name limited time as a challenge when using or adopting digital tools.

AI arrived inside these businesses faster than any prior technology, but it is pointed at operations: invoices, scheduling, drafting. The public surface, where the customer actually decides, is still mostly nobody's job.

Adoption is real and accelerating; a parallel QuickBooks survey puts regular AI use at 68 percent of small businesses by spring 2025, with 28 percent using it daily. But the tools point inward, at paperwork and scheduling. More than half of US small businesses still say they struggle just to keep their public content fresh.

The squeeze is not a competence gap. It is a structural mismatch between what the surface now demands and what one busy person can hold.

Supporting evidence

50% of small businesses have no employees dedicated to marketing; 52% run on marketing budgets under \$1,000 a month.
LocalIQ, 2026

70% of owners spend less than five hours a week on marketing, while naming it a key growth driver. Fiverr survey, 2025

Among surveyed owners already using digital channels, 66% cite limited time to manage everything consistently as a challenge when using or adopting digital tools. CFIB, 2025

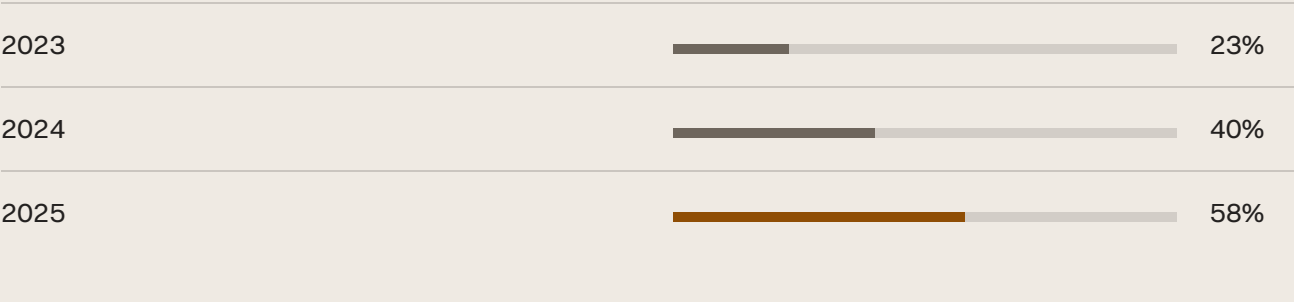
58% of US small businesses now use generative AI, up from 23% in 2023. U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2025

Exhibit 6

The capacity squeeze, in four numbers.

What small businesses actually have available for the work described in this briefing

US small businesses using generative AI



50%

of small businesses have no employees dedicated to marketing. The owner is the department. LocaliQ, 2026

<5 hrs

a week is what 70% of owners give marketing, in total, across every channel. Fiverr, 2025

\$1,000

a month is more than 52% of small businesses spend on marketing altogether. LocaliQ, 2026

66%

of surveyed owners already using digital channels cite limited time as a challenge when using or adopting digital tools. CFIB, 2025

Source: LocaliQ Small Business Marketing Trends Report 2026 (300+ owners); Fiverr Small Business Month survey, released May 2025, with nearly 6,000 active Fiverr users responding from July 2024 through March 2025; CFIB SME digital presence research, Your Voice September 2025 survey, 2,355 responses to the digital-tools challenges question. Scale context: SBA Office of Advocacy, 2025 Small Business Profile.

Cite: byImprint Research, The State of the Small Business Surface 2026, 2nd edition (September 2026), corrected 20 September 2026, Exhibit 6. byimprint.com/surface-2026#section-21.

09 / Research

The gap between intent and surface

The gap grows mechanically now. Reviews arrive without permission. Profiles drift stale. Answer engines re-describe the business overnight, in their own words, from whatever the record supports. The owner, standing inside the building, is the one person who never sees any of it the way a buyer does.

byImprint tested this claim on itself before selling it. The audit of its own public surface found seven leaks, including a homepage still selling retired work and profiles sitting dark. The gap is not a failing of bad businesses. It is the default state of any business whose surface nobody reads from outside.

Supporting evidence

Customers verify before they commit: 56% often or always check that a business's published information is correct. Buyers proofread the surface daily. BrightLocal, 2025

Recency rules compound the drift: with 74% seeking reviews written within the last three months, an untended surface does not hold its value; it leaks it. BrightLocal, 2026

7 leaks surfaced when byImprint ran its own methodology against byimprint.com, then fixed them in public before pointing the method at anyone else. byImprint, 2026

Exhibit 7

Where the gap shows up: six recurring leaks.

Patterns from byImprint reads of owner-operator businesses, 2026

What the owner means

What the world sees

- | | |
|----|---|
| 01 | The time-capsule homepage
Still selling what the business sold when the site was built, not what it sells now. |
| 02 | The invisible brand
Searching the business by name returns thin, wrong, or competitor results. |
| 03 | The decaying profile
Old photos, drifted hours, a latest review from another season. |
| 04 | The proof gap
Useful work can stay in the owner's camera roll, invisible to buyers. |
| 05 | The unanswered room
Reviews accumulating with no reply, each one read as the house position. |
| 06 | The illegible business
Machines cannot extract what it does, where, for whom, or at what price; so the answers say something else. |

Source: byImprint engagement reads and byImprint's own client-zero audit, 2026. Pattern list, not a measured prevalence ranking.

Cite: byImprint Research, The State of the Small Business Surface 2026, 2nd edition (September 2026), corrected 20 September 2026, Exhibit 7. byimprint.com/surface-2026#section-23.

10 / Research

The admin week nobody has automated

Every survey that asks the question finds the same shape: administration takes a large, stable slice of the week, and chasing invoices and payments is the task owners most want gone. The hour figures differ by who asked and how, so this part shows them as a range with each source named, never as one number. Behind the weekly admin sits the paperwork the state requires, and in Canada the smallest firms carry by far the heaviest load per person.

Meanwhile AI use has moved from fringe to common in two years, in Canada and the United States alike. But use mostly means drafting, summarising and answers. Workflow automation, the thing that would give the hours back, remains rare, and the reasons workers give for stopping short are privacy, not knowing where it applies, and skills.

Use is wide and shallow. Three-quarters of the programme owners surveyed use AI and nearly as many say they want help with it, and most owners will not leave a tool unsupervised on even the small tasks. The constraint the sources describe is trust and hands, not the absence of tools.

Supporting evidence

6% of small-business workers who use AI say they use it to automate a workflow with minimal human involvement. U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation with Ipsos, 2026

6.1% to 19.2%: Canadian businesses using AI to produce goods or deliver services, second quarter of 2024 to second quarter of 2026. Statistics Canada, 2024-2026

78% of owners do not fully trust AI to handle low-level tasks without oversight. Bluevine with Centiment, 2026

73% of surveyed owners say they would benefit from more training and implementation help. Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses Voices, 2026

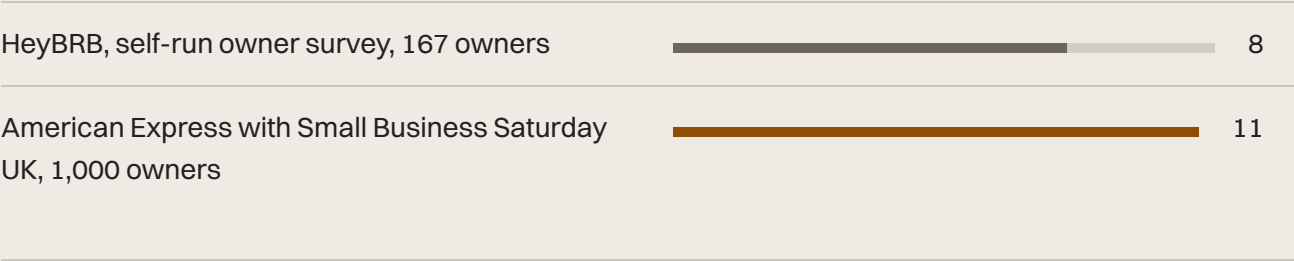
Exhibit 8

The admin week, as owners report it.

Hours a week on administration, by source. Shown as a range with each end named; never averaged across sources.

Scale: relative to the largest reported number of hours in this chart.

Reported hours a week on administration · United Kingdom, 2026



198 hrs

Annual hours per employee complying with government regulation in businesses with fewer than five people, including the owner.
With 100 or more: 8 hours.

Source: CFIB, Canada's Red Tape Report 2025, member survey, 2024 data.

When HeyBRB asked owners which admin task they would most want to automate, chasing invoices and following up payments was the single most common answer, ahead of every other task named.

Source: HeyBRB, UK Admin Drain Report 2026, self-run online survey of 167 owners, March 2026; American Express with Small Business Saturday UK, SME Business Barometer 2026, 1,000 owners, as reported by Retail Times, July 2026; CFIB, Canada's Red Tape Report 2025, 2,891 respondents surveyed in 2024, with 2,230 responses used for estimates after filtering and excluding outliers. Sample types differ, which is why no single figure is given. No primary publisher could be confirmed for the often-repeated claim that owners undercount their admin hours against logged time, so it is not shown.

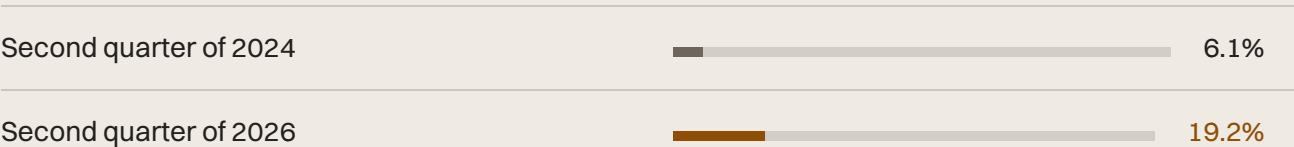
Cite: byImprint Research, The State of the Small Business Surface 2026, 2nd edition (September 2026), corrected 20 September 2026, Exhibit 8. byimprint.com/surface-2026#section-26.

Exhibit 9

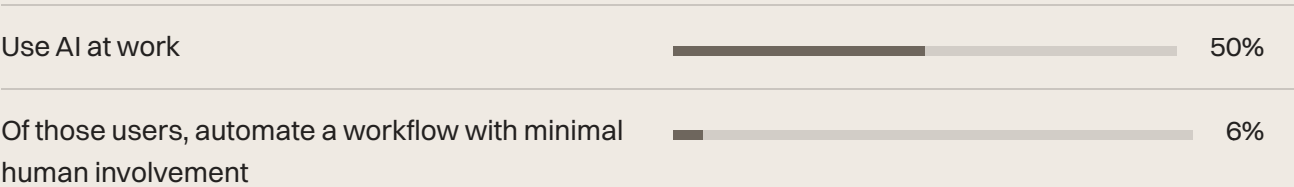
Using AI is common. Automating work is rare.

Share using AI at all, against the share that automates a workflow.
Each series is comparable only to itself.

Businesses using AI to produce goods or deliver services ·
Canada, official series



Small-business workers · United States, probability sample, May
2026



Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Survey on Business Conditions, second quarters of 2024 and 2026, official statistics; U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation with Ipsos, Main Street AI Monitor, May 2026, probability sample of 1,070 small-business workers; BDC, The Digital Transformation of SMEs in the Age of Artificial Intelligence, online panel of 1,500 owners and decision makers, February 2026. The series ask different populations different questions and are not comparable to each other; each is comparable only to itself. The 6% is a share of the workers who use AI, not of all workers.

Cite: byImprint Research, The State of the Small Business Surface 2026, 2nd edition (September 2026), corrected 20 September 2026, Exhibit 9. byimprint.com/surface-2026#section-27.

Exhibit 10

The trust line.

What owners say they will and will not hand over

78%

of owners do not fully trust AI to handle low-level tasks without oversight. Bluevine with Centiment, April 2026, online panel of 942 owners

73%

of surveyed owners say they would benefit from more training and implementation help. Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses Voices, March 2026, programme participants

14%

say AI is fully embedded in their core operations. Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses Voices, March 2026, programme participants

6%

of small-business workers who use AI automate a workflow with minimal human involvement. U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation with Ipsos, May 2026, probability sample

Source: as labelled on each figure. The four figures come from three surveys of different populations by different methods; the pattern, not the arithmetic between them, is the finding.

Cite: byImprint Research, The State of the Small Business Surface 2026, 2nd edition (September 2026), corrected 20 September 2026, Exhibit 10. byimprint.com/surface-2026#section-28.

11 / Research

What the week says

The gap between using AI and getting hours back is trust and hands: owners will not leave a tool unsupervised, and they do not have someone in the building to set one up and stand behind it. That is a different problem from the tools not existing, and it has a different answer.

One rival reading: the tools are not ready. Possible for messy, exception-heavy admin; the surveys do not ask owners why a trial failed, so the sources cannot rule it out.

A second: the admin bill is overstated. The hour figures come from small or vendor-run surveys, and one of the two has 167 respondents. The Canadian regulatory line is a member survey. Every figure carries its sample type for that reason, and none is averaged into a single number.

A third: adoption is real, just elsewhere. AI landed in marketing and drafting first because that is what was sold. This is a timing reading, not a contradiction, and it is the most plausible rival.

What would change the call: a probability-sample survey in which the share automating a workflow rises into the twenties without a matching rise in owners saying they trust the tools.

12 / Research

What it costs a week

About a day a week, every week, on work that nobody has been trusted to take off the desk.

In the owner's units: hours a week on quoting, invoicing and chasing; days between an enquiry and a quote; evenings spent on paperwork. Those are the units the shifts in parts one to three are paid for in.

byImprint works on exactly this half of the week. A focused project takes one such workflow, understands it, makes it work and makes it yours. An ongoing partnership keeps taking the next one off the desk each month. A focused discovery is the sixty-minute version: one workflow reviewed, a written recommendation, yours either way.

13 / Research

The discipline: rules the work runs under

An owner who commissions research about their own business is buying claims about their own livelihood. A single wrong fact, a competitor miscounted, a defect that does not render on the page a customer actually sees, costs the entire document its authority. So facts are gated before opinion is argued.

The same standard applies inward. Before the methodology was pointed at any paying customer, it was pointed at byImprint itself, and the findings were published and fixed.

- 01 Every claim must be visitor-real. If a defect or a strength cannot be seen on the rendered page a customer meets, it does not go in the document. Screenshots are the unit of proof.

 - 02 Facts are gated; judgment is argued. Data points pass a verification gate before synthesis. The analysis is opinionated, but never about what the numbers are.

 - 03 Every number ships with its origin. Client documents carry, for each figure, where it came from, when it was checked, and what it can be used to say.

 - 04 Conservative first, transparent math. No projected lift without the arithmetic on the page. Underclaim and let the work overdeliver.

 - 05 Client zero is the practice itself. The first audit ran against byimprint.com. It surfaced seven leaks, and the remediation was done in public before the method was sold.

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14 / Research

Eight questions to ask about your own surface

- 01 Search your trade and your town tonight. Do you appear before your competitors do?

 - 02 Does your homepage sell what you actually sell today, or what you sold when it was built?

 - 03 When did you last read your own Google profile the way a customer does, hours, photos, first three reviews?

 - 04 Do your reviews answer back? What does your silence under the bad one say?

 - 05 Ask an AI assistant what your business does and what it costs. Is the answer true?

 - 06 Which claims on your site could a visitor verify in sixty seconds without calling you?

 - 07 Is your best work visible anywhere, or does it live only in your camera roll?

 - 08 Who owns this in your week? Name the hour it happens in.

-

15 / Research

The opportunity

Most small businesses are better than they look online. That is the entire opportunity: the work is making the surface tell the truth.

16 / Sources

Sources and method

Prepared by byImprint, June 2026; second edition with Part four, September 2026. Every external figure in this document is tied to a named, dated source listed on the closing pages; review and consumer statistics were checked against their primary publishers during preparation.

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Working with byImprint today

Put the useful finding to work.

If this report reflects a problem in your business, I can work out what to do about it.

Focused project	From CA\$2,500
One defined improvement to a workflow or customer experience, built, tested and handed over.	

Ongoing partnership	From CA\$3,000 per month
From 12 hours a month of direct work with me, including planning, implementation and support.	

Focused discovery · optional	CA\$750
A 60-minute working session, review of one workflow and a written recommendation on what to do next.	

All fees in Canadian dollars; agreed software costs and applicable taxes are additional.

[Talk to James](#) [View pricing and scope](#) [See the work](#)

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