



A collaboration with:



December 2025

Get Ready for Valentine's Day!

Your marketing plans (including direct mail) for this year should be well in place. That's why, we are turning our attention to early 2026 and the first significant marketing opportunity of the new year, Valentine's Day. (Unless you count Blue Monday (January 19th) as a marketing opportunity, as some do.)

Any business can run a Valentine's Day promotion.



All images courtesy of Who's Mailing What!

Consider this example from AmeriGas, the largest retail propane distributor in the United States with approximately 1.7 million customers.

It's Valentine's Day offer is a special price (\$2.99 per gallon) on a single order of at least 100 gallons of propane delivered to customer-owned tanks by February 14th, using the special code "ADORE 25."

The copy on this postcard mailing is full of V Day phrases — "Savings you'll adore," "Fall in love," and "Give the gift of warmth this Valentine's Day season with sweet pricing" — and images of hearts.

These are fundamental elements of any Valentine's Day promotion. Still, the question is: *If a propane distributor can use them in a customer promotion, can your business do the same thing?*

Of course, you can, provided you can create an offer that would appeal to your customer base. The choice of

offers is virtually unlimited — from monetary savings to "couples-only" deals, or the tried-and-true "gift with purchase" option where the gift is a box of chocolates or a bouquet of red roses.

Alternatively, your Valentine's Day promotion could be a series of themed events, such as this one from the Philbrook Museum of Art, titled

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"Valentine's Day..."*



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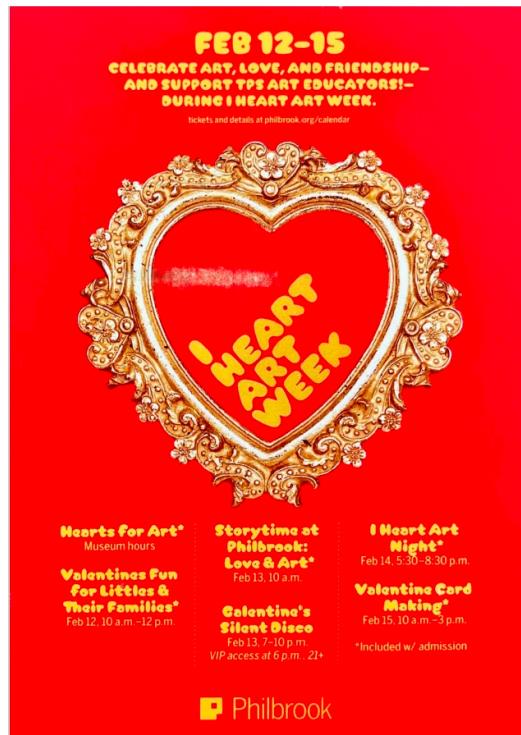
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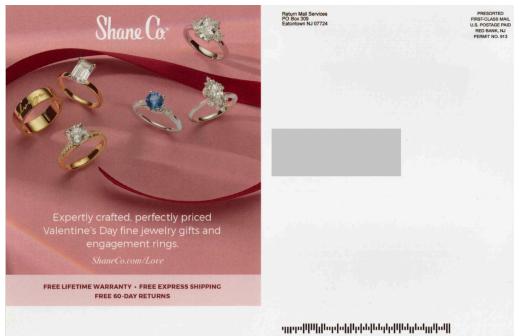
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Continued from page 1



\$37 for adults), a Wine Club tasting event on February 14th (\$35) and a Wedding Showcase (free) on February 21st.

Because Valentine's Day is the most popular day to get engaged, retail jewelry promotions are everywhere.



deals, like love, are in the air.

The copy on this side of the postcard reads "Expertly crafted, perfectly priced Valentine's Day fine jewelry gifts and engagement rings." (*What, exactly, is "perfectly priced?"*)

Shane Co. may have sent this promotion to existing customers or prospects, or both, but it was mailed at first-

"I HEART ART WEEK."

Most of the themed events are included with admission to the museum.

The reverse side of the postcard lists three events, a Quilling Workshop where one can "learn to craft intricate, heartwarming Valentine's Day cards and decorations using delicate strips of paper" on February 8th (\$20 for members,

This mailing, from Shane Co., an independent retailer in Indianapolis, is pure class. (See the other side of the postcard on page 3.)

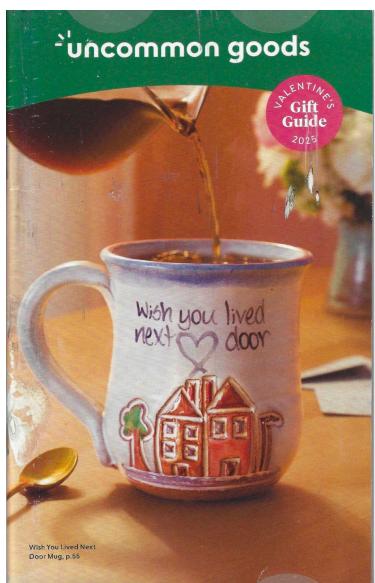
It is clearly pitched at couples and hints that

Continues on the right



(FYI, jewelry sales around Valentine's Day were valued at \$6.4 billion in 2024.)

While these promotions have all been in the form of postcards, that's not the only format for Valentine's Day promotions.



Catalogs are popular, too, like this one from Uncommon Goods, "an online marketplace to connect makers and their creations with shoppers looking for truly unique goods," conceived in 1999 when founder **Dave Bolotsky** visited a local craft show.

While it might be an "online marketplace," it uses physical catalogs to promote the products it sells. This catalog's 58 pages feature romantic gifts, jewelry, and cooking and hosting products.

class rates so that the business has greater certainty over when people will receive it.

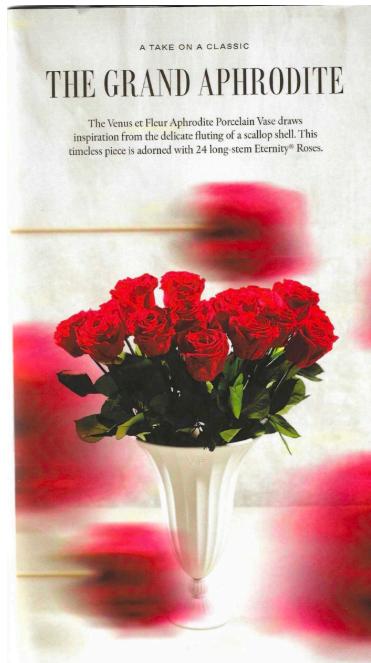
This approach is always worth considering for highly targeted, low-volume promotions tied to a specific date or event. Better to be one day early than one day late.



This 24-page catalog offers a 15% discount on any mouthwatering item featured on its pages.

While flowers are the heart of Valentine's Day, a floral mishap led to the creation of a new business.

In 2015, **Sunny Chada** sent flowers to his now-wife, **Seema Bansal**. The flowers did not last as the florist's website promised.



The couple created Venus et Fleur and its Eternity Roses line, which are "real" flowers that last up to a year with minimal care.

According to the company's website, the roses are picked at their peak and then "dehydrated, preserved and dyed" in a proprietary, non-toxic process.

While these roses may be more "embalmed"

*Continues on page 4
"Valentine's Day..."*

"Valentine's Day..."

Continued from page 3

than they are "real," this fact has not slowed the growth of Venus et Fleur.

The founders have been featured in *Forbes'* Top 30 Under 30, and its 2024 sales were \$9 million, according to data firm ECDB.

Flowers are the classic gift for Valentine's Day, with red roses being the most popular choice; consequently, they can make an excellent promotional item for your business.

But, shop early and lock in your pricing soon, as prices will rise the closer it gets to V Day. In the US, a dozen roses from a local florist cost \$30 to \$60 throughout the year; for Valentine's Day, the same roses cost \$70 to \$90.

A Promotion For Your Best Clients

If your business is local, consider approaching a florist and getting a price quote for 25 gift cards, each for a dozen roses to be delivered (in your city) on Valentine's Day.

You purchase the gift cards by paying half of the value immediately with the balance due, on February 15th, based on redemption.

Send these gift cards to your "top 25" clients.

The florist secures some Valentine's Day sales and may even gain a few new customers. (The latter will be part of your pitch to the florist.)

The client is delighted with the thoughtful gift.

You benefit from an enhanced relationship, one that can be quantified by keeping track of those clients' purchases and referrals in the six months following the gift and comparing this data to a matched set of non-gift recipients.

Or, use the same approach with gift cards for chocolate or dining out as the incentive.

A Promotion For Solid Clients

Not every customer is a "top client;" in fact, very few are. However, you probably have another group of "solid" customers, people who purchase from you regularly.

In this case, bundle the gift card with a specific purchase activity — "Buy X and receive a \$XX Gift Card from [Store Name] with our compliments." You track the impact of this promotion by monitoring the purchases of those who received the offer and comparing them to a matched group who did not.

In closing, our recommendation for these types of promotions is to partner with independent, brick-and-mortar stores in your community.

Preferably, these are places you buy from throughout the year. You know the owners, and they know you. As such, you'll probably get the best deal.

MEMBERS-ONLY LIVE DIRECT MAIL INSIDERS' CALLS ON ZOOM

(All 90-minute calls start at NOON Eastern/11 AM Central/9 AM Pacific)

ALL Members

December 9th

FULL Members

January 13th

February 10th

January 27th

February 24th

These calls will be recorded and posted on the Private Members' Site for future reference.

Call Notes

Our call on November 11th failed due to technical difficulties, and we apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused.

The presentation has been recorded and is available for all members

to view at their leisure.

The presentation features a case study of Canadian furniture retailer The Brick and its pre-holiday promotion, which launched on October 23rd, offering price protection on all purchases made before the end of the year. (There are a few exceptions.)

If a customer finds the identical product at a lower price, they will receive a refund of the difference.



This promotion, now in its fourth year uses television commercials that run in rotation with product/price commercials. (Virtually all advertising for furniture and appliances is product- and price-based.)

Also, the promotion is featured on the company's website, in its printed flyers, and with in-store signage.

The HOLIDAY SEASON PRICE GUARANTEE gives consumers confidence to shop early and the perception of a "lowest price" guarantee.

We say "perception" because it is possible that another retailer could offer the same product

at a lower price.

However, this outcome is unlikely since The Brick and its other brands hold a strong market share (13%+/-) and significant buying power.

Critically, The Brick has "insider information" about the company's overall pricing. So, if the lowest price on a particular item within its family of brands was, say, \$2,997, The Brick could price that item at \$2,989 and be confident that it would not need to issue any refunds. The loss of margin is negligible.

Additionally, this promotion gives consumers the "gift of time," meaning that they are not forced to shop and make purchase decisions on a specific day (i.e., Black Friday) or during a time-limited sales event. They shop at their convenience.

How does this promotion apply to your business? It does, in these four ways:

1. Reward customers for buying early. This approach can take different forms, "early bird" pricing or a "lowest price guarantee," for example. (Cash in the bank is king!)
2. Plan a seasonal promotion but launch it before your competitors do. Modify a promotion from earlier in the year and add a Holiday twist.
3. You don't need TV commercials; physical mail works well with customers. Describe your seasonal promotion in the pages of a catalog or flyer. Summarize it on a postcard and use a QR code to drive traffic to it.
4. Make a motivating offer. The Brick's offer is simple and it has proven to be effective (and perhaps inexpensive): If another retailer sells the identical item for less, they will refund the difference.

2025 Editorial Fe

COVER STORY

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Stu Heinecke, Curating Controls With Cartoons

FEBRUARY 2025

2025 Direct Mail Trends And Predictions

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13 Ways to Improve Sales Letters

MAY 2025

The Marketer's Guide To Surviving A Recession

JUNE 2025

Get Ready for "Christmas In July"

JULY 2025

Secrets Of A \$400 Million Subscription Selling Campaign

AUGUST 2025

State of Direct Mail 2025

SEPTEMBER 2025

If You Are Just Joining Us...

OCTOBER 2025

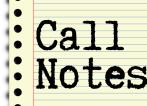
Get Ready for a Great Thanksgiving Weekend

NOVEMBER 2025

Direct Mail Inspiration from DELIVERED 2025

DECEMBER 2025

Get Ready for Valentine's Day!



This summary does not include the Call Notes column or one-off articles that appear in most issues.

MAILING OF THE MONTH

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American Farmland Trust
(Donor acquisition)

FEBRUARY 2025

Amazon Fresh
(New store opening)

MARCH 2025

Root Insurance
(Insights Into a control package)

APRIL 2025

Best Friends Animal Society
(Long-running "Holiday" package)

MAY 2025

Walmart+
(Member acquisition for a retail club)

JUNE 2025

My Pillow, Inc.
("Consistency" in mailings)

JULY 2025

ButcherBox
(Customer acquisition)

AUGUST 2025

Compass
(Monthly mailings to real estate clients and prospects)

SEPTEMBER 2025

United Service Organizations, Inc.
(Donor acquisition)

OCTOBER 2025

Capital One
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NOVEMBER 2025

Baldwin Brothers Funeral & Cremation Society
("Lunch & Learn" Seminars)

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FEBRUARY 2025

What Every Business Can Learn From Costco's Customer-First Approach

MARCH 2025

How to Market in the Age of Cultural Fragmentation

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The Power of Suspension Of Disbelief In Marketing

MAY 2025

The Science Of Selling With Smiles: How Humor Drives Marketing Success

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The Power of Simplicity In Advertising and Messaging

JULY 2025

The Wine Perception Gap: (Creating Powerful Positioning Opportunities)

AUGUST 2025

The Most Dangerous Place In Business Is Your Comfort Zone

SEPTEMBER 2025

How Often Should You Email Your Customers?

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SEO in the Age of AI

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Why So Much Marketing Doesn't Work (And How a Better Offer Can Fix It)

DECEMBER 2025

The Hidden Cost of "Best Practices"

SEND-OFF

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Shortcuts to Innovative Thinking For Your Business

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Merging Two Businesses

MARCH 2025

The Power Of Subtraction: What Happens When You Stop Doing "X?"

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Why People Hate Being Sold To — But Love To Buy

MAY 2025

The Virtue of Patience In An Instant Gratification World

JUNE 2025

Why Overthinking Is The Enemy Of Breakthrough Ideas

JULY 2025

What Wildfire Management Can Teach Us About Scaling Businesses

AUGUST 2025

Do You Need A Mentor — Or Just Better Questions?

SEPTEMBER 2025

The Science Of Scarcity: Using Constraints To Fuel Creativity

OCTOBER 2025

How Betting On Underdog Markets Can Yield Oversized Wins

NOVEMBER 2025

Reverse Engineering Failure: Learning More From What Doesn't Work

DECEMBER 2025

The Hidden Costs of Jumping On The AI Bandwagon

Beyond The Mailbox

The Hidden Cost of "Best Practices"

by David Baer

Recently, I was talking with a residential contractor about her marketing.

As a long-time marketer I noticed some missed opportunities and confusing language in her promotional materials, so I asked about it.

She shrugged and said, *"That's the way it's done in our industry."* No hesitation. No second thought. Just a rule she had picked up along the way.

It's easy to fall into the habit of doing things a certain way just because everyone else does. We see it in every field — especially in marketing.

People follow the "best practices" because they seem safe. But safe isn't always smart. And sometimes, following the crowd can quietly drag your results down.

Copying the usual playbook can hold you back. So let's explore what you can do instead.

Why "Best Practices" Can Hold You Back

The idea behind best practices is simple. Someone tries something, it works, and then everyone else copies it.

But the problem is your business isn't like everyone else's. Your customers, your team, your goals are different.

Stephen Shapiro, in his book, *Best Practices Are Stupid*, explains this well.

He says that copying what others do can make you average.

You stop thinking for yourself. You stop looking for new answers. And you miss out on ideas that could actually work better for you.

I've seen companies stick to the "safe" way of doing things, only to watch their results get worse.

They send emails at the "right" time, use the "right" postcard design, and write the "right" call-to-action. But their customers do not respond. Why? Because their customers aren't the same as everyone else's.

Common Marketing "Best Practices" That Don't Always Fit

Let's look at three examples:

Email Frequency

You'll hear that you should send one email a week. But some businesses find that their audience wants more updates. Others see better results with fewer emails. If you only follow the rule, you'll never know what your customers actually want.

Postcard Design

There's a formula for postcard layouts — big headline, clear offer, lots of white space — and, as a proud advocate of physical mail, I appreciate the importance and the validity of this formula.

But I've seen brands get magnificent results with bold colors, handwritten notes, or even odd shapes in their promotional mailings.

Sometimes, breaking the design rules is what

Continues on the right

gets people to notice you.

Call-to-Action Formulas

"Buy Now" or "Learn More" are common, albeit uninspiring, CTAs.

Sometimes, a softer ask works better. Or maybe your audience responds better to a more direct approach. The only way to know is to test it yourself.

When Breaking the Rules Works

Some of the most successful companies got there by ignoring the rules. They tried things that didn't make sense to others.

They tested new ideas, even when the experts said not to:

Take the UK's Surreal Cereal.



They don't follow the usual playbook for breakfast brands, like focusing on family-friendly ads or fighting for shelf space with big budgets.

Instead, they built their brand around surprise and irreverence.

Surreal targets marketers on LinkedIn, uses humor that pokes fun at industry norms, and launches unexpected partnerships (like teaming up with Gymshark or even Viagra producer Numan).

Their campaigns are designed to get people talking. As their co-founder **Kit Gammell** puts it, "We wanted to be this playful brand, but playful for kids would probably mean going outside, running around and playing. Playful

for adults is a bit more sophisticated. It's humour, it's wit, and, if possible, a bit of sarcasm."

(I should also point out that Surreal Cereal is also relatively healthy, with its high protein, low carb and zero sugar recipe.)

Fashion-retailer Zara ignores the industry's "best practices" by avoiding traditional advertising. Instead, it focuses on rapid inventory turnover and scarcity.

(Quick aside: The term "fast fashion" is based on Zara's highly-efficient supply chain, which gets clothing from its corporate-owned manufacturing sites to its retail stores quickly.)

Trader Joe's doesn't bother with social media or loyalty programs. Unlike most other grocery stores, it does not collect customer data for future marketing purposes.

Instead, the company relies on unique products, fair prices, and a wonderful in-store experience to keep its customers coming back.



Also, it's quirky *Fearless Flyer* doesn't hurt reinforce the emotional connection of its customers to the store.

To say that this publication is a cornerstone of Trader Joe's marketing is a massive understatement... it is their marketing!

The *Fearless Flyer* introduces new products, offers recipes and other ways to use the products that are featured in-store.

Krispy Kreme turns every employee into a

Continues on page 10

marketer and lets customers watch their doughnuts being made.



The company's iconic Original Glazed® doughnut is, according to the company, "universally recognized for its hot-off-the-line, melt-in-your-mouth experience".

These companies have each built a culture around questioning what everyone else in their industry is doing. They test, listen, and adapt — often doing the opposite of what's expected.

How to Move Beyond Best Practices

Here's how you can avoid the trap of blind imitation and start finding what works for you:

1. Question the Norms

Don't just accept advice because it's popular. Ask yourself: *Why does this rule exist? Does it make sense for my business? For my customers?* Sometimes, the answer is yes.

But often, you'll find that the rule doesn't fit your situation.

2. Test Locally

Before you roll out a new idea to everyone, try it with a small group. This could mean testing a new email subject line with a small segment of your list, or sending a different postcard design to one neighborhood. Watch what happens.

If it works, test it a second time to a different group. If not, you haven't risked much.

3. Use Your Own Data

Your customers will tell you what works (if you pay attention, that is).

Track your results. Look at open rates, clicks, sales, and feedback. Don't just rely on industry averages. Your own numbers are more valuable than any "best practice" guide.

4. Be Willing to Break Rules

It's easy to play it safe. But real growth often comes from trying something new. If you have an idea that feels right for your business, test it. Even if it goes against what the experts say. You might be surprised by the results.

5. Address the Real Problem

Before you look for solutions, make sure you understand the problem.

Sometimes, the issue isn't your email frequency or your postcard design.

It might be your offer, your timing, or your audience. Take the time to dig deeper. The right answer often comes from asking better questions.

What You Can Do Next

If you want better results, stop chasing someone else's idea of "best."

Start by questioning the rules. Test your own ideas, even if they go against the grain. Trust your data, not just the experts. And remember, the best answers are often the ones you find for yourself.

You don't have to follow the crowd. In fact, you'll often do better when you don't.

Take a look at your own marketing. Where are you following the rules just because everyone else does? Pick one area and try something different.

Test it... Measure it... See what happens.

You might find that your best results come when you stop trying to be like everyone else.

DMA Awards 2023, Best Use in Mail - GOLD WINNER

Case Study, Courtesy of JICMAIL

MR & MRS SMITH

This online travel business (mrandsmrssmith.com) bills itself as "the travel club for hotel lovers" and boasts over one million members globally. Based in the UK, Mr & Mrs Smith focuses on hotels and wonderful experiences. The site stands out in that hotels need to be invited and approved before being added to the site.

Working closely with its agency, long-time direct mail specialists PSE, they dove into the data. They found four segments for a new campaign, which would celebrate the 20th anniversary of Mr & Mrs Smith, posing the question they want all members to ask:

"...BUT IS IT A SMITH HOTEL?

(The segments were: 45+ affluent families in larger houses and affluent 20 to 30 year olds in rented or shared accommodation in cities. Each had two subsets, active and lapsed.)

Using the JICMAIL insight that travel mail is interacted with 4.5 times, PSE aimed to create something that would remain on the coffee table for an extended period of time. Equally, the mailing had to work hard and drive bookings while appealing to the four segments of active/lapsed and younger/older.

The above question was posed on the outer envelope, while inside members found an 8-page newspaper titled "Room Service," a departure from conventional brochures. Aspirational content showcased the "Top 9 places to Visit in 2023," styled after a Sunday Supplement, enticing readers to explore further on the website and make bookings.

INCREDIBLE RESULTS!

JICMAIL data shows that the average high consideration luxury travel direct mail response rate is 1%. With this campaign, PSE and Mr & Mrs

Smith achieved 1.59% at the time of reporting the results, but PSE knows the long tail bookings continued far beyond this.

The ROAS delivered was 35:1, far exceeding expectations.

Compared to many other luxury brands, this communication didn't resort to discount offers, big phone numbers, or QR codes.

The editorial style, inspirational content, and the power of customer aspiration were more than enough to drive the higher level of bookings.





SEND-OFF

THE HIDDEN COSTS OF JUMPING ON THE AI BANDWAGON

AI has taken the business world by storm, promising efficiency, innovation, and growth. From streamlining processes to enhancing customer experiences, every company is racing to integrate AI into its operations. But in the rush to adopt this transformative technology, many overlook the hidden costs that can undermine its potential benefits. Here's what to watch out for.

Unclear Objectives Lead to Wasted Investment

The hype surrounding AI often pushes companies to adopt it without clear goals. Implementing AI because everyone else is doing so can lead to wasted time, money, and effort. Before investing in AI, define "success" for your business. Is your aim to reduce costs, improve decision-making, or offer better customer insights? Without clarity, your AI efforts may flounder.

Data Quality and Management Challenges

AI systems are only as good as the data they're fed. Poor-quality or insufficient data can lead to inaccurate results, which can harm decision-making. Many businesses underestimate the cost of cleaning, organizing, and maintaining data — budget for data management so that your AI initiatives are not derailed.

Integration Issues with Existing Systems

AI doesn't operate in isolation. It must integrate seamlessly with your existing systems

and workflows. This often requires significant technical expertise, custom development, and ongoing support. These hidden costs can add up quickly, especially if your organization isn't familiar with the complexities of AI integration.

Talent Acquisition and Training

AI requires specialized skills that are often in short supply. Hiring experts in AI and machine learning can be expensive, and retaining them can be challenging in a competitive job market. Additionally, upskilling your workforce to work alongside AI systems is an often-overlooked cost that is critical for long-term success.

Over-dependence and Ethical Risks

Relying too heavily on AI can lead to unintended consequences, including ethical concerns and potential bias in decision-making. These issues pose reputational risks but may also expose your business to regulatory scrutiny. Building safeguards, conducting regular audits, and ensuring accountability are essential steps that require ongoing resources.

Ongoing Maintenance and Scalability

AI is not a "set-it-and-forget-it" solution. It requires regular updates, maintenance, and adjustments to remain effective as business needs evolve. Scaling AI capabilities to match growth or changing objectives often means extra and unanticipated costs.

Conclusion

AI can be a powerful tool, but it's not a silver bullet. Jumping on the bandwagon can turn a potential advantage into a liability. By setting clear objectives, addressing data and talent challenges, and planning for long-term maintenance, businesses can maximize the benefits of AI while minimizing the risks. Careful planning and strategic execution are the keys to making AI work for you.