

THE FUTURE NORMAL OF THE PROMOTIONAL PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

Data & Insight Report

Co-created live with 96 ideas | PPAI NALC | San Diego, May 2026

Prompt: "Sketch the AI tool you want to deploy in your organisation."

Theme	% of Ideas	Strategic Significance
Order, Proof & Service Automation	24.0%	The operational gauntlet — the slowest, most-handed-off work in every job.
Visual Sales Enablement	24.0%	The mockup IS the sales pitch — make the proposal generative.
Decision Intelligence & Forecasting	16.7%	Dusty data becomes the next move — heat maps replace gut feel.
Prospecting & Pipeline Reactivation	14.6%	The highest-value prospect might already be in your CRM.
Supply Chain & Inventory	13.5%	Live lead-time visibility — sourcing becomes a search engine.
Internal Knowledge & Process Mapping	7.3%	Tribal knowledge becomes queryable — end 'who do I ask?'
Quote & Pricing Intelligence	7.3%	Multi-source quoting compressed from hours to instants.
Talent, Onboarding & Engagement	6.2%	The people side gets a digital twin — coaching, engagement, the 'boss clone'.
Vertical ERP & All-in-One Platforms	5.2%	The 'one platform' bet — versus the specialist agent stack everyone else imagined.

Total coverage exceeds 100% — most ideas spanned multiple themes, reflecting the integrated, systems-level thinking of participants.

What the data is telling us

The room is split right down the middle: front-of-house vs. back-of-house.

The two biggest clusters in the San Diego room came in identical at **24.0%**. One half of the room sketched tools that make the customer-facing moment more *generative* — instant virtuals, AI-generated lookbooks, photorealistic pitch decks. The other half sketched tools that make the operational work more *invisible* — automated PO parsing, AI art-proof checking, zero-touch order status. These are different bets with different ROI, different buyers, and different proof points. That they scored exactly equal is itself the signal: the industry knows where its pain is, and it lives on both sides of the sale.

The mockup IS the sales pitch.

Inside Visual Sales Enablement, the pattern was unmistakable. Vizionary intercepts client emails and generates virtuals matching exact brand colors. BrandDeck overlays logos onto every product in a deck. VisionPitch builds storyboards from brand parameters. CatalogConnect generates data-driven sales guides for distributors. MerchFlow goes from idea to PO with print-ready art in one motion. Read together, this is the most distinctly-promo signal in the data: in a business where the proposal IS a visual product, the room wants AI to make the proposal generative — and the line between “creative work” and “sales work” starts to dissolve.

The operational gauntlet is the loudest pain.

Order, Proof & Service Automation combines the three places people most consistently want AI to remove manual friction: PO intake (TransactIQ, OrderStream, FluxPO, LexiOrder), art & proof QA (ArtFlow, PrePress AI, StitchLogic, ChestMark), and post-purchase customer service (OmniTrace, TraceMind, RelayAI, LiberateFlow). The connective tissue: these are all manual handoffs that slow down jobs that have already been won. The room isn't asking for better fire trucks. They want fire prevention.

Dusty data, dressed up as decisions.

16.7% of submissions leaned into forecasting, heat maps, behavioral models, and what-if engines. DataRev wants to “activate dusty data.” VentuMap layers revenue heat maps onto demographics to find white space. LayeredInsight cascades from top categories down to states and reps. The interpretation: this audience has stopped asking for more dashboards. They want a system that distills the data they already have into the next move.

The highest-value prospect might already be in your CRM.

Prospecting & Pipeline Reactivation (**14.6%**) wasn't just generic top-of-funnel hunting. Half the cluster goes after new buyers — including non-obvious ones (ExitAI for M&A acquirers, LegacyLink for aging owners without exit strategies, MerchMatch for sales-rep recruitment). The other half goes after old buyers who went quiet — ReboundAI and ClientRevive both reactivate dormant accounts with hyper-personalised decks. Same AI capability underneath. Very different commercial economics on top.

Tensions worth sitting with

Generative front-end vs. invisible back-end.

The two biggest themes tied at **24%** apiece but pull in opposite directions. Visual Sales Enablement is about making the customer-facing moment more magical: faster, more personalised, more visual. Order, Proof & Service Automation is about making the operational work behind the moment *disappear*: fewer hands, fewer emails, fewer missed proofs. Both bets are valid. But they sit in different budgets, answer to different executives, and prove out on different metrics. If you only have one AI investment in 2026, which side of the sale do you fund first?

All-in-one platform vs. specialist agent.

Vertical ERP submissions (**5.2%**) imagine one platform doing everything — BoostCore, BoostSphere, BoostERP all pitch a unified architecture purpose-built for swag, gifting, and corporate merch. But the much larger weight of the room imagined specialist agents — one for art QA, one for orders, one for forecasting, one for outreach. The room hasn't decided whether 2026 is the year of the promo-products ERP or the year of the modular agent stack.

New buyer vs. revived buyer.

Inside Prospecting, the room split between two very different commercial bets. ExitAI, MerchMatch, and LegacyLink go after new buyers — including non-obvious ones like aging owners or M&A acquirers. ReboundAI and ClientRevive go after old buyers who went quiet. Both lean on the same AI capability — hyper-personalised outreach at scale — but the dormant-client motion is cheaper, faster, and quieter. Which buyer is actually cheaper to acquire in your business in 2026?

For the audience in the room — 3 provocations to take home:

Find your moment of dread.

Nearly a quarter of the room sketched ideas around the moments where the work gets *hard* — the PMS color disagreement, the PO arriving the night before fulfillment, the status update that didn't get sent, the lapsed-client deck no one has time to write. What's the one moment in your week that takes more time than it should — and what would it look like to put an AI agent in that exact moment?

The mockup is becoming the deal.

If a quarter of the room is imagining instant virtuals and AI-generated pitch decks, the implication is that within 18 months, “send me a sample” starts to get replaced by “send me a virtual good enough to commit to.” If your sales process still depends on shipping a physical sample — what does that mean for your speed-to-close compared to a competitor who can ship a photorealistic AI virtual in 90 seconds?

Hire the agent you'd actually keep.

Vertical ERPs were the smallest theme. The room mostly imagined specialist agents — one tool, one job, one outcome. If you could add *one* autonomous colleague to your team in 2026, which seat would they take, what would the first piece of work be — and how would you measure whether they've earned it by the end of the year?

Want to dive deeper? **View & explore all 96 user-generated images and ideas.**

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