

THE CATALYST SERIES

Where Small Businesses, Experts, & Resource Connect

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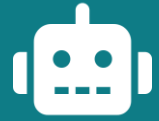
GREATER WILLIAMSBURG CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

DOG Street AI

Practical tools, straight answers, and a plan you can use Monday morning

Presented by Trenton W. Ford

twford@wm.edu • 90-minute interactive workshop



First — let's take the temperature of the room



Raise your hand if... you've ever used ChatGPT, Gemini, or Copilot — even once.



Keep it up if... you've received an email or text you suspect was an AI-written scam.



And be honest... who has no idea whether their business is already using AI?



Where we're headed today



1. Demystify

What AI actually is — in plain English — and where it's already hiding in your tools.



2. Automate

A simple framework for safely putting AI to work in marketing, operations, and customer engagement.



3. Navigate

How algorithms decide who sees you — and how to protect your brand from digital misinformation.



4. Apply

A five-question filter to decide which tools deserve your time and which to skip. You'll use it today.

01



Demystifying AI

No jargon. No hype. What these tools actually are — and why they're not just for big companies.



AI in one sentence

Software that has studied millions of examples so it can make useful predictions — the next word, the likely answer, the best match.

It predicts — it doesn't “know.”

That's why it's confident even when it's wrong.
Your judgment stays essential.

It's trained, not programmed.

It learned patterns from examples — the same way it can learn the pattern of your voice and your business.

It's already cheap.

The tools you'll see today are free or under \$30/month. This is not an enterprise-budget conversation.

Guess the next word

Finish each phrase out loud — don't think, just say it:

1 Peanut butter and _____

(everyone, instantly, together)

2 Life, liberty, and the pursuit of _____

(you've heard this a few thousand times)

3 The fife and _____ corps

(a very Williamsburg pattern)

4 For lunch today, I'm thinking _____

(wait — why did the room disagree on this one?)

How did you know? A lifetime of hearing these patterns — your own “training data.” Hold that thought.



Now call the dice roll

I'm about to roll this die. Shout your prediction.



You can't know the outcome

Any face can come up. Nobody in this room can call a single roll — and nobody's embarrassed about that.



But you do know the odds

Each face is exactly 1-in-6. You know the full menu of outcomes and precisely how likely each one is.



Now imagine a loaded die

Weight one face so it lands 9 times out of 10. You still can't be certain — but now you'd bet on it.

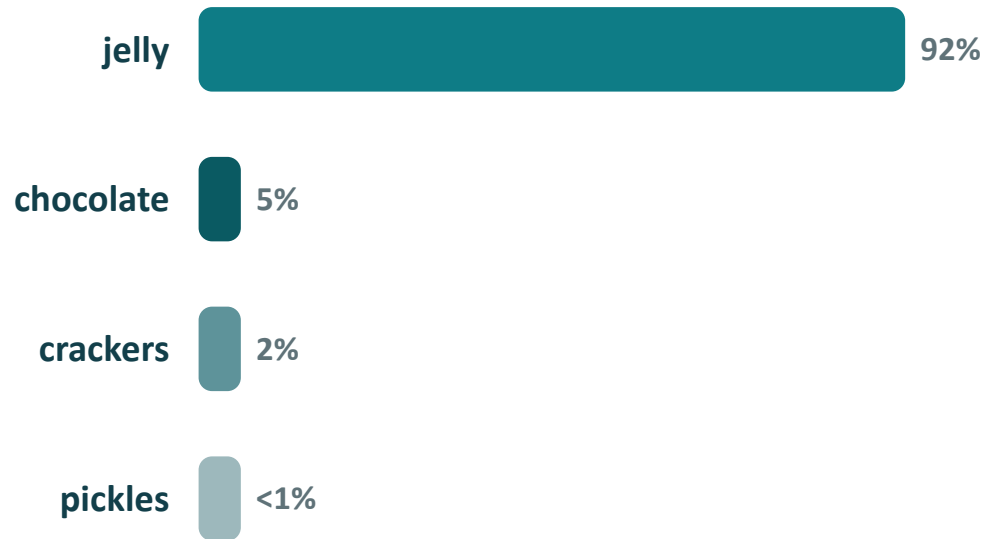
Prediction isn't certainty — it's knowing the odds and playing them. Keep the loaded die in mind...



Put them together — that's generative AI

Peanut butter and _____

The model's "loaded die" for the next word:



Weights come from patterns in millions of pages of training data — its lifetime of "hearing the phrase."

1

Build the loaded die

For every possible next word, score how likely it is — based on everything it read in training.

2

Roll it

Pick a heavily weighted word. Usually "jelly." Occasionally "chocolate." That's why answers vary.

3

Repeat, word by word

Add the word, re-weight the die, roll again. A whole paragraph is thousands of tiny loaded rolls.

This explains both: why it's so fluent (the odds are usually right) and why it "hallucinates" (a wrong word can still roll high).



Two myths to retire today



Myth: “AI is magic — or a menace”

- It doesn't think, feel, or want anything — it completes patterns.
- It makes mistakes confidently (“hallucinations”) — never publish unreviewed output.
- It won't replace the owner. Judgment, taste, and relationships are still yours.
- It isn't one thing: chatbots, schedulers, and photo tools are all “AI.”



Reality: it's a set of assistants

- Great at first drafts: emails, posts, descriptions, replies.
- Great at repetition: sorting, summarizing, scheduling, reminders.
- Works at your scale — solo shop or 30-person crew.
- You direct it. The more specific your instructions, the better the result.



Surprise — you're already using it



Your inbox

Spam filtering, priority sorting, and those one-tap suggested replies — all AI, working quietly for years.



Square, QuickBooks, Toast

Sales forecasts, anomaly alerts, auto-categorized expenses, and invoice reminders are machine-learning features.



Google Business Profile

Suggested replies to reviews, auto-generated business descriptions, and the search ranking itself.



Your phone

Autocomplete, photo search, maps rerouting around traffic — prediction engines you trust every day.

The question isn't “should I use AI?” — it's “which AI is worth using on purpose?”

AI or Not?

I'll show you five real examples. Vote by hand: was it made by a human — or generated by AI?



Round 1

A marketing email



Round 2

A 5-star customer review



Round 3

A product photo



Round 4

A chatbot reply



Round 5

A local news blurb

The point: if this room can't reliably tell the difference, neither can your customers — remember that for Section 3.



The mindset that makes this work

**AI is an assistant.
You are the manager.**



Delegate the drafts

Hand it the first pass — never the final say.



Review everything

You'd proof a new employee's work. Same rule.



Keep the human moments

Customers came to Williamsburg for people, not bots.

02



Practical Automation

A simple framework — and real examples across marketing, operations, and customer engagement.



One rule decides everything

Automate the repetitive. Keep the personal.



Repetitive → automate

- Anything you do the same way weekly: drafts, sorting, scheduling, reminders, data entry.
- Low stakes if imperfect — you review before it ships.
- Test: “Could I write instructions for a new hire to do this?”



Personal → keep it human

- Complaints, condolences, negotiations, community relationships.
- Anything where the customer would feel tricked to learn a bot wrote it.
- Your voice, your story, your judgment calls.



“Keep the personal” isn't sentiment — it's strategy

79%

prefer talking to a human over AI in customer service

SurveyMonkey, 2025

73%

say they're more loyal to companies that use people, not AI, for service

OnePoll / AnswerConnect, 2026

87%

want a real person when contacting a local service business

OnePoll survey of 6,000 adults, 2026

42%

would pay extra for access to human representatives

SurveyMonkey, 2025

The nuance: about half of consumers prefer a bot for instant answers. Automate the quick stuff, keep the human moments — exactly our rule.



Marketing: your always-on drafting desk

Social posts

“Write 5 Instagram captions for our fall menu, casual tone, under 30 words each”
— then pick and polish.

ChatGPT, Claude, Canva Magic Write

Email newsletters

Feed it last month's news + upcoming events; it drafts, you edit in your voice. 2 hours → 20 minutes.

Mailchimp AI, Constant Contact

Product descriptions

Turn a spec list into three description options — pick the one that sounds like you.

Shopify Magic, Claude

Images & flyers

Seasonal graphics and event flyers without a designer on retainer.

Canva, Adobe Express

Rule of thumb: AI writes the first draft — you supply the humanity it can't fake.



Operations: quiet hours given back



Scheduling

Staff shifts, appointment booking, and no-show reminders that send themselves.

Square Appointments, Homebase, Calendly



Books & invoices

Auto-categorized expenses, receipt capture, and polite chase-up emails for late invoices.

QuickBooks, Xero, Wave



Inventory & alerts

Reorder-point alerts and sales-pattern flags — know Tuesday's rush is coming.

Square, Lightspeed, Toast



Paperwork & summaries

Summarize a vendor contract, draft an SOP, turn meeting notes into a task list.

ChatGPT, Claude, Copilot



Customer engagement: fast, but still you



Review responses

Draft replies to every review — you personalize and post. Responding to reviews also helps local search.



FAQ chatbot

Answer “are you open Sunday?” at 11pm. Scope it to hours, location, parking, menu — and hand off anything else to a human.



Follow-ups & win-backs

“We haven't seen you in a while” notes and post-purchase check-ins, drafted from your templates.



Where to draw the line

Complaints, refunds, anything emotional: a human, every time. Disclose the bot (“I'm the shop's automated assistant”) — trust survives honesty, not discovery.



Let's watch it work — live

The task: respond to a real (anonymized) 3-star review

1

Paste the review

"Food was great but we waited 40 minutes..."

2

Give it a role + rules

"You're the owner. Warm, no excuses, under 80 words, invite them back."

3

Read the first draft

Notice: decent, but generic. It doesn't know our Saturday rush story.

4

Edit like a manager

Add the specific fix we made. Cut the corporate phrases. Now it's ours.

Watch for step 4. The edit is the skill. The tool gets you 70% of the way in 10 seconds — your 30% is what customers actually feel.



Four rules before you automate anything



1. Human reviews everything

Nothing AI writes reaches a customer without your eyes on it. No exceptions in year one.



2. Never paste sensitive data

No customer lists, card numbers, health info, or employee records into public AI tools. Assume anything you paste could be seen.



3. Start free, start small

Pilot one tool on one task for two weeks before paying or expanding. Free tiers exist to be used.



4. One tool at a time

Adopting three tools at once means abandoning three tools by March. Master one, then add.

Find your one task



Solo — 3 min

On your worksheet, list the 3 most repetitive tasks in your week. Be specific: “Monday inventory count,” not “admin.”



Pairs — 4 min

Compare lists with a neighbor. Use the test: “Could I write instructions for a new hire to do this?” Pick each person's best automation candidate.



Room — 3 min

A few volunteers share their pick. Keep your worksheet — you'll use this exact task again in Activity 2.

Meet someone new — this is a Chamber event, after all.



Take five

Stretch, refill, introduce yourself to your activity partner properly.
We restart in five minutes — on the dot. Next up: getting seen online, and staying safe there.

03



Navigating the Digital Landscape

How algorithms decide who sees your business — and how to protect your brand from what's fake.



Where your customers actually look

53%

of U.S. adults get news from social media at least sometimes — Facebook (38%) and YouTube (35%) lead

44%

of U.S. adults now use ChatGPT — up from 18% in 2023; half use some AI chatbot

60%

have read AI-generated summaries at the top of their search results

...and the trust gap that comes with it:

Only 24%

say it's easy to tell what's true from what's false online

Only 29%

of chatbot users trust the information chatbots give them

Sources: Pew Research Center surveys, 2025–2026

Your customers are in feeds and AI summaries — and they're skeptical of what they find there. That's this whole section.



Who sees you isn't random

Every platform — Google, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok — ranks you on three signals:



Relevance

Does your content match what they're searching or scrolling for? Keywords, categories, and complete profiles feed this.



Recency & consistency

Regular posting beats occasional brilliance. A profile updated last week outranks one updated last year.



Engagement

Reviews, replies, saves, and shares tell the algorithm real humans value you. Responding to reviews counts double.

Good news: these are habits, not budgets. A consistent small shop beats an inconsistent big one in local results.



The four levers that matter most locally



Claim & complete your Google Business Profile

Hours, photos, services, posts. The single highest-return hour you'll spend online — and it's free.



Ask for reviews, answer every one

A steady trickle of recent reviews (and owner replies) outweighs a big pile of old ones.



Post consistently, not constantly

One good post a week, every week, beats daily posting for a month followed by silence.



Use the words customers actually search

“Colonial Williamsburg lunch spot,” “dog groomer near Lightfoot” — put real phrases in your profile and captions.

Followee counts are vanity. Local search visibility pays rent.



The dark side: what's coming for your brand



Fake reviews

Competitors' bots or extortion schemes (“pay us or the 1-stars continue”). Report through the platform; never pay.



Impersonation

Cloned social accounts and copycat websites taking “deposits” from your customers under your name.



AI-polished phishing

The typo-riddled scam email is gone. Now it's fluent, personalized, and knows your bank's name. Remember our game?



Local misinformation

“They're closing,” “they failed inspection” — false posts in community groups spread faster than corrections.

Spot the scam — together

On the next screen: a real-looking email to a business owner. Call out every red flag you can find.

The six places to look (your take-home checklist):



Sender address — hover, don't trust the display name



Urgency — “within 24 hours or your listing is removed”



Links — does the URL match the real company, exactly?



The ask — gift cards, wire transfers, “verify” your password



Too-perfect personalization — knows your name, cites your reviews



Payment redirection — “we've changed our bank details”

When in doubt: don't click — call the company on the number you already have.



Your one-hour defense plan

1

Claim every profile — even platforms you don't use

Google, Yelp, Facebook, Instagram, Nextdoor. An unclaimed profile is an open door for impersonators.

20 min

2

Set a Google Alert for your business name

Free early-warning system: you hear about the fake post before your customers ask about it.

5 min

3

Turn on two-factor authentication everywhere

Email, bank, social. The single best defense against account takeover — non-negotiable.

15 min

4

Write your response plan while calm

Who checks reviews weekly? Who responds to a false post — and what's the tone? Decide now, not mid-crisis.

20 min

Total: one hour, one afternoon, mostly free. Cheaper than one crisis.

04



The Evaluation Filter

Five questions that separate the tools worth your time from the ones burning it.



Ask these five questions — in order

1

Does it solve a problem I actually have?

Not a problem the ad says you have. Your Activity-1 task list is the honest answer key.

2

Can I try it free in under an hour?

If setup takes a weekend or starts with a sales call, walk away. Good tools prove themselves fast.

3

Does it save more time than it costs?

Count learning, fixing, and reviewing time — not just the demo. Net minutes per week is the score.

4

What happens to my data?

Where does it go, who can see it, can you export and leave? No clear answer = no.

5

Will I still use it in 90 days?

Tools only pay off as habits. If it doesn't fit a routine you already have, it's a toy.

A “no” at any step means stop — you don't owe a tool a chance.



Skip it: six red flags



Guaranteed results

“Double your revenue in 30 days.” Real tools promise time saved, not miracles.



Opaque pricing

If you need a sales call to learn the price, the price is more than you want to pay.



Wants your customer list up front

Your data is the product being bought. See filter question 4.



Long contracts for unproven tools

Annual lock-in before a free trial is a confession about churn.



“Replaces your staff” pitches

Tools that market to your fears usually can't deliver to your needs.



No export, no exit

If you can't take your data and leave, you're not a customer — you're a hostage.



Let's run one through — together

Example: a free AI chatbot for your website's FAQ (swap in any tool the room suggests)

Q1 — real problem?

“We answer the same 10 questions by phone daily” → yes, it's on our Activity-1 list.



Q2 — free trial, fast?

Free tier, ~40-minute setup with our existing FAQ page → pass.



Q3 — net time saved?

Est. 30 min/day of calls avoided vs. 20 min/week reviewing transcripts → strongly positive.



Q4 — data?

Chats stored by vendor; no customer payment data involved; export available → acceptable, with rules.



Q5 — habit in 90 days?

Lives on the website — works without us. Weekly transcript check added to Monday routine → yes.



Verdict: pilot it for two weeks — with the four safety rules on.

Now you: apply the filter



1. Your task

Take the automation candidate you picked in Activity 1.



2. Your tool

Pick one candidate tool for it — from today's examples or one you've been eyeing.



3. The filter

Run all five questions on your worksheet. Honest answers — a “skip it” verdict is a win too.



4. Share out

Two or three verdicts, aloud: task, tool, verdict, and the question that decided it.

This is the takeaway: you're leaving having actually evaluated a real tool for your real business — once here, repeatable forever.



What you're walking out with



Demystified

AI is prediction software — a set of assistants you manage, already priced for small business.



A framework

Automate the repetitive, keep the personal — with four safety rules and your one task identified.



A defense plan

Four visibility levers, six scam red flags, and a one-hour brand-protection checklist.



A repeatable filter

Five questions, in order, any “no” means stop — and you've already run it once for real.

This week: calendar one hour for the defense plan, and pilot the tool that passed your filter.



Take the toolkit home

Worksheet • five-question filter • defense checklist • tool list

tford9.github.io/talks/dog-street-ai

Questions — Reach out.

Trenton W. Ford • twford@wm.edu • (757) 903-3296