The Vendor Gauntlet: Eight Questions for Any AI Vendor

A good vendor answers all eight crisply. A repackaged one gets vague by question three.

1. "What specifically does the AI do that the previous version of your product didn't?"
If the answer is a feature list you had in 2022 with "AI-powered" in front of it, it's a sticker.

2. "Show me it working on my store's data, live — not a demo account."
Canned demos hide everything. Any serious vendor can run a pilot on your real leads or ROs.

3. "What happens when it's wrong, and how do I find out?"
Every AI system makes mistakes. A trustworthy vendor has an error story: escalation to humans, review queues, correction logs. "It doesn't make mistakes" ends the meeting.

4. "Where does my data go, and is it used to train models for my competitors?"
Get it in writing. Your customer and pricing data should not be improving a product your competitor buys.

5. "Does a customer know they're talking to AI?"
Undisclosed AI conversations are a trust risk and, increasingly, a legal one. You want disclosure built in.

6. "What's the measurable result, in what timeframe, and will you put it in the contract?"
"Engagement" is not a result. Appointments set, calls answered, hours saved — numbers you can audit against your own systems.

7. "Who's accountable when the AI misquotes a price or a payment?"
Spoiler: you are — regulators treat claims made by your tools as your claims. So the real question is what the vendor does to prevent it and how they indemnify you.

8. "Can I leave? What do I keep?"
Month-to-month after a pilot, your data exportable, no hostage-taking. AI tools are evolving too fast for three-year lock-ins.

Five terms to negotiate into any AI contract

1. **Pilot period against a named baseline metric** (60–90 days), with a clean exit if the number doesn't move.
2. **Data ownership and export** — your customer data, conversation transcripts, and results are yours, exportable in a usable format, at no charge.
3. **No training on your data for others' benefit** without explicit written consent.
4. **Indemnification for AI-generated claims** — if their tool misquotes a price or invents an offer, the vendor shares the exposure.
5. **Term length ≤ 12 months** with month-to-month after. Pay a little more per month for this if you must; it's worth it.