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A FIELD-TESTED PLAYBOOK FOR PRINT SHOPS

The 20-Day AI Challenge

One challenge a day. Five extra minutes to be great.

Every challenge in this guide was run with a real print shop team in January 2026, across eight departments: production, creative, marketing, finance, sales, operations, and tech. It worked. Steal it.

How to run it (the owner's playbook)

The challenges are the easy part. The structure below is what gets you 100% participation.

- **You go first.**

Do every challenge yourself and post your result before anyone else. The owner being a visible beginner is what makes it safe for everyone else to be one.

- **One channel, one time, one captain.**

Make a dedicated Slack or group chat channel. A named captain posts the challenge at the same time every morning (9:00 AM works). The team replies in the thread by 10 with their actual output, not just “done.”

- **Track every name.**

Keep a shared spreadsheet with a tab per day and a row per person. Review it daily. What gets tracked gets done; what gets skipped gets noticed.

- **Tailor by role, keep the skill.**

Same challenge, different example. Finance writes collection emails, sales role-plays a prospect, production writes press SOPs. If you have multiple teams, run a channel for each.

- **Build in catch-up days.**

Falling a day behind is normal. Skipping is not. Use a midweek check-in: “If you haven't done yesterday's, do it before today's.” Give a full rest day when the team needs one.

- **Celebrate loudly, correct privately.**

When someone shares a win, make it a big deal in public; early adopters and second movers carry the whole rollout. When someone opts out, that's a direct, private, one-on-one conversation, not a channel callout.

- **Be warm about the how, immovable about the what.**

Empathy is not optionality. The challenge is required, the pace is humane, and the standard is simple: it takes five extra minutes to be great.

- **Keep the channel alive after Day 20.**

Convert it into a wins-and-learnings channel. The challenge builds the habit; the channel keeps it compounding.

Pick one AI tool for the whole run. Switching tools daily kills the compounding.

WEEK 1 • FOUNDATIONS

1 Plug AI into your day

Sign into an AI assistant (Gemini, ChatGPT, or Claude) with your work account and connect your email and calendar if your tool allows it. Then ask it three real questions about your inbox: “What needs a reply today?” “Summarize this long thread.” “What did I commit to this week?”

Share: one answer that surprised you.

2 The rewrite test

Find one messy email, text, or customer reply you wrote recently and ask AI to rewrite it so it is clearer, more structured, and easier to act on. Bonus: translate it into your team's second language and check whether it still reads right.

Share: the before and after.

3 Three ways it can help

Tell AI your exact role, your daily and weekly tasks, and the parts of your day you dread. Then ask: “What are three ways you could make me more productive?”

Share: all three suggestions. Bold the one you will build tomorrow.

4 Build your assistant

Create a custom assistant: a Gem in Gemini, a Project in Claude, or a custom GPT. Load it with instructions about your role, your shop, your customers, and your standards. Give it a name. This becomes a knowledge base you feed over time.

Share: its name and the instructions you gave it.

5 Teach it your brand

Feed your assistant your brand voice, price list, policies, or employee handbook, like onboarding a new hire. Then have it rewrite one piece of customer-facing copy so it sounds like your shop instead of a generic marketer.

Share: the rewrite.

WEEK 2 · DOCUMENTS & DATA

6 The job description interview

Ask AI to interview you about everything you actually do, then write your job description. Laundry-list the beautiful and not-so-beautiful things; it doesn't need to be perfect. This is the foundation for cross-training and your next hire.

Share: the finished JD.

7 Your first SOP

Pick one task you do every day: registering screens, mixing ink, closing an online store. Have AI interview you about it (talk instead of type if you can), then write a clean SOP using a template you like. Bonus: have it translated into Spanish too.

Share: the SOP. Extra credit: print and laminate it.

8 Data day

Download a CSV you already use: a shipping report, a sales export, an inventory sheet. Upload it and ask real questions. "How much did we spend on overnight shipping last month?" "Which customers went quiet this year?"

Share: one question and the answer it found.

9 Spreadsheets without formulas

Open a fresh spreadsheet and use AI to build a tracker: supplies by department, press maintenance with reminders, commissions. Describe what you want instead of writing formulas. You no longer need to know Excel syntax to use Excel.

Share: a link to your tracker.

10 The visual cheat sheet

Take a guide, spec sheet, or SOP and have AI turn it into a one-page visual cheat sheet for the wall: a shipping zone map, a patch application chart, a reclaim chemical guide. Make it something the floor will actually use.

Share: the graphic.

WEEK 3 · PUT IT TO WORK

11 Industry AI vs. general AI

Ask an industry-specific tool (like screenprintgpt.com) something hyper-specific: how to maintain your press, register screens, set heat press temps for PVC patches. Ask your general AI the same question. Try to trick both.

Share: which was better, and where each one broke.

12 Money emails

Have AI draft your billing and follow-up email set by aging bucket: due on delivery, net 30 starting, almost due, 30, 60, and 90 days past due. Kind but firm. Load the winners into your shop software as templates.

Share: your favorite of the set.

13 Role play a tough customer

Have AI play a skeptical, price-conscious prospect who had a bad experience with a competitor. Sell for five minutes; voice mode keeps you honest. Then type: “Stop roleplay. Act as a sales coach. Rate me 1 to 10 and rewrite my weakest response.”

Share: your score and your best rebuttal.

14 Tutorial to top ten

Find a tutorial you rely on: a shop software feature, ink mixing, machine maintenance. Paste the link into AI and have it produce a summary plus a “top 10 things to remember” list for that tool.

Share: the list.

15 Fix your floor

Use guided learning mode to learn the 6 S's of Lean Six Sigma as they apply to your role. Then photograph your work area and ask AI to critique it, generate an optimized layout, and build a checklist you can hang on the wall.

Share: the photo, the new layout, and the checklist.

WEEK 4 • BUILD & SHIP

16 Vibe code an app

Go to an AI app builder (aistudio.google.com is free). Describe a tool you wish existed: “An app that makes it easy to reorder supplies for my department, with a button on each item that notifies a manager and tracks inventory.” Let it cook, then keep editing.

Share: the link to your working app.

17 Play day

Upload a photo of yourself and have AI turn you into an action figure, a trading card, or a superhero. Then ask for a coloring book page of yourself. Silly on purpose: you are learning image control, iteration, and prompting while laughing.

Share: the result. The group chat will love this one.

18 Control a design with code

AI doesn't have eyes; it reads designs as data. Upload one of your shop's designs and ask AI to write a JSON description of it. Paste that code into a fresh chat and have it recreate the image. Then edit one part of the code and rerun it.

Share: what changed, what broke, what surprised you.

19 Video to SOP

Take a video: a Loom you recorded, a YouTube how-to, a walkthrough of a machine. Have AI turn it into a print-ready SOP with steps, prep, and final checks, formatted so you can laminate it and hang it in the shop today.

Share: the finished SOP.

20 The recap

Have AI build a recap of everything you learned over 20 days and turn it into a simple presentation (try the video button if your tool has one). Show your team. Then ask everyone the only question that matters now: what do we automate next?

Share: the recap, and your team's answer.

Production

Press, DTF, heat press, shipping & receiving, purchasing, embroidery

A note on “Gems”: our teams ran this challenge in Google Gemini, where a custom AI assistant is called a Gem. If your shop uses a different tool, the same idea is a “Project” in Claude or a “custom GPT” in ChatGPT.

- 1 Set up your AI assistant with your work account. Connect Gmail and Calendar. Ask it real questions about your email.
- 2 Build shared knowledge bases (Gems) for each area, each with a named owner: purchasing & scheduling, shipping & receiving, screen printing, DTF, heat press.
- 3 Have AI interview you and write your job description. Laundry-list everything you actually do.
- 4 Write one SOP for a daily task. Upload your SOP template plus a vendor reference sheet, translate it into Spanish, and output a Google Doc.
- 5 Feed your Gem a few old SOPs. Have it rewrite them in the new format, save to memory, then quiz it on what you uploaded.
- 6 Catch-up day: finish anything missed before moving on.
- 7 Data day: upload a CSV you already use (ShipStation orders, a UPS export, inventory) and ask it questions like “how much did we spend on overnight shipping?”
- 8 Build a tracker in Google Sheets using the AI button instead of formulas: supplies, maintenance reminders, random inventory.
- 9 Department cheat-sheet day: patch application chart, shipping zone maps from your zip, DTF maintenance visuals, reclaim chemical guide, floor layout, embroidery specs. Each person makes the one for their station.
- 10 Industry AI vs. general AI: ask ScreenPrintGPT and your general assistant the same hyper-specific question (maintain a press, register screens, set up a heat press for PVC patches). Try to trick them.
- 11 Rest day. Go home.
- 12 Vibe code an app: “an app that makes it easy to reorder supplies for my department, with a button per item that notifies a manager and tracks inventory.” Share the link.
- 13 Guided learning mode: “Teach me Lean Six Sigma basics as they apply to my role at this shop.”
- 14 Photograph your work area. Have AI apply what you learned and generate an optimized version of your space.
- 15 Learn the 6 S's of Lean Six Sigma, then have AI create a wall-ready graphic plus a checklist for your specific area.
- 16 Play day: turn a photo of yourself into an action figure or superhero, then a coloring book page.
- 17 Find a tutorial for a tool you use often (shop software, ink mixing, anything). Have AI summarize it into a “top 10 things to remember.”
- 18 Turn yesterday's tutorial into a print-ready SOP you can laminate and hang in the shop.
- 19 Recap: have AI build a presentation (and try a video) of everything you learned in 20 days. Share it.

Creative / Art

Designers and artists; ran as a daily tracker thread

- 1 Prompt a single isolated object on white (use “no shadows, no shading”). Image Trace it in Illustrator and clean it up with Simplify Paths.
- 2 Patterns: generate a repeatable pattern you could actually drop into a design.
- 3 Textures: get hyper-specific with prompts and build a texture library entry.
- 4 Gems day: load old winning designs into a Gem and generate new ideas from them.
- 5 Gems part two: upload your favorite school's brand guideline and repeat the exercise on-brand.
- 6 Negative prompting: practice telling the model what to leave out.
- 7 Style reference (SREF) day one: recreate a style from a reference image.
- 8 Style reference day two: push the same style across new subjects.
- 9 The icon set: generate a matching set of icons in one consistent style.
- 10 Illustrator text-to-vector day: AI features inside your design tools count too.
- 11 The clean-up: take an AI-generated texture, Image Trace it, reduce anchor points for a clean production cut.
- 12 Concept day: a fictional brand calls (“Dr. Dew Pepper”) wanting a merch store. Build the collection, then have AI build the pitch presentation.
- 13 JSON day: have AI write a JSON description of one of your designs, recreate it from the code in a fresh chat, then edit the code.
- 14 Vibe code an internal tool: spec out an asset hub for the art team (brand guides, fonts, mockups, search and tags) and let the app builder cook.
- 15 Patch study: feed a real patch or sticker bar you produced, have AI learn the style and write a strong prompt, then simulate it for a different client.
- 16 Recap presentation day. Then graduate: this team moved to daily 10-minute timed design challenges with real client briefs.

Marketing

Email, social, content, e-commerce

- 1 Warm-up: pull one piece of existing copy and have AI rewrite it in brand voice. Compare honestly.
- 2 Brand Brain: paste your full brand guide and voice doc into the model, like onboarding a new hire. Re-run day one and compare.
- 3 Personal assistant Gem: describe your role and tasks, ask for 3 ways AI can make you more productive, then build the best one as a Gem.
- 4 Data Center Gem: build a Gem around your numbers, find trackable activity, and set this month's goals from it.
- 5 Product thinking: take raw graphics (a patch set) and push them into a real product concept plus a scroll-stopping promo image.
- 6 Function-specific day: same prompt, different lever per person (email subject + hero, social post, product page, SMS, influencer DM script).
- 7 Hot moment drill: "your team just won the championship; fans are emotional and impatient." Create the asset that makes someone feel they'll miss the moment.
- 8 Vibe code an app for a repeatable task (example: a morning intel briefing of everything viral in your niche, delivered to your inbox).
- 9 JSON day: control a design by editing its code description.
- 10 AI makeover: transform a person (or yourself) into a new era or identity. Editorial and campaign-ready, not a meme.
- 11 Study day: examine the first AI influencer. Explore how it was built from any angle. Observations only, no hot takes.
- 12 New tools day: drop your website URL into a fresh tool (Google Labs' Pomelli), generate a business DNA, and build a campaign. Note what's good and what falls short.
- 13 Audit day: feed your own Instagram into AI and ask what to change about captions and graphics to drive engagement.
- 14 Recap presentation day, then a Monday discussion: where do we go from here?

Finance & Accounting

Bookkeeping, AR, payroll; started Jan 2, prompts in-thread daily

- 1 Day one journal entry exercise; everyone posts their output in the thread.
- 2 Payroll entry walk-through with AI checking the work.
- 3 Bonus accrual workpaper: sheet structure, monthly journal entry, and a year-end true-up section. Then actually adopt it.
- 4 Prepaid expense amortization: initial entry, monthly adjusting entry, and a 12-month schedule to copy into a sheet.
- 5 New customer credit form: have AI design the field list and conditional logic for a Net 30 onboarding form, then build it in your form tool.
- 6 AR email templates by aging bucket: due on delivery, net 30 start, almost due, 30, 60, 90 days past due. No prompt given; practice writing your own.
- 7 Messy notes to SOP: brain-dump a recurring task, have AI structure it as a professional SOP formatted for your wiki.
- 8 Formula builder: fix a real broken tracker (a commission sheet) by describing what you want instead of writing formulas.
- 9 Process flow: standardize a cross-team approval (in-kind and barter deals across sales, ops, and finance).
- 10 Compliance distribution log: identify recipients of a required notice and draft the audit log.
- 11 Plain-English FAQ: feed a dense compliance PDF (a 401k blackout notice) and have AI draft the employee FAQ.
- 12 Idea day: every person submits one AI task idea for the team backlog. Mandatory.
- 13 Invoice audit: have AI locate a vendor invoice, interpret the line items, and pre-code it for QuickBooks entry.
- 14 Net 30 request template: draft the standard response email and save it as a shared Gmail template.
- 15 Chart of accounts Gem: upload your COA so AI can suggest coding for any new vendor.
- 16 Rewrite every AR email in your shop software. Everyone writes their own version; the best ones get uploaded.
- 17 QuickBooks deep dives: bulk vendor imports (formats, pitfalls, no-undo double checks) and smart bank rules for faster coding.
- 18 Statement of account: turn a raw AR export into a clean customer statement plus a ready-to-send email.
- 19 Explain it like a CEO: simplify one finance concept for leadership using plain English and analogies.

Operations / E-commerce

Store ops, product data, fulfillment; posted daily with expected output

- 1 Rewrite an unclear Slack message so it's easier to act on. Post the before and after.
- 2 Ask AI for a spreadsheet formula that extracts a name from a product title.
- 3 Take a real product mockup and have AI update the name and number on it.
- 4 Translate day one's message into another language and verify it's still correct.
- 5 Have AI explain one of your SOPs as an image.
- 6 Give AI an SOP for a task you do and ask it a question.
- 7 Compress an SOP into a 5-step checklist.
- 8 Have AI find missing details in an SOP.
- 9 Have AI suggest improvements to an SOP.
- 10 Have AI estimate how long each SOP step should take and flag the bottlenecks.
- 11 Fold the improvements into a published new version of the SOP.
- 12 Generate an SOP from a video (a Loom or YouTube walkthrough).
- 13 Ask AI a how-to question about a power tool you rely on (their pick: Matrixify).
- 14 Watch a short video on custom assistants, then design one that would help the whole team.
- 15 Build that assistant. Share its description plus a sample input and output.
- 16 Platform AI day: use your store's built-in AI (Shopify Sidekick) to find products with missing images in a collection.
- 17 Have the platform AI perform one step of your build process you currently do by hand.
- 18 Build a reusable prompt template library: five copy-paste prompts with when-to-use guidance.
- 19 Build a shared glossary: extract and define your team's terms from the SOP database.
- 20 Have the platform AI walk you through a store change (adding a collection to navigation).

Sales

Reps, account managers, student program leads

- 1 Day one exploration: open the assistant, do something useful, screenshot it in the thread.
- 2 Segment Gems: shared knowledge bases per sales segment, plus build your own personal Gem with a name and instructions.
- 3 Data day: upload last year's sales export and ask for your largest targets to prioritize this year.
- 4 Winback day: pick a lost deal, a ghosted client, or a drifted customer, and have AI build the win-back outreach.
- 5 Actions and reminders: have AI teach you scheduled actions, then set one up (a monthly summary of accounts to focus on).
- 6 Gem feeding: give your Gem an internal SOP and have it rewrite it for external customers.
- 7 Personal art assistant: build a Gem that concepts quick client art, tuned to screen print and embroidery with color limits.
- 8 Concept day: the fictional client pitch (collection, promo products, headwear, decoration methods, then the presentation).
- 9 Real corporate client: load their logo and real blank products, curate a 10-12 item collection across decoration methods, and build the deck.
- 10 JSON day: control a design by editing its code.
- 11 Vibe code your tracker: a sales meeting tracker (calendar, notes per student or customer, reminders, red-yellow-green ratings).
- 12 Role play: AI plays a skeptical, price-conscious prospect for five minutes (voice mode keeps you honest), then flips to sales coach and scores you 1 to 10.
- 13 Play day: style iterations of yourself, a trading card, JSON edits.
- 14 Accuracy day: real product mockups with a real client logo at accurate sizes. Find where it breaks and troubleshoot.
- 15 Pitch deck day: a 10-slide spring pitch with headlines and image directions, powered by your Gem. Optionally rebuild it in Canva.
- 16 Repeat business: a 3-part re-order email sequence to last year's customers, leaning on their winning designs.
- 17 Competitive edge audit: where do the big online printers fail, and what's your 30-second advantage pitch?
- 18 Recap presentation day.

Partnerships / Account Management

This team ran the sprint from a shared tracker doc instead of daily channel prompts. Two things worth stealing:

1. The 9:00 AM auto-reminder (set it once, it runs the whole sprint)

“Quick nudge to complete your AI sprint if you haven't yet. Start with the prompt. Follow the objective. Compare your output to the expected outcome. This isn't about perfection; it's about building reps and seeing how close (or far) AI gets you on real work you already do. When you've finished, drop: one prompt that worked well, and one insight or aha from the output.”

2. Prompts are a starting point, not a finishing point

Their weekly themes: custom assistants and asset creation in week one, then email and messaging sequences (outreach, launch follow-ups, onboarding, activations), then a shared social-listening app the whole team stress-tested together. The rule that made it work: outputs go in a shared doc with a tab per person, so everyone can compare results against the objective in review.

“The teams that win won't be the ones with the best models. They'll be the ones who know how to give them something worth working with.”

posted in the channel, day 15

Speak the language

The terms you'll see in this guide (and hear your team start using).

AI assistant

A chatbot you talk to in plain English: Gemini, ChatGPT, or Claude. Pick one and use it for the whole challenge.

Prompt

Whatever you type (or say) to the AI. The more context you give about your shop, your customer, and your goal, the better the output.

Model / LLM

The engine under the hood (a large language model). When people say "the model," they mean the AI itself.

Gem / Project / custom GPT

A custom assistant you set up once with instructions and files about your shop, so you never have to repeat context. Gemini calls it a Gem, Claude a Project, ChatGPT a custom GPT.

Context

Everything you feed the AI: your brand guide, an SOP, a CSV, a photo. AI doesn't know your shop until you show it.

Hallucination

When AI confidently states something wrong. It happens. You are always the editor; verify anything that matters.

Vibe coding

Building a working app by describing what you want in plain English and letting AI write the code. No programming knowledge required.

JSON

A simple text format computers use to describe things. Day 18 uses it to show that AI sees your designs as editable code, not pictures.

Guided learning

A mode where the AI teaches you a topic step by step with questions, instead of dumping one long answer.

Voice mode

Talking to the AI instead of typing. Great for SOP interviews and sales role-plays, where typing lets you cheat.

Image generation

Having AI create or edit pictures: mockups, patterns, cheat-sheet graphics, action figures of your press operator.

Agent

An AI that doesn't just answer but takes actions: browsing, filling in data, running multi-step tasks. Where all of this is heading.

The toolbox

Everyday assistants

Gemini (gemini.google.com) · ChatGPT (chatgpt.com) · Claude (claude.ai). Free tiers handle every challenge in this guide.

Industry & platform AI

ScreenPrintGPT (screenprintgpt.com) for trade-specific questions · Shopify Sidekick if you run a store · the AI buttons already inside Gmail, Google Sheets, and your shop software.

App builders (vibe coding)

Google AI Studio (aistudio.google.com) · Replit (replit.com) · Lovable (lovable.dev). Describe the tool you wish you had; they build it.

Design

Canva and Kittl for print-ready creative · Adobe's generative fill and text-to-vector inside Photoshop and Illustrator.

FAQ

Every question below came up during the real 20-day run.

I'm stuck. What do I do?

Ask AI for help. Let it guide you. Paste the day's challenge into your assistant and say "walk me through this step by step." The tool teaches the tool; getting unstuck this way is itself the skill you're building.

Which tool should I use?

Whichever one your team already has access to. Pick one on day one and stick with it for the whole run; switching tools daily kills the compounding.

Do I need the paid version?

No. Every challenge in this guide works on free tiers. Upgrade later, once a tool has clearly earned it.

It gave me a wrong answer.

Good, you caught it. You're the editor; AI does the first draft, you do the judgment. Tell it what's wrong and have it fix it. Verify anything that touches money, customers, or compliance.

Is it safe to upload our files?

Use a business account, check your tool's data and training settings, and don't paste anything you wouldn't email a vendor: no SSNs, full card numbers, or passwords.

Isn't this cheating?

It's a tool, same as the automatic press that replaced the manual one. The craft is still yours; the busywork doesn't have to be.

How long should each day take?

Five to fifteen minutes. If a challenge runs long, save it for a catch-up day and keep moving. It takes five extra minutes to be great, not fifty.

What if someone on my team won't do it?

Warm about the how, immovable about the what. Ask what support they need, keep the deadline, and have that conversation privately, never in the channel.

The output is generic and bland.

It mirrors your input. Add context: your shop, your customer, your numbers, an example of work you love. Generic in, generic out.

What happens after Day 20?

See the last page. Short version: name a captain, keep the channel alive, and ask everyone which five minutes of their day AI should own next.

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Day 21 and beyond

- Promote your best participant to challenge captain and run another 20 days, harder.
- Turn the channel into a permanent wins-and-learnings feed. Seed it weekly yourself.
- Take the SOPs, trackers, and assistants the team built and make them the standard.
- Ask each person: which 5 minutes of your day should AI own next? Then build it together.

“Habits are the compound interest of self-improvement.”

James Clear, Atomic Habits

It takes five extra minutes to be great.