The Distributor's Guide to AI Vendor Evaluation

Vendors that demo well aren't always vendors that deliver. This guide gives you four criteria to evaluate any AI vendor, so you can assess whether they have the experience, team, and systems to actually hold up once you're live.

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Maturity and Scale

01

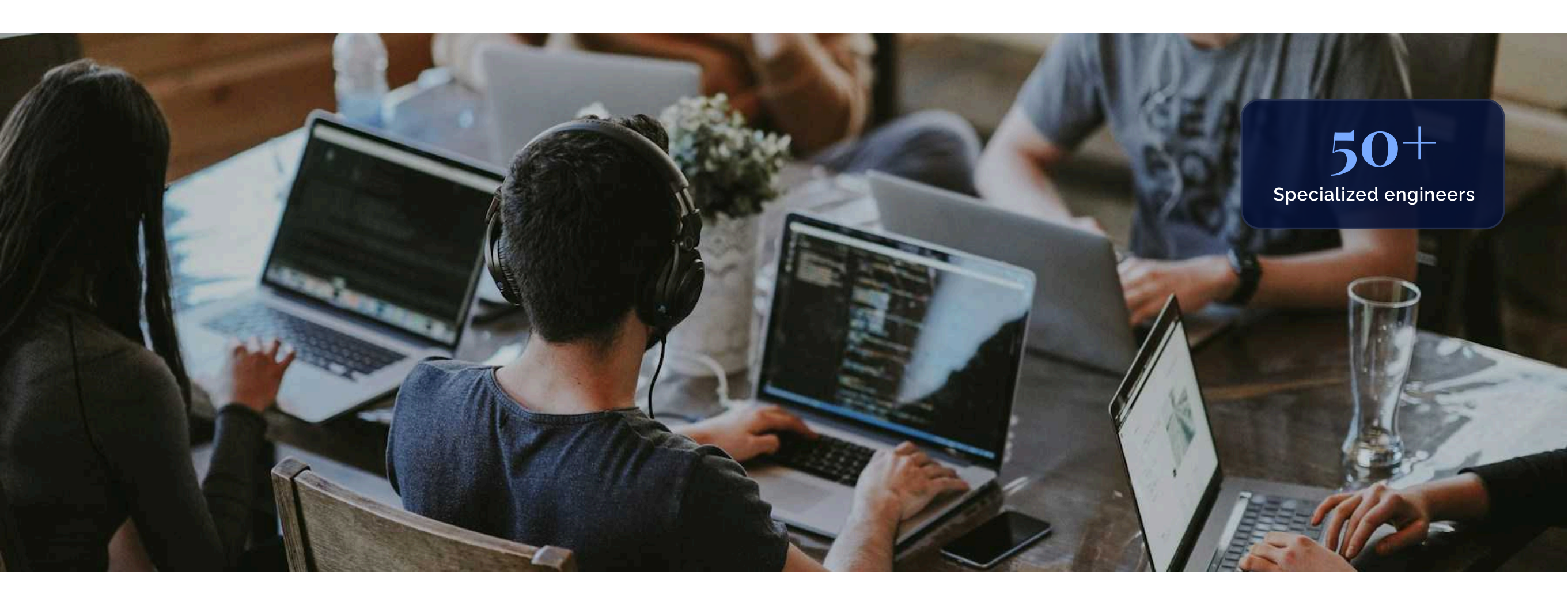
Experience compounds. AI vendors who have deployed across more customers have encountered more real-world complexity and built solutions for it. More customers means more feedback, faster iteration, and a product stress-tested beyond a controlled environment. Before you commit, ask for evidence of production workloads at scale, not just pilots.

? ASK THESE QUESTIONS

- How many distributors are currently live on your platform—not in a pilot, but fully running day-to-day operations?
- Which workflows are fully live today versus still on your roadmap?
- How long does integration take, and what does our IT team need to be involved in?
- How many times have you integrated with our ERP?

CANALS' EXPERIENCE

- ✓ 100+ distributors across multiple verticals using the product every day
- ✓ 5M+ sales orders processed, $5B+ payables submitted, and 8,000+ users saving time
- ✓ Thousands of edge cases solved across critical, real-world workflows of sales, accounting, purchasing, and receiving
- ✓ Clear, simple integration process with implementation in days, not months



Expert Execution

02

Building AI that consistently works is a world-class technical challenge that requires serious engineering talent.. Without engineering depth and dedicated customer support, quality erodes and going live becomes harder than it needs to be. Adoption stalls and ROI is never realized. When you evaluate a vendor's team, look past the pitch and check the people

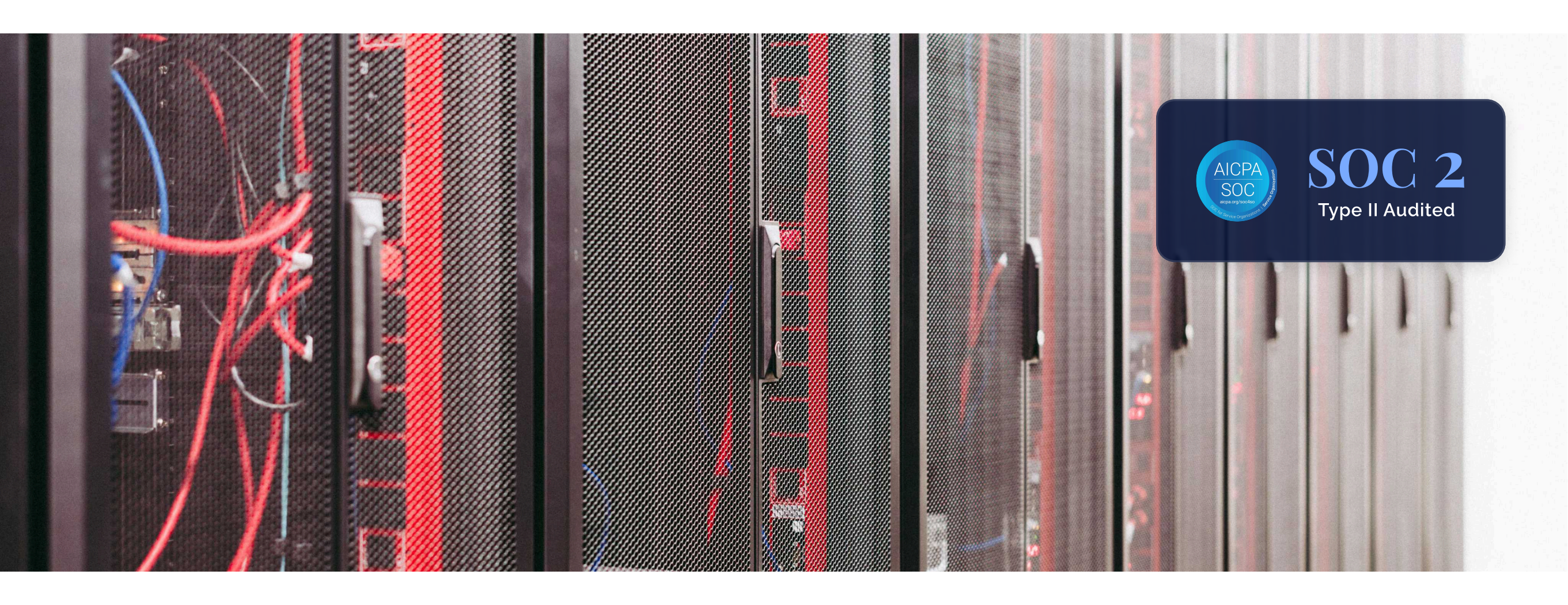
? ASK THESE QUESTIONS

- How many full-time engineers are dedicated to product development?
- How many of your engineers have held senior or leadership positions in their previous roles?
- How many customers does each Customer Success Manager support?
- What does onboarding and go-live actually look like, and who owns it on your side?

> **A NOTE ON VETTING THE TEAM**
> LinkedIn is a very useful evaluation tool. You don't need to be a hiring manager to make a judgment call. A quick scan of the vendor's engineering team tells you more than the pitch. Look for engineers with significant tenure, senior-level experience, and backgrounds at companies known for building complex products.

CANALS' EXPERIENCE

- ✓ 50+ engineers backing product development
- ✓ Engineers with specializations in matching accuracy, platform reliability, tech enablement, and solutions engineering
- ✓ Named Customer Success Manager overseeing your account and actioning feedback
- ✓ Leadership with experience operating within global institutions and large-scale tech platforms like Google, Amazon, and Meta



Enterprise-Grade Security and Privacy

03

When you give a vendor access to your ERP, security and privacy are both critical. Security protects your data from unauthorized access, while privacy governs how it's used and shared.
A vendor's word is not enough. Look for independent verification and specific controls, not general assurances.

? ASK THESE QUESTIONS

- What independent audits and testing have you undergone?
- How do you verify the identity of individuals accessing the application?
- Who owns the data you process, and how is it kept separate from other customers?
- What happens to our data if we stop working with you?

CANALS' EXPERIENCE

- ✓ SOC 2 Type II audited security controls
- ✓ Third-party penetration testing and automated security checks
- ✓ Layered network defenses with isolation, firewalls, and abuse control
- ✓ Secured access through SSO, MFA, and Principle of Least Privilege (PoLP)
- ✓ Services agreements specifying customers retain full ownership of your data and it is not shared with any other customers

Clear ROI and Success Stories

04

Unfortunately, demos can't be trusted. It's too easy to set up a demo to show only the cases where a tool works well. The best evidence is what you hear directly from other distributors. Or if you can test a solution live yourself, that's an even stronger sign. Before you commit, look for evidence that the product actually works.

? ASK THESE QUESTIONS

- Can we speak with a customer who is in our vertical and using the same ERP?
- Can you share case studies with specific, measurable outcomes?
- Can we see the product process something live—not a staged input, but data we send you when we're meeting?
- How long have you been working with the customers listed on your website?

> **A NOTE ON REFERENCES**
> One thing worth knowing: vendors will typically connect you with customers they know will speak highly of them. That's expected, but don't stop there. Try reaching out directly to a few customers listed on their website to see if they're willing to chat. If so, the conversation will likely be much more revealing.

CANALS' EXPERIENCE

- ✓ Case studies from distributors like Turtle, The Kendall Group, and Kirby Risk, describing increased hit rates, time savings, and more
- ✓ Live demo processing real orders from you, so you can see how quickly and accurately our AI parses and structures requests
- ✓ Named website testimonials, like "On a scale of 1 to 10, our satisfaction with Canals is a 12" - **Jim Warshauer, Warshauer Electric Supply**
- ✓ Customer references we're happy to share

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AI Vendor Evaluation Cheat Sheet

Use these questions with every AI vendor you evaluate. The answers, and the hesitations, will tell you everything.

01 Maturity and Scale

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02 Expert Execution

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How many customers does each Customer Success Manager support?

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03 Enterprise-Grade Security and Privacy

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DEMOS CAN'T BE TRUSTED

A live test with *your real-life data* tells you everything

Ask any AI vendor you're considering to process a sample from your day-to-day while you meet—no prepared examples, no staged inputs, no getting back to you later.

In a live evaluation with Canals, you'll see how quickly and accurately we can process an RFQ, turning it into a quote that's ready for reps to review and submit in minutes.

Book Your Live Evaluation →

Canals is the end-to-end Operating AI for customer-focused distributors, automating workflows across Sales, Customer Service, Accounting, Purchasing, and Receiving to drive speed, accuracy, and consistency. By reducing reliance on manual processes and institutional knowledge, our suite of AI tools maximizes operational efficiency and visibility at any scale. Respond to customers faster and free up team members to be more proactive, taking service to the next level and building deeper relationships. Over 100 distributors run on Canals to win, keep, and grow more customers. Learn more at www.canals.ai.