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YOUR AI DEVELOPMENT PARTNER EVALUATION CHECKLIST

The shortcut to a decision you can defend

The vendor you choose will have access to your systems, your data pipelines, and the business logic your team spent years building. When something goes wrong in production — and something always does — it's on you. And yet most AI vendor evaluations are just expensive gut feelings with extra steps. There's one question that changes that, and this checklist is built around it.

What's the biggest risk in what we've asked you to build, and what would you do if it materialized?

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**One question tells you most of what you need to know.
These twelve tell you the rest.**

On domain & industry experience

- What projects have you delivered specifically in our industry?
- What regulatory or data constraints came up on those projects, and how did you handle them?
- What would you approach differently on a similar project today?

Strategic thinking

- Is there a simpler solution we should consider before committing to AI?
- What assumption in our brief are you least confident about?
- Have you ever recommended a client not build something? What happened?

On proof & track record

- Tell us about a project that didn't go as planned.
- Can I speak to a reference twelve or more months after their project launched?
- Will the people I'm speaking with today have any involvement once the project is signed?

On compliance & regulatory fit

- Have you worked on a project where the same regulations we have to play by shaped the entire delivery or influenced every technical decision you made?
- Who on your team owns compliance decisions, and what's their background?
- What would you do if the technical solution conflicts with a regulatory requirement mid-project?

Score Your Shortlist

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Deal-breakers

Mark each cell ✔ Pass or ✖ Fail.

	Vendor 1	Vendor 2	Vendor 3
Do I legally own the model weights, pipelines, and code?			
Is my data excluded from being used to train systems for other clients?			
If we part ways, do I walk out with everything they've built?			
Can I speak to a reference a year+ after their project launched?			
Can I run a scoped pilot before committing serious budget?			
Did they give me a real, specific answer about a failed project?			
Do they have experience dealing with our specific regulatory framework before?			

Differentiators

Mark green, yellow, or red per vendor based on how confident you are that each statement is true.

	Vendor 1	Vendor 2	Vendor 3
They have weighty experience in my industry	○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○
They pointed out gaps and asked clarifying questions about my brief	○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○
They gave me concrete timelines for POC, production MVP, and when I'll realistically see ROI	○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○
They told us concretely who from our team they need to involve, at what stage, and how often	○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○
A compliance question came up before I raised it	○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○
The people presenting are the people delivering	○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○
They have a well-defined plan for what happens after launch	○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○

● Confident ● Needs clarification ● Serious concern

HOW TO READ YOUR RESULTS

Any vendor who fails a single deal-breaker is out, and you go on with the next vendor.

For the vendors who pass all deal-breakers, move to the differentiators on the right:

Mostly green → strong candidate. Address any yellows in writing before signing.
Two or more reds → only proceed with specific written commitments against those areas.
More yellows than greens → the evaluation isn't done. Go back with the questions from page 2.

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If you need someone who'll tell you the truth, not what you want to hear, we offer a scoped discovery to pressure-test your idea and find out whether we're the right team to build it.

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