# **From Gut Feel to Smart Moves: AI-Powered Decision-Making for Pacific Northwest SMBs**

## **Section 1: PNW SMB 'Guesswork' Pain Points: Where Intuition Often Overrules Data**

Small to Medium-sized Businesses (SMBs) in the Pacific Northwest (PNW) operate within a dynamic and often challenging economic landscape. While renowned for their innovation and resilience, these businesses frequently encounter pressures related to operational costs, regulatory complexities, and resource limitations that can compel them to make critical decisions based on intuition or "gut feel" rather than comprehensive data analysis.1 This reliance on guesswork, while sometimes born of necessity, can expose businesses to unnecessary risks and missed opportunities. Identifying these "guesswork hotspots" is the first step towards leveraging accessible Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools to foster more data-informed strategies.

The following table provides an overview of common decision-making areas where PNW SMBs across various sectors may resort to guesswork, outlining the key regional factors that contribute to this tendency and offering illustrative examples. This synthesis is drawn from an analysis of regional business conditions and common SMB operational challenges.

**Table 1: PNW SMB 'Guesswork' Hotspots: Common Decisions and Influencing Factors**

| **Sector** | **Common 'Guesswork' Decision Area** | **Key PNW Contributing Factors** | **Illustrative Example of Guesswork** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Retail, Light Manufacturing | Inventory Levels & Product Mix | Volatile demand/supply chains; high commercial rent in urban centers; limited time/resources for sophisticated forecasting tools.3 | Ordering popular SKUs based on last year's feel without analyzing recent sales velocity or local demand shifts, leading to overstock or stockouts. |
| Services, Retail | Staff Scheduling & Labor Cost Optimization | High state minimum wages; talent scarcity and high costs of recruitment/retention 5; unpredictable customer flow in service/retail settings. | Creating weekly staff schedules based on subjective busyness perception rather than POS data analysis, leading to inefficient labor spend or service gaps. |
| Services, Retail, some Trades | Marketing Spend Allocation | Diverse and fragmented local markets; intense competition requiring differentiation; lack of dedicated marketing expertise or time for campaign performance analysis.1 | Investing a fixed amount in traditional advertising or generic social media without tracking lead sources or conversion rates effectively. |
| Retail, Services, Light Manufacturing | Pricing Strategies | High input costs (materials, labor, rent, compliance) 6; pressure to remain competitive without full cost-to-serve analysis; lack of data on price elasticity or customer perceived value.9 | Setting service or product prices based on competitor observation or standard markups without a detailed analysis of own overheads and value proposition. |
| Trades | Project Bidding & Resource Allocation | Skilled labor shortages and high labor costs 5; material price volatility; complex project variables and regulatory compliance 10; reliance on memory for estimating similar past jobs.12 | Estimating labor hours and material costs for a bid based on a "gut feel" from a superficially similar past project, risking unprofitable bids or delays. |

**Detailed Elaboration of Pain Points:**

**1. Inventory Management (Retail & Light Manufacturing)**

* **Guesswork Decision:** Determining optimal stock levels, reorder points, and the right mix of products to meet customer demand without incurring excessive costs.
* **PNW Contributing Factors:** The Pacific Northwest's role as a significant trade hub can introduce volatility into supply chains, while regional factors like seasonal tourism can cause unpredictable demand shifts. Furthermore, high commercial real estate costs, particularly in urban centers like Seattle and Portland, mean that holding excess inventory is a more significant financial burden.4 Many SMBs lack dedicated inventory management software or the personnel hours to conduct deep analysis of sales data, leading to reliance on intuition.3 This often manifests as "overstocking, understocking, estimates unknowingly incorrect," which becomes a critical issue as a business grows.3 Challenges such as inaccurate demand forecasting are common.4
* **Example:** A specialty gift shop in a PNW tourist town might base its holiday season orders on the owner’s memory of last year's bestsellers, without leveraging current sales velocity data or analyzing emerging local craft trends. This can easily lead to an oversupply of items that have waned in popularity and stockouts of newly trending products, directly impacting revenue and customer satisfaction.
* The financial implications of mismanaging inventory are particularly pronounced in the PNW. Given the region's higher-than-average operational costs, including rent and labor 8, the expense of storing unsold goods or the lost revenue from stockouts is amplified. Thus, AI-driven tools that can refine inventory forecasting and optimize stock levels offer a more critical pathway to maintaining profitability for businesses in this region compared to areas with lower overheads.

**2. Staff Scheduling & Labor Cost Optimization (Services & Retail)**

* **Guesswork Decision:** Aligning employee schedules with fluctuating customer demand to manage labor costs effectively while ensuring adequate service levels.
* **PNW Contributing Factors:** States such as Washington and Oregon feature some of the nation's highest minimum wages, making labor a substantial operational expense.5 Compounding this is the widespread challenge of talent acquisition and retention; businesses struggle to find and keep qualified staff.5 This pressure can lead to scheduling decisions based on ensuring basic coverage rather than true optimization against demand patterns. Service-oriented businesses like restaurants or salons, and many retail establishments, frequently experience peaks and troughs in customer traffic that are difficult to predict accurately without data-driven insights.16
* **Example:** A cafe owner in downtown Portland might draft the weekly employee rota based on anticipated bookings and a subjective sense of "how busy it felt" the prior week. Without analyzing point-of-sale data to pinpoint exact peak hours or measure server productivity, this approach can result in overstaffing during quieter periods or critical understaffing during unexpected rushes, impacting both profitability and customer experience.
* PNW SMBs often find themselves in a difficult position: elevated labor costs necessitate lean staffing models, yet persistent talent shortages make it risky to understaff, which could lead to employee burnout and compromised service quality. This delicate balance makes data-driven scheduling, as opposed to intuitive approaches, particularly vital for optimizing costs while maintaining service standards and employee morale.

**3. Marketing Spend Allocation & Customer Acquisition (Services, Retail, some Trades)**

* **Guesswork Decision:** Determining how to allocate limited marketing budgets across various channels to achieve the best return on investment and effectively identify and attract new customers.
* **PNW Contributing Factors:** The Pacific Northwest encompasses a diverse mix of urban, suburban, and rural markets, each with distinct consumer behaviors, making a one-size-fits-all marketing approach ineffective. Many sectors are highly competitive, demanding clear differentiation. SMB owners often lack specialized marketing expertise or the time for in-depth analysis of campaign performance, a situation described as "Marketing Mayhem".1 Common issues include inefficient advertising expenditure and low website conversion rates.7
* **Example:** An independent bookstore in Boise, Idaho, might allocate a consistent monthly budget to local print advertisements and maintain a basic social media presence primarily because "it's what they've always done" or it mirrors competitors' visible efforts. Without systematically tracking lead sources or analyzing online engagement and conversion rates, the bookstore cannot ascertain which channels genuinely drive profitable customer traffic versus those that consume resources with minimal return.
* The PNW region often places a strong emphasis on "localism" and community connection. Coupled with a generally digitally adept population, this means that SMBs relying on broad, unanalyzed marketing guesswork might be overlooking significant hyper-local digital marketing opportunities. AI tools can facilitate the analysis of customer data to identify specific local digital niches or optimize online advertising spend for particular demographics within PNW communities, moving beyond generalized assumptions.

**4. Pricing Strategies (Retail, Services, Light Manufacturing)**

* **Guesswork Decision:** Establishing appropriate prices for products or services that cover costs, reflect value, and remain competitive.
* **PNW Contributing Factors:** As previously noted, operational costs in the PNW—encompassing materials, labor, rent, and regulatory compliance—are notably high.6 The National Federation of Independent Business (NFIB) data indicates that "Higher costs were the top reason given for lower earnings," specifically citing labor, materials, financing, taxes, and regulatory costs.6 While businesses must remain competitive, merely matching competitor prices without a thorough understanding of one's own detailed cost structure is a precarious strategy. SMBs frequently lack the data or analytical tools to accurately assess price elasticity or how changes in price will affect demand for their specific offerings.9
* **Example:** A small-scale artisan coffee roaster in Washington might determine wholesale bean prices by applying a standard industry markup to their estimated green bean and roasting labor costs. Without a granular analysis of overhead allocation per product line, nuanced competitor pricing for comparable quality, or data on customer perceived value, they risk either underpricing (thereby missing potential revenue) or overpricing (leading to lost sales).
* The challenge for many SMBs of being "price takers" rather than "price makers" 6 is especially acute in the high-cost PNW environment. When pricing decisions are based on incomplete cost calculations or reactive mirroring of competitors, already constrained profit margins are directly eroded. AI-powered tools that assist in analyzing costs, modeling various pricing scenarios, and understanding market positioning can enable a shift from intuitive guesswork to more strategic, data-informed pricing.

**5. Project Bidding and Resource Allocation (Trades)**

* **Guesswork Decision:** Accurately estimating project costs for competitive bids and efficiently allocating necessary resources such as labor, equipment, and materials.
* **PNW Contributing Factors:** The trades sector faces significant challenges in sourcing and affording skilled labor; "skilled production positions" are notably difficult to recruit for.5 The volatility of material prices can also complicate the accuracy of long-term project bids. Each construction or trade project often presents unique variables, including site-specific conditions, distinct client requirements, and the potential for unforeseen complications. Relying solely on experience from superficially "similar" past jobs can therefore be misleading.12
* **Example:** A general contractor in Oregon bidding on a commercial renovation might estimate labor hours based on a "gut feeling" derived from a previous project that seems comparable on the surface. Without factoring in the current skill mix of their team, potential overtime requirements due to tight project deadlines, or recent fluctuations in the cost of specific materials, the bid could be unprofitable, or the project could face delays and budget overruns.
* For trade businesses in the PNW, the intricate web of regulatory requirements—such as specific building codes, permitting processes, and environmental standards (as suggested by discussions around Oregon Department of Transportation rules and public improvement bidding processes 10)—adds a further layer of complexity to project estimation. Guesswork in this domain not only affects profitability but can also impact compliance adherence and the business's professional reputation. AI tools could offer support by analyzing historical project data to more accurately forecast the time and costs associated with navigating these specific regulatory landscapes.

## **Section 2: Low-Cost Tool 'How-To' for Data Insights: Practical Steps for SMB Owners**

Demystifying the use of AI tools is crucial for their adoption by SMB owners, many of whom may not have extensive technical backgrounds. The following guides present accessible, step-by-step approaches to using common AI tools—ChatGPT's data analysis feature and Gemini in Google Sheets—to extract practical business insights, transforming raw data into a foundation for smarter decisions.

**Guide 1: How to Use ChatGPT's Data Analysis Feature to Analyze Customer Survey Comments for Sentiment Trends**

* **Introduction:** Businesses often collect valuable customer survey comments but may lack the time to manually sift through each response to gauge overall sentiment. ChatGPT's data analysis capabilities can expedite this process, offering a quick understanding of customer mood and key feedback themes.
* **Prerequisites:** A subscription to ChatGPT that includes data analysis features (often part of premium tiers). Survey comments should be compiled into a single, compatible file format such as.csv,.xlsx, or.txt.18
* **Step-by-Step Guide:**
  1. **Prepare & Upload Your Data:**
     + Organize survey comments into a clear format. A simple spreadsheet with a dedicated column for "Customer Comments" and one comment per row is ideal. This adheres to best practices for data uploading, which advise against multiple tables in a single sheet or empty rows.18
     + Within the ChatGPT interface (ensuring data analysis mode is active), use the attachment function (typically a paperclip icon) to upload the prepared file.
  2. **Prompt for Sentiment Analysis & Trend Identification:**
     + After the file is uploaded, provide a clear and specific prompt. For instance: "Analyze the sentiment of the customer comments in the uploaded file. Identify the primary positive and negative sentiment themes. Please summarize the overall sentiment trends and provide two to three illustrative example comments for each key theme identified." ChatGPT is capable of identifying patterns indicative of positive, negative, or neutral sentiments and can generate summaries of its findings.18
  3. **Review and Refine Insights:**
     + ChatGPT will process the data and return a summary, which may include sentiment categorizations (e.g., positive, negative, neutral), identified key themes, and potentially charts visualizing the data.18
     + Carefully review the AI-generated summary. Assess whether the findings align with general expectations or recent customer interactions. If further clarification is needed, ask follow-up questions, such as: "What percentage of comments were classified as positive?" or "Can you provide more examples related to comments about 'product durability'?"
  4. **(Optional) Export or Save Key Findings:**
     + The key insights, thematic summaries, or any charts generated by ChatGPT can be copied and pasted into a separate document for record-keeping, team discussions, or strategic planning.
* The significant advantage for an SMB in using such a tool extends beyond a simple "positive/negative" classification. ChatGPT's proficiency in understanding natural language allows it to rapidly surface the *underlying reasons* for customer sentiments by identifying recurring themes within unstructured text.18 This is a task that, if performed manually, would be exceptionally time-consuming and resource-intensive for most small businesses.

**Guide 2: How to Use Gemini/Google Sheets AI Features to Identify Top-Selling Products/Services and Potential Cross-Selling Opportunities from Basic Sales Data**

* **Introduction:** A business's sales data is a rich source of information about customer preferences and potential future purchases. Gemini integrated within Google Sheets can help uncover these insights, empowering SMB owners to make data-driven decisions without needing specialized data science skills.
* **Prerequisites:** Sales data should be organized within a Google Sheet, ideally with columns for details like Product/Service Name, Quantity Sold, Price, Sale Date, and Customer ID (if available for tracking repeat purchases). Access to Gemini in Google Sheets is also necessary, which may depend on the user's Google Workspace plan or require a specific sign-up.
* **Step-by-Step Guide:**
  1. **Organize Your Sales Data:**
     + Ensure the sales data in Google Sheets is clean, accurate, and well-structured. Using clear and descriptive column headers (e.g., "Product Name," "Units Sold," "Total Revenue," "Customer Identifier") is important for the AI to correctly interpret the data.
  2. **Activate Gemini & Ask for Top Sellers:**
     + Access the Gemini feature, typically by clicking an "Ask Gemini" button or through a side panel within Google Sheets.20
     + In the provided prompt box, ask a specific question about the sales data. For example: "Analyze the data in columns A through D to identify my top 5 best-selling services by total revenue for the last fiscal quarter. Present this information as a table and also generate a bar chart." Gemini in Sheets is designed to create tables, charts, and perform data analysis based on user prompts.20
  3. **Explore Cross-Selling Opportunities:**
     + If the sales data includes customer transaction details (showing multiple items purchased in a single transaction or a history of individual customer purchases), prompt Gemini to look for relationships. For instance: "Analyze the purchase patterns in this sheet. Which products are most frequently bought together by the same customer? Suggest three potential cross-selling opportunities based on these patterns." While direct commands are key, AI's core strength in pattern recognition can surface such correlations.20
  4. **Review and Apply Insights:**
     + Gemini will generate outputs such as tables, charts, or textual summaries based on the prompts.20 Carefully review these insights. Do the identified top-selling items align with expectations? Are the cross-selling suggestions logical and actionable?
     + Utilize these data-driven insights to inform strategic business decisions, such as adjusting inventory levels (stocking more of the top sellers), designing marketing campaigns (promoting product bundles), or enhancing staff training (encouraging the team to suggest relevant add-on purchases).
* For SMBs already utilizing Google Sheets for their record-keeping, the integration of Gemini significantly lowers the barrier to AI adoption. It embeds advanced analytical capabilities within a familiar software environment, removing the need to learn new, potentially complex business intelligence platforms or undertake complicated data migration processes.2 This accessibility can transform a simple sales ledger from a passive record-keeping tool into an active, strategic asset for informed decision-making.

## **Section 3: Composite PNW Case Study: From Forest Products Guesswork to Data-Driven Growth**

To illustrate the practical impact of AI on PNW SMBs, consider the following composite case study. This narrative is based on scrubbed information from real-world accomplishments detailed in various business articles, reflecting how accessible AI can solve specific "guesswork" problems and deliver measurable outcomes, presented in Fae Intelligence's 'Practical & Actionable' voice.

A mid-sized specialty wood products company in rural Oregon, "Cascade Custom Cuts," historically grappled with accurately forecasting demand for its niche timber items and managing the volatile costs of raw lumber. This often resulted in either expensive overstocking of slow-moving custom wood pieces or frustrating missed sales opportunities due to under-stocking popular standard items. Their pricing model was largely determined by perceived market rates and historical job costs, lacking the agility to respond to sudden spikes in material prices. By strategically implementing an AI-powered analytics tool—akin to those readily accessible to SMBs today—to analyze its historical sales data, track supplier price fluctuations, and even incorporate regional construction activity indicators, Cascade Custom Cuts transitioned from reactive, intuition-based operations to proactive, data-informed planning. **Within just nine months, the company achieved a notable 15% reduction in the holding costs associated with unsold inventory and a 10% increase in on-time order fulfillment for its high-demand products.** More critically, the insights derived from AI allowed Cascade Custom Cuts to adjust its pricing dynamically in response to market conditions, leading to a **5% improvement in gross margin on custom orders**, a significant gain considering the volatile nature of raw material markets. The company now makes smarter purchasing decisions for raw timber and can price its jobs with greater confidence, effectively turning market uncertainty into a tangible competitive advantage.16

The challenges faced by "Cascade Custom Cuts"—inventory mismanagement and pricing based on incomplete data—are common across many manufacturing and custom production SMBs.3 The quantifiable improvements, such as the 15% reduction in holding costs (adapted from similar percentage improvements seen in retail and logistics AI applications 24) and the 5% gross margin increase, highlight the direct financial benefits of replacing guesswork with AI-driven analysis. The most compelling applications of AI for PNW SMBs often involve tackling problems that are exacerbated by regional economic realities. For instance, a wood products company navigating volatile commodity prices, or a service business contending with high labor costs, can find AI particularly impactful. When AI delivers clear, quantifiable improvements in such contexts, its value proposition becomes highly tangible and urgent for other local businesses facing similar circumstances, positioning AI not merely as an innovative option but as a crucial tool for navigating specific PNW economic conditions.

## **Section 4: Overcoming Algorithm Aversion: Building Trust in AI Insights**

The adoption of AI, while promising, can be met with skepticism or "algorithm aversion," especially within teams unfamiliar with the technology. For SMBs, this apprehension often stems from practical concerns about complexity, cost, job security, and the perceived "black box" nature of AI decision-making.23 Fae Intelligence workshops emphasize practical strategies to build trust in AI-generated insights by focusing on human oversight, transparency, and starting with small, verifiable wins.

**Practical Tips for Building Trust:**

1. **Start Small & Prove Value with Verifiable Wins (The "Show Me" Approach):**
   * **Fae Teaches:** It is advisable to avoid attempting a complete operational overhaul with AI from day one. Instead, begin by applying AI to a single, specific, and manageable problem where it can deliver clear, rapid, and easily verifiable results. For example, use an AI tool to analyze customer feedback collected over the past month (as outlined in the ChatGPT guide for sentiment analysis) or to identify the top three best-selling products from the previous quarter's sales data (as described in the Gemini/Google Sheets guide).
   * **Human Oversight:** Encourage the team to manually cross-reference a sample of the AI's findings. If the AI tool identifies top-selling products, does this align with the team's recent sales experience? If it flags particular negative sentiment themes from customer comments, do these themes resonate with recent customer interactions or complaints? This process of parallel validation with familiar data helps build initial trust and comfort with the AI's capabilities. This approach aligns with the strategy of starting small, measuring results, and gradually expanding successful applications, thereby confirming and checking trust in the system through iterative successes.27
   * **Why it Works:** Witnessing AI accurately solve a small, familiar problem demystifies the technology and demonstrates tangible benefits quickly. This creates buy-in and confidence, paving the way for addressing more complex challenges with AI in the future.
2. **Emphasize AI as an Assistant, Not a Replacement (The "Human in the Loop" Principle):**
   * **Fae Teaches:** Position AI tools as powerful assistants designed to augment the team's existing capabilities, rather than as replacements for human roles. AI can efficiently handle data-intensive tasks like processing large volumes of information or identifying subtle patterns, thereby freeing up team members for higher-value activities such as strategic thinking, nuanced customer interaction, and making final decisions based on AI-surfaced insights. Many AI applications focus on automating "mundane tasks," which allows employees to concentrate on "growth-driving tasks".16
   * **Human Oversight:** It is critical to stress that the ultimate decision-making authority always rests with a human. AI systems provide recommendations, highlight patterns, or suggest courses of action, but the team's experience, contextual understanding, and professional judgment are indispensable for interpreting these outputs and acting upon them appropriately. Openly communicating where AI excels and where human oversight is necessary fosters a sense of collaboration rather than competition.28
   * **Why it Works:** This framing directly addresses the common fear of job displacement, a significant concern for many workers when new technologies are introduced.27 By presenting AI as a supportive tool that empowers employees, businesses can reduce resistance and encourage more enthusiastic adoption.
3. **Foster Transparency & Understanding (The "No Black Box" Rule):**
   * **Fae Teaches:** Whenever feasible, opt for AI tools that offer some degree of transparency into their decision-making processes or, at a minimum, ensure clarity about the data being input into the system. For SMBs, this might involve understanding the basic operational logic—for example, "the AI is identifying keywords in customer feedback to determine sentiment" or "it is sorting sales figures by volume to find top performers."
   * **Human Oversight:** Cultivate an environment where team members feel comfortable asking questions about the AI's output. If an insight generated by AI seems counter-intuitive or unexpected, encourage an exploration of the underlying data that the AI used to reach its conclusion. Some tools, like ChatGPT's data analysis feature, provide users with the ability to view the computational steps or code executed.18 Gaining even a high-level understanding of "how" the AI works can significantly build confidence in "what" it produces. Transparency is a critical first element in building trust, as it helps users understand how AI models arrive at decisions.28
   * **Why it Works:** Demystifying AI helps to reduce the anxiety often associated with "black box" technologies.26 When team members have a clearer understanding of the process, even if it's a simplified one, they are more likely to trust the output and integrate the technology into their workflows effectively.

For many SMBs, aversion to algorithms is less about abstract concerns regarding artificial general intelligence and more about immediate, practical fears: "Will I be able to understand this new technology?", "Will the investment yield uncertain or insufficient results?", "Will it complicate my existing job, or worse, make it obsolete?" Therefore, strategies for building trust must directly address these fundamental, grassroots concerns by emphasizing simplicity, proven value, employee empowerment, and clear reassurance about the continued importance of the human role in the business.

## **Section 5: Fae Workshop Link: Continue Your AI Journey**

The insights and practical guides provided in this report serve as an introduction to the transformative potential of AI for Pacific Northwest SMBs. For business owners and teams looking to delve deeper, acquire hands-on skills, and develop a tailored AI strategy, Fae Intelligence offers specialized workshops.

**Suggested Fae Workshop Module(s):**

Based on the content of this report, which focuses on leveraging accessible AI tools like ChatGPT Data Analysis and Gemini in Google Sheets for practical data analysis, improved decision-making, and overcoming initial adoption hurdles, the most directly relevant Fae Intelligence workshop module is:

* **"Data to Decisions: AI for Business Analytics"**

This workshop title (an example provided in the initial request) perfectly encapsulates the journey from raw business data to actionable, AI-driven insights. It aligns with the core theme of moving beyond "gut feel" to make "smart moves."

**Justification:**

The blog post for which this report provides foundational material is fundamentally about using AI (specifically tools like ChatGPT and Gemini) for business analytics tasks such as sentiment analysis from customer feedback, identifying sales trends, and uncovering cross-selling opportunities. The ultimate goal is to enhance decision-making within SMBs. The "Data to Decisions: AI for Business Analytics" workshop would logically expand on these concepts, providing more in-depth training on:

* Selecting and preparing data for AI analysis.
* Advanced prompting techniques for various AI tools.
* Interpreting AI-generated reports and visualizations.
* Integrating AI insights into strategic planning and daily operations.
* Further strategies for fostering team buy-in and managing the change associated with AI adoption.

The how-to guides presented in Section 2 and the tips for overcoming algorithm aversion detailed in Section 4 are foundational elements that would naturally be elaborated upon with practical exercises and deeper discussions in such a workshop.

This report and the subsequent blog post aim to serve as an "appetizer," showcasing the tangible benefits and accessibility of AI for SMBs. The linked Fae workshop represents the "main course"—an invitation for businesses to engage more deeply, acquire practical skills, and begin their AI transformation journey with expert guidance. The relevance and appeal of the workshop are therefore critical for converting reader interest into active participation and, potentially, longer-term client engagement. The title "Data to Decisions: AI for Business Analytics" clearly promises the development of tangible skills and achievement of outcomes directly related to the practical solutions introduced, ensuring a coherent and compelling path for interested PNW SMBs.

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