

A SHORT NOTE FOR FOUNDERS

How is your
brand *handling*
the exponential age?

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ELIA ATELIER · 2026

FOR

Independent and family-led houses.

Watchmakers, jewellers, perfumers, leather ateliers, fashion houses serving private clients. *Ten to one hundred and fifty people*, founder or family principal with signing authority, looking at the same eighteen months.

I.

You have been
seeing it.

I.

—

THE SIGNS

A client asks you something your team would have spent two hours researching. The client got the answer from ChatGPT in *ninety seconds*.

A younger client mentions AI agents the way he used to mention email.

Three of your competitors have rebuilt their websites in the last six months, and the new versions read *nothing like the old ones*.

Your accountant's software writes its own footnotes. Your phone summarises your meetings. *The instruments are already in the office*.

The shift is not coming. It arrived eighteen months ago and you have been watching it.

A NOTE FROM ONE FOUNDER TO ANOTHER

I am writing this
as one of you.

The advice in the pages that follow is what I am applying to my own practices in 2026. Whatever does not survive that test does not appear here.

Two things I will not do in this document. I will not pretend the picture is more certain than it is, and I will not pretend the time available is longer than it is. *The next eighteen months matter more than the eighteen that follow.*

— A. O.

SECTION ONE

What changed, *in plain words.*

Three terms to have straight before we go further.

i. *AI.*

The catch-all. Chatbots, image and video tools, prediction systems. When most people say AI in 2026, they mean the next two terms.

ii. *LLM.*

Large language model. The engine underneath most of the new tools. A fast writer, reader, and researcher with no values or taste of its own. ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini.

iii. *Agents.*

LLMs given the ability to execute on your behalf. Book a meeting, send an email, fill a form, search the web, make a purchase. *New in 2025 and 2026*, and the reason every founder in this segment is asking the same questions in the same week.

2022. The models got good enough that *normal people* could use them.

2024. They got reliable enough for *real business work*.

2025. The cost of running these tools fell *roughly a thousand-fold* from 2022.

2026. They started *executing on your behalf*, not just answering questions.

SECTION TWO

Why the next
eighteen months
matter for your brand.

Five shifts already in motion.

SHIFT ONE

Your client is
already using it.

Forty-five percent of consumers used AI in some part of their buying journey in January 2026. Shopping queries on AI platforms grew *four thousand seven hundred percent* between 2024 and 2025.

The client who walks into your office on Tuesday morning has spent the weekend asking ChatGPT, Claude or Gemini what to expect, what to ask, what the alternatives are, and whether you are the right brand for the work. *Whatever the AI said is the brief the client is now holding.*

IBM INSTITUTE FOR BUSINESS VALUE

AN EXERCISE

They are also asking
the AI *about you.*

Open ChatGPT now. Type your brand's name. Then ask: "*Who are the leading brands in [your category] in [your city]?*"

Three possibilities. You are not in the answer. You are in the answer but described inaccurately. You are in the answer and described in a way that makes you sound like *the three brands two streets down.*

Each of these is a different problem with a different fix. The most cost-effective hour of strategic work the founder can do in any given quarter.

SHIFT TWO

What your HNW client *wants*.

Three things, above all. *Managed expectations*, a *relationship* with specific people, and their *time respected*.

AI delivers all three when it is deployed inside a house that knows its voice and its boundaries. It destroys all three when it is deployed without either.

SPENDING IS MOVING

Health as wealth.

The HNWI client of 2026 is spending less on pure status and more on what restores. *Wellness, longevity, health, aesthetics, time in beautiful places.* BCG projects double-digit growth across those categories while traditional luxury flattens.

If your brand is selling what the client used to buy rather than what the client now wants, *the gap is going to widen for the rest of the decade.*

SHIFT THREE

Smallness is now *an advantage.*

LVMH spends years aligning seventy-five brands. A *ten-person house can decide on Monday and ship by Friday.*

A project that required **€5M** and a full engineering team in 2022 now assembles for **€40 to €150K**, in three to six months, with the right architecture.

EUROSTAT · 2025 REFERENCE YEAR · EUROPEAN AI USAGE

55%

*of large European enterprises
(250 employees and above)
now use AI in some capacity.*

17%

*of small enterprises
(10 to 49 employees)
do.*

48%

*increase in EU enterprise AI adoption in
twelve months.
Overall adoption rose from 13.5% in 2024
to 20% in 2025.*

*The capability that produced this gap has reversed
in the last eighteen months. The independent brand
that moves now closes the gap before the large
enterprise has time to compound.*

THE OBJECTION WORTH ADDRESSING

If the technology gets cheaper every six months — *why now?*

The technology gets cheaper. *Three things do not.*

Your corpus. The voice, archive, client history, and internal knowledge that calibrates AI to your brand specifically. Eighteen months of corpus work in 2026 produces an instrument the brand starting in 2028 cannot replicate without going back in time.

Your discoverability position. Citations and authority in AI search compound the way SEO compounded between 2008 and 2015. The brands that become the canonical answer in 2026 are the canonical answer in 2028.

Your team's fluency. Forty to sixty hours of training per person does not get faster because the tools improve.

The price of the tools is falling. The cost of being late is rising.

SECTION THREE

Three things
nobody tells you.

ONE

Most AI projects *fail at the pilot.*

70 to 80% across all industries. *90%* in fashion. The technology is not the cause. The teams do not know what problem they are solving, and the human side is rarely planned for.

A brand that starts with *one well-scoped instrument* and finishes it before starting the next is the brand that has something working by month nine. The brand that starts three at once has three half-built instruments and a team that has lost faith in the work.

MCKINSEY · GARTNER · IBM COHORTS

TWO

The human layer is *the biggest risk.*

McKinsey on large transformations: roughly **70%** fail. The technology is almost never the cause. *The team is.*

Inside an independent brand, the cohort most resistant to AI is almost always *the admin staff*. The sales coordinator, the proposal writer, the marketing assistant, the bookkeeper, the office manager. The roles where the work is most clearly addressable by the new tools — and the roles where the fear of replacement is most rational.

The moment the founder says the word "AI" in a meeting, the team's trust in the founder takes a hit before any tool is deployed. *Whatever the founder says next has to address the fear directly*, or the implementation is already losing ground in the first week.

WHAT THE FOUNDER IS ACTUALLY SEEING

Picture the *senior salesperson* who has spent eighteen years writing letters to her clients in her own voice, asked to let a machine draft them.

The *atelier head* whose juniors used to come to him for research that now takes seconds.

The *marketing coordinator* who learns that the part of her job she trained for is the part the machine does best.

None of these people is resisting the technology. They are mourning a part of themselves that the work used to hold.

Training alone does not address it. *What does* is the founder naming what is being given up, in the same room where the new tools are being introduced — before anyone is asked to celebrate them.

THREE

What makes you defensible *is not the technology.*

The technology is rented. *Anyone can buy your ChatGPT subscription.*

Your know-how, archives, reputation, client relationships, aesthetic, and judgment are what make the brand irreplaceable. None of those is reproducible by a competitor with the same subscription.

AI deployed inside a house that has named its voice and its boundaries *encodes those assets* and protects them across every surface where the brand communicates. AI deployed without that work turns the same assets into the same generic output as the brand two streets down.

SECTION FOUR

What the house *can now make.*

Beyond the foundations of voice and memory sits the question worth asking. *What can a maison now create that it could not create before?*

The *Soul*.

The voice of the house, embedded in an instrument the team can consult. Client communications, brand narratives, internal briefs, and the documents that travel with a piece come back in the founder's register, ready for *one editorial pass* before they go out.

The team holds the voice; the founder is no longer the only person who can write it.

The *Clientele*.

A living intelligence of every relationship the maison has built. Before the conversation that matters, *the brief arrives on the founder's desk*: the pieces acquired, the preferences expressed, the family history, the relationships across decades.

The client memory becomes a working instrument, *calibrated to how a house of this register serves its clients*.

The *Commission.*

The bespoke cycle that consumed a senior partner for a day comes back inside an hour, with the brief drawn from the maison's case history, the materials research already gathered, the client context already integrated.

Twelve weeks become six.

The made-to-measure piece arrives without the time cost, *and without losing what made it bespoke in the first place.*

The *House*.

The maison knows what it holds, what it produces, what is in motion, and what is at risk, *at any moment*. The founder sees the house the way she would if she had three more hours in the day.

Decisions made on data she can read, in language the house already speaks. The operations become legible without the founder running the spreadsheet.

The *Discovery*.

A position in AI search that reflects the maison as it stands. When a prospect asks ChatGPT or Perplexity *which houses to consider in your category*, the answer is calibrated to what the maison has built.

IN SHORT

Until eighteen months ago, none of this was practical. Today it takes weeks and costs a fraction of what a traditional studio would charge.

A REFRA ME

This is an *investment*,
not an expense.

A marketing campaign produces a six-month run of impressions and goes back to zero. A trade-show booth produces three days of conversations and hopefully sales, and is taken down. Office rent resets each year. *None of these compounds.*

The instruments described in this paper produce three things that compound from the day they go live. *Productivity* — hours returned to the team across every working week, for three to five years. *Output quality* — the proposal that arrives in the client's hands with the brand's voice intact, the relevant precedents drawn from the archive, the personalisation that closes the work. *Defensibility* — corpus, discoverability position, team fluency, all building inside the house and unavailable to competitors who start later.

The founder who books this as an expense will underbudget it, undermeasure it, and undermanage it.

FOUR THINGS TO AVOID

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- i. Do not hire a Chief AI Officer under one hundred employees. Hire one experienced person, fractional, on a six-month engagement.

 - ii. The shiny is not for you yet. Digital twins, virtual showrooms, NFT loyalty programs, AI influencers. Most are real categories that will mature in the segments above yours. *Say "not yet" without saying "never."*

 - iii. The founder cannot be the only person who understands the new tools. Within six months of starting, a second person must know how the work was built and why.

 - iv. Governance is not optional. A Brand AI Charter, a Refusals Register, a record of the team's AI literacy training. From *2 August 2026* the EU AI Act is binding, with fines up to *7% of worldwide turnover*.
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THE QUESTION WORTH ASKING

"Should we do AI?" is the question most founders are starting with — and it is the wrong one.

What in my house is being done by *a good person* at fifteen percent of their skill and *eighty percent* of their day?

Find three of those. Free up the hours. Give them back to your best people and your best clients.

The rest of the work in this paper is sequencing.

A NOTE ABOUT WHO IS WRITING THIS

Twenty years inside the luxury industry, thirteen of which were at executive level in high jewellery and watchmaking. A decade sparring founders.

I spent those years watching how the most accomplished founders carried what they built and what it cost them. *ELIA Atelier exists* because independent brands serving wealthy and demanding private clients have a once-in-a-decade window in front of them — and most of them are going to miss it. Not because they lack the budget. *Because they lack someone who understands both their world and this one.*

— *Alexandre Olive*

TWO WAYS TO BEGIN

The Reading.

A *fifteen-minute* online assessment of where your brand sits today. You receive a structured editorial profile across five dimensions by email.

Free, and useful whether or not we ever speak.

A first conversation.

Thirty minutes, private, without a deck. We look at your situation as it stands, what is working, what is not, and what is worth doing in the next six months.

BOOK A CONVERSATION →

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