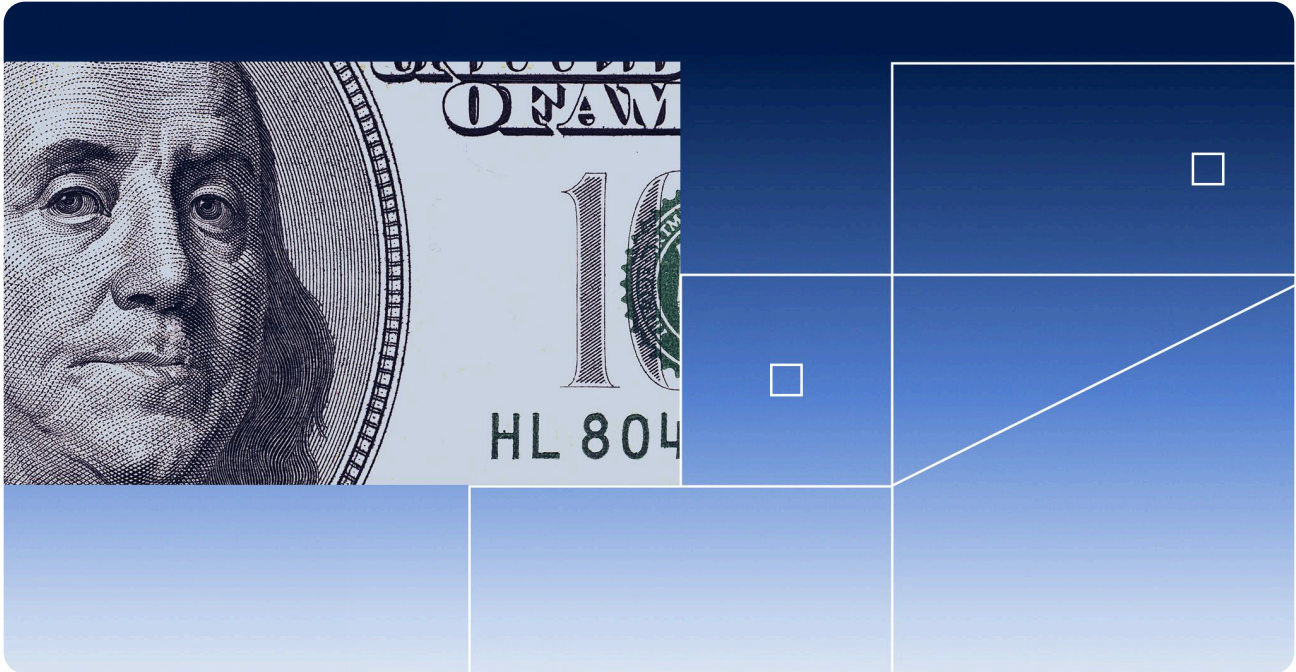


How to buy AI: 5 tips for every finance leader





A new spending category demands a new playbook

AI adoption among businesses recently crossed 50%, according to the Ramp AI Index. But this doesn't mean that more than half of companies have intentional and well-organized AI strategies. Much of this wave was driven by employees signing up for tools on their own: individual subscriptions billed to corporate, team-specific plans, and free tiers that quietly converted to paid. Few followed a formal purchasing process — often because a process didn't exist.

This left many finance teams in the dark. Now, these teams are looking to build a more intentional and strategic approach to purchasing AI tools, but they're not sure where to start. They face a marketplace with an overwhelming number of vendors and no playbook on how to evaluate which AI tools their teams actually need and how best to approach buying them.

Now that most companies are investing in AI, the big question is: how do we build a deliberate purchasing strategy that will boost productivity while keeping costs under control? This is especially critical because AI costs are fundamentally different from the tried-and-true SaaS model: pricing is much more variable, security concerns are more complex, and the vendor landscape is less mature.

This guide provides the AI purchasing roadmap you need, whether you're starting from zero or trying to bring order to systems that are already scattered across the organization.

What makes AI different from other purchases

Let's start by breaking down the structural differences that explain why your existing playbook for software purchasing won't translate directly to AI.

Usage-based pricing changes the math

The vast majority of SaaS tools charge per seat, per month, making costs predictable and easy to budget. Many AI tools charge based on consumption — tokens processed, API calls made, compute hours used — and that means costs can vary greatly from one month to the next. Expenses for the top quartile of Ramp customers by AI spend with GenAI vendors are about 4x those of the median business. For some vendors, that gap exceeds 15x.

Traditional approaches to budgeting don't account for this variance, which means finance teams that try to apply them end up with forecasts that miss the mark by a wide margin.

New tech presents new security concerns

AI tools need access to core business systems and sensitive company information to deliver real impact, whether financial data, strategy docs, or customer data. This raises critical questions about data privacy. The first one: Are employees' inputs and outputs used to train the model, exposing proprietary information? Does the vendor retain your data after the contract ends? What are the data residency implications? Most AI vendors offer data protection commitments, but the terms vary widely and the defaults can be less restrictive than you would think. For example, the enterprise tiers of many providers still retain prompts and responses for 30 days.

3x

year-over-year
increase in AI-related
reimbursements

AI has an ownership problem

Employees are adopting AI faster than any previous technology, mostly through informal buying. Ramp data shows AI-related reimbursements tripled year over year, and nearly two-thirds of businesses using generative AI already use more than one tool. The root issue: it's unclear who owns this category. Is AI-buying a finance decision, an IT call, or a departmental one? A senior finance leader is often the natural owner, since they already oversee expenses, understand budget implications, and have the authority to set companywide policy.

The 'right' AI vendor can change in months

OpenAI, Anthropic, and Google dominate when it comes to frontier models, but the market remains in flux. Anthropic, for example, served roughly one in 25 businesses just a year ago and now serves about one in four, according to Ramp AI Index. That pace of change means the "right" vendor for your organization today may not be the right vendor in six months, heightening the risk of vendor lock-in. There's not yet a consensus on the best choice for companies of a certain size or in certain industries.

5 best practices for purchasing AI tools

These challenges may be new, but they are solvable. Here are the steps you can take to identify, purchase, and maintain AI tools that will put your company on strong footing.

1

Audit what your teams are already using

Before you can build a purchasing strategy, you need to know what's already in the building. Understanding what employees are already using can help guide decisions about what tools you should adopt at the company level.

Look in three places for hidden spend:

- AI features embedded in tools you already pay for (Google Workspace, Microsoft 365, Salesforce).
- AI subscriptions charged to corporate cards or paid via reimbursements.
- Individual accounts employees pay for out of pocket or use on free tiers.

Talk to power users across each department and ask what tools they use daily, what they tried that fell short, and what they wish they had. Running a companywide survey can also provide valuable perspective.

You may find that three departments are paying for overlapping tools, or that one team turning to a free AI tool because they couldn't secure budget signals a broken purchasing process.

Document your findings in a simple format: tool name, owner, approximate cost, and the subscription type (free, team, etc.). This inventory becomes the foundation for everything that follows.

Governance metrics rise with integration stage

● Piloting ● Scaling ● Fully integrated

Very confident: could pass independent audit



2

14%

software budget
consumed by AI
tools for median
business

Right-size your AI budget

Once you know what's in use, establish AI as a distinct line item in your software budget. Explain that this is no longer a small, experimental expense: the median business on Ramp with significant AI spend now dedicates roughly 14% of its total software budget to AI tools.

Think about your AI budget in two tiers:

- Foundation model access for platforms like OpenAI, Anthropic, or Google that provide general-purpose AI capabilities across the organization. These are usually the largest AI line items.
- Function-specific tools such as coding assistants for engineering, design tools for creative teams, and AI-powered support platforms for customer service.

Most foundation-model vendors charge based on token consumption. Others offer tiered plans with overages or charge by seat, which can make it easier to ballpark expected AI costs.

Since pricing is unpredictable, you'll need to build in a buffer. Hard caps can easily block productivity, especially when you're unsure what actual AI spend will look like. One solution: set a working budget for one or two quarters based on some rough math (users, current pricing), then adjust based on real usage numbers before scaling companywide. Talk to peers to get a sense of expected costs and use an AI token management tool to track spending.

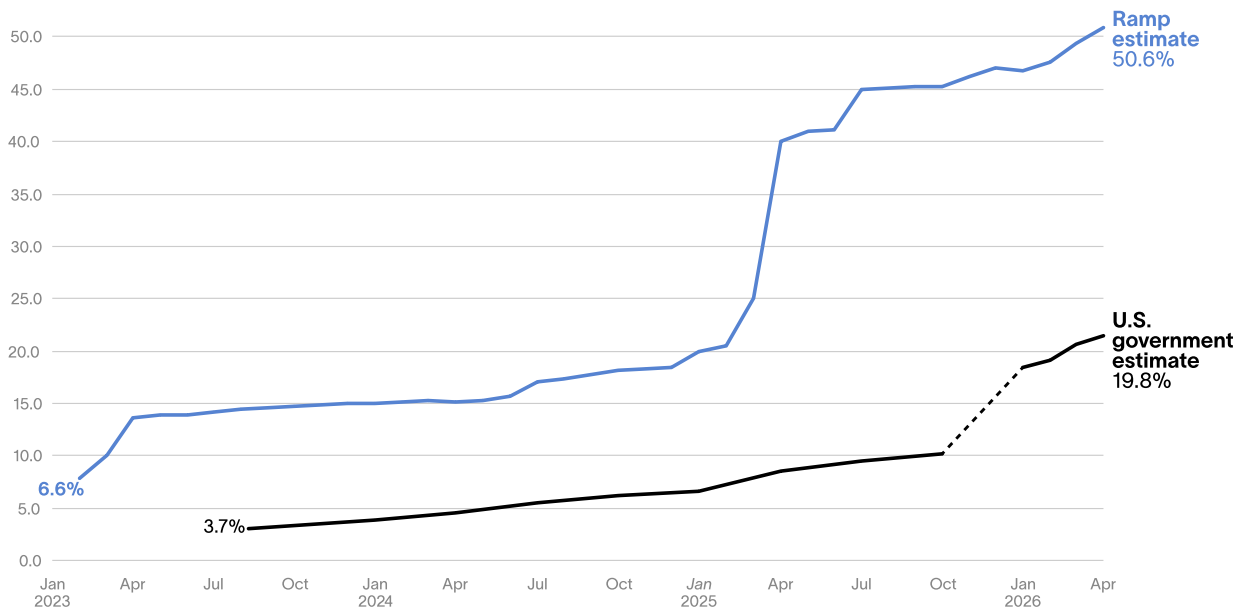
A hidden lever: choosing the right model for the job

AI costs vary widely by the specific model you use. Anthropic's most capable Claude model is currently five times as expensive as its more basic model per million input and output tokens. Generally, the newer the model, the higher the price.

It's critical to make teams aware of this so they don't default every task to the most expensive model. Give employees guidance on what work to route where: cheap models for basic tasks like email writing or basic research, premium ones for deep research or multi-step workflows. Track usage by model and follow up with employees primarily using the most expensive models to see if their use cases justify it. They may not even be aware they're using unnecessary horsepower.

As AI use scales, some effort here can go a long way toward controlling costs.

Share of U.S. businesses with paid subscriptions to AI models, platforms, and tools



Source: Card spend data from Ramp; U.S. Census Business Trends and Outlook Survey

3

Run a pilot to determine buy vs. build

Given the vast and ever-growing number of AI tools on the market, committing can feel risky. To ease these concerns, ask vendors if they're open to a structured 30- to 60-day pilot before you sign a longer-term agreement that locks you in before you know what's best for your business.

The key to a successful pilot is establishing clear KPIs and tracking usage from the start. The benefits are twofold: you can avoid tools that don't deliver before you commit dollars to them, and you can see what the true cost would be for your business.

A pilot can also help you identify what tools you might be able to build internally rather than buy — an increasingly common conversation in the AI era. Internal teams with some technical skills may be able to leverage foundation models to match the core functionality of more specialized tools faster and at a lower cost.

4

Negotiate the right plan for your business

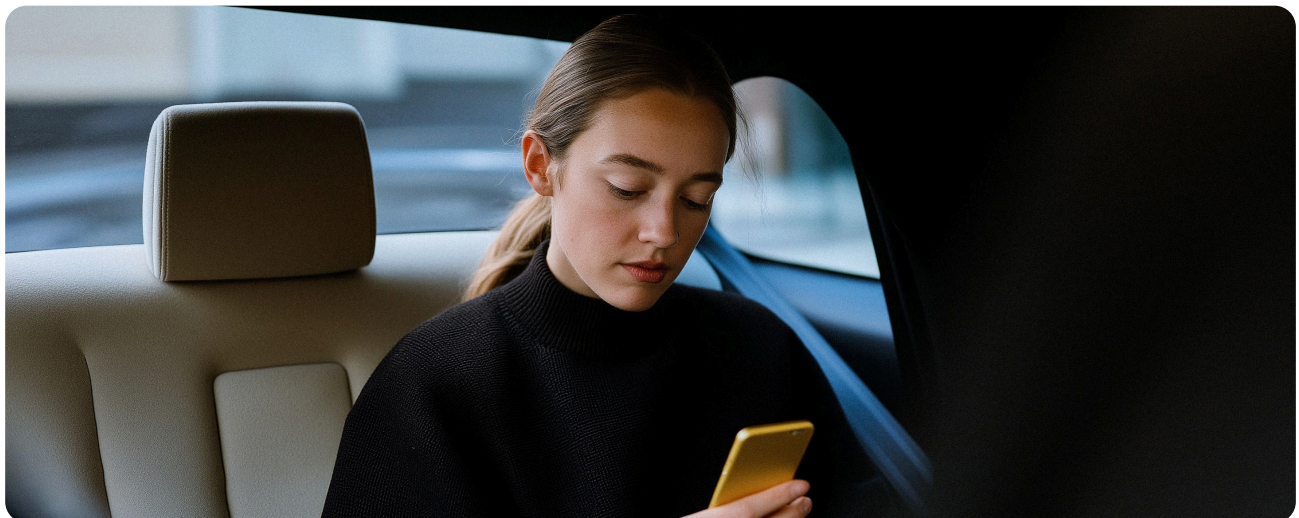
Before kicking off negotiations, build a set of key requirements you can use to evaluate AI tools. How many people need access? Which specific models do you need? Do you need enterprise-grade security features like SSO, audit logs, and data isolation? These requirements can substantially increase costs: Mid-market businesses spend as much as 6x more than smaller companies with some of the most popular vendors, per Ramp data.

Once you've zeroed in on a list of must-haves, use the intensely competitive market to your advantage. Don't accept list pricing. For most companies, the capabilities of any of the leading models exceed your needs, so run a comprehensive evaluation to secure the best deal. Vendors know their customers are open to switching: 43% of Anthropic's customers switched from another GenAI vendor, according to the latest Ramp data.

A few tactics to give you an edge in negotiations:

- **Run parallel evaluations.** Keep a competing quote on the table to add pressure, even if there's a clear front-runner.
- **Add leverage with in-house options.** Note that you're considering building something in-house, a credible threat with smaller and more role-specific AI vendors.
- **Consolidate tools:** Look for areas where the frontier models can now cover what previously required a separate tool, like image generation or coding, for additional savings.
- **Avoid multi-year contracts.** The pricing may be attractive, but simply look at how much the foundation model marketplace has shifted in the past six months. Protect yourself with shorter terms and pricing caps of 3% to 5%.
- **Ask for switch-over credits.** Request discounts to offset the remaining value of your current contract with another vendor as a condition of switching.
- **Push for credit pooling, rollovers, and ramp-up rules.** Ensure credits are pooled across the company, that unused credits roll over, and that the first three to six months include grace periods or soft caps while you calibrate actual usage.

A lightweight compliance checklist should be a standard part of every vendor evaluation, and run proposed solutions through legal, IT, and security before signing.



5 red flags to watch out for with AI vendors

Auto-escalation clauses tied to usage. Some contracts automatically bump you to a higher tier, without explicit approval, after crossing a certain consumption threshold. This can turn a relatively predictable monthly bill into a surprise that blows the quarterly budget.

Training opt-out availability. This is a critical one: Is your company's data used to improve the vendor's model? Can you opt out, and is that opt-out the default or something you have to request? This is especially critical if your company deals with a lot of protected data.

Token overage charges without caps or warnings. Understand what happens when a team exceeds the plan's usage limits. Make sure you know whether there is a hard cap, a soft cap with overage fees, or no cap at all.

Data retention. Does the vendor offer zero data retention, meaning it does not retain any prompts and responses during normal use? Zero data retention is critical for regulated industries and should be standard in enterprise contracts. Additionally, when you end the contract, does the vendor delete your data immediately? Can you export it first?

Model deprecation policies. AI vendors frequently come out with new models and retire old ones. What happens to your pricing, data, and integrations when the model you're paying for gets sunset? Will you be migrated automatically, or are there actions necessary to avoid disruptions?

5

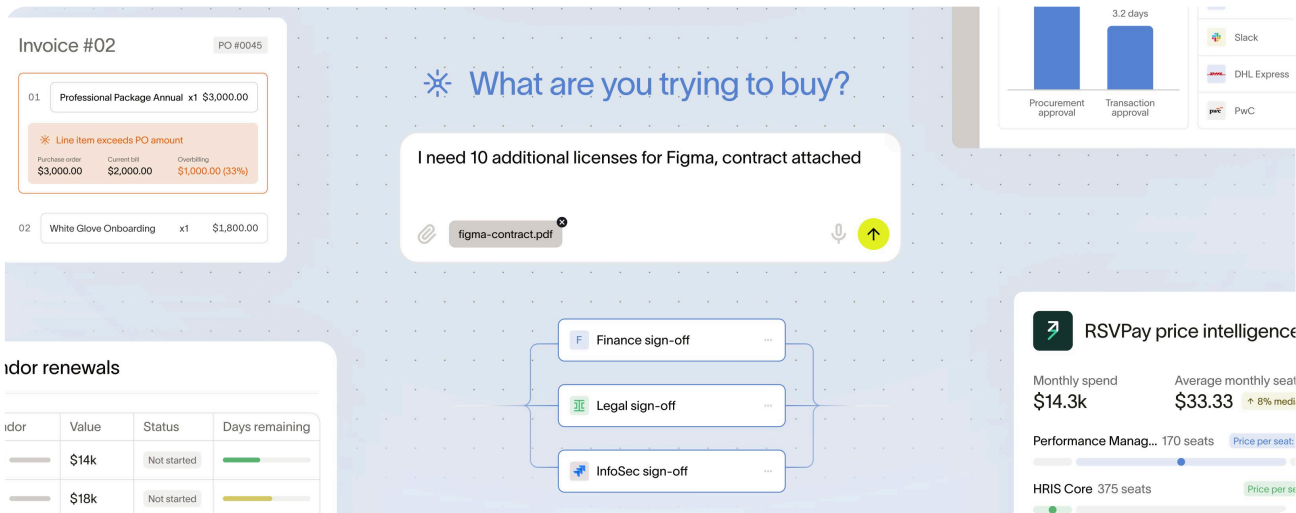
Build a regular review cadence

A software category moving faster than any in history demands more frequent check-ins. Target a light quarterly review plus a full reassessment ahead of every annual renewal.

Track four things to inform this:

- **Actual usage.** Employee behavior shifts fast, so a tool with heavy adoption at signing can go dormant within months, and vice versa.
- **Quantifiable time and money savings.** Ask teams to report back on what they're actually getting out of the tool and calculate ROI where possible.
- **Vendor pace of innovation.** Today's marketplace demands speed. Vendors can fall behind quickly, and that puts you at a disadvantage.
- **Capability overlap.** What required a specialized tool six months ago is often covered by the foundation models you already pay for.

The quarterly check-in keeps spend honest and ensures you head into renewals with all the information you need to continue capitalizing on a buyer's market.



The power of agentic purchasing

AI's rapid rise means finance teams have a new, large, and rapidly growing line item to manage. A purchasing strategy can go a long way in keeping AI costs reasonable, but many companies don't have the capacity to manage this. Finance teams evaluate and buy these services between closing the books and running forecasts.

That's where Ramp Procurement can help. It gives teams without dedicated purchasing the benefits of a more disciplined process:

- **Let Ramp source your vendors.** Simply describe the features you need or the problem you're trying to solve and Ramp researches options, generates RFPs, collects vendor responses, scores them, and provides a recommendation. You eliminate weeks spent comparing pricing models and building and scoring RFPs.
- **Agents complete and review requests.** Explain what you need in simple terms, and Ramp automatically finds and pre-fills the correct form. An agent runs security, legal, and financial checks. All of this happens before the request ever reaches an approver.
- **Built-in negotiation leverage.** Pricing benchmarks from aggregated, anonymized data on 50,000-plus customers tell you what companies like yours are actually paying for software. Ramp flags contracts worth renegotiating and recommends whether to renew, renegotiate, or cancel.
- **Unified purchasing workflow.** Request, approve, pay, and track spend in a single platform, with no separate tools for intake, approvals, payments, and contract storage. From the initial purchase request through renewal, everything lives in one place

46 hrs

of work eliminated per month with Ramp Procurement

Ramp's AI-native capabilities save an average of 16% annually on vendor spend¹ and eliminate 46 hours per month of manual purchasing work² — all without an enterprise software price tag.

¹ Based on Ramp customer data. Numbers presented are median figures; individual results will vary. See ramp.com/procurement for details.

² Based on Ramp analysis of mid-market procurement workflows. Includes planned features. Individual results will vary. See ramp.com/procurement for details.

A framework for the future

AI adoption is accelerating, and the businesses that build a purchasing framework now will have compounding advantages. They'll enjoy better pricing, cleaner compliance, less shadow spend, and a finance team that's in control and ahead of the curve as AI spend continues to balloon.

The framework itself is straightforward. The key is to put this plan into action now.

Soon, AI will be a standard spend category for every company, and the right strategy and toolkit can take AI purchasing from overwhelming and disorganized to coordinated and effective. Teams can do their best work, and finance can stop having nightmares about out-of-control token consumption.

Methodology: All figures based on Ramp Rate, a free vendor directory powered by aggregated, anonymized data from Ramp's corporate card and bill pay platform. The dataset covers billions of dollars in spend across more than 50,000 American businesses, so you can benchmark vendors, spot market shifts, and make more informed buying decisions across hundreds of vendors and categories.