

Being Prepared

The business trends shaping B2B growth in 2026

by: Jenna Miller, Emerald Strategic Marketing

As a business leader in 2026, you are operating in one of the most complex and opportunity-rich business environments in decades. Technology is accelerating more quickly than most companies can adapt. Customer expectations are rising. Talent markets remain tight. And economic signals are mixed at best.

But there is good news. The companies that adapt to the major trends shaping this year will grow more quickly, operate smarter and outperform competitors that are still reacting instead of preparing. Following are the four trends every B2B business owner needs to understand, as well as how each one ties directly to business growth.

AI is Operational, Autonomous & Embedded Everywhere

Artificial intelligence (AI) needs to be part of your business. And, if you are using AI, it needs to be scaled. It is already the backbone of modern business infrastructure. In fact, as of 2025, 78% of businesses use AI for at least one function (source: SellersCommerce.com). From AI-native development platforms like Microsoft Copilot to multiagent systems and physical AI, the shift is abundantly clear: companies need to be moving at the speed of generative and agentic AI.

Small and mid-size businesses are leaning heavily into automation to reduce costs, streamline workflows, increase marketing personalization and improve overall decision-making. In 2026, AI adoption is what will set success stories apart from company failures.

What this means for growth: AI is a competitive advantage. Companies that embed AI into customer service, sales enablement, operations, marketing and product development will scale more quickly and operate with fewer bottlenecks. If you are still relying on manual processes or siloed tools, this is the year to update your business plan.

Tip: Audit your most manual workflows and identify the top three areas where automation could reduce friction or



speed up productivity. Start there. Small wins compound quickly and show ROI for scaling AI further.

Economic Ambiguity — Proactive, Resilient Strategy

Economic sentiment is split. Only 39% of leaders feel optimistic about the national economy but, oddly, 71% feel confident about their own company's performance

this year (source: JP Morgan). That gap tells an interesting story: Leaders believe in their ability to navigate uncertainty, even if the broader economic environment feels unstable.

Harvard Business School experts point to political contradictions, global fragmentation and climate pressures as ongoing challenges (source: HBR.org). The companies that thrive will be the ones that plan for multiple scenarios, embrace changes, and allow flexibility within their business and marketing strategies.

What this means for growth: Resilience is now a growth strategy. Diversified supply chains, strong cash positions, a flexible marketing strategy and adjustable planning models give you the ability to move quickly when opportunities arise.

Tip: Build a simple plan with best-case, expected-case and worst-case scenarios. Identify the decisions you would make in each. This eliminates panic and reactive decision-making, as well as speeds up execution when conditions shift. Do not wait for challenges to take you by surprise. Be ready for them.

Sustainability Aligns With Growth

Sustainability is becoming a driver of profitability. Climate initiatives are increasingly tied to economic growth, not regulation. And as AI infrastructure expands, energy efficiency and resource management are becoming business-critical.

Companies that embrace circularity, low-carbon operations and energy-efficient technologies are seeing measurable cost savings and stronger brand trust. According to Superpowers Index research, businesses that prioritized sustainability were 28% more likely to see increased revenues

in the last 12 months (source: B2BInternational.com).

What this means for growth: Sustainability is a differentiator. It is another way for your marketing team to set you apart. Customers, partners and investors are paying attention. Efficient operations reduce expenses. Plus, environmentally responsible practices open doors to new markets and contracts.

Tip: Start with one measurable sustainability initiative like energy reduction, waste minimization or supply chain transparency. Track the financial impact. Use that data to scale your efforts.

Workforce Flexibility, Upskilling & Human-Centric Leadership

Talent remains one of the biggest challenges for B2B businesses. Retention, flexible work and skill development are top priorities. But the real shift in 2026 is leadership: Companies need emotionally intelligent leaders who can manage conflict, uncertainty and cultural change. Human-centric leadership is not soft; it is strategic. Teams perform better when they feel supported, aligned and empowered.

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What this means for growth: Your people are your growth engine. Upskilling, hybrid flexibility and strong leadership directly impact productivity, innovation and the customer experience.

Tip: Invest in leadership development and cross-training. The ROI is immediate: fewer bottlenecks, stronger teams and faster execution.

The Bottom Line

2026 is the year of acceleration. AI is becoming infrastructure. Economic ambiguity demands resilience. Sustainability is now a growth lever. And your workforce is the ultimate competitive advantage. B2B companies that embrace these trends will not only survive the year, but also grow, differentiate and lead. ■

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