Alation

How to Build Your First Data Product

(with Real-World Examples)

Executive Summary

For years, organizations have poured effort into “catalog everything” initiatives — curating metadata, documenting lineage, and enforcing governance. But catalogs, no matter how thorough, only provide partial answers.

Alation is changing that. By shifting from passive catalogs to outcome-oriented products, organizations can package curated data, business context, and trust signals into outcomes-oriented products that drive business value. With a Data Products Marketplace, leaders can scale this approach, ensuring that AI, analytics, and decision-making are powered by trusted, governed, and reusable assets.

This guide walks through:

- **Why data products matter now:** The business case for data products today
- **How to build your first data product:** A practical, step-by-step “report-to-product” approach that delivers quick wins and builds repeatable success.
- **Five high-value use cases:** Real-world examples that prove ROI today and accelerate readiness for agentic AI.
- **How to measure success:** Key metrics and role-based goals that ensure accountability, trust, and business impact.

Why Data Products, Why Now? The Business Case

Instead of governing for the sake of governance, data products are designed to answer real business questions:

- How can we improve sales pipeline conversion?
- Which customers are at risk of churn?
- What’s driving supply chain volatility?

The results speak for themselves. Organizations that adopt data products significantly lower costs by standardizing curation, avoiding duplication, and eliminating waste. They also reduce risk, because each product carries built-in governance, clear ownership, and enforceable contracts.

At the same time, data products fuel revenue growth — trusted data enables faster, more confident decisions. And crucially for the AI era, they provide a foundation for innovation: packaged, AI-ready products are discoverable, machine-parsable, and consumable by agents and workflows.`

The Problem: "Catalog Everything"

Ingesting every data asset's metadata creates a huge, complex catalog.

Users get lost in the noise.

The Solution: Data Products Marketplace

Package the most high-value data — with business context and trust signals — into data products.

Users can find and trust what they need.

What is a Data Product?

A **data product** is more than a dataset — it's a complete package:

- Curated data tied to specific **business outcomes**.
- Documented **questions it answers**.
- Clear **ownership and stewardship**.
- Embedded **quality signals** and **access policies**.

Think of it as a "single source of truth with context," not just a dataset.

The **Data Products Marketplace** makes these discoverable, comparable, and reusable across the enterprise. Instead of sifting through thousands of catalog entries, business users shop for a trusted product that solves their problem.

Report-to-Product: Build Your First Data Product in Alation

Many organizations struggle with how to begin the data product journey. Leaders often understand the concept but hesitate when asked, “What should our first data product be?” To avoid endless debates and early-stage paralysis, Alation recommends a simple, pragmatic approach: start by converting a **business-critical report** into a data product.

Why a report? Because reports already encapsulate business-critical logic, are widely used by stakeholders, and rely on data that is (at least to some degree) trusted. By working backwards from an existing report, organizations can sidestep theoretical debates and immediately deliver value.

1
Choose a business-critical report

2
Frame the product with business questions

3
Curate with purpose

4
Publish to the Marketplace

5
Iterate deliberately

Report-to-Product: Build Your First Data Product in Alation

The **report-to-product approach** unfolds in several steps:

1. **Choose a business-critical report**. Identify one that executives or business users rely on consistently — such as sales pipeline, churn dashboards, or supply forecasts. Focusing here ensures that the resulting data product is anchored in relevance and already has a natural audience.
2. **Frame the product with business questions**. Every data product must answer a finite set of questions. For example, in a sales pipeline product: “How much net new pipeline entered this quarter?”, “Which deals are stuck in stage?”, “What is the forecast accuracy by rep or region?” This step ensures the data product is outcome-oriented rather than a random collection of tables.
3. **Curate with purpose**. Curation has historically been a pain point for data managers because it felt endless. With data products, curation is targeted: only the fields necessary to answer the defined questions need to be documented and contextualized. Owners should capture definitions, fiscal logic, refresh cadence, and data contracts. The result is sharper and more purposeful metadata that has a direct payoff in usability and accuracy.

   The focused nature of data product curation also transforms how teams perceive this work. Rather than cataloging data "just in case," data stewards now see their curation efforts directly enabling business outcomes. This connection between their daily work and tangible business value increases engagement and ensures higher-quality metadata.

Report-to-Product: Build Your First Data Product in Alation

4. **Publish to the Marketplace**. Once curated, the product is published to Alation's Data Products Marketplace. Here it is packaged with ownership details, intended audiences, usage guidance, and quality indicators. The business use case and value proposition should be prominently featured to help users understand not just what the product contains, but why it matters and how it drives decisions. Publishing elevates the data product into a discoverable, reusable asset, not a one-off project.
5. **Iterate deliberately**. Treat the product as an MVP. Monitor usage. Ask: Are the right questions being answered? What gaps remain? Are users adopting it in place of older manual workarounds? Expand only when justified by business demand, and retire products that no longer serve a purpose. Remember that continuous iteration is not a sign of immaturity — it's the essence of product thinking.

This prescriptive process transforms the often-messy exercise of catalog curation into a clear blueprint for success. By focusing on one report at a time, customers achieve value quickly and build confidence in their ability to repeat the process at scale.

Defining Your Pilot Data Product

Pilot Scope

Need:
Understand if customers are using our loyalty program

Enterprise Data Warehouse

Alation Data Products

"This data product is needed so our marketing and store teams can easily see how customers are using our loyalty program, helping us run better campaigns and keep customers coming back."

Outcomes

Discoverability & Understandability

Trust & Data Quality

Collaboration & Self-Service with AI

Business Value

Increase Profit

Enhanced Customer Lifetime Value (CLV)

Reduced Customer Acquisition Cost (CAC)

Five High-Value Data Product Use Cases (And the AI They Unlock)

Again, every data product must tie directly to a business outcome. But what does this look like in practice?

To illustrate, let’s explore five high-value use cases that Alation customers can start with today. Each is grounded in real-world reports and directly supports both human decision-making and emerging agentic AI capabilities.



Sales Pipeline Health



Customer Churn Analysis



Campaign Performance



Supply Chain Forecasting



Finance Close Pack / Executive KPIs

Five High-Value Data Product Use Cases (And the AI They Unlock)

1. Sales pipeline health

Sales leaders need timely, accurate insight into pipeline creation, conversion, and risk. Yet too often, this information is fragmented across CRM reports and analyst spreadsheets.

Data product: A consolidated pipeline product pulls opportunity data, stage definitions, and owner assignments into a governed, trustworthy asset.

AI actions: Leaders can query in natural language — “What new pipeline entered this quarter?” AI agents can then flag deals at risk, forecast slippage, and recommend interventions, turning visibility into proactive sales coaching. The conversational interface goes beyond simple Q&A, enabling follow-up questions like "Why was the pipeline this quarter lower than the previous quarter?" or "What should we focus on next quarter to maximize our pipeline based on the available data?" This depth of interaction transforms static reporting into dynamic business advisory.

Five High-Value Data Product Use Cases (And the AI They Unlock)

2. Customer churn analysis

Retaining customers is more cost-effective than acquiring new ones. In this way, early identification of churn risk directly protects revenue.

Data product: The churn product combines usage metrics, support ticket trends, billing patterns, and survey data. Curation ensures clear definitions for “at-risk” accounts and transparent scoring methodology.

AI actions: Agents can flag top accounts likely to churn, summarize key drivers (e.g., declining product adoption or unresolved tickets), and even draft executive briefs or account manager alerts. The result? Business leaders gain foresight and the chance to act, rather than reactive reporting.

Five High-Value Data Product Use Cases (And the AI They Unlock)

3. Campaign performance

Marketing executives need to understand which campaigns drive qualified pipeline and which waste budget.

Data product: A curated campaign performance product integrates data from marketing automation systems, CRM, spend platforms, and customer feedback channels. This unified view ensures consistent ROI metrics and creates a trusted foundation for deeper analysis.

AI actions: With chat-enabled access, a CMO can ask in plain language, “Which of my campaigns are underperforming?” The AI agent not only identifies low-conversion campaigns but also analyzes why performance is lagging — correlating sentiment data, spend patterns, and customer feedback. From there, the agent can recommend pausing underperforming ads, reallocating spend to better-performing channels, or launching a revised campaign version. This shifts campaign analysis from static reporting to **real-time optimization and automated engagement**, helping leaders act quickly and confidently.

Five High-Value Data Product Use Cases (And the AI They Unlock)

4. Supply chain forecasting

For manufacturers and retailers, supply chain disruptions create costly stockouts or overstocks. Forecasting demand accurately is essential.

Data product: A supply chain product integrates order history, inventory, lead times, and promotion calendars. Governance ensures consistent definitions for key terms such as “stockout risk” or “safety stock.”

AI actions: Agentic AI can not only highlight projected demand spikes but also propose purchase orders, recommend inventory rebalancing, or alert planners to risks. This proactive automation reduces costs and protects customer satisfaction.

Five High-Value Data Product Use Cases (And the AI They Unlock)

5. Finance close pack / executive KPIs

Closing the books quickly and accurately is a perennial CFO challenge. Inconsistent numbers and ill-defined terms undermine trust at the top of the house.

Data product: A finance close-pack product consolidates GL, subledger, and headcount data into a trusted view of variance vs. plan, unit economics, and operational KPIs.

AI actions: Instead of manually assembling decks, AI can generate narratives explaining variances, highlight anomalies, and prepare briefing materials for board or executive reviews. Finance teams spend less time reconciling and more time advising.

What unites these use cases is their outcome orientation. Each begins with a clear business question and evolves into a reusable product that supports decision-making and automation. By feeding into agentic AI, these products don’t just answer questions — they drive action.

Proving Value: Metrics that Matter

Organizations often ask, *“How do we measure the impact of data products?”* The answer lies in a mix of **adoption, trust, efficiency, and business impact**. Unlike traditional cataloging initiatives — where success is often fuzzy — data products lend themselves to clear ROI measurement.

Key data product metrics to track

Adoption and usage

- Number of active data product users.
- Frequency of queries answered via chat.
- Number of business units leveraging a product.

These metrics demonstrate whether products are being discovered, trusted, and relied upon across the enterprise.

Trust and governance

- Percentage of products with defined owners, SLAs, and data contracts.
- Percentage of curated fields relative to total.
- Audit and compliance adherence through policy-aware access.

These signal whether governance is purposeful and operationalized, not theoretical.

Proving Value: Metrics that Matter

Key data product metrics to track

Efficiency gains

- Reduction in time-to-insight (e.g., analysts spending hours instead of days).
- Decrease in duplicate datasets or conflicting reports.
- Reduction in manual report preparation (e.g., automated finance narratives).

Efficiency metrics validate that teams are reclaiming time for higher-value work.

Business impact

- Increase in pipeline conversion from sales products.
- Reduction in customer churn due to early interventions.
- Savings from optimized marketing spend or supply chain planning.
- Risk avoided through policy-driven governance and trusted metrics.

Together, these measures demonstrate that data products aren’t just an IT initiative; they are a business growth engine.

Proving Value: Metrics that Matter

Key metrics by job category

While categories of metrics reveal overall progress, accountability lives with specific roles. Alation recommends aligning each persona with clear goals that contribute to adoption, trust, efficiency, and impact. See examples of data product roles and their success metrics below:

Data product owner

- Achieve **90% consumer satisfaction** in quarterly surveys.
- Increase **adoption rates** through targeted engagement and product enhancements.
- Deliver up to **three new features** per quarter based on user feedback.

Data steward

- Conduct **monthly metadata audits** to ensure 95% of products are discoverable and curated.
- Maintain **100% compliance** with governance standards.
- Reduce **data quality issues** by a measurable percentage each quarter.

Proving Value: Metrics that Matter

Key metrics by job category

Data engineer

- Reduce **pipeline processing time** by 20% within six months.
- Maintain **99.9% uptime** for infrastructure supporting data products.
- Automate **80% of data quality checks**, reducing manual intervention.

Executive sponsor

- Allocate **15% of the IT budget** to initiatives supporting data product development and scalability.
- Provide **quarterly executive updates** on cost reduction, risk mitigation, or revenue growth achieved through data products.
- Drive **organization-wide adoption**, targeting measurable uptake across the workforce within one year.

Why metrics matter

By combining metric categories with role-specific goals, organizations gain both a high-level view of progress and clear accountability for results. Owners focus on adoption, stewards on trust, engineers on efficiency, and sponsors on business outcomes. Together, these measures provide a 360° view of how data products are delivering on their promise of quality, agility, and impact.

Data Sovereignty and Vendor Neutrality

Today's most innovative organizations are asking a key question: "Who really owns our data and AI?" As large tech vendors acquire metadata companies, CIOs are voicing concern: "We don't want the robots to own us — we want to own the robots."

This is why data sovereignty matters. Enterprises need control over:

- Any compute
- Any storage
- Any model
- Any location (cloud or on-premises)

With Alation, you're not forced into a monolithic platform or locked into a single vendor's ecosystem. Instead, you gain a neutral Agentic Knowledge Layer that spans Snowflake, Databricks, Oracle, Microsoft, and more. This adaptability safeguards sovereignty and ensures your organization maintains the freedom to innovate on its own terms.

Vendor neutrality doesn't just reduce risk — it enables agility. It means you can experiment with new AI models, customize solutions, and adopt emerging technologies without re-architecting your data stack. It means you can govern smarter, move faster, and stay ahead of competitors. It means that your key competitive advantage–your unique enterprise data–truly remains your own.

Conclusion

Moving from cataloging to data products represents a fundamental shift in how organizations create value with data. By starting with report-to-product conversions, leaders can deliver quick wins while laying the foundation for scalable governance. While this approach provides an accessible entry point, organizations should view it as one of several methodologies for identifying and developing data products as their maturity grows.

By focusing on outcome-driven use cases, they can prove impact where it matters most: sales, marketing, customer retention, supply chain, and finance. The Data Products Marketplace provides the trust, standards, and lifecycle management required to scale these wins across the enterprise. And when paired with agentic AI, data products unlock automation and proactive decision-making that go beyond human capacity.

The message is clear: AI-ready data starts with Alation data products. Those who embrace this model today will be the organizations prepared to thrive in the next generation of data and AI.

The Alation AI Advantage



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