

LEAD RESPONSE PLAYBOOK

What to do in the first five minutes after a lead arrives, before you lose them to a faster competitor

WHO THIS IS FOR

Home service operators who spend money to make the phone ring and then watch revenue slip out the back door because nobody answered, nobody called back, or nobody called back fast enough.

WHAT YOU GET

A speed-to-lead system with specific targets, scripts for the first sixty seconds of a phone call, a missed-call recovery loop, after-hours coverage that does not depend on you, and a CSR pay structure that makes self-policing the job.

BASED ON

Field research across 200+ home service operators, call center analytics covering 1M+ calls per month, and documented results from multi-location franchises scaling past \$100M in revenue. Every benchmark, script, and pay structure here comes from an operator who runs it.

WHY THIS IS THE LEAK THAT HURTS MOST

Your marketing budget is paying for phone calls and form fills. The math is simple. A qualified inbound call in home service costs around \$100 to generate through advertising. Miss ten of them in a single day, at an average ticket of \$450, and you just lost \$4,500. That is real operator math, not an industry estimate.

Now compound the loss. The industry median booking rate, based on analysis of more than a million calls a month, is 46%. Call analytics firms will not tell a client to spend more on marketing until booking sits above 70%. Below 70%, more traffic makes the leak worse, not better.

The gap between the operators who win and the operators who bleed is not the ad spend. It is what happens between "the phone rang" and "the appointment is booked." Operators who install this system typically move from sub-60% to 85-90% booking rates. Same business. Different system.

This playbook is that system.

THE SPEED-TO-LEAD TARGETS

There are three lanes. Each one has a hard target and a falloff curve.

Phone calls (the burning match). Answer on the first attempt. If you do not, 63% of callers will not leave a voicemail. They hang up and call the next contractor in the search results. Only 37% leave a message. The voicemail you finally hear is the floor of the problem, not the picture of it.

Web forms and lead aggregator leads. The target is a sub-60-second response. This has been tested directly. One operator submitted a tree-removal lead through a major aggregator after a storm. The company that called in 60 seconds got the job. A competitor with better reviews called in 30 minutes and lost. Speed beat reputation.

Web inquiries at the macro level. If you do not respond within one hour, the prospect is 7 times more likely to choose a competitor. Wait 24 hours and the multiplier jumps to 60 times. Multi-location franchise operators track a sharper number on web leads specifically: callback within five minutes and you convert above 70%. Slip past five minutes and you fall below 30%. Same lead. Same prospect. Different decision because someone else got there first.

The internal target at high-performing shops: "The goal is always to get to them within a minute, essentially." That is not just for hot leads. That is the standard for every non-phone inbound channel.

THE FIRST 60 SECONDS OF A PHONE CALL

Call center coaches who have analyzed thousands of CSR interactions identify the most important window in a CSR's day. 90% of a call's outcome is decided in the first 30 to 50 seconds. If the CSR has not made the caller feel understood, cared about, and reassured in that window, everything after is uphill.

Here is the five-step intake framework that top-performing operators use. Five steps. No improvisation.

Step 1: Greeting and tone. Warm, named, unhurried. The caller heard a robot menu somewhere else that morning. You are not that.

Step 2: Immediate reassurance. The caller states a problem. Before you ask anything, say: "I will certainly be able to help you with that." Or some natural version. This puts the caller into a positive, receptive state of mind before the questioning starts. Without this line, every follow-up question feels like an interrogation.

Step 3: Capture phone and email early. Give a reason. "Let me grab your number, just in case we get disconnected. And your email is?" Slide the email request right behind the phone, while the compliance reflex is still active.

Step 4: Open-ended discovery. Not a checklist. A question and silence. "Tell me what is going on with the door." Then write down their exact words. Especially the emotional ones: "concerned about," "costing us," "causing problems." Those words go into the appointment recommendation verbatim. People do not argue with their own words.

Step 5: Assume the appointment and close low-friction. The non-committal close, a pattern interrupt validated by phone sales experts:

"You're in luck, I've got a guy out in your area. I'll have him come by. He's one of my lead technicians. He'll take a look, tell you what's going on. If you like what he has to say, I'll have the stuff on the truck. How does that sound?"

Notice what this script does. It removes commitment. It frames the visit as diagnostic, not a sale. It assumes a yes. The next words out of your CSR's mouth should be a time window: "I have between 10 and 2 today."

BRANCH SCRIPT: THE KNOWLEDGEABLE CALLER

When the caller tries to self-diagnose ("I'm pretty sure it's the spring"), do not argue. Validate, then assume the appointment:

"Sounds like you know a lot about this. You're in luck. I'm going to send out one of our best technicians, and since you already have a pretty good idea what it is, you won't have to go through the whole process. He'll confirm it or catch anything else. I have between 10 and 2 today."

The principle: for emergency or high-anxiety service calls, customers still demand a human voice. AI scripts feel inadequate at peak emotional intensity. The reassurance has to come from a person.

THE FIVE-MINUTE WEB LEAD DROP

Multi-location franchise operators tracked the curve on their web leads. Inside five minutes, conversion sits above 70%. Past five minutes, it falls below 30%. To beat that drop, they built an automatic dialer that connects the lead to a live agent the moment the form is submitted.

If you cannot build that yet, here is the manual version. Assign one CSR to a single high-priority lead source and force push notifications on her phone. She hits the notification before the email or text arrives, dials the lead immediately, and earns a \$5 bonus for every booked call. Roughly \$25 extra a day for her. Nine out of ten aggregator leads booked. The focus did it.

The principle: a single source, a single owner, a financial stake in the response time. If your "speed-to-lead" is the responsibility of "whoever sees it first," nobody owns it, and the leak continues.

MISSED-CALL RECOVERY: THE THREE-STEP LOOP

The text-back tools that fire automatically after a missed call are not the system. They are step one of a three-step system. Operators who rely on automation alone still lose the lead, because nobody on staff has time to make the human callback that closes the loop.

Here is the full recovery sequence:

- 1. Automated text-back.** Within seconds of a missed call, the prospect gets a text: "Sorry we missed you. Can we call you back in 5 minutes, or would you like to book online right now?" Include the booking link.
- 2. Human callback.** A named person on your team owns the missed-call queue. They make the callback in the window you promised.
- 3. Booked in CRM.** A trained agent finishes the booking in the system and triggers the same pre-arrival sequence a phone-booked job would receive.

The verbatim recovery script, designed for high-queue moments: "Give us your phone number to call you right back, and then I would send them a link to book now, or we'll call you back in five minutes." Dual path. The customer chooses self-serve or callback. Either way they stay in the

pipeline.

A parallel principle: when the call queue is overloaded, your hold message should offer the online booking link as an in-queue alternative. The customers who prefer to self-serve will. The customers who want to wait will. The lead does not drop either way.

AFTER-HOURS COVERAGE THAT DOES NOT DEPEND ON YOU

One operator used to get anxiety at movies because his phone was ringing with unanswered after-hours calls. That is owner-dependency wearing the disguise of dedication. He fixed it by building three layers.

Layer 1: Rotation. Weekend and after-hours coverage rotates across a defined team. Nobody owns the burden permanently. Nobody is unmonitored.

Layer 2: Booking bonus. Every after-hours call answered and booked pays the agent a bonus. Not optional. Not nice-to-have. The bonus is the reason the call gets answered, instead of "I had to go get something for my kids," which was the actual excuse a home-based hourly CSR used when she went silent at 9pm.

Layer 3: Overflow infrastructure. Large operations maintain a secondary call center for nights, weekends, holidays, and understaffed days. The math: if the average job is \$400 to \$500 and the third-party agent costs \$1.30 per minute, roughly \$13 for a ten-minute call, the cost-to-capture ratio is not close.

For Stage 1 and Stage 2 operators not ready for a third-party overflow center, a \$2 to \$4 per minute answering service is the highest-ROI capture spend you can make. AI receptionists built into your field service software lift voicemail capture from 37% to 50-60%. Better than voicemail, not as good as a human.

A no-cost technical move: configure your VoIP system to ring unanswered inbound calls to all managers and field supervisors simultaneously after 15 seconds. That gives you a human overflow net before a paid service has to take the call.

One last lead-killing setting to fix tonight. Look up your own business on Google Business Profile. If your hours show "9 to 5, Monday through Friday," you are telling every after-hours emergency customer not to call you. They will not. Update to 24/7 and route after-hours to the coverage you just built.

CSR PAY: PERFORMANCE PAY OR NO PAY

You will not solve speed-to-lead with hourly pay. One operator's evening CSR proved it. She had no skin in the game, so she had a thousand reasons not to answer.

When CSRs moved to performance pay, two things happened on day one. Conversion went up. And when the phone system had a problem, agents reported it within two minutes, because they could not afford the missed calls. Compare that to the hourly era, when a full internet outage went unreported for hours because nobody had a financial reason to notice.

A proven performance-pay structure has five weighted components:

- Attendance
- Shift differential
- Booking rate (largest weight)
- Quality and error rate
- Pay for performance on total booked jobs

The base is minimum wage. Top performers earn \$20 to \$33 per hour, with a \$35+ ceiling during high-volume periods. The goal is \$40 to \$50 per hour. This is not a theoretical structure. It is one that large-scale operators run every day.

Layering per-action incentives on top of base for service agreements and replacement upsells drives additional results. \$10 per service agreement sold is one example. Two service agreements per day is an extra \$5,200 a year for the CSR, and a career-track financial path inside what used to be a flat seat.

Also consider tiering CSR roles. A CSR reaches "Level 2" only after 4 to 5 months and only after hitting the top tier of the booking-rate payout structure. Level 2s handle escalations and pricing. Supervisor ratio is 1:6, compared to the industry norm of 1:20 to 1:25. More supervision, more coaching, more retention.

One last reframe: stop calling them "customer service reps." Call them "sales representatives" or "customer care representatives." Every call is a sales event. The title changes how the CSR sees the role.

THE BOOKING RATE TARGETS YOU SHOULD HOLD

Set these as your floor, ceiling, and warning lines.

- **46%.** Industry median. If you are here, you are leaking.
- **70%.** The threshold to start expanding marketing spend. Below this, do not run more ads.
- **80%.** The minimum for a customer success team on qualified inbound calls.
- **85-95%.** Achievable with structured CSR coaching and ongoing one-on-one training. High-performing answering services run 93% on inbound.
- **90% ceiling.** Above 90%, you are likely booking unprofitable calls (parts-only, wrong-service-area) that should be routed away from top bookers. "If you get 10 out of 10, you're probably getting customers you shouldn't be getting."

A warning. AI call analysis platforms that review 100% of calls consistently find that companies self-reporting 90%+ booking rates are actually booking at 68 to 72%. CSRs in your CRM can mark calls as "out of service area" or "parts only" and game the metric. The gap between reported and real is the revenue leak most owners do not know they have. One company whose CRM showed 30% booking turned out to have an actual rate of 65% after correcting the configuration. Trust the data only after you have verified it.

THE CTAS THAT SHOULD REPLACE YOUR PHONE NUMBER

The principle: every booking CTA you used to send to a phone number should now send to a direct booking link or QR code. Email signatures. Truck wraps. Invoices. Yard signs. Door hangers. Marketing emails.

The proof: at minimum 30% of a contractor's total bookings can flow through an automated online scheduling system with zero CSR involvement and no callback required. Of those online bookings, 30 to 40% come from net-new customers who have never been served before. More than 40% arrive after business hours, when most contractors have no CSR coverage at all.

And the generational signal: millennials, who recently surpassed boomers in home purchases, do not want to be on the phone. A phone-only intake system is aging out of relevance.

This does not replace your CSRs. It frees them to do the work humans are better at: handling complex questions, recovering missed calls, and selling service agreements while emotional urgency is still on the call. The booking step is a transactional task that should be automated.

IMPLEMENTATION CHECKLIST

Speed-to-lead infrastructure

- ☐ Web form submissions trigger an auto-dial to a live agent within 60 seconds
- ☐ Lead aggregator apps live on a named CSR's phone with push notifications forced on
- ☐ \$5 per-booked-lead bonus active for that CSR on aggregator sources
- ☐ Missed-call text-back tool active, with the dual-path script (booking link + callback)
- ☐ Named owner of the missed-call queue and a documented callback time window

After-hours coverage

- ☐ Google Business Profile shows 24/7 availability, not 9-to-5
- ☐ On-call rotation calendar for nights and weekends
- ☐ After-hours booking bonus per call answered and booked
- ☐ VoIP overflow rule: unanswered calls ring all managers/supervisors after 15 seconds

- ☐ Backup answering service or AI receptionist contracted for full overflow

The first 60 seconds

- ☐ Every CSR can deliver the 5-step intake (greeting, reassurance, capture, discovery, assume close) without reading it
- ☐ The non-committal close ("you're in luck") is the default appointment script
- ☐ CSRs trained to write down the caller's exact emotional words and use them verbatim
- ☐ Branch script for the knowledgeable caller is rehearsed

CSR pay

- ☐ Base + booking-rate performance pay structure documented
- ☐ Per-action bonuses on service agreements and replacement upsells
- ☐ Tiered career path (Level 1 to Level 2) with hard performance gates
- ☐ Supervisor-to-CSR ratio at or below 1:10

Online booking

- ☐ Booking link or QR code on every CTA that used to show a phone number
- ☐ Hold-message script offers booking link as in-queue alternative
- ☐ Online booking system live, accepting bookings 24/7

Metrics you trust

- ☐ CRM configuration audited for booking-rate calculation accuracy
- ☐ Booking rate tracked per CSR, not just total
- ☐ Cancellation rate tracked per CSR (the spread is often 3% to 17% within the same call center)
- ☐ Real booking rate verified against AI call analysis or manual sample review

WHAT THIS SYSTEM PRODUCES

The operators who run this end-to-end do not have a marketing problem. They have a capacity problem, which is a much better problem to have. Top in-house CSRs at high-performing shops book 80 to 100 calls per day at a 95% booking rate. The contact center is the lifeblood of the company. If your marketing dollars are going to work, the call center is where they cash in.

Start with one move. Pick the leak you can close this week. For most operators reading this, the highest-ROI fix is the after-hours coverage gap and the 24/7 GBP update. For the operators a step further along, it is moving one CSR to performance pay and watching what happens to her booking rate inside 30 days.

The pipeline next door (your CRM and your customer journey) will not work if the pipe in front of it is leaking. Fix the first five minutes first.

All tactics in this playbook are sourced from operators who use them. Every benchmark, script, pay structure, and recovery loop comes from documented field research across home service operations ranging from single-truck shops to \$100M+ enterprises. Full source index available in the BurksUP Field Intelligence Library.

• WHAT'S NEXT •

READY TO *INSTALL* THIS?

BurksUP builds the marketing systems that make home service operators findable, bookable, and referable. This guide is the playbook. We're the team that installs it.

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