PHONES

CHOOSING AFTER-HOURS COVERAGE, INCLUDING AI

Match each kind of call to the right answer.

Homeowners often call in the evening, when they finally have time, and emergencies don't keep office hours. Voicemail is a weak answer: in one survey, 80% of callers who reached it left no message.

SORT YOUR CALLS FIRST

Simple requests like hours or rescheduling may suit AI. An upset homeowner with water on the floor usually needs a person. Five9's research found 55% of people trust AI to resolve an issue when a clear path to a human exists, and 26% when it doesn't.

WHATEVER YOU CHOOSE

- Always give callers a way to reach a person.
- Write down what counts as an emergency.
- Decide who gets woken up, and how fast.

WHAT'S ACTUALLY COMING IN AFTER 5:00

Before you buy anything, look at what you're trying to solve. Pull a month of after-hours calls and listen to as many as you can. Sort them:

- True emergencies, like no heat in a freeze or an active leak
- Urgent, but able to wait until morning
- Ordinary service requests from people who finally have time to call
- Existing customers asking about a job
- Spam and vendors

Many owners assume nights are all emergencies. The middle groups are often larger, and they're the ones most often lost to voicemail.

YOUR OPTIONS

Voicemail. It's free, and it's where a lot of revenue goes to die. If you keep it, return every message first thing and say so in the greeting.

On-call technician or owner. The person knows the business. But it's hard to run a family life with a phone that can ring at 2:00 a.m., and it's a common reason good techs leave. Rotate the duty and pay for it fairly. On-call rules can affect hours worked, so check with your attorney. See cutting wage and hour risk.

Answering service. It takes messages and can dispatch by your rules. Quality varies a lot. Message-takers don't always know how to book or how to calm a frightened homeowner. Test them by calling at 11:00 p.m.

Dedicated call center. Trained agents can book directly into your schedule, follow your scripts and hold to your rules. It costs more than a message service, and it should book more too.

AI voice. It answers instantly, doesn't get tired and handles simple tasks well. It's weaker with people who are upset, confused or dealing with something unusual. A caller who can't get through to a person may simply call someone else.

WRITE YOUR EMERGENCY RULES

Don't leave this up to whoever's working. Write down:

- What counts as an emergency, by trade
- What to tell callers about gas, sparking or fire, including when to leave the home and call 911 or the utility
- Who gets called, in what order, and how long before moving to the next person
- The after-hours fee, and when to state it
- What happens when no technician can be reached

SET THE PROMISE YOU CAN KEEP

"Someone will be there within two hours" is a promise your on-call tech has to keep, while covering a large area and possibly coming off a full day. It's far better to give an honest arrival estimate and update it.

HAND IT OFF CLEANLY

The morning team needs to know what happened overnight. Require a written summary of every after-hours call, with outcome and next step. Make someone responsible for reviewing it at the start of each day.

TEST IT

Once a quarter, call your own number after hours. Do it from a phone they don't recognize. Time the answer. Listen to what they say, and ask a question that's slightly unusual. Then ask whether the call was logged and whether it reached the right person.

MEASURE IT

Track after-hours calls, answer rate, bookings, revenue and cost. Compare those with the emergency premium you collect. Run the missed-call calculator on after-hours calls alone to see what they're worth. White Paper 10 compares AI answering with live dispatchers in more detail.

Sources: Forbes survey, as reported by DestinationCRM. Five9, 2026 Business Leaders CX Report. White Paper 10.

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BEST PRACTICES: MISSED CALLS

MAKE IT A HABIT

What good looks like

> Aim to answer at least 9 in 10 calls live during business hours.

> Aim to pick up within about 20 seconds.

> Every voicemail and missed call returned within minutes, not by the end of the day.

The habits

1. Measure your true answer rate by hour of day, not your gut feel. Most owners guess high.
2. Cover the gaps on purpose: lunch, the first and last hour of the day, Saturdays and the first big weather day.
3. Set an overflow rule: after a set number of rings or calls waiting, calls roll to a second person or an outside team.
4. Return every missed call fast, with a named owner for the call-back list.
5. Write a short after-hours plan: what counts as an emergency, who is on call and what the caller is told.
6. Listen to five recorded calls a week and coach one thing at a time.

Signs it's time to get help

- Your answer rate is under 80% in your busiest hours.
- Your dispatcher answers phones and runs the board at the same time.
- Weather days or ad spikes regularly swamp the office.

How one shop did it: Bonney Plumbing (multi-brand plumbing, HVAC and electrical company). Merged five brands' customer service teams into one team that can answer for any brand, stretched coverage to seven days without adding staff, and coaches with call transcripts and role-play. Booking rate rose from 35% to 41%, missed calls fell from 10% to 4%, and abandoned calls fell from 12% to 4%. Case study published by its software provider, April 10, 2025

Where we fit: Service ProCall answers overflow, lunch, after-hours and surge calls in your name, and books into your own software.

More on missed calls