PHONES

HOW FAST SHOULD YOU CALL A NEW LEAD?

The bar is low, and that is your opening.

When Harvard Business Review audited 2,241 U.S. companies, only 37% answered a web lead within an hour, the average first response took 42 hours, and 23% never responded. An earlier study found the odds of reaching a lead fell sharply between 5 and 30 minutes.

TEST YOURSELF TONIGHT

Fill out your own website form and note when someone calls. Do it again during a busy Monday and on a Saturday.

ASSIGN AN OWNER

- Name who owns new leads by daypart, including weekends.
- Send form and ad leads to a phone, not only an inbox.
- Decide what happens after the first attempt, and how many attempts follow.

WHY MINUTES MATTER

A person filling out a web form is thinking about the problem right now. They probably have another tab open with your competitor. Twenty minutes later they may be on a job site, in a meeting or already booked with somebody else.

In home services, this is even sharper. A water leak, a dead AC or a tripped panel doesn't wait for your office to check its inbox. The first company to have a real conversation has a major advantage, and the price comparison often never happens.

MEASURE WHAT YOU REALLY DO

The test in this guide tells you a lot, but follow it with data. Pull 30 days of leads from every source: web forms, Google Local Services Ads, Facebook, Angi, Thumbtack and any others. For each one, record when it arrived, when someone first attempted contact, and when someone actually talked to the customer. Calculate:

- Median time to first attempt
- Median time to first conversation
- Share of leads contacted within 5 minutes
- Share never reached
- Booking rate for fast responses and slow responses

That last comparison is often the one that gets the owner's attention.

REMOVE THE DELAY

Most slow responses come from process, not attitude. Common causes:

- Leads land in a shared email that nobody watches.
- Forms send alerts to someone who's out on a truck.
- Nobody is assigned during lunch, evenings or weekends.
- Staff are finishing another call and don't see the alert.

Send each lead straight to a person's phone or screen, ring it through as a call if you can, and set a backup if it isn't picked up within a couple of minutes.

USE A SIMPLE CONTACT PATTERN

A single attempt isn't follow-up. Try a pattern like this, adapted to your market and the consent you have:

1. Call immediately.
2. If no answer, send a text within a minute, if you have permission to text them.
3. Call again within the hour.
4. Call again later that day, at a different time.
5. Try again the next morning and the next afternoon.
6. Close it out with one final message, and leave the door open.

Texts and automated calls carry their own consent rules. Read the calling rules and talk with your attorney before automating anything.

WHAT THE FIRST CALL SHOULD DO

Don't open by reading the form back to them. Start with a human sentence: "Hi, this is Maria at Smith Plumbing. You just asked about your water heater, so I wanted to catch you right away." Then ask what's happening, confirm the address and offer two windows. See what a good booking call sounds like.

COVER NIGHTS AND WEEKENDS

Leads don't stop at 5:00. Many homeowners fill out forms in the evening, when they finally get time to deal with the house. Decide what happens then: an on-call person, an answering service, or a rule that every overnight lead is called at 8:00 the next morning, before anything else. Whichever you pick, write it down.

KEEP SCORE BY SOURCE

Report speed and booking rate by lead source each month. A lead service that looks expensive might simply be getting a slower response. A cheap one might be sending people who were never going to book. You can't tell until you measure the speed. When you can show a vendor exactly how fast you responded, you'll also have better conversations about credits and quality.

Sources: Oldroyd, McElheran and Elkington, Harvard Business Review (2011). Oldroyd and Elkington, Lead Response Management Study (2007).

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BEST PRACTICES: SLOW RESPONSE TO NEW LEADS

MAKE IT A HABIT

What good looks like

> Aim to call every new lead within 5 minutes during business hours.

> At least three attempts over the first two days, by call and text.

> One named owner for new leads every hour you are open.

The habits

1. Send every lead source to one place, so nothing sits in an inbox.
2. Call first, then text if there is no answer. Leave a short voicemail with a call-back number.
3. Make three attempts in the first 48 hours, at different times of day.
4. Time your response for a week. What gets measured gets faster.
5. Know what each lead source costs per booked job, not just per lead.
6. Plan who covers new leads at night and on weekends, when many forms come in.

Signs it's time to get help

- Your average first call is over 15 minutes.
- Leads arrive while your office is on the phone with customers.
- You pay for leads that nobody calls the same day.

Where we fit: Service ProCall works new leads within minutes during your coverage hours, with a 60-second average target.

More on slow response to new leads