GROWTH

EIGHT PROBLEMS THAT HOLD TRADE COMPANIES BACK, AND HOW LEADING COMPANIES SOLVE THEM

The same issues show up in almost every AC, plumbing and electrical shop. Here is what the companies pulling ahead are doing about them.

1. THE PHONE RINGS AND NOBODY GETS IT

What it costs. Most homeowners still call. In a 2025 survey of more than 1,000 contractors reported by ACHR News, 64% said customers typically first contact them by phone. A guest column in the same publication cited research that half of callers hang up after 45 seconds on hold. Missed callers rarely leave a message, and most call the next company.

What leading companies did. Gold Medal Service in New Jersey added live outside agents for after-hours, emergency and overflow calls, and credited that backup with millions in revenue when its own phones failed in a storm. Davis A/C and Heating in Houston told Contracting Business its priority was to take pressure off its CSRs in the busy summer season, not replace them.

What matches. Trained outside agents who answer overflow and after-hours calls in your company's name and book straight onto your board, not a message service. Contractor magazine suggests a one-week call audit first: answer rate, answered-to-booked ratio and after-hours share.

2. CALLS GET ANSWERED BUT NOT BOOKED

What it costs. An answered call that ends in "we'll call you back" is often a lost job. A consultant writing in Contractor estimated that message-taking callbacks convert at only 25% to 35%.

What leading companies did. Jolly Heating, Air, Plumbing and Electric in Cincinnati told Contracting Business that when a third party only answered its after-hours calls, it booked 25% to 40% of them. Its best booking rate, 85% to 90%, came when its own trained people answered. Its takeaway: keep the human element where it matters.

What matches. Agents trained on your service area, offers and scripts, who book the visit on the first call, with recordings you can review. See the booking call.

3. THE BOARD RUNS LIGHT IN THE SHOULDER MONTHS

What it costs. Fixed costs keep running while the trucks sit. See the shoulder season roller coaster.

What leading companies did. Contractors interviewed by ACHR News, including Cooling Equipment Services in Illinois and Abacus Plumbing and Heating in Houston, schedule maintenance into the slow months so techs are in homes every spring and fall. Trade columns describe owners pulling lists of aging systems, repeat repairs and open estimates, and calling them before the season turns.

What matches. Equity mining: an outbound team that works your past customers at volume, ranked by need, with a no-charge safety check or maintenance visit as the offer.

4. PAST CUSTOMERS DRIFT TO WHOEVER CALLS FIRST

What it costs. An ACHR News column puts typical customer attrition at 17% to 21% a year. Contractor magazine makes the point plainly: a happy customer is often lost not to a bad experience, but to no follow-up at all.

What leading companies did. Davis A/C and Heating said the time it freed up on inbound calls went into outbound maintenance calls and customer relationships.

Contractors profiled in ACHR News treat maintenance agreements as the core of the relationship.

What matches. A standing outreach program: seasonal reminder calls, renewal calls 60 days before plans lapse, and check-ins after major repairs. See plan renewals.

5. ESTIMATES GO OUT AND NOBODY FOLLOWS UP

What it costs. Every unsold estimate is a lead you already paid to create.

What leading companies did. Tuck and Howell, profiled in ACHR News, created a dedicated team to reach customers with unsold estimates, then added texting when phone-only follow-up got a weak response. A contractor described in Contracting Business added automated reminders on open estimates and saw closed sales rise 15% in three months.

What matches. A follow-up team or service that calls every open estimate on a set schedule, logs the reason, and books the second look. See estimate follow-up.

6. THE OFFICE IS DROWNING, AND SO IS THE DISPATCHER

What it costs. One person answering phones and running the board does both badly at peak. Missed calls and dispatch mistakes rise together.

What leading companies did. Jolly told Contracting Business it grew 50% while adding no dispatch staff and only one CSR, by taking repetitive work off its people with better tools. Another owner profiled by ACHR News had CSRs match jobs to the technician best suited for them, with weekly bonuses tied to the results.

What matches. Overflow call coverage plus field service software that puts the board, job history and status updates in one place. See dispatch best practices.

7. RUNNING THE BUSINESS ON PAPER AND SPREADSHEETS

What it costs. Double entry, late invoices, techs calling the office for addresses, and no clear numbers until the month is over.

What leading companies did. Russell's Heating and Cooling in Virginia called job details appearing on the tech's tablet "a huge time saver." McAfee, profiled in ACHR News, gave techs full customer history on every call and sent invoices the moment work was done.

What matches. One field service system for booking, dispatch, the tech app, invoicing and reporting, with your customer list imported on day one. See getting off the spreadsheet.

8. YOU CAN'T SEE WHAT'S WORKING

What it costs. Marketing reports count calls. Owners need booked, shown and sold jobs.

What leading companies did. Contractor magazine recommends a weekly leak check: missed calls never returned, urgent forms with no human response, qualified leads not booked. The thriving contractors in the 1,000-contractor survey were described as doing the basics exceptionally well: clear goals, options for customers and no opportunity slipping through the cracks.

What matches. Reporting that ties every call and campaign to booked, shown and sold work, reviewed with someone accountable on a set schedule.

THE PATTERN

The companies pulling ahead aren't doing anything exotic. They answer and book every call they can, they keep calling the customers they already have, they follow up on every estimate, and they run the business from one system. Where they can't do it with their own people, they bring in trained help and measure it. Run the calculators on your own numbers to see which of these is costing you the most.

Sources: ACHR News, lessons from 1,000+ contractors; ACHR News, missed calls and lost jobs; ACHR News, call-answering services; Contracting Business, contractors on AI adoption; Contractor, one-week call audit; Contractor, manual back-office work; Contracting Business, AI in the HVAC business; ACHR News, shoulder seasons; ACHR News, shoulder season plan; ACHR News, seasonal marketing; Contractor, the callback that never comes; Contracting Business, reactivating customers; ACHR News, keeping employees; Contracting Business, dispatching; ACHR News, field and office tools; Contractor, where emergency leads get lost. Company results are as reported by the sources.

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