

AI receptionist for small business: how to set one up, what it costs, and a 10-minute checklist

What an AI receptionist does, what one costs, the ten setup steps from the tool's own docs, and a ten-minute checklist. Free PDF, no sign-up.

WHAT THIS ADDS

Most AI receptionist pages are sales pages. This one is a walk through the public documentation of one tool, step by step, with the limits stated: what the plans cost, what is only available in the US, and which settings decide whether it sounds helpful or foolish. The tool matters less than the instructions you write for it.

Why owners are searching for this

If you cannot pick up the phone while you are with a customer, the call goes to voicemail, or nowhere. An AI receptionist is software that answers the phone for you, answers questions about your business, and books appointments.

On October 25, 2026, AnswerThePublic showed about **1,600 US searches a month** for *ai receptionist for small business*. In the same list, *claud ai for small business* showed about 1,000, *ai tools for small business* about 720 and *ai agents for small business* about 210. That is what sent this guide in this direction.

The example tool: Reception by ElevenLabs

ElevenLabs introduced **Reception** (part of its ElevenAgents line) on September 16, 2026. Its blog says it answers calls around the clock, responds to questions about your business, and books appointments in your calendar. It is one option among many and this is not a ranking. It is the example here because its documentation is public, so every step below can be checked.

Important: this guide was written from the product page and documentation, which were opened on October 25, 2026. It was not tested on a live phone line.

What it costs

The pricing page lists three plans, billed monthly. Every plan includes appointment booking, call summaries, transcripts and recordings.

Plan	Price	Phone minutes	Extra minutes	Numbers	Calls at once
Basic	\$29/month	75	\$0.45/min	1	1
Plus	\$79/month	275	\$0.38/min	3	Up to 3
Premium	\$199/month	1,000	\$0.30/min	5	Up to 10

There is a free trial with no credit card. The Quickstart says it includes 30 credits, which is 30 phone minutes. Prices can change, so check the pricing page before you pay.

Set it up in ten steps

1. **Create the account** at app.reception.ai. The setup wizard offers *Scan my website* (recommended) or *Enter information manually*. The scan needs your HTTPS website address, reads up to 15 key pages and usually takes under a minute.
2. **Pick the phone number.** US and Canadian businesses enter a preferred 3-digit area code. Toll-free numbers are not available. The step is skipped if your website already lists a supported number. Other countries work differently, so read the docs for yours.
3. **Meet your receptionist.** Set the agent name, a voice and the first message, then talk to it in the browser as a customer would. Check the greeting, the business information and booking. Then select *Start free trial*. For US and Canadian businesses the receptionist starts answering right away.
4. **Voice, tone and greeting.** Filter voices by language, accent, gender and age. Tone is any mix of Professional, Concise, Friendly, Warm, Formal, Empathetic, Direct and Upbeat. Keep the greeting under about 15 words. *Always finish the first message* stops callers interrupting it, which the docs say suits greetings that must include a required disclosure.
5. **Who answers first.** Under *On the call, Answering order* is Receptionist first (default) or Staff first. Staff first rings your phone for 10, 15 (default), 20 or 30 seconds, then the receptionist takes over, and you can set staff answering hours with a time zone. The docs say Staff first is available for US businesses, or businesses using only their own Twilio or SIP numbers. To keep your current number, use *Forward an existing number*; your carrier controls the rings and may charge for forwarded calls.
6. **Rules and procedures.** A rule applies on every call (up to 50 per receptionist). A procedure runs only when the caller's request matches its trigger (up to 20). Rules are Strict or Suggestion.
7. **Transfer to a human.** Up to 100 transfer rules, each with a label, a phone number and a plain-English *When to transfer* condition. Transfers work on phone calls only, and are available for US businesses or businesses using only their own Twilio or SIP numbers.
8. **Scheduling.** Set up services, locations, staff, assets and booking rules. A slot is offered only when the location is open, a qualified staff member is free, assets are available, the booking rules allow it and nothing conflicts. Google Calendar sync is on the Home checklist; Calendly or Cal.com can manage availability instead.
9. **Protect your customers.** *Secure mode* (off by default) only looks up or changes a client's details when the caller's number matches the one on file. An identity verification option sends a one-time code, and a Blocked numbers list rejects callers immediately.
10. **Test it.** Use Call or Chat in the browser, then call the receptionist's number from a real phone to test transfers, staff-first answering and secure mode. Read the Conversations transcript after every test.

Rules and procedures: the part that matters most

The docs separate the two. A **rule** is a constraint that is always true. A **procedure** is a step-by-step flow tied to one kind of request, with a trigger written from the caller's point of view.

Docs example rule (Strict): *No medical advice. Never provide medical advice. Always recommend the caller schedule an appointment with a specialist.*

Docs example procedure, trigger *When the caller reports a water leak*: 1) ask whether water is actively leaking right now; 2) if it is, tell them to shut off the main water valve and take an urgent message for a callback; 3) if it is not, collect the address and offer the next available inspection slot.

The docs' advice: use Strict sparingly, keep each rule to one instruction, put multi-step flows in procedures, and test after every change. The free starter sheet gives you blank templates in the same shape.

The ten-minute checklist

1. Write down the ten questions your callers ask most.
2. Put your hours, prices and service area in one place; the tool reads them from your website.
3. Decide who answers first: you or the receptionist.
4. Write three Strict rules, one instruction each.
5. Write one procedure for your most urgent kind of call.
6. List who gets transferred calls, and when.
7. Write a greeting under 15 words.
8. Check your carrier's forwarding rules and fees.
9. Run the test list from a real phone.
10. Read your first week of conversations and fix what it got wrong.

This list is Fynl's own, built from the docs' advice.

Honest limits

- This was not tested on a live phone line, so how it sounds with your customers, and how often it is wrong, is unknown.
- The docs say US medical and dental practices see *Talk to sales* instead of continuing the self-serve setup.
- Some features depend on your country and phone numbers: UK businesses get a held number that starts after regulatory approval, and other countries connect a number from the dashboard.
- Every plan includes recordings. Check what you must tell callers where you operate; this is not legal advice.
- Prices, limits and menu names can change. Check the sources below.

DO THIS

Before you sign up, write your top ten caller questions, your hours and prices, three Strict rules and one urgent-call procedure. Then test from a real phone before you share the number.

What Fynl.io is

One portal a small business runs itself on, instead of five subscriptions that do not talk to each other.

- A CRM and pipeline that shows every lead and where it stopped
- A calendar clients can book straight into
- Quotes, contracts and invoices, with deposits taken up front
- A website and form builder, so the enquiry lands in the same place
- Your Gmail connected, so the whole thread sits on the contact
- Automations for the follow-up you keep forgetting to send

The AI runs on **your own Claude or ChatGPT API key** — no markup on it. No SMS or phone calls yet. \$49/month per business, \$149 Agency, and we move your contacts over for you.

Fynl.io is for the rest of the job: one portal for your contacts, calendar, quotes, invoices and email, with AI that runs on your own key. Fynl does not answer phone calls yet, so an AI receptionist like this would sit alongside it, not inside it.

Sources

- ElevenLabs Reception: product page, plans and prices — <https://elevenlabs.io/reception>
- ElevenLabs blog: Introducing Reception, by ElevenAgents (Sep 16, 2026) — <https://elevenlabs.io/blog/reception>
- Reception.ai docs: overview — <https://elevenlabs.io/docs/reception-ai/overview>
- Reception.ai docs: Quickstart — <https://elevenlabs.io/docs/reception-ai/quickstart>
- Reception.ai docs: Voice and personality — <https://elevenlabs.io/docs/reception-ai/receptionist/voice-and-personality>
- Reception.ai docs: Rules and procedures — <https://elevenlabs.io/docs/reception-ai/receptionist/rules-and-procedures>
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- AnswerThePublic: keyword research for "ai for small business" (Oct 25, 2026) — <https://answerthepublic.com/en/reports/16ee23ee-5975-47ba-8534-8dcd06e43a9a>

