

SMALL BUSINESS · VIRTUAL PHONE SYSTEMS · 2026

You Do Not Need a Phone System

You need a number that behaves like one. Three people, one business number, no office and nothing installed anywhere is a complete setup in 2026, provided the number is intelligent.

Most businesses stall at stage two for years without ever framing it as a decision. The jump that matters is not stage one to stage two. It is **stage two to stage four**, and it is usually cheaper than people expect, because there is no hardware in it.

■ Four stages, one business

Stage	What it looks like
1. The personal mobile	The number on the invoice, the ute and the website is a personal mobile. Free, and the business has no phone identity at all. Missed calls are invisible.
2. A business number, diverted	Feels like the fix and changes almost nothing. Same phone, same missed calls, and outbound still shows the personal number, so customers save that one and ring it on Sundays.
3. A second person, and the problem appears	The number rings one pocket. A second person cannot help, cannot see what was missed, and cannot pick up where the first left off.
4. The number belongs to the business	It rings two people in order, knows the time and date, presents itself on outbound from everyone's mobile, and when nobody can answer, something intelligent talks to the caller and writes down what happened.

■ What happens at 7:40pm

Arrangement	What the caller gets	What you have next morning
Diversion, phone in a pocket	Rings out, or you answer badly while driving.	Nothing, or a half remembered conversation.
Voicemail	A message asking them to leave a message. Most hang up.	A recording, sometimes with a number you cannot make out.
Answering service	A person who cannot answer anything about your business.	A message, and a bill scaled to call volume.
AI answering	Their question answered, details taken properly, a time booked.	A structured summary, a calendar entry, a caller already dealt with.

Why after hours is the whole argument

The difference between a voicemail and an answer is not politeness. It is whether the customer is still available in the morning, and **by morning most of them have rung somebody else**.

■ Twelve things to check before you buy. Under ten and it is a phone number with an app

- ☐ Presents the business number on outbound calls made from a mobile
- ☐ Rings more than one person, in an order you set
- ☐ Real opening hours, including public holidays
- ☐ A defined after hours path, not a default
- ☐ Escalates to a person at any point, without the caller guessing a phrase
- ☐ Captures every call, answered or not
- ☐ Transcribes and summarises
- ☐ Two way SMS from the business number
- ☐ Ports your existing number
- ☐ Holds a registered address for emergency calls
- ☐ Writes into your calendar or CRM
- ☐ Lets you change a greeting or an hour yourself, in two minutes

■ Where it genuinely stops

- It needs usable data. On one bar, enable native dialling fallback so the call uses the carrier voice network.
- It depends on the device. Flat batteries and notifications never enabled look like faults and are not.
- Emergency calls behave differently from the handset dialler. One clear conversation at setup.
- No supervision layer. Service levels, live queue visibility and coaching are a different tier.

■ Three signs you have outgrown it

- Callers are waiting and nobody knows how long.
- Somebody is supervising the phones.
- You are asked for numbers you cannot produce.
- All three are growth, not a wrong decision. Pick a provider whose contact centre tier is on the same platform and it is a plan change, not a migration.

What it costs, and the question that decides the bill

Roughly \$20 to \$35 per user per month for an app seat including AI answering, transcription and business SMS, plus nothing to about \$150 one off for porting. Then ask how the AI is charged. Per minute suits low, steady volume. If your calls are lumpy, per seat or bundled removes the month where the invoice becomes an argument. Ask for a worked example at your real call count, then the same table with volume doubled, and ask what the seat rate becomes in months 13 and 25.

Six ways to waste the first month

Ringling one person instead of two. Leaving the AI answers generic instead of writing what you actually say, including the awkward answers about price and availability. Skipping the vocabulary list of your suburbs, product names and staff names, which is ten minutes and prevents most transcription errors. Never ringing your own number at 9pm on a Saturday. Not verifying notifications with a real call rather than a question. And not reading week one's transcripts, which tell you what customers actually ask, reliably different from what you assumed.