

BUILD AN AI RECEPTIONIST

Free to build • about 15 minutes • tools change, so check each site

1

Pick a business that lives on the phone

Best first targets: plumbers, HVAC, roofers, towing, locksmiths, salons and auto shops. Their hands are busy, the phone goes to voicemail and the caller dials the next business. Ask the owner: "What happens to the calls you can't answer?" Skip medical and dental offices at first (HIPAA, page 4).

2

Build the agent on Retell

Sign up at the Retell dashboard. New accounts get \$10 in free trial credit and need no card. Open Agents, click Create an agent, choose Single prompt, then pick the Receptionist template or Build from scratch (prompt on page 2). Click Test to talk to it in your browser, free.

dashboard.retellai.com \$10 free credit, no card to test

3

Add a calendar so it books on the call

Make a free Cal.com account, connect your calendar under Apps and create an event type like "Estimate visit, 30 min". In Cal.com go to Settings > Developer > API keys > New, turn on Never expires and copy the key. In Retell go to Integrations > Available > Cal.com > Connect and paste it. Add the Check Availability and Book Appointment tools to your agent and enter the event type ID (the number in the Cal.com address bar).

cal.com free plan: unlimited event types

4

Get a phone number and call it

In Retell open Phone Numbers, click Buy New Number, pick an area code and set your agent as the Inbound Call Agent. Retell numbers are US and Canada only: \$2 a month, or \$5 toll-free. A payment method is needed only at this step. Call the number from your own phone. That call is your demo.

5

After the owner says yes: forward their calls

The owner keeps their number. In their phone carrier's settings they turn on call forwarding for busy or no answer, pointing at your Retell number. Do a live test call together before you switch it on, and keep an emergency transfer to the owner's cell in the prompt.

Retell updates its dashboard often. If a button has moved, search docs.retellai.com for the step name.

COPY THIS PROMPT

TEST IT HARD

One prompt • an automatic summary • five test calls

PROMPT: THE VIRTUAL RECEPTIONIST

You are the virtual receptionist for [BUSINESS NAME], a [TYPE OF BUSINESS] in [CITY]. Be warm, brief and clear, and ask one question at a time. Start every call with: "Thanks for calling [BUSINESS NAME]. This is the virtual assistant, and this call may be recorded. How can I help?" Business facts: hours [HOURS]; services [SERVICES]; service area [AREA]; prices: only quote what is written here [PRICES], otherwise say the owner will confirm the price. For every caller collect: name, best phone number, what they need, and the address or zip code for a service visit. To book, check availability, offer the two earliest times, book the one they choose, then repeat the day and time back. Emergency ([EMERGENCY EXAMPLES]): say you are alerting the owner and transfer the call to [OWNER PHONE]. If you do not know something, say the owner will call back. Never guess, and never promise a price, a time or a result that is not written here. Never ask for card numbers or ID numbers. If asked, say you are an AI assistant. Finish by asking if there is anything else, then thank them.



Send the owner a summary of every call

In your agent's settings add post-call analysis fields: caller name, phone number, reason for the call, booked (yes or no) and urgent (yes or no). Retell fills them in after every call, so you can send the owner a clean summary. Read the first 20 calls and tighten the prompt wherever the agent guessed.

FIVE TEST CALLS BEFORE YOU SHOW ANYONE

- The price shopper: "How much do you charge?" It should quote only what you wrote, or say the owner will confirm.
- The emergency: "My basement is flooding." It should say it is alerting the owner and transfer the call.
- The booker: ask for tomorrow at 3. It should check the calendar, offer real times and book one.
- The mumblur: wrong number, background noise, interruptions. It should stay calm and ask again.
- The skeptic: "Are you a real person?" It should say it is an AI assistant.

RECORD THE DEMO

SEND THE PITCH

Demo first • three messages • what it costs you

1 The 40-second demo

record this first

Call your agent from your own phone the way a customer would: ask for a quote, book a time, then show the owner's summary. Retell keeps a recording and transcript of each call in your dashboard. Trim it to about 40 seconds and name it [BUSINESS NAME]-demo.

2 Message 1: The Demo

DM or email

Hi [OWNER NAME], quick question: what happens to the calls you can't answer when you're on a job? I built a phone assistant for [BUSINESS NAME] that answers every call, takes the caller's details and books the visit on your calendar. Here is a 40-second recording of it handling a call: [DEMO LINK]. Want to try it free for two weeks? [YOUR NAME]

3 Message 2: The Follow-Up

3 days later

Hi [OWNER NAME], did you get to hear the demo for [BUSINESS NAME]? I can change the greeting, the services it mentions or the voice. Want me to switch it on for the two-week free trial?

4 Message 3: The Offer

after they say yes

Great, [OWNER NAME]. It answers when you can't, books on your calendar and sends you a summary of every call. Two free weeks, then \$[PRICE] a month, cancel anytime. I'll set up the call forwarding with you today. Ready to start?

WHAT IT COSTS YOU (examples only)

- Retell's own estimate is about \$0.11 per minute (its published range is \$0.07 to \$0.31, depending on the voice and AI model). Example: 150 calls x 2 minutes = 300 minutes = about \$33 a month, plus \$2 for the phone number.
- AI receptionist services list roughly \$50 to \$150 a month, with setup fees from \$0 to \$500 (public pricing pages, Oct 2026). Check your own market.

Educational only. No income is promised. Results depend on your work, your market and each tool's current prices.

RULES, RISKS AND TOOLS

Read this before you forward anyone's calls

RULES BEFORE YOU GO LIVE

- Incoming calls only. In February 2024 the FCC ruled that AI-generated voices count as artificial voices under the TCPA, so calling or texting people with one needs their prior express consent. Let your agent answer the calls a business receives. Never use it to cold call.
- Tell callers it is an AI and that the call may be recorded. Florida and several other states need every party's consent to record a call, so check your state's rules.
- Never collect card numbers, Social Security numbers or passwords on a call.
- Medical and dental offices: patient details are protected health information. Retell says a signed BAA is required before that data goes through it (signing is free on its site). Get legal advice first, or start with trades, salons and auto shops.
- Get the owner's written OK before you forward their calls, keep an emergency transfer on, and review the call log every week for the first month.

Educational only. Not legal advice. Sources: FCC declaratory ruling (Feb 2024); Retell compliance docs; checked Oct 7 2026.

TOOLS

Retell AI (build the voice agent):

dashboard.retellai.com

Cal.com (free booking calendar):

cal.com

Instantly (email the owners you want to reach):

refer.instantly.ai/coldcrm

Blotato (post your demo clips):

blotato.com/?ref=SocialMedia

Also worth comparing before you commit: Vapi (vapi.ai) and ElevenLabs Agents (elevenlabs.io/agents). Prices change, so check each site.

Disclosure: Instantly and Blotato are my affiliate links. I may earn a commission if you sign up, at no extra cost to you.

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