

AI Receptionist vs Contact-Centre Voice AI vs Outbound Calling vs Voice API

An AI receptionist answers a business's inbound calls. Contact-centre voice AI automates a support queue at scale. Outbound calling software makes calls and must follow consent rules. A voice API gives engineers the parts to build their own agent.

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"AI voice agent" covers several kinds of product. They solve different problems. This guide compares four approaches. Each one matches a category on this site.

Side by side

| | AI receptionist | Contact-centre voice AI | Outbound calling | Voice AI API | |---|---|---|---|---| | Main job | Answer a business's calls | Automate a support or service queue | Make calls to a list | Give engineers the parts | | Call direction | Inbound | Mostly inbound | Outbound | Either | | Typical buyer | Small or local business | Support or operations leader | Sales, collections or reminders team | Product and engineering team | | Setup | Dashboard, templates | Project with integrations | Campaigns, lists, consent records | Code | | Key integrations | Calendar, booking, CRM | Contact-centre software, helpdesk, CRM | CRM, dialer lists, consent records | Your own systems | | Main risk | Wrong answers to customers | Failed handoffs at scale | Consent and opt-out rules | Engineering effort | | Category | AI receptionists | Contact-centre voice AI | Outbound sales calling | Voice AI APIs |

AI receptionist

An AI receptionist answers calls when your staff cannot. It answers questions, books appointments, takes messages and transfers urgent calls.

Choose it when:

- You miss calls after hours or at busy times.
- Most calls are routine: hours, prices, bookings.
- You do not have engineers.

Check:

- The booking and calendar systems it connects to.
- How it sends you messages and call summaries.
- How it transfers a call to a person.

The healthcare voice AI and hospitality voice AI categories list vendors that focus on clinics, hotels and restaurants.

Contact-centre voice AI

Contact-centre voice AI handles large inbound queues. It resolves common requests and routes the rest to agents with context.

Choose it when:

- You run a support or service queue with many agents.
- You need reporting, quality review and routing.
- You need contracts with uptime and support commitments.

Check:

- Integration with your contact-centre software and helpdesk.
- Concurrency at your peak hour.
- Warm transfer, with a summary for the human agent.
- Enterprise terms. Synthflow, for example, states that enterprise contracts start at \$30,000 a year. Retell AI lists custom concurrency "starting at 50+ calls" on its enterprise plan.

Outbound calling

Outbound voice AI calls people on a list. Uses include appointment reminders, lead follow-up and surveys.

Choose it when:

- You have a defined list and a clear goal for each call.
- You can prove consent for every number you call.

Check:

- Consent and opt-out handling. In the US, the FCC ruled in February 2024 (FCC 24-17) that AI-generated voices are an "artificial or prerecorded voice" under the TCPA. These calls need prior express consent, absent an emergency purpose or exemption. Telemarketing calls must also offer opt-out methods.
- Call caps. Bland AI's Start plan, for example, caps calls at 100 per day and 100 per hour. Its Build plan caps them at 2,000 per day and 1,000 per hour.
- Caller ID. Retell AI lists "Branded Call" at \$0.10 per outbound call.
- Outbound telephony rates. Twilio lists US local outbound calls at \$0.0140 per minute.

Voice AI API

A voice AI API gives engineers parts: speech-to-text, text-to-speech, models and telephony. Some APIs combine parts.

Choose it when:

- You build a product that includes voice.
- You need control of each part of the stack.
- You have engineers to build and run it.

Check:

- Price per part. Deepgram, for example, lists Nova-3 streaming speech-to-text at \$0.0077 per minute and its Voice Agent API at \$0.075 per minute on pay as you go.

- Pass-through options on platforms. Vapi lists \$0.05 per minute for hosting and bills models at cost.
- Rate limits and concurrency.

See our build vs buy guide for open-source frameworks.

A simple test

Answer these three questions:

1. Do the calls come in, or do you make them? Inbound points to a receptionist or contact-centre product. Outbound points to outbound calling.
2. How many calls at the same time? A few points to a receptionist. Many points to contact-centre voice AI.
3. Do you have engineers who want to build? Yes points to a voice AI API or framework.

Prices change. Check each vendor page before you compare. Then browse the listings in the category that fits.

Frequently asked questions

Can one vendor do inbound and outbound calls?

Often, yes. Many platforms support both. But outbound calls in the US add consent duties under the TCPA, so check the vendor's consent and opt-out features.

Is an AI receptionist the same as an IVR?

No. A classic IVR plays a menu and waits for key presses. An AI receptionist understands speech and answers in natural language. It can also take actions, such as booking.

Which approach is cheapest?

It depends on volume and on how much your team builds. Per-minute API costs can be low, but you add engineering time. Compare the total monthly cost, not only the rate.

Sources

[FCC, Declaratory Ruling FCC 24-17, CG Docket No. 23-362 \(fetched 2026-10-29\)](https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/FCC-24-17A1.pdf) — <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/FCC-24-17A1.pdf>

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