

Selling AI Services to Local Businesses

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Table of Contents

1. Chapter 1: Pick One Service You Can Deliver in Under 10 Hours
2. Chapter 2: Deliver the First Engagement Without Overbuilding
3. Chapter 3: Build a 90-Minute Portfolio Using Businesses That Never Hired You
4. Chapter 4: Turn a One-Off Project Into a Monthly Retainer
5. Chapter 5: Find 100 Local Prospects Without Buying a Lead List
6. Chapter 6: Handle the Five Objections You Will Hear Every Single Week
7. Chapter 7: Diagnose What a Business Actually Loses Money On
8. Chapter 8: Prove Your Work With Numbers the Client Already Tracks
9. Chapter 9: Write a First-Contact Message That Gets Replies From Real Owners
10. Chapter 10: Raise Your Rates Without Losing the Client
11. Chapter 11: Run the 20-Minute Discovery Call Without Sounding Like a Salesperson
12. Chapter 12: Decide When to Fire a Client, Hire Help, or Stay Solo
13. Chapter 12: Price Your First Three Deals So You Don't Resent Them
14. Chapter 15: Write a One-Page Proposal That Closes in Under 48 Hours
15. Conclusion
16. References and Further Reading

Chapter 1: Pick One Service You Can Deliver in Under 10 Hours

Most people who try to sell AI services to local businesses fail for the same reason: they sell "AI." Not a thing. Not an outcome. Just the word, plus a vague promise about efficiency, plus a proposal that reads like a consulting firm's brochure written by someone who has never actually shipped anything.

I want to be blunt with you before we go one paragraph further. The market you are entering is crowded with people doing exactly that. In 2026, every marketing agency, every freelance web developer, and a meaningful number of people who watched a weekend of YouTube videos are all knocking on the same doors — the dentist, the HVAC company, the law office, the med spa, the roofer, the pizza place with three locations. The owner has already been pitched. Often several times. Often badly.

That is not a reason to quit. It is a reason to be specific. Because the pitch that cuts through is not "we do AI." The pitch that cuts through is: **"I will do this one specific thing, it will be done by Friday, here is what changes, and it costs this much."**

To make that pitch honestly, you need a service you can actually deliver in under ten hours of your own working time. This chapter is about picking that service and only that service. Not a menu. One.

Why Ten Hours Is the Number

The ten-hour cap is not arbitrary. It comes from the arithmetic of getting paid while you learn.

Here is the realistic math for a first engagement. A small local business — one location, under twenty employees, revenue somewhere in the low seven figures or less — will typically pay somewhere in the range of **\$750 to \$3,000** for a discrete project from someone with no track record. That is an honest range based on what small-business service work generally clears, not a promise. Some markets and niches pay more. Some owners will not go above \$500 no matter what you show them. In

wealthier metro areas with high-ticket services (cosmetic dentistry, personal injury law, custom home builders), the top of that range moves up. In rural markets with thin margins, the whole range shifts down.

Now put ten hours against the bottom of that range. \$750 for ten hours is \$75 an hour. That is a real wage. It is not life-changing, but it is a foundation you can stand on while you get faster and better. At twenty-five hours, that same \$750 is \$30 an hour and you will quietly start to resent the client, cut corners, and stop returning calls. I have watched people do exactly that. The project that eats your calendar is the project that kills your business, because you stop selling while you are drowning in delivery.

Ten hours also does something else that matters more than the money: **it forces the scope to be small enough that you can actually finish it.** Unfinished work is the number one killer of new service businesses. Not bad marketing. Not pricing. Unfinished work — the project that stretched to four months, produced no visible result, and ended with an awkward email nobody answered.

The Test: Can You Draw the Deliverable on an Index Card?

Before you commit to a service, apply this test. Take an actual index card, or a sticky note, or the back of an envelope. On it, write:

1. The name of the thing you hand over at the end.
2. The format it arrives in (a document, a live phone number, a spreadsheet, a login).
3. The one number in the business that should move because of it.
4. How long until that number should move.

If you cannot fill in all four in under sixty seconds, the service is too vague to sell and too vague to deliver. "AI strategy consulting" fails this test instantly. "A trained answering assistant that picks up calls after hours and books appointments into your existing calendar" passes it: the deliverable is a working phone number, the format is a live line, the number is after-hours booked appointments, and the timeline is thirty days.

Do this test on paper, not in your head. In your head, everything sounds clear. On paper, the vagueness shows up immediately.

The Six Services That Actually Fit in Ten Hours

These are the six I would put in front of anyone starting out. They share three traits: the deliverable is visible, the value is easy for a non-technical owner to understand, and the underlying work is mostly configuration and writing rather than software engineering.

I am going to be honest about the failure modes of each one, because the failure modes are where you will spend your emotional energy in month one.

1. The After-Hours Call Handler

What it is: An AI voice agent that answers the business phone when nobody is there — evenings, weekends, lunch, or while the one office manager is on another line. It answers common questions, takes a message, and where possible books an appointment into the existing calendar.

Why local businesses care: This is the single most legible pain in local service businesses. A plumbing company, a dental office, a law firm, a garage door repair outfit — they all lose calls. The owner already knows they lose calls. You are not educating them about a problem; you are showing up with a fix for a problem that already annoys them.

The tools, named: Retell AI, Vapi, Bland AI, and Synthflow are the ones that have stuck around and are actively maintained in 2026. Retell and Vapi are the most developer-flexible; Synthflow is the most point-and-click. All of them have per-minute pricing that generally lands in the ballpark of a dime to a quarter per minute of call time, plus telephony costs — check current pricing yourself before you quote, because this category changes pricing frequently and I do not want you repeating a number from a book. Twilio handles the phone number and forwarding in most setups.

Your ten hours: Roughly two hours listening to real recorded calls or interviewing the person who answers the phone; three hours writing and structuring the agent's script and knowledge; two hours on integration (calendar, call forwarding, message

delivery); two hours of test calls including deliberately hostile ones; one hour of handoff and training.

Where it fails: The agent mishandles an emergency. A woman calls a plumber at 11pm with water coming through the ceiling and the AI cheerfully offers her a Tuesday slot. This is the failure mode that ends relationships, and you prevent it by building an explicit escalation path — certain keywords or intents immediately transfer to a human cell phone or deliver an urgent text. Build that before you build anything else. Also: voice agents still get tripped up by heavy accents, background noise, and people who talk over them. Do not promise a perfect experience. Promise a captured lead instead of a dead line.

2. The Inbox and Quote-Response System

What it is: A system that watches an inbox or web form, drafts a response to each inquiry in the owner's voice, and either sends it after a human click or sends it automatically for clearly-defined categories.

Why local businesses care: Response time is the most reliably documented driver of lead conversion in local services. I am not going to give you a specific study statistic here because the widely-quoted ones are old and often mangled in repetition. What I will say honestly: every owner you talk to will agree from their own experience that the first business to respond usually wins, and most of them will admit their own response time is bad. That agreement is enough. You do not need a stat.

The tools, named: Zapier or Make for the plumbing, connected to the Claude API or Gemini API for the drafting. Gmail and Outlook both have native automation hooks. If the business runs on a CRM like Jobber, Housecall Pro, ServiceTitan, or Clio, those have APIs or Zapier connectors you can hook into.

Your ten hours: Two hours pulling and reading the last hundred real inquiries and the owner's actual replies — this is the part people skip and it is the part that determines whether the output sounds like the business or like a robot. Three hours writing prompts and building the categorization logic. Two hours wiring it up. Two hours testing on historical emails. One hour of handoff.

Where it fails: Tone. An AI-drafted reply that sounds slightly too polished, slightly too eager, or slightly too long reads as fake to customers, and the owner will feel it immediately even if they cannot articulate why. Fix this by feeding real past replies into the prompt as voice examples, and by capping reply length aggressively. Second failure: the system replies confidently to something it should not have — a price question with a wrong price, or a legal question. Build a "flag for human" category and make it the default for anything uncertain.

3. The Review Engine

What it is: A system that requests reviews from customers at the right moment, and drafts responses to every review that comes in — good and bad.

Why local businesses care: Local search visibility and consumer trust both lean heavily on review volume, recency, and response rate. Google's own local ranking guidance names reviews as a factor. Owners intuitively know this and most of them are bad at it because asking for reviews feels awkward and responding to a one-star takes emotional energy they do not have at 9pm.

The tools, named: Google Business Profile is the primary surface for most local businesses. For the request side, most field-service CRMs (Jobber, Housecall Pro) can trigger a message on job completion; otherwise Twilio for SMS or the email platform they already use. For drafting responses, the Claude or Gemini API, or simply a well-built prompt template the owner pastes into a chat interface.

Your ten hours: One hour auditing their current review profile across the platforms that matter for their category. Two hours writing the request sequence — timing, channel, wording. Two hours building response templates and a prompt that handles the four review categories (glowing, positive-with-a-note, mixed, angry). Two hours wiring the trigger. Two hours on a backlog pass, responding to their unanswered reviews. One hour handoff.

Where it fails: Review platform rules. Google, Yelp, and others have specific policies about how you may solicit reviews. **Never** offer incentives for reviews, never filter so that only happy customers get asked (that is review gating, and it violates Google's policies and can violate consumer protection law), and never write fake reviews. This

is not just an ethics point, it is a business-survival point: a business that gets caught gaming reviews can lose its profile, and you will have been the one who did it to them. Read the current policies of each platform before you build anything, and put in writing to the client that you follow them.

4. The Content and Local SEO Engine

What it is: A repeatable system that produces the local-intent content a business needs — service pages, location pages, FAQ content, Google Business Profile posts — plus the process for keeping it running.

Why local businesses care: Most small local businesses have a website with four pages and no answer to the specific questions people actually search. The owner knows the site is bad. They have known for years.

The tools, named: Claude or Gemini for the drafting, Google Search Console and Google Business Profile for the data and distribution, and whatever CMS they run — usually WordPress. Ahrefs, Semrush, or the free Google Keyword Planner for research; the free tools are adequate at this scale.

Your ten hours: Two hours of research into what people in that town actually search for that service. Five hours producing a defined batch — say, one strong service page, three FAQ pieces, and four GBP posts. Two hours publishing and setting up the internal linking. One hour handoff with a documented process so they can continue.

Where it fails: Undifferentiated AI content that ranks for nothing and reads like every other page on the internet. Google's guidance is explicit about rewarding content made for people, and mass-produced generic content is exactly what its systems are built to discount. The fix is that **you must extract real information from the business** — the actual objection their customers raise, the actual price range, the actual reason they do it differently than the shop down the road, the neighborhood names their techs actually use. AI is a drafting tool here, not a source of knowledge. If you skip the extraction interview, you are producing landfill.

Also be honest about timelines. Content is the slowest-feedback service on this list. Anything you publish may take months to affect search traffic, and it might not work at all. Say that out loud before they pay you.

5. The Quoting and Estimate Accelerator

What it is: A system that takes the messy inputs of a quote request — photos, a voice note from the tech, a phone description, a walk-through — and produces a structured, branded estimate in minutes instead of the evening.

Why local businesses care: In trades and contracting, quoting is the bottleneck and it happens after hours. The owner does estimates at the kitchen table at 9pm. That is a genuinely miserable part of their life and if you take it away you are worth real money to them.

The tools, named: Claude or Gemini (both handle images, which matters when the input is a photo of a roof or a panel box), a transcription layer like Whisper or the built-in transcription in most modern assistants, and their existing estimating or invoicing software for the final output — Jobber, Housecall Pro, ServiceTitan, QuickBooks.

Your ten hours: Three hours understanding their pricing structure in detail — this is the hard part and it is where the value lives. Three hours building the input capture and the generation logic. Two hours testing against past jobs where you already know what they quoted. Two hours of training and handoff.

Where it fails: Wrong numbers. If your system produces an estimate that is 30% under what the job costs, you have not saved them time — you have cost them margin, and possibly a lot of it. **Never let the AI invent a price.** The AI's job is to structure, assemble, and format from a price book the owner controls. The owner reviews and approves every estimate before it leaves. Build that approval step in and never remove it, no matter how confident the output gets.

6. The Internal Knowledge Assistant

What it is: A searchable, conversational layer over the business's own documents — pricing sheets, warranty terms, SOPs, employee handbook, vendor contacts, insurance panel rules — so staff stop interrupting the owner with the same fifteen questions.

Why local businesses care: In a business with ten to fifty employees, the owner is the database. Every answer routes through them. It is exhausting, and it is the specific reason they cannot take a vacation.

The tools, named: A Claude Project or a Gemini Gem loaded with their documents is often enough at this scale and requires almost no engineering. If they need something more permanent and multi-user, a lightweight retrieval setup or an off-the-shelf tool works, but do not start there.

Your ten hours: Three hours collecting and cleaning documents — expect them to be scattered across a shared drive, someone's desktop, and a filing cabinet. Two hours structuring and loading. Two hours building and testing against the real questions staff ask. Two hours training staff, which is the part that determines adoption. One hour handoff.

Where it fails: Adoption. You build it, three people try it, and everyone goes back to texting the owner. Fix it by getting the owner to publicly commit in a staff meeting to answering "did you ask the assistant?" instead of answering directly for two weeks. Second failure: confidently wrong answers pulled from an outdated document. Date-stamp every source, remove anything superseded, and tell staff explicitly which categories of question require human verification.

How to Actually Choose: Three Filters

Six options is still too many. Run them through three filters and you will be down to one.

Filter One: What Can You Already Do?

Not what you could learn. What you have already done, at least once, for yourself or someone else. If you have never made a phone call route anywhere, do not start with voice agents. If you have written for a living, content and inbox work are the natural entry. If you are comfortable in spreadsheets and process, quoting and internal knowledge work will feel easy.

The reason is speed to first sale. You want to be selling within two weeks, not studying for two months. The learning happens during delivery, on someone else's dime, with a