

Google Is Quietly Changing What “Good Service” Means for Sole Traders & Tradespeople



*Why the way you answer the phone now matters as much as the work you do — and why that's true
whether Google has reached your trade yet or not*



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The bit most tradespeople haven't heard about yet

If you search for a plumber, an electrician or a locksmith in London right now, the first thing you see at the very top of the page — above the paid ads, above the normal search results — is a small handful of businesses with a green tick and a star rating. These are Google Local Services Ads, or LSAs, and they work completely differently from anything Google has done before.

They haven't reached everywhere yet. Some trades and some parts of the country — including much of the North West — have barely seen them. But they are spreading, trade by trade and city by city, and the direction of travel is not in doubt. What matters for you right now isn't whether they've arrived on your patch. It's what Google is actually rewarding with this system — because that reward structure tells you exactly where customer expectations are heading, whether Google forces the issue for your trade or not.

What these ads actually are

With ordinary Google Ads, you pay for clicks. With Local Services Ads, you only pay when a real customer actually calls or messages you. Google verifies your insurance, your qualifications and your business details first, and if you pass, you get a “Google Guaranteed” or “Google Verified” badge — a visible sign to the customer that Google has checked you out.

That much is straightforward, and plenty of people have written about it. The part that matters far more, and that almost nobody explains properly, is how Google decides which business appears first.

The three things Google is actually scoring you on

It isn't who bids the most. Google has been open about this: LSA position is decided by a mix of signals, and three of them dominate everything else.

How fast and how consistently you answer. Google tracks, to the minute, whether you pick up the phone and how long you take to reply to a message. Businesses that answer within seconds are treated completely differently from businesses that let it ring out. Google doesn't ask why you missed a call. A missed call counts the same whether you were on the tools, in the loft, or under a sink — it still counts against you.

How recently — not just how often — you've been reviewed. A business with five reviews from the last month can outrank a business with fifty reviews from two years ago. Google isn't just measuring reputation. It's measuring whether you're actively, currently, taking care of customers.

How close you are to the person searching. This one you can't do much about — it's simply proximity. But it's worth knowing, because it means the other two factors are the ones actually within your control, and they're the ones Google leans on hardest.

Put plainly: Google has built a public scoring system for exactly the things that used to be invisible — whether you actually answer your phone, and whether your recent customers are happy. Skill and price barely get a mention.

Why this matters even if it hasn't reached you yet

It's tempting to read all of that and think: “Fine, but that's not my trade, and it's not really live around here yet — so it's not my problem.” That's understandable, but it misses the actual point.

Google didn't invent this expectation. It measured it. LSAs are Google's way of putting a number on something customers already feel and already act on — they ring, and if nobody answers quickly, they ring the next name on the list. Industry data has said the same thing for years: a large share of calls to trades businesses go unanswered, and most of those callers don't leave a voicemail — they simply call somebody else.

Google has just made that behaviour official, visible, and rankable. Whether or not your trade or your town has LSAs live today, the underlying expectation — answer fast, keep your reviews current, or lose the job to someone who does — is already the standard your customers are judging you against. The platform is catching up to the customer, not the other way round.

That's the direction of travel. It's coming for every trade eventually, in one form or another, because it reflects something real about how people already behave, not a passing feature Google might drop.

The uncomfortable part: it's not about being good at the job

Here's the thing that's genuinely hard to hear, and also the most useful thing in this whole piece. None of the three ranking factors above have anything to do with how good you are at your trade.

You could be the best electrician in your county. If you're on a job and you miss three calls in an afternoon, and your last review was eight months ago, Google will quietly push a less experienced competitor above you — because that competitor answered the phone and has a five-star review from last week.

This isn't Google being unfair. It's Google reflecting a genuine shift in what “good service” means to a customer standing in their kitchen with a leak, phone in hand. They can't assess your skill before they've met you. What they can assess, in the ten seconds before they decide who to call next, is whether someone picks up.

What “good” actually looks like in practice

Strip away the algorithm and the jargon, and the standard Google is measuring boils down to a short, practical list:

- Answering calls in real time, not letting them go to voicemail during working hours
- Getting back to missed calls and messages within minutes, not by the end of the day
- Making it just as easy to book out of hours or on a weekend as during a Tuesday morning
- Asking every satisfied customer for a review, and doing it consistently — a steady trickle rather than a rush once a year
- Being straightforward about what you do and don't cover, so the person on the phone isn't left guessing

None of this requires new tools, new certifications, or new prices. It's a change in operating habit, not a change in trade skill.

The real opportunity hiding in this

There's a genuinely encouraging way to look at all of this. Most sole traders are excellent at the actual work and average — through no fault of their own, simply because they're on a ladder or under a van when the phone rings — at the responsiveness side. That gap is precisely where the opportunity sits.

If the standard customers now expect is fast, consistent answering and a steady flow of recent reviews, then getting genuinely good at that — regardless of whether Google's ads have reached your trade yet — puts you ahead of most of your local competition today, not in some future when the algorithm arrives. You don't need to wait for LSAs to reach your postcode to benefit from behaving the way LSAs reward. The customer standing in their kitchen with a leak doesn't care whether Google is watching. They care whether you pick up.

That's really the whole story here. Google built a scoring system, but the underlying truth it measures — answer quickly, stay current, be easy to reach — was always going to matter. The businesses that get ahead of it now, on their own terms, will find the transition far less disruptive whenever it does formally reach their trade and their town. The ones who wait until Google forces the point will simply be catching up to where their customers already are.

This document is intended as general information about a genuine shift underway in the trades sector. It reflects publicly available data and Google's own published guidance on Local Services Ads as of mid-2026.