

AI AGENTS EXPLAINER · 2026

AI Agents on the Business Phone

What agentic AI actually means, the one question that separates a real agent from a menu with a better voice, and which of your calls should go anywhere near one.

Every phone vendor in Australia now sells an AI agent. Most are selling something that listens well, talks well, and leaves your business exactly as it found it. The line is not about how good the conversation sounds. It is about whether the system **writes** to a system of record, or only reads from one.

■ Five rungs. The line sits between four and five

Rung	What it does	Work it removes
1. Touch tone menu	Press 1 for sales. Fixed tree, no understanding.	Routing. Adds caller effort.
2. Speech menu	The same tree, spoken.	Routing, marginally better.
3. Scripted assistant	Natural voice, conversation flows written in advance.	The two or three most common questions.
4. Retrieval assistant	Answers from your real content. Cannot do anything.	Answering questions. Taking messages.
5. Task completing agent	Books, reschedules, cancels, raises, updates, sends.	The work itself.

Ask exactly this, and watch the screen

"Show me a call where the outcome appears in the calendar or the CRM, and nobody types it in afterwards." The transcript always looks impressive. The record either exists or it does not. **It emails your team, who then enter it** is rung four with extra steps. **It creates a task for somebody** is rung four with a queue attached. Then ask what happens when it gets it wrong, who finds out, and how fast it can be undone. And insist the trial runs on your data, with your real exceptions.

■ Automate first

- Hours, address, parking.
- Booking, rescheduling, cancelling.
- Order, job and delivery status.
- After hours capture with a real outcome.
- Overflow, when everyone is already on a call.

■ Never automate

- Complaints.
- Distressed or vulnerable callers.
- Anything with a safety or medical dimension.
- A cancellation you would fight to keep.
- The first call from a large new customer.

The real argument is capacity, not quality

Most Australian small businesses do not have a call quality problem. They have a call capacity problem: the phone rings while everybody is already on a job, and a share of those callers ring somebody else and are never counted. The value is rarely that an agent handles a call better than your best person. It is that it handles the fourteenth simultaneous call at 8:40am, which your best person cannot, because they are on the first one.

■ Six week rollout. The order is the point

- 1 **Listen.** Sort your last two hundred calls into intents by hand, and count them. Almost everybody is wrong about the proportions.
- 2 **Choose two intents.** Write down the exceptions, including the ones that only live in people's heads.
- 3 **Build the escalation path first,** before the conversation. A rough agent with a good handover is safe. The reverse is not.
- 4 **After hours only.** Read every transcript. The alternative was a voicemail nobody returns, so the floor is low.
- 5 **Add overflow** during business hours, when everyone is already on a call.
- 6 **Review, then widen.** Either add a third intent or fix what is broken. Not both.

■ Measure these, not containment alone

Measure	Why	Watch for
Resolution rate	Calls where the need was actually met, checked against the record written.	If a provider cannot produce it, ask why.
Escalation quality	Did the handover arrive with context, and how long did the human then spend.	Slower than no automation is a net loss.
Repeat contact in 48 hours	Whether the call finished, from the customer's side.	Rising repeats with rising containment.
Abandonment inside the agent	People hanging up mid conversation.	Almost always one broken flow, not the model.
Total answered enquiries	The number that matters commercially.	Compare to the same month last year.

■ Guardrails that remove most of the risk

- **Answer from your material, not the world.** Unknown means saying so and offering a callback. General knowledge has no place in an answer about your pricing.
- **Write narrowly.** Booking into a defined calendar is safe. Amending an invoice is not, at least not on day one.
- **Confirm before committing.** Read it back in the caller's words, take an explicit yes.
- **Treat inbound content as data, never instructions.** Prompt injection reaches the phone through messages, emails and documents.
- **Never let a 000 call enter an automated flow.** Check this rather than assume it.

Australian obligations, briefly

Say plainly in the greeting that it is automated. Notify recording on every path, including the automated one, to a single organisation wide standard. Disclose in your privacy policy where automated systems make or substantially influence decisions about people. Know which country the transcripts are stored in and who can see them. Outbound calls made by an agent are subject to the Do Not Call rules exactly as a person's calls are.