NORTHLOOP

Your Website's New Best Employee

The no-BS guide to AI chatbots for small business: what works, what does not, and how to buy one without getting burned.

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A free guide from Northloop | northloop.vercel.app

WHAT'S INSIDE

- What chatbots are actually good at, and what they are bad at
- 5 proven use cases with example conversation flows you can steal
- The 4 mistakes that make most bots useless, with fixes
- How to scope and buy one: questions to ask, real prices, build vs. buy

Read this first

Chatbots have a bad reputation, and most of it is earned. Bad bots waste your customers' time and embarrass your business. Good bots quietly handle routine work around the clock and hand off gracefully when a human is needed.

This guide shows you the difference: what bots are actually good at, five use cases with real conversation flows you can copy, the four mistakes that ruin most bots, and how to buy one without getting burned.

What chatbots are actually good at

- **Answering repeat questions instantly.** Hours, pricing, location, policies. The ten questions you answer every day.
- **Booking and rescheduling.** It can offer times, take the booking, and send confirmations without you touching it.
- **Capturing leads after hours.** Nights, weekends, holidays. The bot takes the details so Monday-you has a full pipeline.
- **Qualifying inquiries.** A few smart questions before you call back, so you know who is serious.
- **Status updates.** Order status, appointment details, delivery windows. Look it up, report back.

And what they are bad at

- Anything requiring judgment, negotiation, or reading between the lines.
- Upset customers who need empathy. A bot should detect frustration and hand off fast.
- Questions your business has never documented. If you cannot answer it, neither can the bot.
- Tasks that span systems with no clean handoff. The bot needs somewhere to send the result.

The honest test
If the task follows a script you could write on an index card, a bot can do it. If it needs your judgment, keep the human.

5 proven use cases, with example flows

Steal these. Each flow below is a starting point. Adapt the wording to your business and your voice.

1. After-hours lead capture (home services)

Bot: Hi, this is Brightline Plumbing's assistant. What can I help with tonight?

You: My kitchen sink is leaking.

Bot: Sorry to hear that. Is it still leaking now, or has it stopped?

You: Still leaking.

Bot: Got it. I can have someone call you first thing at 8am. What is your name and best number?

You: Sam, 555-0142

Bot: Thanks Sam. We will call at 8am sharp. If it gets worse overnight, our emergency line is 555-0199.

2. Appointment booking (salon or clinic)

Bot: Hi! Looking to book, reschedule, or just have a question?

You: Book a haircut.

Bot: Great. We have Thursday at 2:00, Friday at 11:30, or Saturday at 9:15. Which works?

You: Friday 11:30

Bot: Done. You are booked Friday 11:30 with Priya. I will text you a reminder the day before. Anything else?

3. Pricing and service FAQ (with honest pricing)

You: How much is a deep cleaning?

Bot: Deep cleans run $180 to $260 depending on home size. A standard 2-bed is usually $200 flat. Want a firm quote? I just need your square footage.

You: About 900 sq ft.

Bot: That would be $200 flat, all supplies included. Want me to hold a slot this week?

Notice the bot gives a real range instead of dodging. Bots that refuse to discuss price lose trust instantly.

4. Quote intake (contractor or agency)

Bot: I can get you a quote started in about a minute. What kind of project is it?

You: Kitchen remodel.

Bot: Nice. Roughly what budget range are you thinking: under 15k, 15 to 40k, or 40k plus?

You: 15 to 40k.

Bot: Perfect. And when are you hoping to start?

You: September.

Bot: Thanks. Leave your name and number and Maya will call you tomorrow with next steps and a site-visit slot.

5. Support triage (online store)

You: Where is my order?

Bot: I can check that right now. What is your order number?

You: 10482

Bot: Order 10482 shipped Tuesday and is arriving Thursday. Here is the tracking link. Anything else I can help with?

The 4 mistakes that make bots useless

Mistake 1: It pretends to be human.

Fix: Have it introduce itself as your assistant in the first message. Customers trust a labeled bot far more than a bot caught lying.

Mistake 2: No way to reach a human.

Fix: Make 'talk to a person' one tap away, always. The bot's job is to handle the routine, not to trap people.

Mistake 3: It was trained on nothing.

Fix: A bot is only as good as its source material. Feed it your real FAQs, pricing, policies, and actual customer questions before launch.

Mistake 4: It chats but does nothing.

Fix: Connect it to your booking system, CRM, or inbox. A bot that books the appointment is useful. A bot that only talks is a toy.

How to scope and buy one

What to ask any vendor

- What happens when the bot does not know the answer?
- How do I update its answers when my prices or policies change?
- What does it connect to: my booking system, my CRM, my email?
- Who owns the conversation data?
- What does support look like after launch?
- Can I see a demo using **my** business info, not a generic demo?

Realistic prices

Build: $300 to $1,200 for a focused bot covering FAQs, booking, and lead capture. **Monthly care:** $50 to $300 for hosting, updates, and monitoring. Anyone quoting far below this is selling a template with your logo on it. Anyone quoting far above this for a simple bot is overselling.

Build vs. buy

Buy off the shelf when you need standard FAQs and booking, fast. **Build custom** when you need it in your voice, connected to your systems, handling your edge cases. Most small businesses are best served by a focused custom build, not a monthly chatbot subscription they never finish configuring.

Free 30-minute workflow audit
Not sure what a bot should do for your business? Northloop will map it out with you and give you a plan, whether or not you hire us. Book at northloop.vercel.app