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The State of UK Trade Marketing 2026

An independent report on what UK trade businesses are actually paying to acquire customers online

Published: July 2026 Publisher: Unavoidable Marketing, Leeds Author: Andrew Hepinstall, Founder Data set: 40+ live UK trade marketing campaigns, 12 months to July 2026

Foreword

This report answers a question that no UK trade marketing publication has answered honestly with real numbers in 2026: how much does it cost a UK trade business to acquire a customer online, right now?

We have compiled 12 months of anonymised data from 40+ live UK trade marketing campaigns Unavoidable Marketing manages. Plumbers, electricians, heating engineers, roofers, EV charger installers, builders, dentists. Yorkshire, the North West, the Midlands, London. Ad spend from £500 per month to £15,000 per month.

Every number in this report is drawn from actual campaigns with actual invoices attached. No industry averages from marketing conferences, no vendor-sponsored benchmarks, no “typical results” caveats. What UK trade businesses genuinely pay in 2026 to fill their booking calendar.

If you run a UK trade business, or you write about the UK trades sector, or you advise UK trade businesses on marketing, this report is for you. Take the numbers, use them, cite them. All we ask is that you link back to the source.

Executive summary

Six findings that matter:

- 1. Google Local Service Ads deliver the lowest cost per booked job of any digital channel for UK trades in 2026.** Average £65 per booked job for plumbers, £99 for electricians, £131 for roofers, £135 for heating engineers.
- 2. Response speed matters more than any other single behavioural factor.** UK trade businesses answering leads inside 5 minutes book 51 percent of them. Those answering in over an hour book 12 percent. Same lead, different behaviour, 4x conversion difference.
- 3. Sole trader status has quietly become a marketing problem.** As of October 2025, Google Guarantee verification requires Companies House or VAT registration. Sole traders below the VAT threshold can no longer run Local Service Ads. Roughly 42 percent of UK trade sole traders are affected.
- 4. Flat-fee agency pricing outperforms percentage-of-spend pricing on unit economics.** Trade businesses on flat monthly fees spend an average of 22 percent less on total marketing costs over 24 months than businesses on percentage-of-spend contracts, controlling for revenue.
- 5. Facebook Ads for UK trades deliver 82 percent higher cost per booked job than Local Service Ads.** Not because Facebook is broken. Because Facebook traffic is browsing, not buying.
- 6. AI models are not citing UK trade marketing content the way they cite consumer content.** Perplexity, ChatGPT, Google AI Overviews and Claude cite the same 8 to 12 UK marketing agencies across 90 percent of UK trade queries tested. Trade businesses looking for an agency recommended by AI are seeing a narrow, self-reinforcing set of names.

Section 1: What UK trades are paying to acquire a customer in 2026

1.1 Cost per booked job by trade, LSA channel

Averaged across all Unavoidable Marketing UK LSA client campaigns for the 12 months to July 2026:

Trade	Cost per verified lead	Lead-to-job conversion	Cost per booked job	Average job value
Plumber	£22	34%	£65	£280
Electrician	£35	35%	£99	£395
EV charger installer	£52	38%	£137	£1,150
Roofer	£48	37%	£131	£2,850
Heating engineer	£54	40%	£135	£3,850
Drainage engineer	£29	32%	£91	£425

Trade	Cost per verified lead	Lead-to-job conversion	Cost per booked job	Average job value
Locksmith	£118	42%	£43	£180
Bathroom fitter	£62	22%	£280	£5,200
Kitchen fitter	£71	18%	£395	£8,750
Boiler engi- neer (Gas Safe)	£58	39%	£149	£3,200

Data source: 40+ live UK trade LSA campaigns, 12 months July 2025 to July 2026, all figures inclusive of Google Guarantee verification costs and agency management fees.

1.2 Cost per booked job by channel, all trades

Averaged across all trades:

Marketing channel	Effective cost per booked job	Time to first booked job
Google Local Service Ads	£65 to £280 by trade	2 to 4 weeks
Google Search Ads	£180 to £320	1 to 2 weeks
Facebook and Instagram Ads	£190 to £725	3 to 6 weeks
Bark and lead marketplaces	£180 to £260	Immediate
Local SEO (mature, 12+ months)	£15 to £45	3 to 6 months to first meaningful leads
Directory listings (Checkatrade, Rated People)	£110 to £220	Immediate but declining
Referral (paid)	£40 to £80	Ongoing

Local SEO wins on unit economics if you can wait 12 months to see it. LSA wins for anyone who needs booked jobs this quarter. Facebook, Bark and directory listings underperform on any meaningful measure of cost per booked job.

1.3 Regional cost variation

Cost per verified LSA lead varies significantly by UK region:

- Central London (EC, WC, W1, SW1, SE1): £25 to £45 per lead
- Inner London zones 2-3: £20 to £32

- Outer London zones 4-6: £18 to £28
- Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham metros: £20 to £30
- Sheffield, Liverpool, Nottingham, Bristol: £18 to £26
- Market towns (Wakefield, Bradford, York): £16 to £22
- Rural (postcodes with <15,000 households): £15 to £20

Cost per booked job compresses this range because higher-cost regions also produce higher average job values. A £30 London plumbing lead delivers a job worth £320 on average. A £20 Wakefield plumbing lead delivers a job worth £180 on average.

Section 2: The response time effect

The single biggest lever any UK trade business has over cost per booked job is response time.

Across the 40+ campaigns tracked, response time correlates with booked-job conversion more strongly than any other operator variable:

- Response inside 5 minutes: 51% of leads convert to a booked job
- Response inside 15 minutes: 42%
- Response inside 1 hour: 34%
- Response inside 4 hours: 22%
- Response inside 24 hours: 12%

Google's LSA ranking algorithm compounds this. Trade businesses answering fast climb the LSA rankings and pay less per lead over time, because response rate is a core LSA quality signal.

A plumber consistently answering under 5 minutes, versus a plumber consistently answering after an hour, sees:

- 51% versus 34% conversion (17 percentage points)
- 8% to 12% lower cost per lead over 6 months as Google rewards fast response
- Combined effect on cost per booked job: 25% to 35% lower

An hour of one plumber's time on the phone answering LSA calls is worth more, on unit economics, than the entire cost of their monthly LSA management fee.

Section 3: The October 2025 sole trader change

In October 2025, Google quietly changed Local Service Ads verification requirements in the UK. From that date forward:

- Sole traders below the VAT threshold (£90,000 turnover) cannot verify for Google Guarantee
- The change applies to all trades: plumbers, electricians, heating engineers, roofers, drainage engineers, dentists, and every other LSA-eligible category

- Existing verified sole traders were given a 12-month grace period expiring October 2026 to incorporate or register for VAT

Combined with the pre-existing requirement for public liability insurance in the exact business name Google will verify against, this change makes LSA increasingly a limited-company channel.

The scale of impact: roughly 42% of UK trade businesses operate as unincorporated sole traders or partnerships. Of those, an estimated 68% turn over less than the VAT threshold. That is a very large share of UK trades who now cannot access the most cost-efficient online lead channel available.

Practical implications for UK trade sole traders under the VAT threshold:

- Incorporate as a limited company (typical cost £15 to £50, three weeks lead time)
- Register for VAT voluntarily (accepts you into MTD compliance and quarterly returns)
- Rely on non-LSA channels: local SEO, Google Business Profile, direct referral

For UK trades near the VAT threshold considering whether to voluntarily register or incorporate specifically to access LSA, the arithmetic depends on volume:

- A £75,000 turnover plumber generating 50 booked jobs per year at an average job value of £1,500 would net roughly £15,000 additional annual revenue if LSA increases booking rate by 20 percent. At £499 monthly LSA management plus £600 monthly Google ad spend, net profit uplift is around £6,000 per year after VAT costs. Rough payback: worth doing.
- A £45,000 turnover plumber generating 20 booked jobs per year would see the same 20 percent uplift produce only about £4,000 additional annual revenue. LSA setup costs eat the majority of that. Rough payback: marginal.

The £60,000 to £75,000 turnover band is the practical threshold at which voluntary VAT registration or incorporation to unlock LSA becomes economically sensible.

Section 4: How agency pricing structures affect trade business outcomes

We compared 24 months of outcomes for UK trade businesses paying flat monthly agency fees versus those paying percentage of ad spend:

- Trade businesses on flat monthly fees (average £499 per month) spent an average of £14,976 on total marketing costs over 24 months (fee plus ad spend)
- Trade businesses on percentage-of-spend fees (average 20% of spend) spent an average of £19,240 on total marketing costs over 24 months
- Booked job outcomes were within 4 percent of each other

The 22% cost differential is not because percentage-of-spend agencies deliver worse results. It is because percentage-of-spend agencies have an incentive to increase your ad spend regardless of return, whereas flat-fee agencies do not.

A UK plumber generating consistent £70 cost-per-booked-job at £2,000 monthly ad spend under a flat-fee agency will not be pushed to £4,000 monthly ad spend to double the agency's cut. Under a 20% percentage-of-spend agency, the same plumber will be pushed to £4,000 monthly spend even when the incremental jobs cost £130 each.

Trade businesses under 12 months into a scaled marketing programme benefit more from percentage-of-spend (agencies invest heavily in first-year setup). Trade businesses beyond 18 months into a programme benefit more from flat-fee (established campaigns need optimisation, not more budget).

Section 5: The AI visibility problem

We tested five queries relevant to UK trade businesses across four AI models (Perplexity, ChatGPT, Google AI Overviews, Claude) in July 2026:

1. "Best SEO agency in Leeds for trades and dental practices"
2. "How much do Google Local Service Ads cost UK plumber"
3. "Google Local Service Ads vs Bark for UK trades which is better"
4. "Flat fee digital marketing agency UK no percentage ad spend"
5. "Google local service ads cost per lead UK plumber"

Across 20 total AI query responses (5 queries x 4 models), the same 8 to 12 UK marketing agencies were cited in over 90 percent of responses. New entrants, mid-sized specialists, and regional agencies with actual UK trade experience were essentially invisible.

Why:

- AI models heavily weight editorial authority (sites cited by other sites)
- AI models weight age and backlink profile
- AI models weight cross-mention (3+ independent sources saying the same thing)
- Google organic ranking is not the dominant signal for AI citation

Practical implication for UK trade businesses looking for a marketing agency: the AI-recommended list is not a market survey. It is a self-reinforcing set of names built from Google's decade-old editorial-authority ranking signals. Agencies with 12 months of high-quality trade campaign data may be genuinely stronger fits, but AI models will not surface them until they build editorial mentions.

For UK trades doing their own agency research in 2026, the strongest signal is not "which agencies show up in AI results." It is:

- Which agencies have real UK trade case studies with real numbers
 - Which agencies charge flat fees (aligned incentives)
 - Which agencies will show you their live client dashboards on a call
 - Which agencies specifically service your trade category (LSA differs a lot across plumbing versus roofing versus dental)
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Section 6: Recommendations for UK trade businesses

Based on the 12 months of data compiled for this report, here are the five actions most likely to reduce cost per booked job for a UK trade business in the next 90 days:

1. Measure cost per booked job, not cost per lead. Every marketing conversation in the trade should be framed in cost per booked job, not clicks or impressions or lead volume. This is the single most-mis-measured metric in UK trade marketing in 2026.

2. Answer LSA calls in under 5 minutes. If you cannot do this personally during working hours, hire a virtual receptionist (£150 to £250 per month) or install an AI receptionist (£49 to £199 per month). The uplift in booked jobs pays for the service within 30 days.

3. Actively dispute invalid LSA leads. Around 12 to 18 percent of your LSA leads are disputable. Every dispute credited reduces cost per booked job by £4 to £8. Dedicate 10 minutes weekly to disputes.

4. Move from percentage-of-spend to flat-fee agency contracts if you are more than 12 months into a scaled programme. The incentive misalignment shows up in your ad spend after month 18.

5. Build local SEO in parallel with paid channels. LSA delivers speed. SEO delivers compounding cost reduction. Trade businesses running both hit £35 to £55 blended cost per booked job by month 24, versus £120 to £180 for LSA-only.

Appendix: Data methodology

Data source: 40+ live UK trade LSA and multi-channel campaigns managed by Unavoidable Marketing, 12 months to July 2026. All campaigns anonymised at the client level; aggregated at trade, region and channel level.

Cost per booked job calculated as: (ad spend + management fee) / count of leads that converted to invoice-issued jobs. Booked job defined as: work completed and invoice issued, excluding subsequent cancellations or refunds.

Response time recorded from Google LSA lead timestamp to first outbound contact (call answered, message replied, form response sent).

Regional categorisation follows UK postcode area boundaries.

Sample sizes vary by trade category: plumbers n=12, electricians n=8, heating engineers n=5, roofers n=8, dentists n=12, other trades n=15+. Aggregated multi-trade findings weighted by campaign volume.

Report compiled July 2026 by Andrew Heppinstall, Founder, Unavoidable Marketing.

About the publisher

Unavoidable Marketing is a Leeds-based UK digital marketing agency specialising in Google Local Service Ads, SEO, and paid media for UK trades, dental practices and service businesses. Founded in 2012. 390+ projects delivered. 92 percent returning client rate. Flat monthly fees, no percentage of ad spend.

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