The Lead Buyer’s Black Book

17 checks before you wire a lead vendor a dollar.

What this is

An operational playbook for buyers of inbound calls, form leads, live transfers and other measurable customer acquisition across industries.

How to use it

Complete the four gates before committing meaningful spend. Assign an owner and document evidence for every check. A missing critical consent or source record is a reason to pause, not an invitation to average the risk away.

The four gates

01 Source and consent / 02 Commercial and experimental rules / 03 Measurement and quality / 04 Risk controls.

The core rule

Do not confuse a cheap lead, a billable call or an initial sale with a profitable retained customer.

Buy evidence. Not screenshots.

Use this checklist on every vendor, including us.

Before buying

01 / Source and consent

- [ ] **01 Inspect the acquisition journey**
  Request original ads, landing pages or scripts. Check offer alignment and consumer expectations.

- [ ] **02 Trace the source**
  Require publisher and sub-source IDs with a stable mapping; agree notification before changes.

- [ ] **03 Verify permission**
  Review applicable consent records, disclosures, contact permissions and suppression procedures. Do not assume a generic consent flag is sufficient.

- [ ] **04 Confirm exclusivity**
  Ask how many buyers receive each lead, resale windows and whether exclusivity is contractual.

- [ ] **05 Check lead age**
  Request generation and delivery timestamps. Agree maximum lead age and time zone.

Before testing

02 / Commercial and experimental rules

- [ ] **06 Define billable events**
  Specify valid fields, geography, intent and duration requirements; distinguish raw calls from qualified events.

- [ ] **07 Agree duplicate rules**
  Define matching keys, lookback window and cross-source deduplication.

- [ ] **08 Agree credits and disputes**
  Set evidence requirements, deadlines, replacement terms and escalation contacts.

- [ ] **09 Set economic limits**
  Use retained-customer contribution and acquisition costs to calculate allowable CPL and maximum test loss.

- [ ] **10 Allocate fairly**
  Randomly distribute comparable leads across eligible agents and time blocks where feasible. Avoid changing scripts mid-test.

During the test

03 / Measurement and quality

- [ ] **11 Track each funnel stage**
  Record delivered, valid, contacted, qualified, sold and retained counts with consistent denominators.

- [ ] **12 Sample call quality**
  Review a random sample of legally recorded calls and check consent, intent and script adherence. Restrict access.

- [ ] **13 Measure retained customers**
  Allow cohorts to mature; subtract refunds, cancellations and chargebacks before judging economics.

- [ ] **14 Segment results**
  Compare publisher, sub-source, geography, time and agent team; investigate routing and mix shifts.

Before scaling

04 / Risk controls

- [ ] **15 Allow for conversion lag**
  Set observation and retention windows in advance. Compare cohorts at the same maturity.

- [ ] **16 Quantify uncertainty**
  Use confidence intervals for binary outcomes where assumptions hold. Small tests are screening, not proof.

- [ ] **17 Scale gradually**
  Set an incremental budget, loss limit and rollback rule. Recheck marginal acquisition cost and complaints.

The small-test trap

05 / Statistical uncertainty

100 leads. 10 sales. Now what?

A 10% observed conversion rate is not a promise of 10% on future traffic. The Wilson 95% interval is approximately 5.5% to 17.4% under independent comparable binary outcomes.

50 leads / 5 sales	**4.3% to 21.4%**
100 leads / 10 sales	**5.5% to 17.4%**
500 leads / 50 sales	**7.7% to 12.9%**
1,000 leads / 100 sales	**8.3% to 12.0%**

Translate uncertainty into dollars

At $20 CPL, the interval for 100 leads implies roughly $115 to $364 in lead spend per customer. Other acquisition costs are excluded. At zero lower conversion bound, upper implied CAC is unbounded.

Do not overinterpret

Intervals assume independent, comparable observations. Repeated consumers, clustered publishers and changing traffic mixes may invalidate that assumption. Use mature cohorts and predetermined test criteria.

The diagnostic matrix

06 / Find the bottleneck before assigning blame

Low contact rate

Lead age, valid phone numbers, speed to contact and coverage.

High contact / low qualification

Ad promise, targeting, qualification criteria and intent.

High qualification / low sales

Routing, sales skills, price and offer fit.

High sales / high cancellations

Expectation setting, sales quality and retention.

Performance drops at scale

Source mix, saturation, marginal CPA and staffing capacity.

Good ROAS / poor cash flow

Refunds, commissions, collection timing and payout terms.

Rising complaints

Consent, disclosures and marketing practices.

Decision rules

07 / Put numbers behind your next purchase

True CAC

Total lead spend plus other acquisition costs, divided by retained customers.

Break-even CPL

(Retained customer contribution before acquisition minus other acquisition costs) divided by purchased leads. Use a mature cohort.

Marginal CPA

Additional acquisition spend divided by additional retained customers. Use comparable periods or experiments; zero or negative additional customers means undefined CPA.

Decision gate

Pause for critical compliance failures or unreliable source evidence. Otherwise compare mature CAC against target, uncertainty, cash exposure and available capacity.

Source notes

Original operational synthesis. Statistical method: NIST Engineering Statistics Handbook, confidence intervals for proportions. Compliance: FTC business guidance on telemarketing and lead generation; requirements vary by jurisdiction and vertical.

https://www.itl.nist.gov/div898/handbook/

https://www.ftc.gov/business-guidance