



CASE STUDY

Driving Guest Engagement Through Experiential Retail: Cincinnati Zoo's Pin Trading Program

SSA partnered with the Cincinnati Zoo to launch a first-of-its-kind pin trading program as part of the Zoo's 150th anniversary celebration. Designed to create interactive, story-driven guest experiences, the program combined retail, education, and engagement. The initiative quickly gained traction, selling hundreds of starter packs in its first week and driving new forms of interaction between guests and staff.



The Challenge

The Zoo wanted to celebrate a major milestone in a way that went beyond traditional merchandise or passive experiences. **The challenge was to create something that would:**

- Encourage active guest participation
- Deepen engagement with the Zoo's history and mission
- Create meaningful interactions between guests and staff
- Deliver both experiential and retail value

The Objective

- ✓ Create a memorable, interactive experience tied to the 150th anniversary
- ✓ Increase guest engagement across the park
- ✓ Drive retail participation through a collectible program
- ✓ Strengthen storytelling through merchandise



"The pins can't just be merchandise. They need to mean something. Guests are buying into a story and a memory."

The Approach

Rooted in Experiences

The program was designed as more than a retail initiative. Pin trading was chosen as a format that encourages interaction, discovery, and repeat engagement, inspired by broader pin trading culture.

Design That Tells a Story

Over 30 unique pins were created, each tied to the Zoo's history, animals, or memorable moments. Each pin included a backstory, turning merchandise into a storytelling tool.

Making Every Interaction Count

Some pins were only available through trading with staff or volunteers, requiring guests to engage directly with employees. This created spontaneous conversations and added an element of excitement and discovery.



Working Together to Bring It to Life Quickly

SSA partnered closely with Zoo leadership and creative teams to bring the concept to life, managing sourcing, production, and logistics within a five-month timeline.

Keeping Guests Coming Back

New pins are released monthly, including exclusive and trade-only designs. This creates repeat visitation opportunities and keeps the experience fresh over time.

Staff at the Heart of the Experience

Staff became active participants in the program, trading pins with guests and helping drive engagement. This extended the experience beyond retail into broader workplace culture.



The Results



- ✓ Over 30 unique pin designs launched
- ✓ Nearly 400 starter packs sold in the first week
- ✓ Increased guest interaction with staff across the Zoo
- ✓ Strong internal staff engagement and participation
- ✓ Ongoing repeat engagement driven by monthly releases

The Impact

The pin trading program transformed retail into an interactive experience that drives connection, learning, and memory-making. It demonstrates how small, tangible interactions can create meaningful engagement in a largely digital world, while also supporting revenue and guest satisfaction goals.

[TALK TO OUR TEAM](#)

