



ATTRACTIONS TRENDS REPORT | ZOOS, AQUARIUMS, & MUSEUMS

Eight Guest Experience Trends Shaping 2026

WHAT 25,228 GUEST REVIEWS REVEAL ABOUT PRICING, FRICTION, FOOD, TECHNOLOGY, AND BELONGING ACROSS THE SSA PORTFOLIO

- 01 Pricing transparency is a non-negotiable
- 02 The arrival experience sets the tone before guests reach the gate
- 03 Waiting is the friction guests will pay you to remove
- 04 Cleanliness is the guest's proxy for trust; restrooms play a big part of this
- 05 Accessibility is quietly expanding the addressable market
- 06 Food & beverage is part of the experience and not an afterthought
- 07 AI and immersive technology are quietly becoming a key part of the guest experience
- 08 Membership is more about belonging than just providing access

Plus: a two-page deep dive on what guests are saying across social & online media

SSA Group is committed to understanding and anticipating the evolving needs, preferences, and expectations of today's visitors. Through our partnership with Tatvam, we continuously analyze guest feedback and visitor data to identify emerging trends and opportunities across the attractions industry.

The information that follows incorporates data from both SSA-operated locations and non-SSA partner organizations, providing a broad and comprehensive view of the current visitor landscape.

SUMMARY

What Guests and the Industry are Telling Us in 2026

25,228

REVIEWS ANALYZED

THE BIG PICTURE

Across every operational theme guests raise (pricing, arrival, waiting, cleanliness, and accessibility), the same pattern holds: **guests reward convenience, clarity, and value**, and they punish friction and surprise.

25,228

REVIEWS ANALYZED

2,519

RATED 1-2 ★

4.37★

BASELINE AVG. RATING

8

TRENDS IDENTIFIED

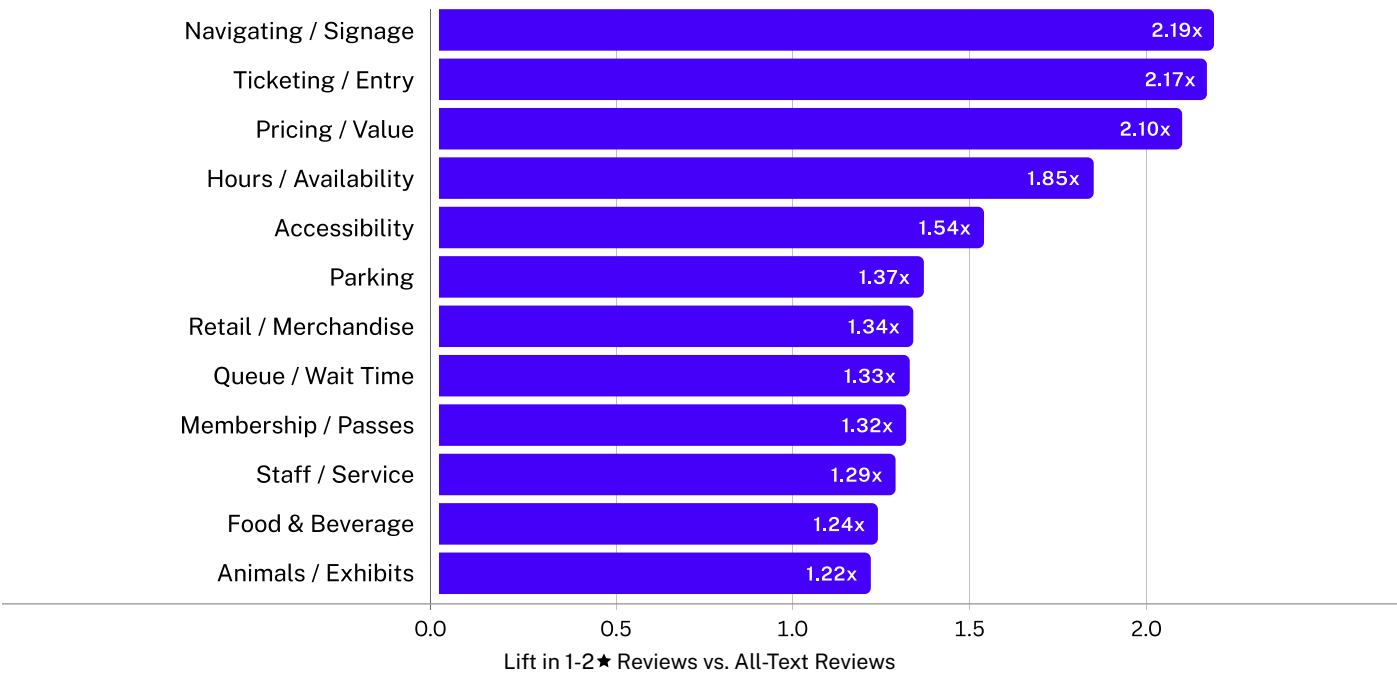
Guest-review analysis: Tatvam, 2026 attractions dataset (25,228 written reviews, January–June 2026). Industry context drawn from named sources throughout.

THE FINDING

Guests Typically Do Not Complain About Just One Thing; Friction Compounds Their Complaints

- ➔ A guest who mentions a queue is also likely to mention Ticketing & Entry (467 co-occurring reviews), Pricing (348), Staff & Service (347), Food & Beverage (326), and Parking (227)
- ➔ Reviews mentioning any operational friction average 3.99★ vs. 4.55★ when none is mentioned.
- ➔ Navigation/Signage and Ticketing/Entry are among the most disproportionately negative in the entire dataset.

COMMON THEMES IN LOW-RATING REVIEWS



This chart shows lift: how many times more likely each theme is to appear in a 1–2★ (low-rated) review compared with how often it appears across all written reviews. A lift of 1.0x, the dashed reference line, means a theme shows up in low-rated reviews at the same rate as in reviews overall. Values above 1.0x mean the theme is overrepresented in low-rated reviews, so guests who mention it are more likely to be leaving a low rating than guests overall. Reading the bars from highest to lowest: navigation/signage (2.19x) and ticketing/entry (2.17x) are more than twice as likely to appear in a low-rated review as in the average review; pricing/value (2.10x) and hours/availability (1.85x) follow; accessibility (1.54x), parking (1.37x), retail/merchandise (1.34x), queue/wait time (1.33x), membership/passes (1.32x), staff/service (1.29x), food & beverage (1.24x), and animals/exhibits (1.22x) are all still overrepresented in low-rated reviews, to a smaller degree.

The data suggests that fixing themes individually does not move the overall rating as effectively as addressing the chain of related friction points together. A guest who experiences a confusing queue, difficulty finding the exit, and an unexpected price increase in the same visit tends to report these as a single negative experience, reflected in one overall rating rather than several separate complaints.

Co-occurrence and lift analysis: Tatvam, 2026 attractions dataset, 25,228 reviews.

How We Prioritized the Trends

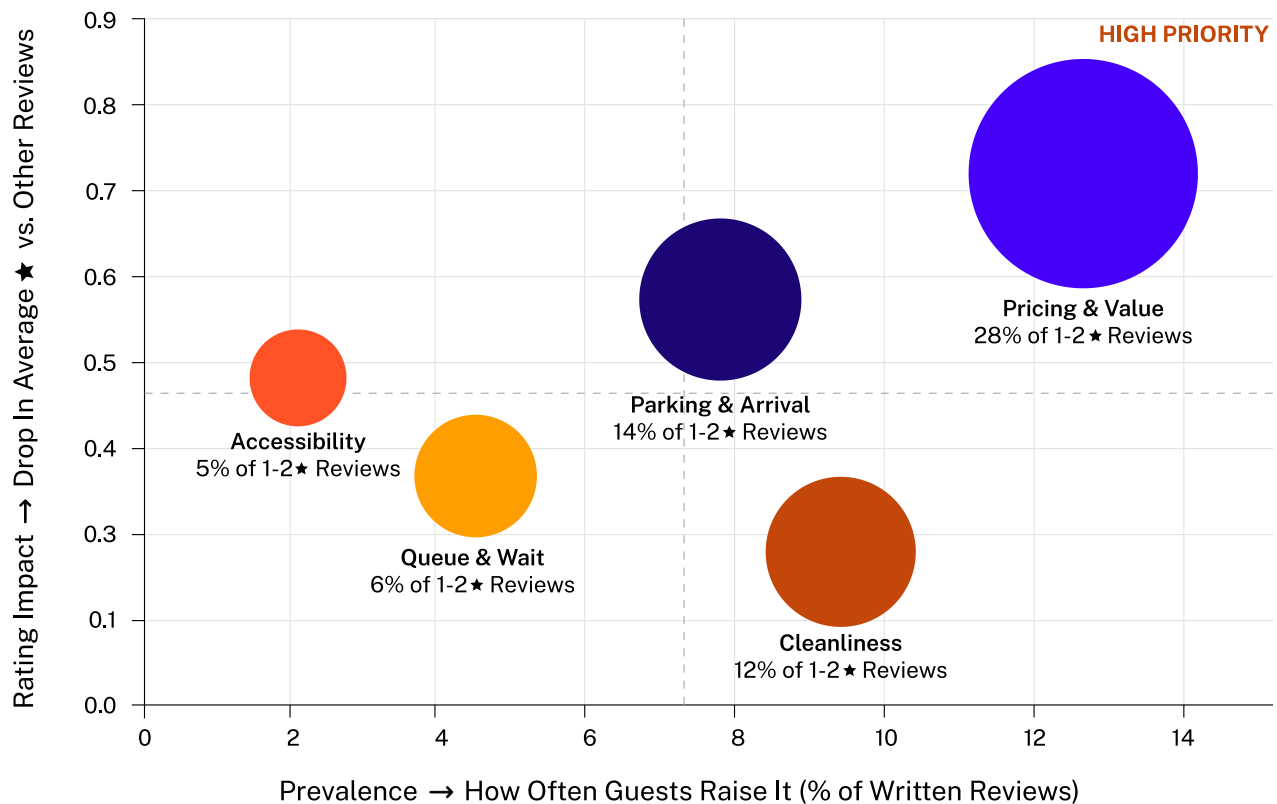
Trends 1–5 are ranked using two guest-review measures side by side, not gut feel.

Here's what each one means and how to read the chart below:

- ➡ **Prevalence (horizontal axis):** How often guests raise a theme, as a share of all written reviews
- ➡ **Rating Impact (vertical axis):** How far a theme pulls the average star rating down when guests mention it
- ➡ **Bubble Size:** Each theme's share of all 1–2★ (lowest-rated) reviews. A bigger bubble indicates a bigger driver of low ratings
- ➡ **Upper-Right Quadrant = Highest Priority:** Raised often **and** does real damage to the rating

OPERATIONAL IMPACT RANK: PREVALENCE VS. RATING IMPACT

Bubble Size = Share of All 1-2★ Reviews the trend drives. Upper-Right = Highest Priority



Operational Impact Rank: Prevalence vs. Rating Impact; Bubble Size = Share of all 1–2★ Reviews. Pricing sits alone in the upper-right quadrant, with the highest prevalence, the largest rating drop, and the single biggest share of low ratings, which is why it is Trend 1.

Pricing Transparency Becomes Non-Negotiable

12.6%

OF REVIEWS MENTION PRICE

27.5%

OF ALL 1-2★ REVIEWS
CITE PRICING

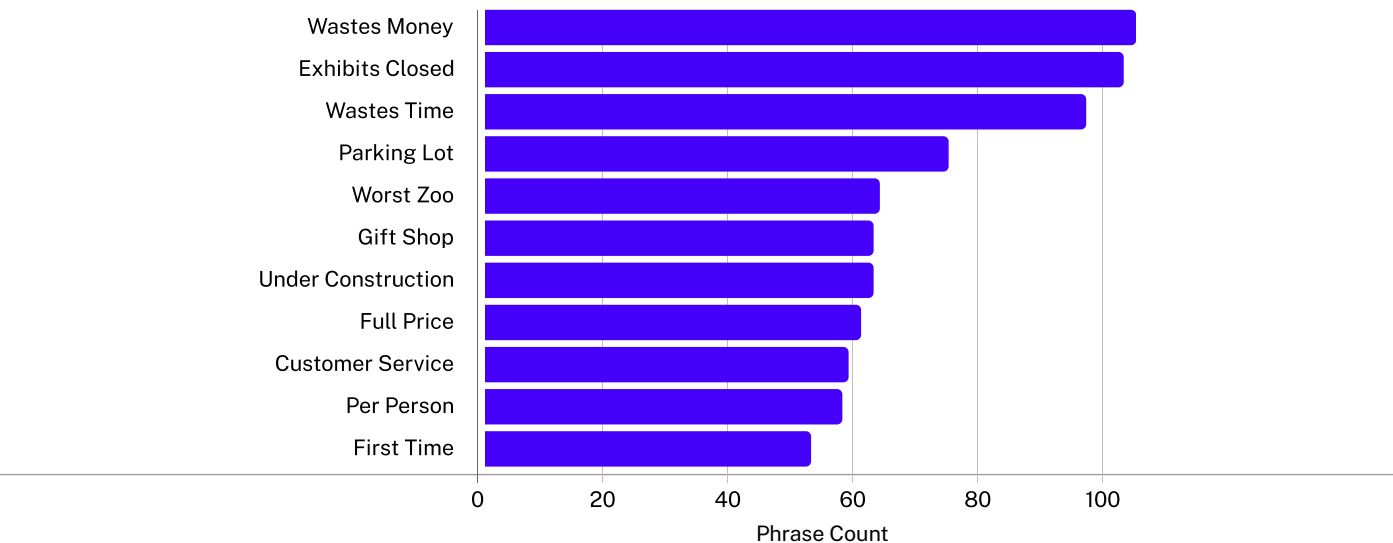
3.71★

AVG. RATING WHEN PRICING
IS RAISED

Pricing and value is the single biggest driver of low ratings in the data, with a 0.76-star gap, the largest of any theme. Guests rarely object to price alone; frustration increases when price feels disconnected from speed, quality, or clarity:

- ➔ Reviews that mention price average 3.71★, compared with 4.47★ when they don't, the largest rating gap of any theme measured
- ➔ Guests primed by a year of “junk fee” news coverage are quicker to notice, and call out, a price that isn't what it first looked like
- ➔ McKinsey: a 1% price improvement can lift operating profit 8–11%; Bain: actively managed pricing can add 2–7 points of return on sales

TOP PHRASES IN 1-2 STAR REVIEW TEXT



Top phrases in 1–2★ review text. “waste money,” “full price,” and “per person” show pricing language dominating guests’ own words when they’re disappointed.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- ➔ Align admission and add-on pricing to the value guests actually perceive, not just cost-plus
- ➔ Use bundles, memberships, and family packages rather than blanket discounts
- ➔ Fix the value-drivers guests link to price (waits, service, cleanliness) before adjusting price itself
- ➔ Show all-in pricing before checkout

Tatvam 2026 dataset (3,184 reviews mention pricing)

The Arrival Experience Sets the Tone Before Guests Reach the Gate

7.4%

OF REVIEWS MENTION PARKING

13.8%OF ALL 1-2★ REVIEWS
CITE PARKING**3.89★**AVG. RATING VS. 4.42★
OTHERWISE

Parking & Arrival carries the second-largest rating impact we track, a 0.53-star gap, and it affects everything that follows, before a guest has seen a single exhibit:

- ➔ Convenient parking consistently ranks among the very first touchpoints shaping how a guest feels about the whole visit
- ➔ Arrival friction rarely shows up alone; it co-occurs heavily with queueing, pricing, accessibility, staffing, and wayfinding
- ➔ Because this moment colors everything after it, staffing and guidance at the first point of friction return more than the same effort spent later in the visit

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- ➔ Set visitor expectations before arrival to reduce perceived challenges
- ➔ Provide paid “VIP” parking for those willing to pay extra to eliminate lines or distance
- ➔ When possible, improve traffic flow, staffing, and shuttle service during peak arrival periods
- ➔ Upgrade signage and wayfinding from the lot to the gate, not just inside the attraction
- ➔ Review parking capacity and accessible-parking availability against actual peak demand

Tatvam 2026 dataset (1,864 reviews mention parking/arrival)

Waiting is the Friction Guests will Pay You to Remove

4.6%

OF REVIEWS MENTION QUEUES

17.7%

OF QUEUE REVIEWS RATED 1-2★

4.00★AVG. RATING VS. 4.39★
OTHERWISE

Queue and wait-time complaints are low in volume but high in damage: only 4.6% of reviews mention them, yet 17.7% of those land at 1-2★:

- ➞ Waiting rarely happens in isolation; it co-occurs most with Ticketing & Entry (467 reviews), Pricing (348), Staff & Service (347), Food & Beverage (326), and Parking (227)
- ➞ Waits of just 10–30 minutes have been shown to cut a visitor's perceived value of the attraction by half
- ➞ Queueing is one of the few frictions attractions can monetize while fixing it: guests are demonstrably willing to pay for shorter waits through premium queue systems

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- ➞ Set accurate wait-time expectations through the app, signage, and pre-arrival messaging
- ➞ Deploy virtual queueing or timed-entry at peak-demand periods
- ➞ Add premium or skip-the-line options as a revenue stream and experience enhancer
- ➞ Set expectations as part of trip planning –eliminating the surprise helps to meet expectations and eliminate complaints

Tatvam 2026 dataset (1,158 reviews mention queue/wait)

Cleanliness is the Guest's Proxy for Trust, and Restrooms are the Tell

9.4%OF REVIEWS MENTION
CLEANLINESS**490**REVIEWS SPECIFICALLY CITE
RESTROOMS**4.23★**AVG. RATING VS. 4.39★
OTHERWISE

Cleanliness has the mildest rating impact of the five core themes (a 0.16-star gap) but the widest reach, present in nearly one in ten reviews:

- Restrooms are the hotspot: of 2,372 cleanliness mentions, 490 call out restrooms by name
- Cleanliness co-occurs with animals & exhibits, staff, pricing and hours. Guests read it as a signal of how well-run the whole operation is, not an isolated complaint
- 85% of U.S. adults report an overall negative impression of a business with a dirty restroom (Bradley Corp.)
- 68% say they're more likely to return, and spend more, at businesses with clean, well-maintained facilities

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- Monitor cleanliness in real time for restrooms, dining, and other high-traffic zones
- Design and operate restrooms as a continuation of the visitor experience, not a separate entity
- Prioritize recurring issues by specific location and time of day, not just average scores
- Confirm that cleaning-schedule changes actually reduce guest-reported complaints

Tatvam 2026 dataset (2,372 reviews mention cleanliness); Bradley Corporation, 2026 Healthy Handwashing Survey.

Accessibility is Quietly Expanding the Addressable Market

2.7%

OF REVIEWS MENTION ACCESS

16%

OF THE WORLD'S POPULATION
HAS A DISABILITY

3.95★

AVG. RATING VS. 4.41 ★
OTHERWISE

Accessibility is the least-mentioned of the five core themes, but it carries a meaningful 0.46-star gap when it does come up, the third-largest impact we measured:

- ➔ It co-occurs with parking, queueing, staffing, wayfinding, and cleanliness. Access is shaped across the entire guest journey, not fixed by a single ramp or sign
- ➔ The World Health Organization estimates roughly 16% of the world's population lives with some form of disability
- ➔ Treating accessibility as more than a compliance checkbox widens the addressable market and improves the visit for families with strollers, older adults, and anyone with a temporary mobility limit

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- ➔ Audit pathways, ramps, elevators, accessible parking, and signage together, not separately
- ➔ Train frontline staff to proactively offer help rather than wait to be asked
- ➔ Prioritize the specific access barriers guests flag most often, not a generic checklist

Tatvam 2026 dataset (684 reviews mention accessibility); World Health Organization.

Food & Beverage has become the Experience, not an Afterthought

2,767

F&B MENTIONS (2ND LOUDEST AREA)

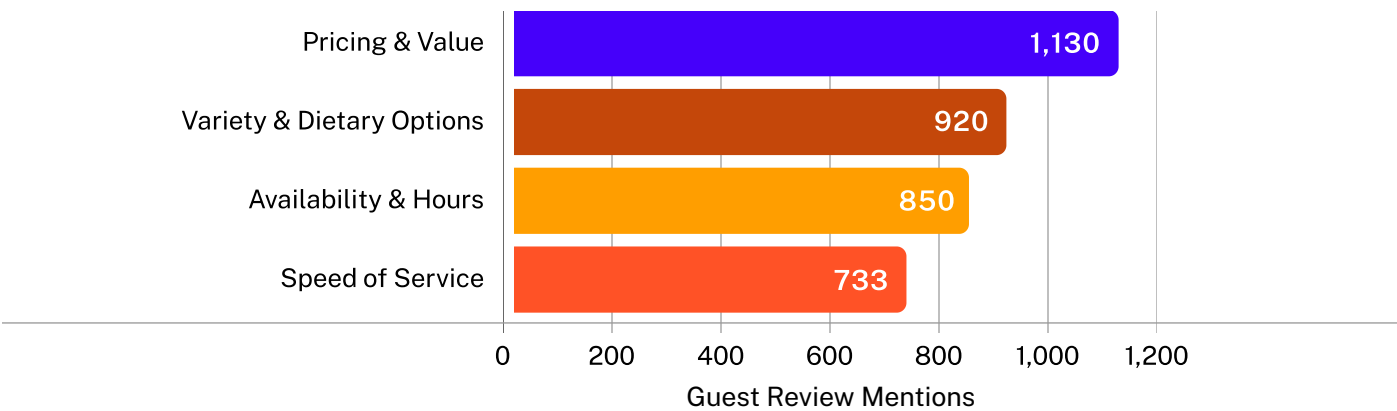
3.93

AVG. SENTIMENT (STRONGEST OF ANY AREA)

In last year’s baseline, food & beverage was the loudest operational conversation after ticketing itself, and it carried the strongest sentiment of the three areas measured:

- ➔ Guests talk about F&B in the same breath as variety & dietary options, availability & hours, and speed: the texture of a modern food experience, not just a transaction
- ➔ F&B and staff & service co-occur heavily with the core friction themes. A strong F&B operation buffers against friction elsewhere in the visit

FOOD & BEVERAGE THEMES IN GUEST COMMENTS



Food & beverage themes in guest comments (2026 baseline). Value leads, but variety, availability, and speed shape whether the experience feels “worth it.”

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- ➔ Post open locations and peak times so guests can plan around availability
- ➔ Set wait time expectations at the time the order is placed to remove surprise waits
- ➔ Protect speed of service during meal periods without sacrificing quality
- ➔ Tie signature items to exhibits or stories rather than treating F&B as generic concessions
- ➔ Have strong menu descriptors so visitors understand the value of what they are purchasing

Tatvam/Cinchio Solutions 2026 baseline (25,069 reviews, 2,767 F&B mentions); IAAPA Funworld, “What’s Trending: F&B at Zoos, Aquariums, and Museums,” 2026, featuring SSA Group.

Membership is Being Reframed as Belonging, Not Just Access

+5%

RETENTION LIFT

25-95%

RESULTING PROFIT INCREASE (BAIN)

A 5% increase in customer retention can increase profits substantially. This has long been the business case for membership. Some emerging trends in retaining members include:

- ➔ Framing a program as simply “unlimited admission” undersells what people actually buy
- ➔ The recommended shift: treat membership as a social permission slip (bring someone, make it a tradition, come back for the next thing), not a transactional pass
- ➔ A single generic renewal email is not enough. Instead, multiple communications throughout the membership journey that connects value to experience will retain members.

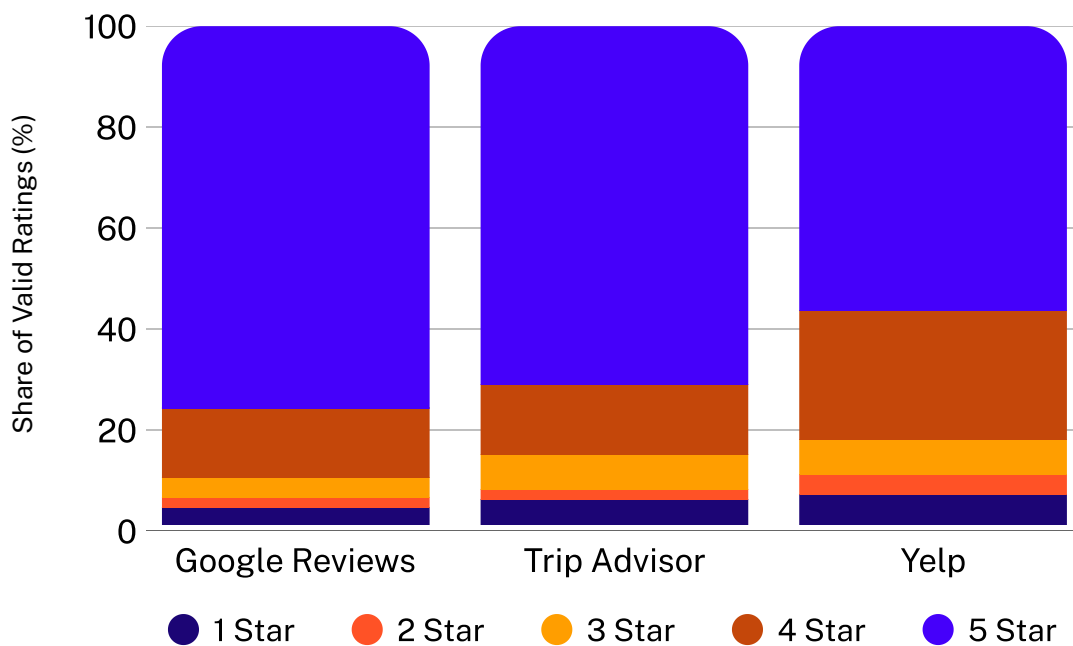
RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- ➔ Segment membership communications by life stage and visitation pattern, not a single blanket message
- ➔ Position membership around shared tradition and repeat visits, not just unlimited entry
- ➔ Use survey and feedback tools to hear from members specifically, not just first-time guests
- ➔ Use publications and events throughout the year to communicate the value of membership. Don't just count on a single communication at the time of renewal.

What People are Actually Talking About Online

Written reviews are only part of the guest's megaphone. Even within reviews, the platform changes the tone: Yelp skews notably more critical than Google or TripAdvisor, which matters when deciding where to focus response efforts:

RATING DISTRIBUTION BY REVIEW SOURCE



Rating distribution by review source. Yelp carries a larger share of low ratings than Google Reviews or TripAdvisor. The same visit can read very differently depending on where a guest posts.

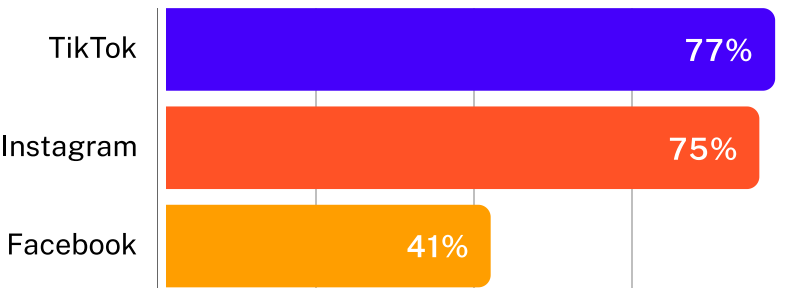
BEYOND REVIEW SITES, FIVE PATTERNS STAND OUT ACROSS TIKTOK, INSTAGRAM, AND REDDIT THIS YEAR:

- ➞ Animal celebrities travel further than any paid campaign. Viral baby-animal continue to drive outsized reach and even merchandise and welfare conversations.
- ➞ Unscripted staff content outperforms polished marketing.
- ➞ Recurring “museum staff” and docent-tour posts turn everyday work into popular shareable content at no production cost.
- ➞ Peer consensus now outweighs brand messaging. Guests trust user comments and ratings over produced content at nearly every decision point.

What This Means for the SSA Portfolio

Guests aren’t just reviewing us after the visit; they’re discovering us, and deciding whether to trust us, before they ever buy a ticket. Discovery itself has moved:

SHARE OF GEN Z USING EACH PLATFORM FOR PRODUCT DISCOVERY



Share of Gen Z using each platform for product discovery. TikTok and Instagram now lead Facebook by a wide margin. Source: Statista/GWI, aggregated via Hootsuite and sqmagazine.co.uk, 2026.

41-64%

of Gen Z now use TikTok itself as a search engine, alongside (not instead of) Google (multi-platform search, not platform replacement)

69%

of Gen Z cite user comments and ratings as the deciding factor in a purchase, ahead of any brand messaging

FIVE ACTIONS FOLLOW DIRECTLY FROM THIS:

- ➔ Treat frontline Ambassadors as the content engine, not just marketing: authentic staff and keeper content may travel further than produced campaigns
- ➔ Optimize for on-platform discovery (captions, alt text, hashtags) the same way admissions teams optimize for search. TikTok and Instagram are discovery engines in their own right
- ➔ Monitor pricing conversation on social with the same discipline as reviews. Annual-pass and ticket pricing at major operators is already a recurring social flashpoint industry-wide, priming guests to scrutinize price everywhere else
- ➔ Feed social listening into the same dashboards as reviews and surveys so one team sees the whole guest voice, not three disconnected inboxes

Hootsuite, “26 Gen Z Statistics That Matter to Marketers in 2026”; sqmagazine.co.uk, “Gen Z Social Media Statistics 2026”; SociallyIn, “Gen Z Social Media Usage Statistics 2026”; Tatvam Playbook, Feature 6, Surveys.

Across All Trends, One Pattern Holds

Guests reward convenience, clarity, and value, and they punish friction and surprise, and those frictions compound rather than standing alone.

The highest-leverage move for any attraction is to set expectations before arrival, on pricing, hours, wait times, and what's open, and to fix friction at the first point of confusion rather than the point of complaint.

A short note on method: all guest-review figures in this report come from Tatvam's 2026 attractions dataset (25,228 written reviews; 2,519 rated 1–2★). External statistics has been checked against its original source and is cited where it's used.

For more than 50 years, SSA has partnered with cultural attractions across the country to design and support the full Hospitality Experience Journey. We do this through a One Revenue Strategy, aligning the complete guest experience so every touchpoint works together over time.

We're known for the strength of our relationships and our long-term partnerships, many lasting more than a decade. Guided by our 452 Hospitality ethos, we create special moments of hospitality that have a lasting impact, while helping our partners drive sustainable growth and stay focused on what matters most: their mission.

With more than 90 partners and over 100 million guest visits annually, SSA brings a unique perspective in driving our industry forward, and ensuring hospitality can continue to feel personal in an increasingly disconnected world.

