

Inside Out

The Experience eZine

FROM THE CREATORS OF THE GET SMART PLATFORM | OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2025



Famous
cream
horns at *Viv's
Kitchen*

Putting small town
Sanson on the map



Beyond the stars
*Are you getting the full
story from public reviews?*

Can AI actually make
tourism more human?

The invisible ingredient
in every visitor experience



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From the Editor's desk

We launched **Inside Out** to spark ideas that get people thinking about delivering awesome experiences in their organisations. I've loved hearing these stories start to emerge in real-life conversations and am delighted to welcome our new subscribers to our growing Insider community.

In this edition, we dig into what Customer Experience (CX) really means. It can sound a bit buzzy, like something only big brands workshop, but really, it's the everyday stuff you're already doing. We unpack the role of public reviews in CX, why designing for emotion matters, the impact of AI and real stories from Ōpuke Spa and Viv's Kitchen. Enjoy the read!




Samantha Howarth
INSIDE OUT EDITOR

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A photograph of a woman with long brown hair, wearing a dark turtleneck, smiling and looking towards a customer with long red hair who is seen from the back. They are in a cafe or shop setting with a chalkboard and wooden walls in the background.

People remember the experience, not the receipt

Walk out of any café, spa, or tour and what do you remember? Chances are it isn't the exact figure on your receipt. What you saw, felt, heard, touched and sometimes even smelt too is what you remember and that is **customer experience** in action.

Customer experience is not just a concept for global brands with big budgets. It's the real product every business sells, whether you've put a label on it or not.

What is customer experience exactly?

Customer experience, or CX for short, is simply the sum of every interaction a person has with your business. It's the journey they take from the moment they discover you, through their booking or purchase, to the time they

leave (and ideally return). It's what shapes how they feel about you, and whether they tell others to give you a try.

CX is not the same as customer service. Service is one part of the experience, usually happening when staff and customers interact directly. Experience goes broader. It includes the ease of finding you online, the design of your space, how you handle hiccups, the tone of your social media posts, and even the feeling people have as they step out the door.

In short, your product is the experience. The food, the spa treatment or the tour, these are vehicles for the memory your customer will carry away.

Not just for big brands

It's easy to assume that CX belongs in the world of large hotel chains, airlines or international operators who have teams dedicated to "experience design." But that's missing the point.

For smaller and mid-sized businesses, CX is often even more powerful. Your closeness to the frontline means you can feel the mood of your customers directly. You can make quick adjustments. You can try something new today and see the response tomorrow.

Customer experience isn't about slick systems or huge marketing campaigns. It's about being intentional with the things you already do, ensuring they add up to a consistent, memorable journey for the people you serve.

When was the last time you experienced your own business?

Here's a challenge. Step into your customer's shoes. Try booking your own service online, calling your business number, or walking through your doors as if for the first time.

What stands out?

As a business leader, your eyes are trained to see flaws. You'll notice the scuff on the paintwork, the menu item that sold out, the gap in the schedule, the staff member who seemed distracted. You see the *mess*.

But customers often see something different. They see the staff member greeting them by name, the authentic character of your space, the buzz of others enjoying themselves, the way small imperfections remind them they're in a real place, not a manufactured one. They see the *magic*.

That's why it's so important to view your business not just through your operational lens, but through your customer's emotional lens. They aren't tallying the logistics, they're building a feeling.

The danger of forgetting the experience

When things get busy, it's tempting to focus all your energy on operations: filling bookings, keeping the roster covered, cutting costs, or fixing the next problem. These things matter, of course, but if experience slips into the background, the long-term impact can be costly.

Why? Because customers are more likely to remember how you made them feel than the price they paid. They might forgive a hiccup if they feel genuinely cared for. They might overlook a small delay if the atmosphere keeps them relaxed. They might even pay more than they planned if the experience feels special and unique.

If you forget that the experience *is* your product, you risk becoming just another transaction. And transactions are easy to replace. *Experiences are not.*

Practical ways to refocus on CX

You don't need a CX department to sharpen your customer experience. Here are some practical ways to bring it front and centre:

Walk the journey. Experience your booking process, website, or premises exactly as a customer would. Note both friction points and delightful moments.

Ask, don't assume. Invite feedback in simple ways - a friendly conversation, a well designed survey, or a quick follow-up message. Customers often tell you what mattered most, and it's not always what you think.

Focus on the senses. People remember experiences that touch them on multiple levels: the sight of a well-set table, the scent in your space, the sound of music or laughter, the texture of your product, the taste of your food.

Train for empathy. Remind staff that their role isn't just to complete a task but to connect with people. Small gestures of care add up.

Celebrate the magic. Share positive customer stories with your team so they see the impact they're making. It builds pride and consistency.

Why it matters even more in tough times

Economic headwinds, rising costs, and tight labour markets are a reality for many right now. The instinct can be to pull back. Leaders strip out extras, cut back on staff training and focus narrowly on the bottom line.

But here's the truth, tough times are exactly when customer experience matters most.

Loyalty is earned. In leaner times, customers are more discerning about where they spend. If you deliver an experience that feels worthwhile, they'll choose you over the competition.

Word of mouth works harder. A great experience generates organic promotion, which can reduce your marketing spend.

Experience drives resilience. Staff who feel proud of the experience they're part of creating are more engaged and motivated, even under pressure.

Price becomes less of the story. Customers may pay more if they feel they're getting something memorable, unique, or personal.

In other words, when every dollar and every customer counts, the best investment you can make is in how people experience your business.

The lasting product you sell

Think back to the last great memory you had as a customer. Was it the line on the receipt that stuck with you? Or was it the way the place made you feel?

That's the lasting product you sell. Not just the meal, the massage, the ticket or the tour. It's the experience that wraps around it. From here, don't leave that experience to chance. Step into your customer's shoes, see the magic they see, and be deliberate about shaping it.

Because long after the receipt fades, the memory remains.



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unforgettable is in reach?

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Cream horns and curated moments at Viv's Kitchen

When you arrive in Sanson, a small town at the crossroads of State Highway 1, you don't expect to find a café that North American visitors claim rivals anything on Route 66. **But Viv's Kitchen isn't about imitation, it's about authenticity, and that's what keeps customers coming back.**

The story started modestly. Viv once worked at a local café, but when a vacant shop opened up, she and her husband Kevan decided to try it themselves. The first iteration was Crazy Sundae, an ice-cream parlour and lunch bar. A couple of pivots later, first to Somethin's Cooking, then to Viv's Kitchen, they were on their way to finding their niche.

Each rebrand wasn't just about survival, but about evolving the experience, step by step.

And then came the now famous cream horn.

A chance radio appearance with broadcaster Duncan Garner led Viv to casually sign off her appearance with the line, "and the cream horns are to die for."



Photo by Shellie Evans Photography

What happened next was nothing short of extraordinary.

Customers began travelling from as far as Ohope Beach to try them. Sales jumped from a few a day to a record 724 in one day, and more than 3,000 in a week. To date, over 620,000 cream horns have been sold, putting both Viv's Kitchen and Sanson firmly on the map.

But here's the thing, cream horns get people in the door. What keeps them coming back is the experience.

Cream horns get people in the door but what keeps them coming back is the experience.

Curated first impressions

Stepping into Viv's Kitchen feels like a step back in time. It's a carefully designed immersion into the 50s and 60s, a nostalgic trip curated not just for an older demographic but,

unexpectedly, loved by all ages. Children enjoy the hand-cranked train and playground. Families linger. Travellers walk in wide-eyed, cameras out. As Viv puts it, *the customer promise is simple*:

Step into a time before the world went mad.

That experience isn't an accident. It's built into every detail, the music, the décor sourced from around the world, the food, the rockabilly era team uniforms and the way customers are greeted. Cleanliness is non-negotiable, "we make no apologies for setting high standards," one sign reads. And it shows, customers consistently rate service speed, friendliness, and spotless presentation as standouts.



Viv & Kevan Withers, Viv's Kitchen

Leadership by example

For Viv and Kevan, creating a great customer experience starts with their team. In an industry known for high turnover, they've learned the only way to get buy-in is to lead from the front. You'll find Viv behind the coffee machine, serving cream horns, or even scrubbing the chiller floor. "I wouldn't ask our team to do something I wouldn't do myself," she says.

There are perks too, paid birthdays off, generous meals, and performance-based earning potential. The result? A team that feels valued, which customers feel too.

More than social media, actual socialising

Viv's Kitchen has a strong online presence, but it doesn't come from strategy decks or paid ad campaigns. It comes from being genuinely social. Their café cat, KitKat, has a loyal following thanks to frequent cameos. Customer interactions spill over into social media and back again, like the young customer who recently sent Viv a set of handmade, on-brand earrings. That authenticity has built them into one of the top five most-reviewed cafés in New Zealand on Google. Their reviews aren't engineered, they're earned.

Reinvention as a discipline

Perhaps the real secret is that Viv and Kevan don't rest on their laurels. Whenever the

café risks feeling stale, they reinvent. Sometimes it's small, like crowdsourcing the name of a new slice (the "Rodney Slice" was named after a beloved pet). Sometimes it's bigger, like expanding facilities or redesigning spaces. It keeps the experience fresh and fun, for them, their team, and their customers.

It hasn't always been smooth sailing. Property negotiations and the constant uncertainty of hospitality have tested their resolve. But reinvesting in the experience has insulated them from the worst of industry pressures. As Kevan says, "It's a compromise personally, but without it, we wouldn't have the reputation we have today."



Photo by Shellie Evans Photography

Authenticity personified

What makes Viv's Kitchen special isn't just cream horns, décor, or customer service. It's that the café is Viv and Kevan personified. Every detail, from the jukebox and memorabilia to the high standards, from Kitkat to the cream horn tally books, is infused with their personality.

That's why people travel hours out of their way to stop there, truck drivers have even been

known to miss the ferry to time their visit through Sanson for breakfast. That's why families return, why social media feels like a conversation instead of a campaign, and why Viv's Kitchen continues to thrive in an industry where many struggle.

Cream horns may be the hook, but authenticity is what keeps people coming back for more.

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The invisible ingredient in every visitor experience

Brad Rowe of **Tourism X Design** is an award-winning tourism development expert with a track record of turning ambitious ideas into successful businesses.



While rushing to the airport in Rwanda, we started the usual conversation, “have you got your passport?”.

“Yes”, “yes”, “yes”... “NO!”.

He couldn’t find it.

Not a great thing to happen in Africa while you’re going through your third military checkpoint....he was denied travel to Kenya and missed the

flight. Eventually he found the passport...the next day, in the depths of his bag.

Safe to say, this was not the highlight of a once-in-a-lifetime trip.

However, it is a story that I often bring up anytime I get asked about Africa or when a conversation around passports comes up.

It's a strange phenomenon but people love to tell stories about what went wrong just as much as they like to talk about what went right when it comes to travel. Whether it's losing a passport or missing a flight, when things go wrong it makes for a very compelling story. *Why?*

Emotion.

There's often excitement, sadness, surprise and then, if you're lucky, a sweet release that ties it all together. Basically, these stories make you feel something, some sort of emotion.

These feelings and emotions shape our memories of an experience as a whole. The good news is, positive moments can be memorable too and it's our job as tourism operators and experience designers to make these come to life.

Now I'd love to write exactly how you can make your guests feel a certain way... but, controlling how your guests

feel is impossible. We've all had guests who seem intent on having the worst holiday possible! So you need to give yourself every chance of success.

The best way to do this is to start with clearly identifying the emotion you want your guests to feel. Sounds simple yet very few businesses do it but there are very compelling reasons why you should.

What the research says

According to the *Harvard Business Review*, emotionally engaged visitors are:

Less price sensitive (so they spend more)

More likely to recommend your experience (do your marketing for you)

More likely to repeat their visit (lowering your cost of acquisition)

Increase value while lowering costs? Yes please! *This is the perfect fusion of visitor experience and value creation.*

And it all starts with emotion - it's a powerful lever when it comes to improving your tourism business.

So the smart move is to design from the inside out and here's how.

Start with the chemistry, the “four happy hormones”, that create those feelings.

Endorphins. These fuel excitement and anticipation. That's the energy of the countdown, the reveal, the little rush before the main event. When you design a check-in, a briefing, or even the walk from the car park, you're building anticipation and setting your guest up for a great experience.

Dopamine. The high of achievement. Travellers love milestones, even little ones (think of how good it is to check in to your hotel after 30 hours of travel). That beautiful feeling is dopamine. It doesn't have to be knocking off Everest. But we have to recognise these moments and

not lose empathy to them, even if we see them every day. Mark the win. The task creates the memory; the celebration locks it in.

Serotonin. This is the glow of recognition and belonging. That could be as simple as a guide remembering a name, or as powerful as giving guests an insider's tip that makes them feel like “one of us.” People crave status (airlines and hotels know this well) but in tourism that usually means just being seen and valued in person, not just by accruing loyalty points.

Oxytocin. Often referred to as the trust chemical. It's what happens when strangers bond over a shared meal, or when a guide goes the extra mile to make someone feel recognised - not just running them through a script. That connection is contagious and we can help make that happen. It's also the part guests carry home long after any ticket is scanned.

As tourism owners and managers, you'll always be busy. But if you carve out time to design the emotions you want your guests to feel and intentionally weave those feelings into your business, you can create something unforgettable.

**When that happens,
the flywheel starts.**

Those moments you designed become the memories of your guests. The memories become the marketing. Word of mouth spreads, five-star reviews stack up, guests return and your business grows.

And the story they share when they get home won't be about what went wrong; ***it will be about the experience you created.***

Brad Rowe X **GROW
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The Art and Science of Visitor Experience Design

Discover how to make emotion your edge – with **Brad Rowe's** online learning pathway



growtourism.com



From great to even better at Ōpuke Thermal Pools & Spa

How the daily habits behind Ōpuke Thermal Pools and Spa's standout service mean they never become complacent.

Commitment to excellence from day one

From day one, Ōpuke aimed to deliver an exceptional guest experience. With a General Manager who's been in the tourism game for years leading the way, they wanted to avoid getting comfortable with "good enough." They needed a way to uncover honest, detailed feedback and spot small issues to support their commitment to excellence.

Ōpuke collects guest emails at booking or reception and using the Get Smart platform, sends their expert-crafted post-visit survey. The response rate is strong, with detailed comments that provide real insight.

Engaging the Ōpuke team

Every morning, the team shares feedback during a brief stand-up, recognising staff

with coffee vouchers when mentioned. Neutral or negative feedback triggers instant alerts for fast follow-up.

The leadership team tracks improvement ideas and assigns actions across the business. The survey also includes a marketing opt-in, steadily growing their email list. While public reviews are monitored, Ōpuke values private feedback for its honesty, especially about

small details online reviews often miss.

Continuous improvement is the norm at Ōpuke

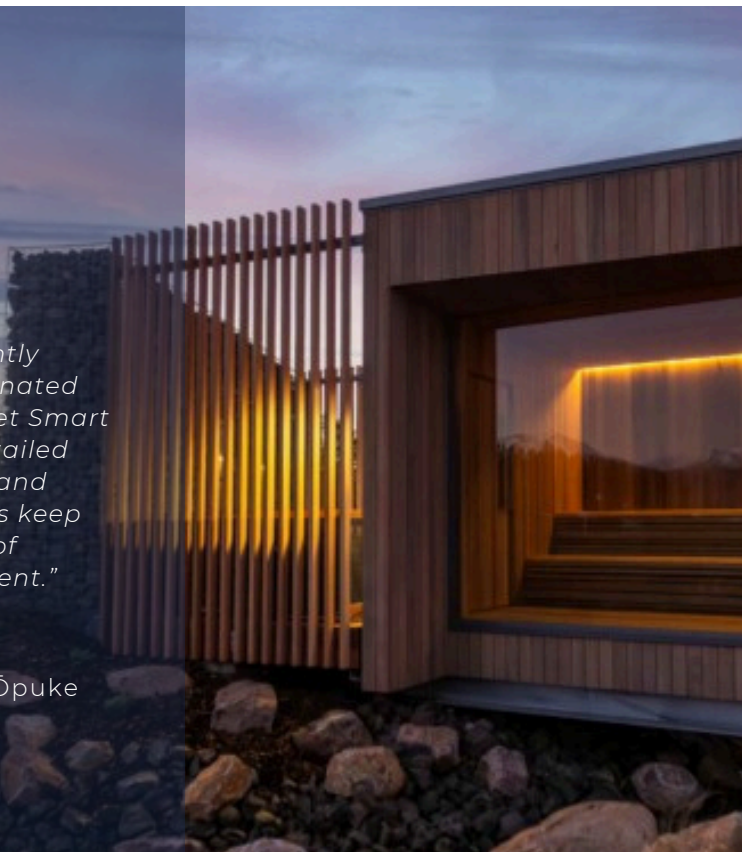
Ōpuke now has an extremely effective system that keeps them sharp. Staff feel valued, issues get fixed fast, and guests rave about their time there. All of this, without needing a dedicated team or complicated tools.



"Our guests frequently leave feeling rejuvenated and relaxed, and Get Smart gives us honest, detailed feedback privately and regularly. It helps us keep improving instead of becoming complacent."

MATT TURNER

General Manager, Ōpuke



Can AI actually make tourism more human?



by **Nadia Ellis**, Founder of Curiosity, a strategic AI and marketing consultancy for tourism and purpose-led businesses.

The magic of our industry has always been the human touch, like the front desk team member who spots a birthday on a booking and makes a guest's day. But as we scale, maintaining that personal excellence becomes a monumental challenge.

Anyone in tourism and hospitality recognises the true enemy of CX: *overwhelm*. You're swamped with queries, the inbox explodes, and review alerts keep pingping. Most of what drags us away from guests is boring, repetitive admin. "Sorry about the weather, we'll need to re-book." It's death by a thousand polite emails. You know what guests want, but you'd need a 36-hour day to deliver it.

The promise of AI is time back for high-touch service

For many, "AI" triggers visions of a dodgy chatbot called Greg, bland replies, looped apologies, and frustrated guests. I get it.

But here's what's on the table now: voice agents with genuine personality, tools that spot no-show or cancellation patterns, and 24/7 strategic assistance once reserved for expensive agencies.

In reality some AIs are so good you probably don't know you're interacting with one. Imagine a system trained on your company data, your FAQs, and your tone of voice, that

never tires, never rolls its eyes, and never runs out of empathy.

It drafts responses with the skill of your best people and expertly triages the inbox. That reclaimed time fuels better CX, faster recovery when things go wrong, and a happier team.

However, AI isn't magic.

Its benefits follow effort and intention. The single biggest mistake leaders make is treating AI as a technical project for the IT team.

Generative AI is a fundamentally new capability, it isn't entirely predictable, so it is much closer to hiring a new staff member than upgrading your CRM.

So, where do you start? There are two practical onramps:

Personal AI Give your staff access to high-quality tools, provide training, and trust them to solve real problems. Empower them to experiment and become AI champions.

Process AI Target one specific bottleneck, like managing TripAdvisor reviews or competitor monitoring. But be warned: if you automate a chaotic process, you just get faster chaos. Look at the process first, even if it makes you squirm.

It comes down to trust

Whichever path you choose, it all comes down to trust. If you want ROI from AI then you need to start with people, build the culture, and manage the change. This requires leadership, training, and access to quality tools (if you're only using the free version of CoPilot, you're missing the point).

It's about empowering those who know your business best to use AI as an extension of themselves. Yes, it's an investment. *But even an AI tool that saves each person a modest 25 minutes a day adds up to a full workday per month.*

Top Tips for Leaders

Start with the "Why." Imagine the experience you could deliver if your team wasn't buried in admin. What could you achieve with faster, better decision making and more time with your people?

This isn't an IT project. AI should be as normal as a laptop: accessible, hands-on, and owned by everyone, not just "the techies."

Rethink "upskilling." You didn't 'learn the internet' in a single workshop. AI is the same. It is equal parts learning curve and behavioural shift. Remember the most human-centric skills: managing relationships, coaching, and giving feedback, are what makes people thrive with AI.

Treat AI like a teammate, not a tool. You wouldn't give a new hire a login and just walk away. Onboard your AI with ALL the relevant information, manage it continuously, review its outputs, give it feedback, and refine its role.

AI is incredibly smart but not clairvoyant. If you starve it of context, you will always get bland, generic results.

Lead from the front. This is a leadership project. Your job isn't to have all the answers; it's to get your people curious, experimenting, and sharing wins (and flops) as they go. If you wait until everything is perfect, you'll never start.

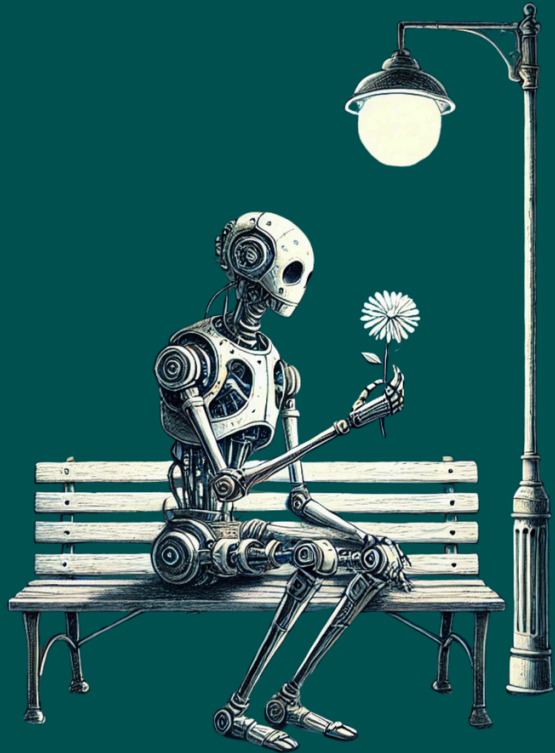
Have more of why you fell in love with this industry

The goal isn't to "do AI." The goal is to get time back for the things that made you fall in love with this industry: the quiet magic of a well-timed surprise, the five-minute chat that turns a visitor into a lifelong fan.

AI isn't here to replace the human touch in tourism and hospitality. It's here to give us the time to deliver it, again and again. **That future is already here.**

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The experience equation for business performance

Ask any business leader what drives performance and you'll hear familiar answers - **loyal customers, engaged employees, committed partners and a trusted brand.**

It's an intuitive formula, when people are motivated, connected and see value in the relationship, the business thrives.

Yet these elements are often measured in isolation. Customer feedback sits apart from employee surveys. Brand awareness is tracked separately from financial results. Partner sentiment is rarely captured at all. **The real picture only emerges when the pieces come together.**

That's the thinking behind **EX4**, a connected insights programme from **Get Smart** by Angus & Associates.

EX4 links the four experience lenses, **customer, employee, partner**, and **brand**, directly with business performance data.

The approach enables benchmarking by sector or size and more importantly, helps leaders identify the blueprint of a high-performing business.

Because when experiences align, when customers keep coming back, teams feel invested, partners grow alongside you, and the brand inspires trust, **performance isn't just the outcome, it's the natural result.**

Learn more at www.getsmartglobal.com/ex4



Beyond the stars , what public reviews don't tell you

The first thing many people check before making a purchase is the star rating. Five stars? Must be great. Three stars? Probably a risk. **Karen Connell**, *Research Director at **Angus & Associates*** unpacks what your public reviews aren't telling you.

The problem with stars alone

One of the biggest pitfalls is assuming review scores reflect the full customer experience. A single scathing review can undo years of good service in the eyes of a potential customer, even if most people are satisfied. At the other end of the spectrum, a wall of five-star reviews can also raise suspicion; research shows customers tend to trust a mix of positive and negative feedback more than perfection.

Recent Angus & Associates research also challenges the long held belief that people are more motivated to

complain than to compliment. Survey results show people are **more likely to post about especially positive experiences (47%) than negative ones (28%)**, though fewer than a third regularly post either way. Many also write reviews to support businesses they care about or to share something surprising.

The outtake? Reviews can give an **unreliably positive view** of customer experiences. Businesses that rely on stars alone risk missing pain points or friction that, if addressed, could make a real difference.

There are other limitations too. Context is often absent.

Was that one-star rating because the 'experience' - meal, activity, accommodation - was poor, or because the weather, traffic, other guests were awful? Fabricated reviews, whether damaging or glowing, cloud the picture. And outdated reviews can mislead: if the last comment was from three years ago, does it still reflect your standards? Probably not.

Getting the full picture

So how can businesses cut through the noise and get feedback they can actually use? It starts with taking charge of the process rather than leaving your reputation entirely in the hands of online reviewers. Collecting structured, ongoing feedback from real customers gives a much more reliable sense of what's working and where improvements are needed.

This ensures you hear from the majority, not just the minority of customers who post online.

Better still, the information is timely and actionable, so you can respond quickly and make changes that matter.

What this means for your business

Star ratings will always play a part in shaping customer choices, but they're only one piece of the puzzle. To really understand how your customers feel, and to keep improving, you need insights that go deeper than a number. By looking beyond the stars and investing in genuine customer experience research, you'll build stronger trust and create a business that consistently delivers in the real world.

*At Angus & Associates, we've begun exploring how and when people post public reviews, and how this differs across market segments. We'll be sharing more of these insights in future editions of **Inside Out**.*