

# Synergistic CX

The Customer Experience Magazine

UNDERSTANDING STANDOUT  
EXPERIENCES WITH

**DARREN  
DENINGTON**

**1** What Reviews Expose  
**Mapping How  
Guests Judge Bars**

**2** Leading the Bar Experience  
**Expert Perspective on  
What Drives Results**

**3** Closing the CX Gap  
**Turning Insights into  
Consistent Execution**

**April 2026**

## Moments Worth Sharing

The Details That Shape an Unforgettable Experience

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## MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

Dear readers,

In customer experience, the most significant risks rarely sit in strategy. They emerge in execution - the space between what companies believe they deliver and what customers actually experience.

This month's theme, Closing the CX Gap, focuses on that distance. Organizations continue to invest in design, technology, and transformation, yet a persistent disconnect often remains between intention and reality. This gap is usually invisible internally, but unmistakable to customers.

This edition features an online study using Aspect-Based Sentiment Analysis, examining close to 50,000 customer reviews in the bar industry worldwide. Experience does not break only at the margins; it weakens across the journey itself. Small inconsistencies, missed expectations, and operational gaps accumulate and shape perception far more than the intended design.

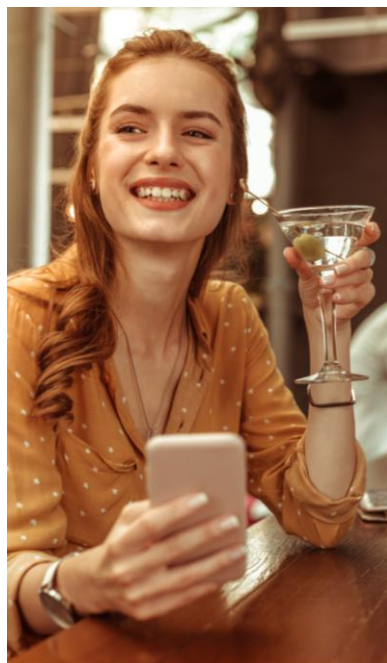
Our guest expert, Darren Denington, Founder of Service with Style, brings a pragmatic view on how organizations can move from assumption to understanding, using mystery shopping to identify where gaps truly exist.

In our Business Perspective section, Ferg's Sports Bar shows how strong leadership presence, different types of research, and accountability sustain consistency at scale, even in complex, high-volume environments.

The CX gap does not close on its own. It requires visibility. And visibility requires objective research. Without it, organizations risk managing perception instead of reality.

Erik Brooks  
VP of Research Metrics  
Together with the CX Channel Team

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# PREVIOUSLY ON SYNERGISTIC CX

The March edition focuses on the gas station sector, unpacking how everyday customer journeys unfold from initial intent to post-visit experience. Oleksiy Tsysar, CEO of 4Service Group, brings a sharper perspective on what truly drives performance – not more data, but clearer focus, deeper understanding of customer behavior, and disciplined execution. The issue reveals how small operational gaps shape perception, and how consistency, clarity, and well-defined standards transform routine visits into reliable, trust-building experiences that support long-term loyalty.



# KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM OLEKSIY TSYSAR

## **FROM FOCUS TO ACTION: TURNING FUNDAMENTALS INTO DIFFERENTIATORS**

*Effective experience management starts with focusing on what truly matters. Prioritizing the right metrics, aligning teams around clear objectives, and turning insights into action ensures measurable impact instead of fragmented efforts.*

## **BENEATH THE SURFACE: UNDERSTANDING THE HIDDEN DRIVERS OF CUSTOMER BEHAVIOR**

*Customer feedback alone does not reveal true behavior. Moving beyond stated opinions to uncover underlying drivers helps organizations focus on what genuinely influences decisions, ensuring actions target real impact rather than perceived priorities.*

## **CONSISTENCY AS COMMITMENT: DELIVERING WHAT WAS PROMISED – EVERY TIME**

*Consistency is built through reliable delivery, not isolated moments. Aligning strategy, processes, and execution ensures promises are met every time, strengthening trust and turning routine interactions into dependable, confidence-building experiences.*



OLEKSIY TSYSAR, CEO of 4Service Group



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# PODCAST REACTIONS FROM THE CX CHANNEL TEAM

Our March edition, focused on the gas station industry, examined how customer experience is shaped in high-frequency, routine-driven environments where consistency is critical. The analysis revealed how sentiment often weakens early in the journey, even before arrival, highlighting the growing influence of digital touchpoints and setting expectations. Oleksiy Tsysar emphasized the role of structured research in uncovering what truly drives customer perception, while the edition reinforced that People, Product, and Place remain central to experience quality. Ultimately, it showed that in operationally intensive sectors, disciplined execution of fundamentals, supported by objective measurement, is what sustains trust and drives repeat behavior.



## EMIL TSANKOV

*“Oleksiy reframes a critical leadership reality: in high-frequency environments, customer experience is defined by execution and discipline. What is often treated as operational detail is, in fact, where customer perception is formed. Without objective measurement of fundamentals, consistency cannot be managed at scale.”*

CEO & Co-founder  
Research Metrics



## CRISTIANI OLIVEIRA

*“Oleksiy brings precision to a common blind spot in customer experience: the gap is not in design, but in delivery. His focus on fundamentals elevates them from basic operations to strategic drivers of trust. This is where CX research becomes essential, by making inconsistency visible and enabling leaders to act with clarity.”*

CX Strategy Ambassador  
Research Metrics

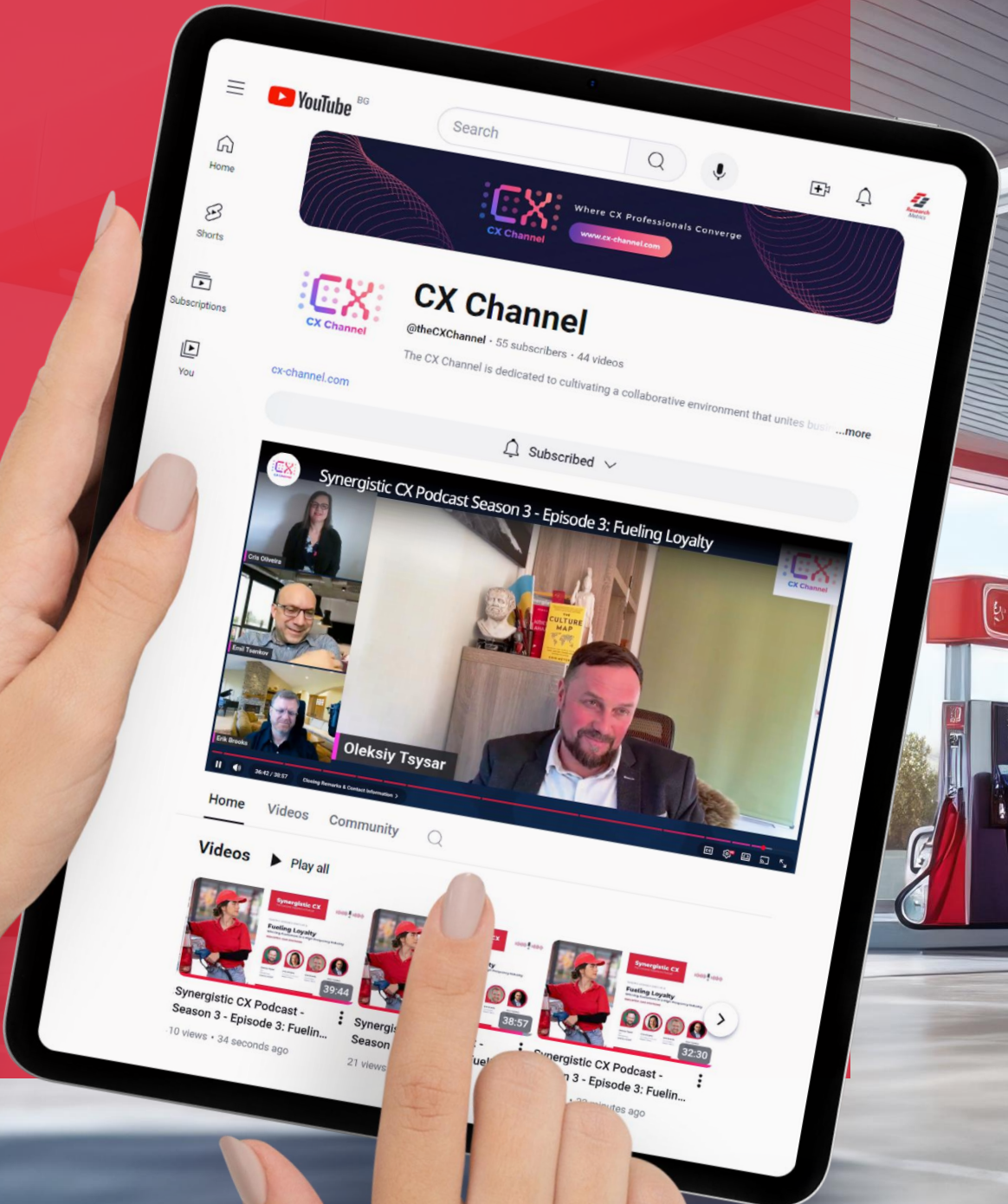


## ERIK BROOKS

*“Oleksiy highlights a structural challenge many organizations underestimate: customers do not evaluate intent, they evaluate reliability. In routine-driven industries, consistency is the experience. Without visibility into actual performance, organizations risk investing in areas that do not influence loyalty or business outcomes.”*

Vice President  
Research Metrics

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INDUSTRY SPOTLIGHT:

# Moments Worth Sharing

The Details That Shape an Unforgettable Experience



# INTRODUCTION

Bars operate in a space where choice is primarily emotional and driven by mood, making consistency one of the biggest challenges. Unlike necessity-based industries, guests walk in with expectations shaped by atmosphere, energy, and social context. A single weak element – slow service, inattentive staff, or a flat ambience – can quickly break the rhythm of the night and impact the overall perception.

The experience is highly dynamic and unfolds in real time. Peaks in demand, crowd density, and shifting energy levels create pressure on operations, where speed and coordination must align seamlessly with personal interaction. Maintaining flow – from ordering to serving to payment – becomes critical, as any friction is immediately felt and amplified in a social setting.

At the same time, bars hold a unique advantage: they are built around shared moments. When executed well, they create a sense of belonging, connection, and enjoyment that goes beyond the product itself. A clear and distinctive identity plays a crucial role in this – one that people recognize, relate to, and feel as their personal space and concept. Music, lighting, staff presence, and crowd composition all contribute to shaping a place people choose not just to visit, but to return to.

This creates a clear opportunity. By focusing on the subtle details that define how a night unfolds – timing, atmosphere, interaction, and ease – bars can transform occasional visits into habitual choices. Those that master this balance are not just serving drinks, but becoming the setting where people want to be, again and again.

This edition sets out to uncover actionable insights that help bars create stronger, more engaging experiences. The focus is on identifying the elements that shape how people feel the moment – from the first impression to the final round – and how atmosphere, flow, and interaction come together to influence choice, time spent, and the desire to return. In this issue, we will:

- **Decode Social Influence**  
Examine how online reviews, ratings, and social media feedback shape perception, influence where people choose to go and impact a bar's ability to attract its crowd .
- **Shape Interaction Dynamics**  
Focus on how each interaction unfolds – from the first welcome to the final payment, and how staff energy, responsiveness, and attitude influence the pace, mood, and overall flow of the night.
- **Refine the Marketing Mix**  
Analyze the 7Ps : refining the offer and drink selection, aligning pricing, ensuring accessible location and layout, creating compelling promotions, empowering staff, streamlining service processes, and delivering a cohesive atmosphere.
- **Orchestrate the Bar Journey**  
Map the full visit – from planning and arrival to ordering, socializing, and leaving – to remove friction, maintain flow, and create a seamless, enjoyable experience.
- **Unlock Growth Opportunities**  
Examine how evolving bar concepts, new formats, and more personalized, socially driven approaches are reshaping the industry - helping venues attract the right crowd and become places people choose for their celebration moments.

# INDUSTRY STUDY SAMPLE

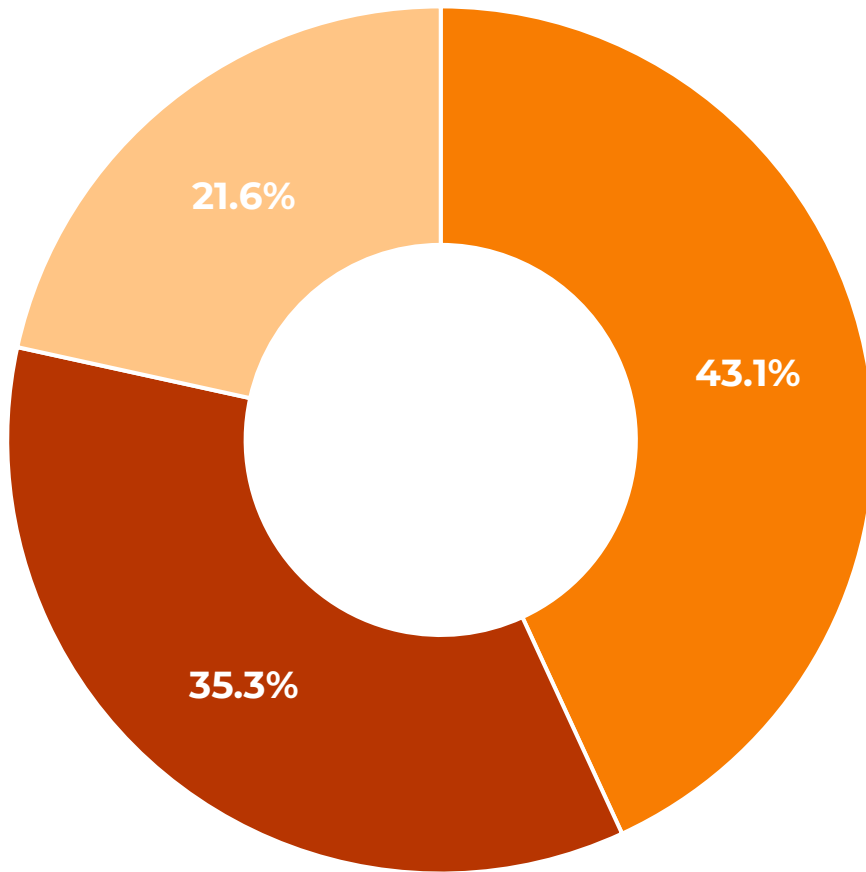
The sample represents the **selection of places** included in the study. Its key **parameters** are:

- Number of Places **2147**
- Confidence Level **99.50%**
- Margin of Error **2.50%**
- Number of Reviews **49,249**

Our sample's worldwide geographic structure is separated into three primary zones: the Americas, APAC (Asia-Pacific), and EMEA (Europe, the Middle East, and Africa). Each zone is further broken down into specific regions, as visualized here.

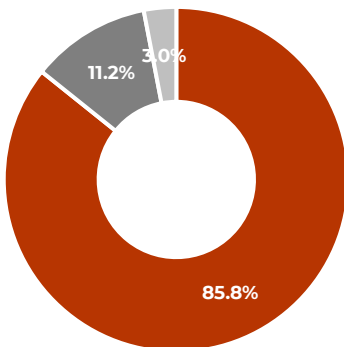
The global sample is predominantly driven by the Americas, which account for the largest share at 43.1%, followed by a solid contribution from EMEA at 35.3%, while APAC remains comparatively smaller, representing 21.6% of the dataset.

# GLOBAL



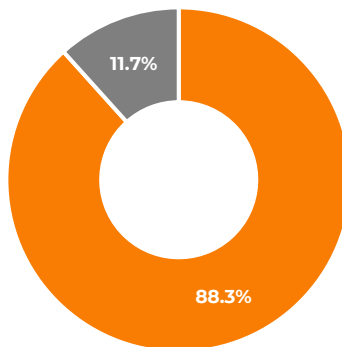
EMEA AMERICAS APAC

## EMEA



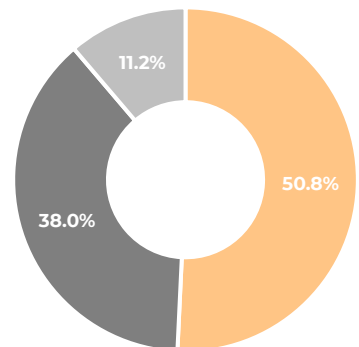
Europe  
Africa  
Middle East

## AMERICAS



North America  
Latin America

## APAC



East Asia  
Central and South Asia  
Oceania

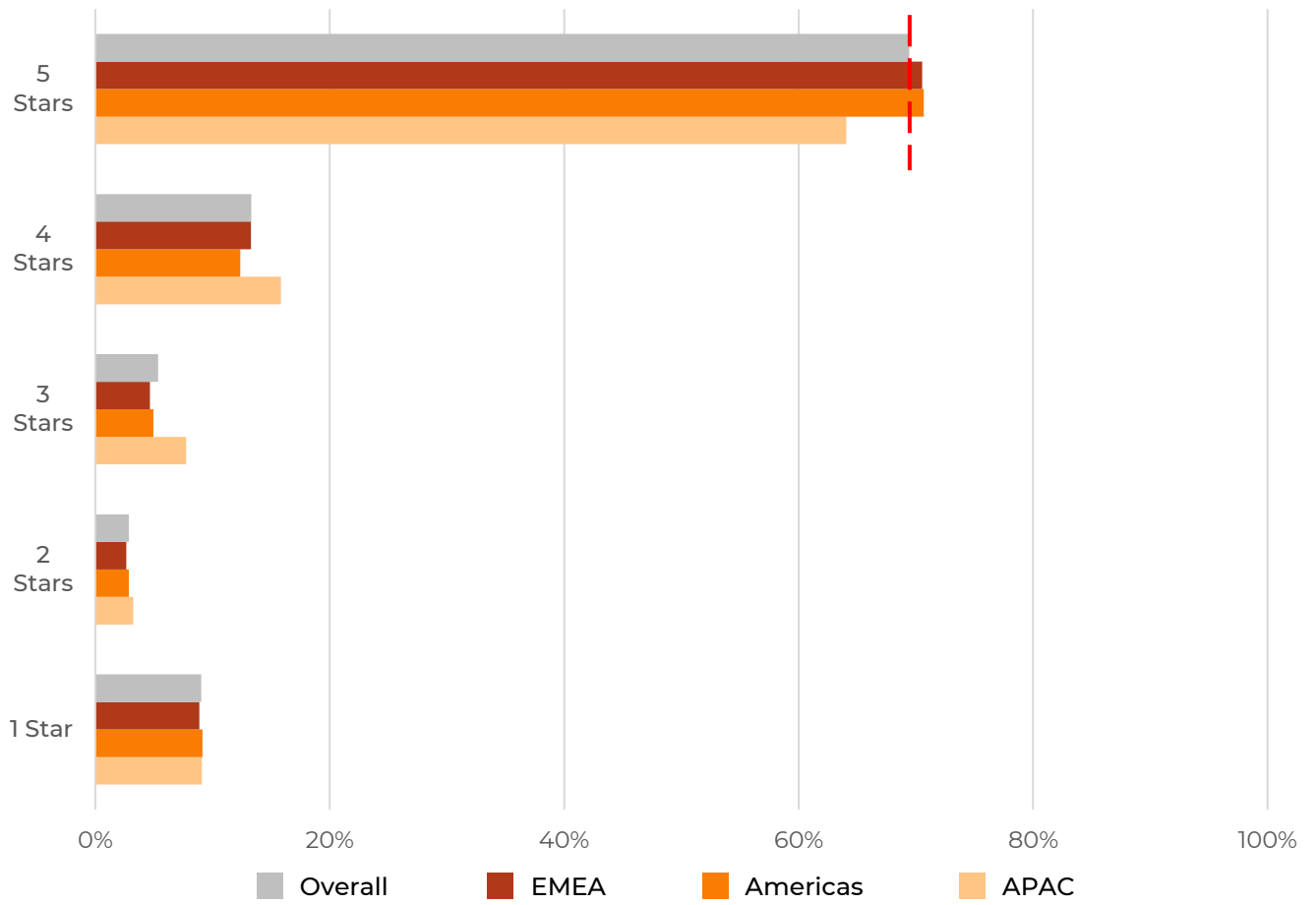
# STAR RATINGS

Ratings are heavily concentrated at the top end, with **five-star reviews accounting for nearly 70%** globally, clearly dominating the distribution. Mid-range scores (two to four stars) remain relatively contained, while **one-star feedback represents a smaller but consistent share**, pointing to generally strong satisfaction levels across regions.

Regional averages show a relatively close performance across markets, with EMEA slightly ahead at 4.34, followed closely by the Americas at 4.33 and APAC at 4.23, all aligning around a solid global average of 4.31.

*"Star ratings" in online reviews and ratings are a system that allows customers to evaluate a product, service, or business on a scale, typically from one to five stars. Each star represents a level of satisfaction, with one star being the lowest (very dissatisfied) and five stars being the highest (very satisfied).*

## STAR RATINGS DISTRIBUTION



## AVERAGE STAR RATING



# CRITICAL REVIEW RESPONSE TIME (CRRT)

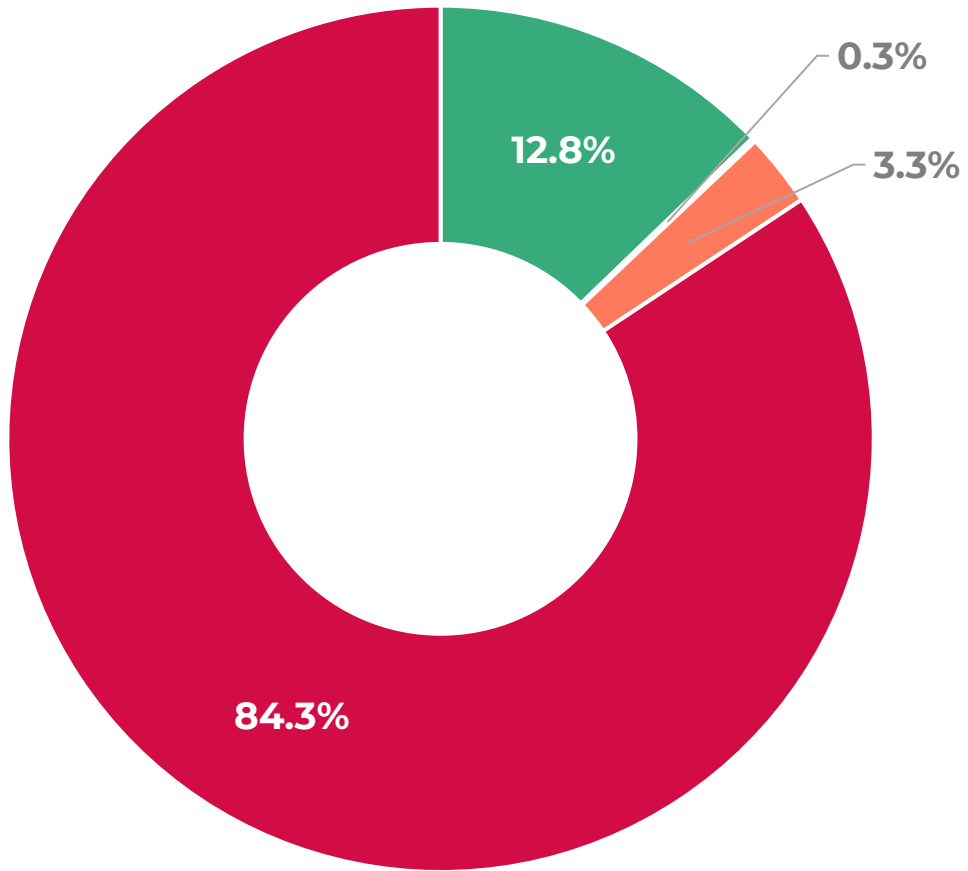
Follow-up on critical feedback remains a clear weak point, with the vast majority of negative reviews left without a response. **Globally, over 84%** fall into the **critical (unanswered)** category, while only a small share is addressed promptly, with excellent responses reaching just 12.8%. This pattern is consistent across regions, with EMEA and APAC exceeding 85% in unanswered cases, and the Americas performing slightly better but still above 83%. Overall, the results highlight a **significant gap in timely engagement** and a need for more proactive response management.

The **Critical Review Response Time (CRRT)** KPI measures how quickly a business responds to critical reviews – those with a rating of **1 or 2 stars**. This KPI is key in customer relationship management, as it reflects the business's dedication to addressing customer complaints and issues promptly.

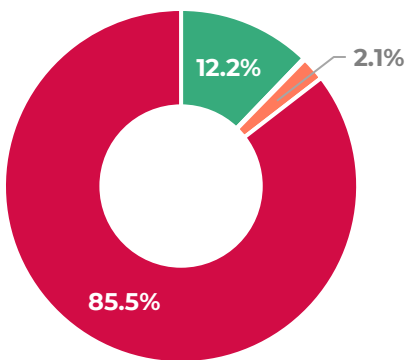
CRRT KPI bands:

- **Excellent**: within 24 hours
- **Fair**: within 72 hours
- **Attention**: more than 72 hours
- **Critical: Not Responded**

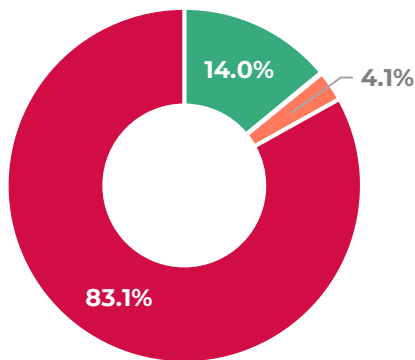
# GLOBAL



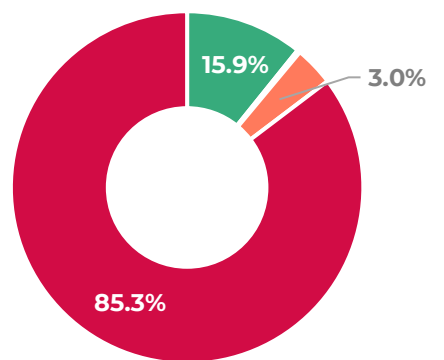
## EMEA



## AMERICAS



## APAC



■ Excellent   ■ Fair   ■ Attention   ■ Critical

# REVIEWS WITH COMMENTS VS RATING-ONLY

Reviews that include written feedback receive slightly more attention, yet **overall responsiveness remains critically low**. Globally, the vast majority of these cases still go unanswered, with response rates staying well below meaningful levels, while rating-only reviews show even weaker engagement. Across regions, the pattern holds consistently – EMEA and APAC exceed 85% in unanswered cases, with the Americas performing marginally better but still leaving most feedback without follow-up. The results shows that **even more detailed customer input is not enough to drive consistent response behavior**.

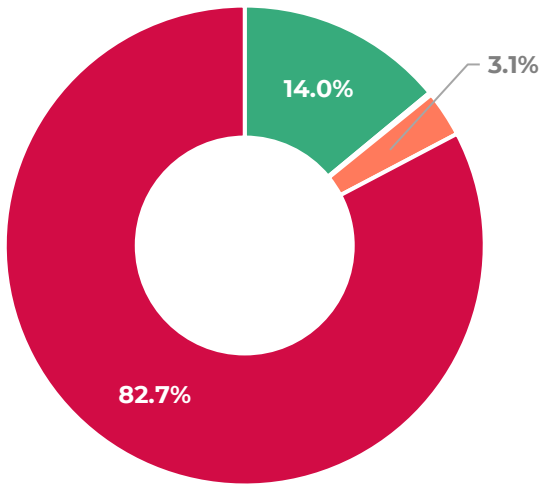
**Reviews with Comments:** These are the reviews where customers provide written feedback along with their rating. These provide context and a chance to address specific concerns.

**Rating-only Reviews:** These are reviews where the customer only leaves a star rating without any additional comments or details.

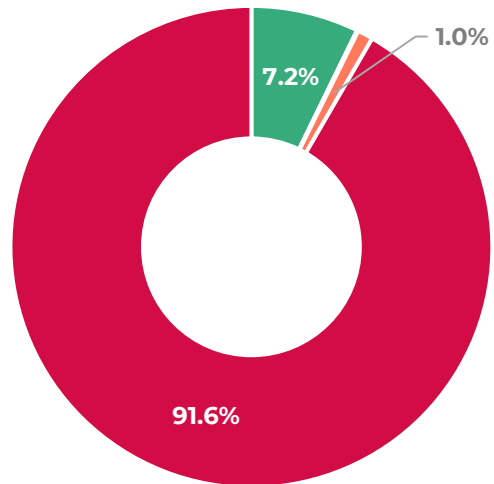
CRRT KPI bands:

- **Excellent:** within 24 hours
- **Fair:** within 72 hours
- **Attention:** more than 72 hours
- **Critical: Not Responded**

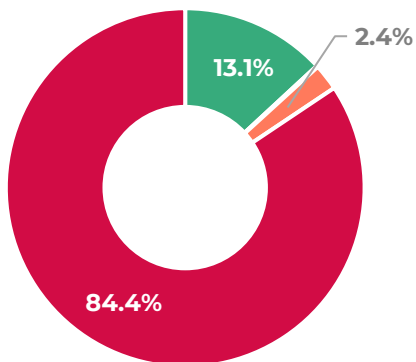
CRRT: REVIEWS WITH COMMENTS



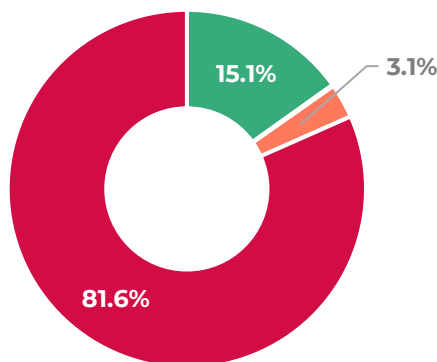
CRRT: REVIEWS WITH RATING-ONLY



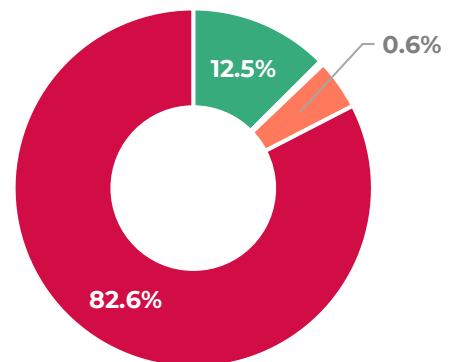
EMEA



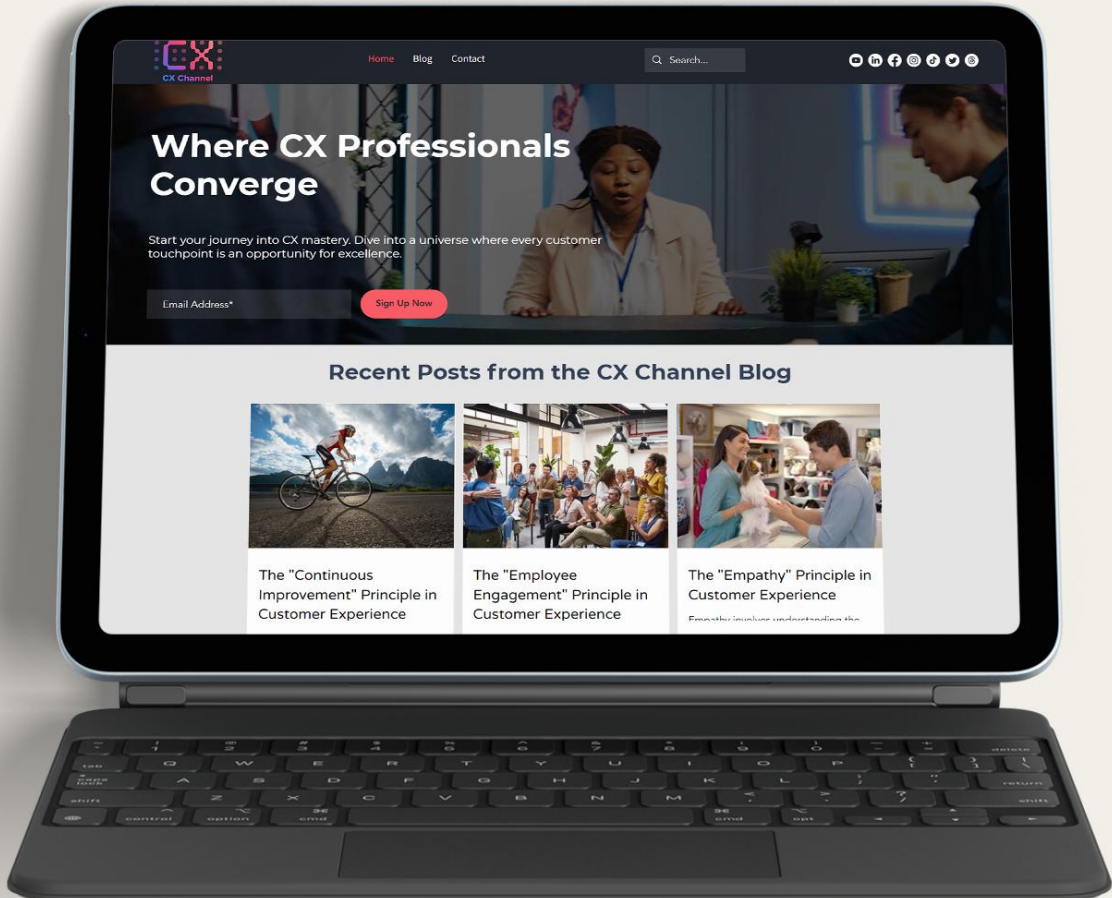
AMERICAS



APAC



■ Excellent    
 ■ Fair    
 ■ Attention    
 ■ Critical



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## Bars: **Marketing Mix**

Bars don't compete only on what they serve, but on how everything comes together in the moment. The 7Ps framework offers a structured way to unpack this complexity and understand what shapes perception – from the first impression to the lasting feeling people take with them when they leave.

In this section, we explore how each element contributes to that overall picture. The setting defines the mood, the offer shapes expectations, and the people behind the bar bring it all to life. Pricing, promotions, and processes influence how smoothly everything unfolds, while the physical details reinforce the concept. When these elements work in sync, they create places people don't just visit – they choose to come back.

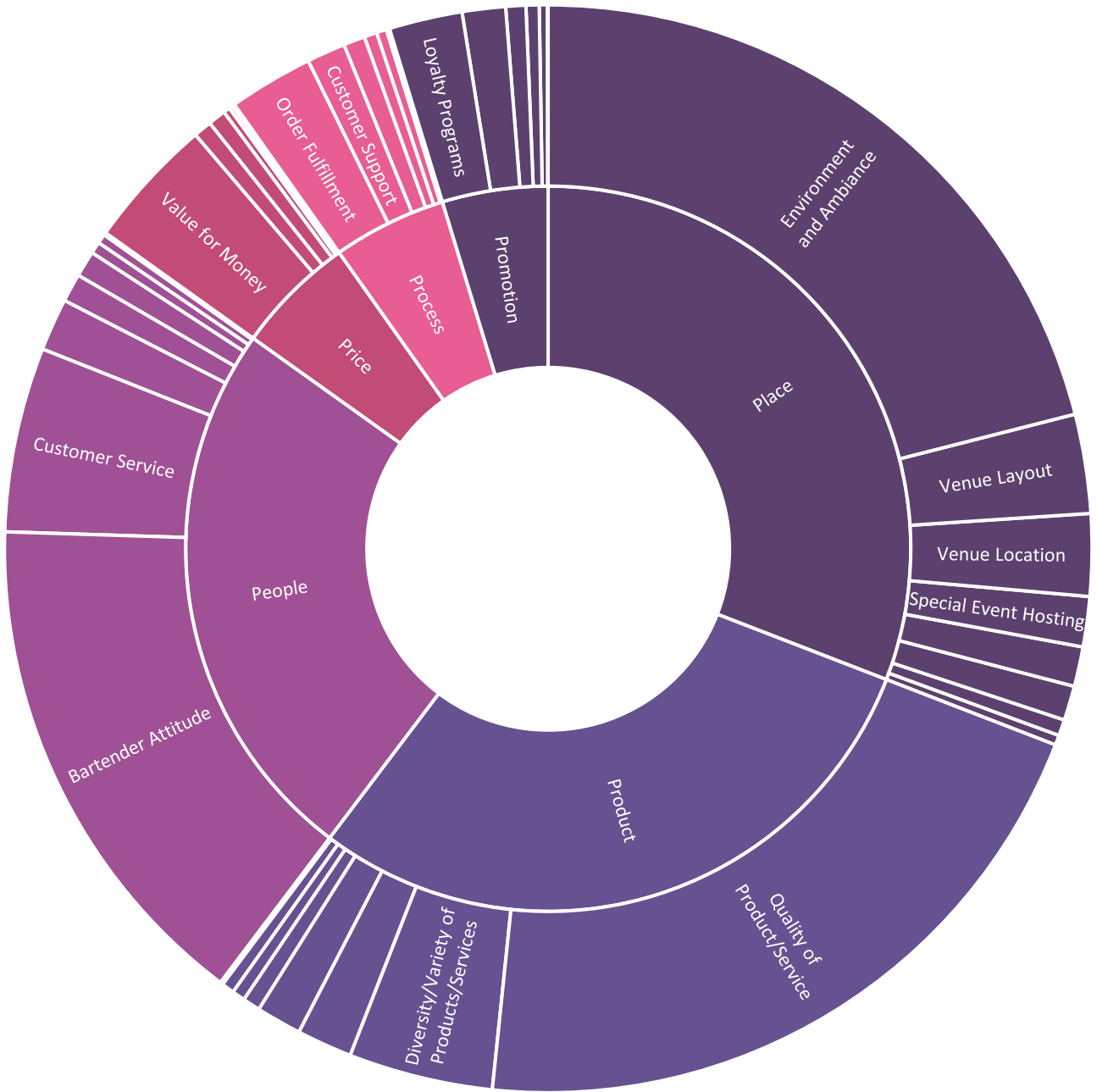
# MARKETING MIX ELEMENTS

## What Do Customers Talk [Care] About?

Customer feedback highlights a clear concentration around three core elements – **Place (31%)**, **Product (29%)**, and **People (25%)**, which **together** account for over **85%** of all mentions. This distribution shows that the bar experience is shaped primarily by **the setting, the products offered, and the human interaction**, while the remaining elements contribute in a more supportive and complementary way to the overall perception.

Looking closer, atmosphere and ambience stand out as the most dominant drivers, followed by the quality and variety of the offerings, and the attitude and presence of staff. These factors collectively define how a place feels and how smoothly the visit unfolds. Together, they shape whether a bar becomes just another option or a place people consciously choose for their gatherings.

*The 7P Marketing Mix is an extended version of the traditional 4P concept. It includes the following seven elements: Product, Price, Place, Promotion, People, Process, and Physical Evidence. This model provides a more comprehensive framework for businesses to evaluate and improve their marketing strategies.*



Explore the top 5 features within each marketing mix element on the next page. ▶

# MARKETING MIX ELEMENTS AND FEATURES

## Which Details Do Customers Prioritize?

Customer feedback clearly concentrates around the atmosphere and the core elements that define how a bar feels. **Environment and Ambiance (21.0%)** and **Quality of Product/Service (20.8%)** stand out as the strongest drivers, closely followed by **Bartender Attitude (15.2%)**. Guests consistently emphasize the importance of the right mood, high-quality drinks, and engaging, attentive staff as the foundation of a great visit.

At the center of the bar setting is the atmosphere itself – music, lighting, and overall energy shape the first impression and influence how long people stay. This is reinforced by the product, where quality and variety set expectations and support different preferences. Equally important is the human element: bartender attitude and interaction bring personality to the space, turning service into a key part of the overall feel.

Supporting these core drivers, elements such as venue layout and perceived value contribute to how smoothly everything comes together. When the setting feels right, the offer meets expectations, and the people behind the bar create a positive connection, the result is a place that stands out and remains top of mind when choosing where to go.

MARKETING MIX ELEMENT	MARKETING MIX ELEMENT FEATURE	% OF THE MARKETING MIX	
Place	▶ Environment and Ambiance	21.02%	90.3% of Place
	Venue Layout	2.95%	
	Venue Location	2.43%	
	Special Event Hosting	1.49%	
	Other	2.98%	
Product	▶ Quality of Product/Service	20.77%	95.3% of Product
	▶ Diversity/Variety of Products/Services	4.29%	
	Product/Service Availability	1.65%	
	Artisanal Drink Selection	1.35%	
	Other	1.38%	
People	▶ Bartender Attitude	15.19%	94.0% of People
	▶ Customer Service	5.49%	
	Bartender Expertise and Knowledge	1.57%	
	Bartender Availability	0.84%	
	Other	1.48%	
Price	Value for Money	3.90%	96.5% of Price
	Price	0.54%	
	Clear Pricing	0.53%	
	Happy Hour Specials	0.19%	
	Other	0.19%	
Process	Order Fulfillment	2.51%	92.2% of Process
	Customer Support	1.14%	
	Checkout Process	0.64%	
	Hygiene Protocols	0.38%	
	Other	0.40%	
Promotion	Loyalty Programs	2.18%	94.4% of Promotion
	Community Engagement	1.29%	
	In-Venue Promotions	0.59%	
	Influencer Engagement	0.39%	
	Other	0.26%	

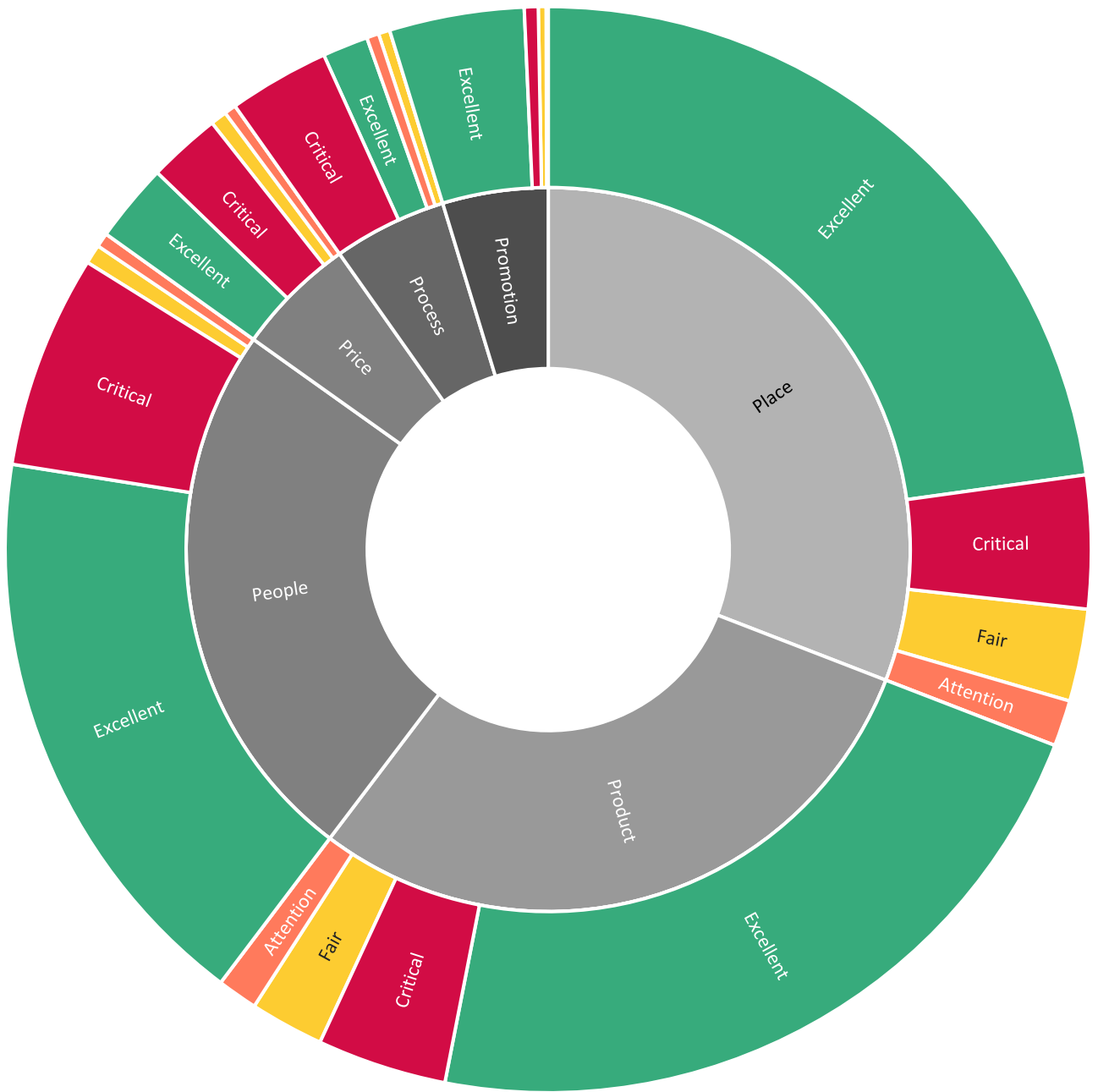
# MARKETING MIX EXPERIENCES

## Understanding Customer Sentiments, Thoughts, and Feelings

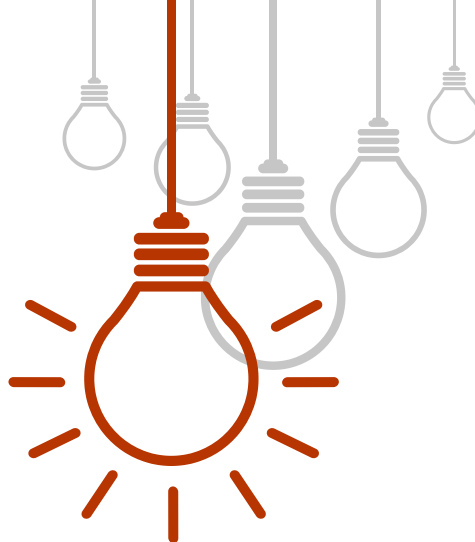
Customer sentiment in bars concentrates around the core elements that shape how a place is perceived. While **Place, Product,** and **People** generate the majority of feedback, they also account for **over 70% of all critical comments**, showing that the most influential drivers are also the most exposed when expectations are not met. At the same time, **Process (59%)** and **Price (40%)** stand out with the highest share of negative sentiment, pointing to clear friction points.

Behind these results is a clear pattern: guests are highly sensitive to anything that disrupts the rhythm. Feedback on Process reflects delays in ordering, serving, and payment, while Price-related concerns highlight gaps between expectations and perceived value. Even when atmosphere and product are strong, these disruptions can quickly influence the overall perception.

At the same time, Place and Product continue to generate a strong share of positive sentiment, driven by atmosphere and quality, while People remains a defining factor through staff attitude and interaction. Addressing the points of friction while strengthening these core elements allows venues to reduce inconsistencies and deliver a more reliable overall performance.



# KEY TAKEAWAYS



Bar customer feedback reveals a clear pattern: what creates the strongest impressions also carries the highest expectations. Atmosphere, product quality, and staff interaction define the visit, while execution and follow-up gaps quickly disrupt the overall perception.



### **Close the Response Gap:**

Over 84% of critical reviews receive no response at all, exposing a major breakdown in follow-up. Across all regions, unresolved feedback remains the norm rather than the exception. Addressing this gap is essential to protect brand perception.



### **Focus on What Shapes the Visit:**

Customer feedback concentrates heavily around Place (31%), Product (29%), and People (25%), which together account for over 85% of all mentions. The setting, the drinks, and the human interaction form the core of how guests evaluate their bar experience.



### **Strengthen Core Experience:**

Place, Product, and People attract the most attention but also carry negative sentiment – over 70% of all negative feedback. Inconsistencies in atmosphere, drink quality, or staff attitude quickly shift perception, requiring consistent execution beyond first impressions.



### **Fix the Friction Points:**

Process (59%) and Price (40%) carry the highest share of negative sentiment, highlighting breakdowns in ordering, serving, and payment, as well as gaps between cost and perceived value. Removing these frictions is critical to maintaining a smooth and satisfying visit.

By addressing feedback more actively, delivering consistency in the core elements, and reducing operational and pricing friction, bars can turn key pressure points into stronger satisfaction and repeat visits.

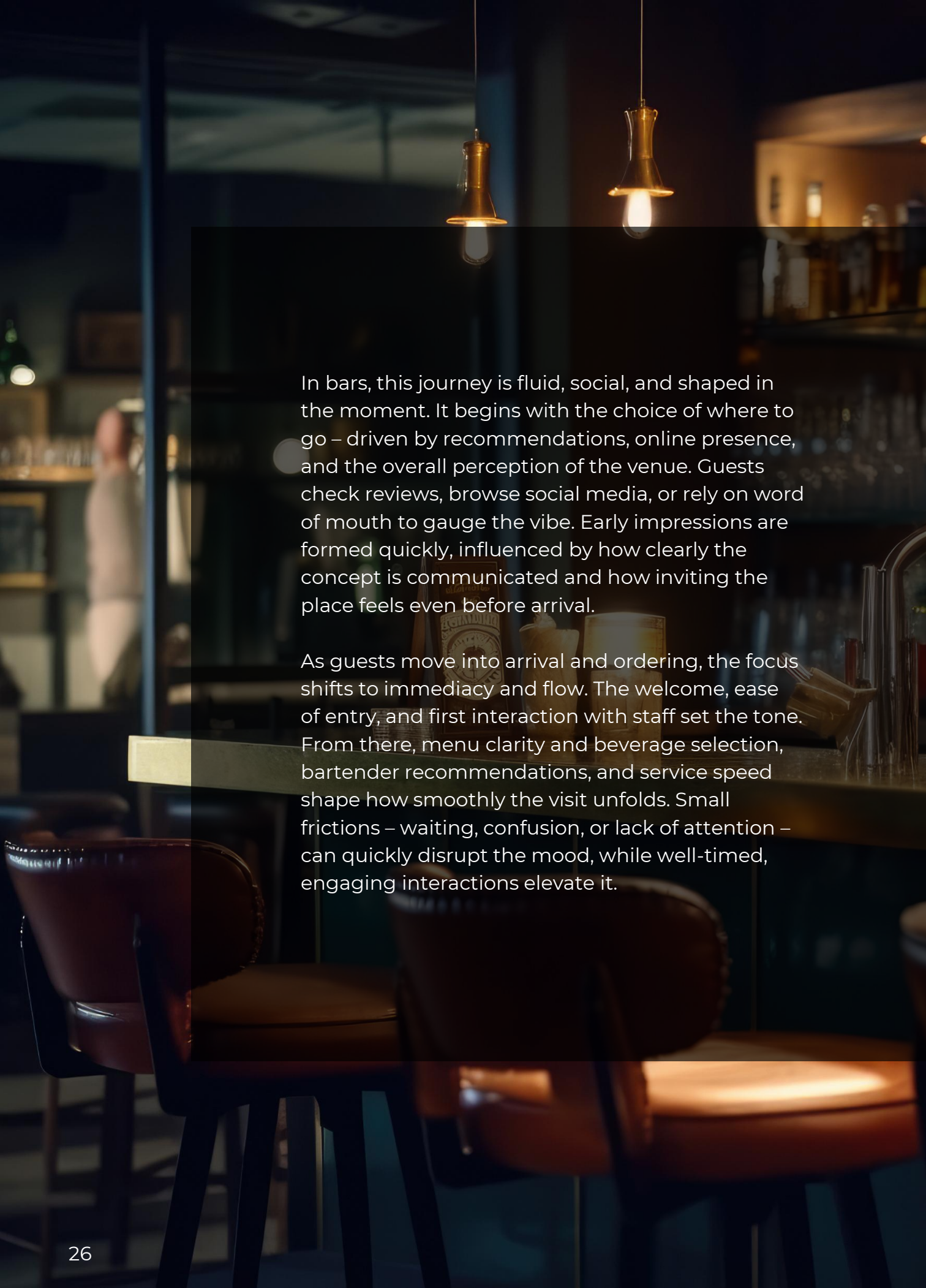


## Bars:

# Customer Journey

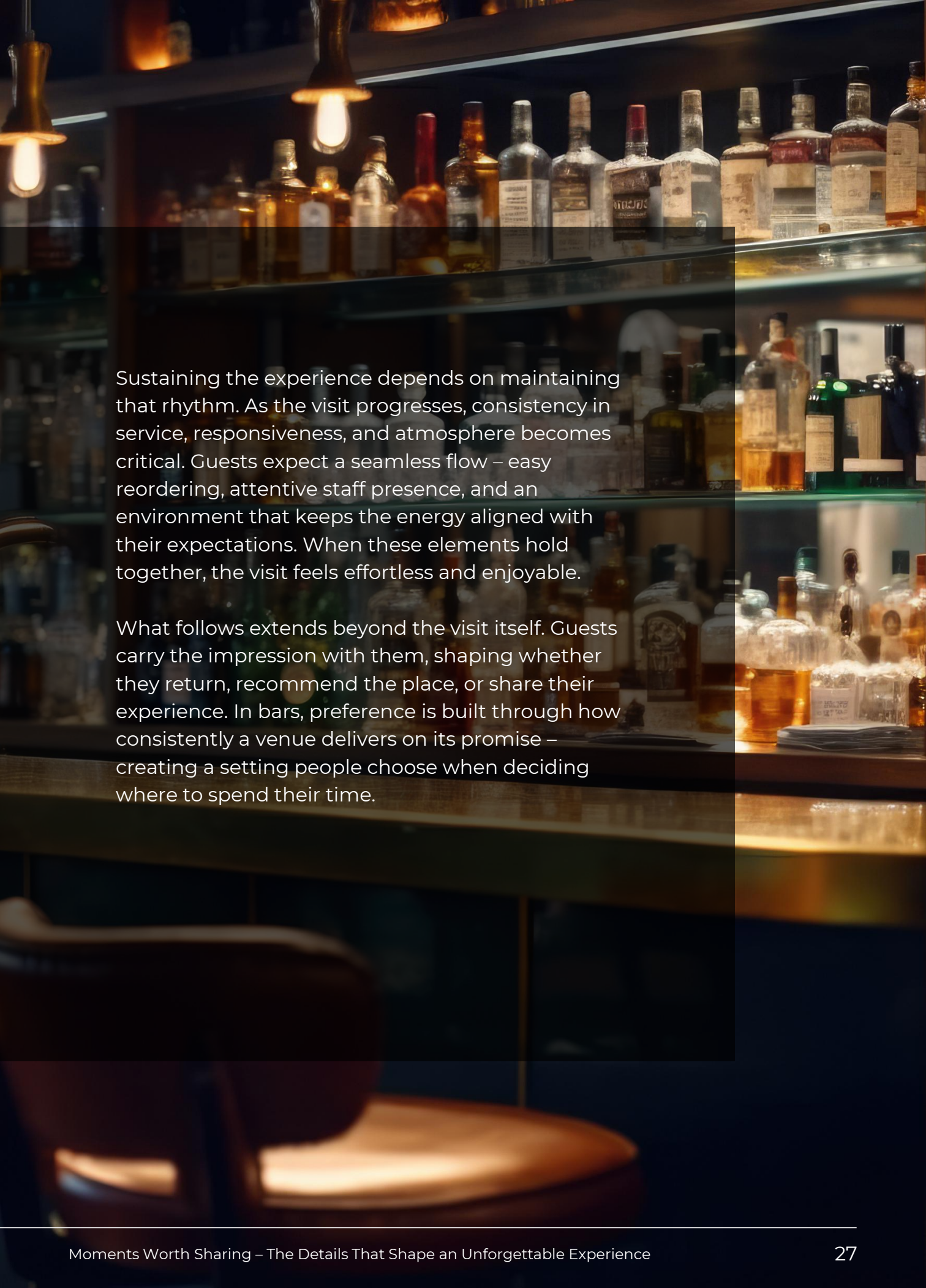
Choosing a bar is rarely a purely rational decision – it is shaped by mood, context, and the desire to be somewhere that feels right. The journey unfolds across a sequence of moments, as each of them, whether subtle or visible, contributes to how the place is perceived and remembered.

This section brings together the key stages of that journey – from initial awareness and consideration to the in-venue experience and what follows after. Along the way, guests move through a series of touchpoints that influence energy, ease, and connection, giving bars multiple opportunities to shape how people feel, how long they stay, and how likely they are to choose the same place again.



In bars, this journey is fluid, social, and shaped in the moment. It begins with the choice of where to go – driven by recommendations, online presence, and the overall perception of the venue. Guests check reviews, browse social media, or rely on word of mouth to gauge the vibe. Early impressions are formed quickly, influenced by how clearly the concept is communicated and how inviting the place feels even before arrival.

As guests move into arrival and ordering, the focus shifts to immediacy and flow. The welcome, ease of entry, and first interaction with staff set the tone. From there, menu clarity and beverage selection, bartender recommendations, and service speed shape how smoothly the visit unfolds. Small frictions – waiting, confusion, or lack of attention – can quickly disrupt the mood, while well-timed, engaging interactions elevate it.

A photograph of a bar with shelves of liquor bottles and warm lighting. The bottles are arranged on shelves, and the lighting is warm and ambient. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

Sustaining the experience depends on maintaining that rhythm. As the visit progresses, consistency in service, responsiveness, and atmosphere becomes critical. Guests expect a seamless flow – easy reordering, attentive staff presence, and an environment that keeps the energy aligned with their expectations. When these elements hold together, the visit feels effortless and enjoyable.

What follows extends beyond the visit itself. Guests carry the impression with them, shaping whether they return, recommend the place, or share their experience. In bars, preference is built through how consistently a venue delivers on its promise – creating a setting people choose when deciding where to spend their time.

# CUSTOMER JOURNEY MAP: BARS

In this analysis, we examine a typical **5-stage** Customer Journey Map that includes **11 distinct steps** reflecting the evolution of the customer experience.

**The Customer Journey** refers to the various stages a customer goes through while interacting with a company or brand – from the initial contact to the eventual purchase, and beyond.

**The Customer Journey Map** is a visual diagram that shows the Customer Journey. The Customer Journey Map helps businesses understand and analyze their customers' experiences, identify pain points, uncover opportunities for improvement and ultimately enhance the overall customer experience.

## Awareness

Becomes aware of a brand, product, or service

## Consideration

Researches and evaluates potential solutions

## Conversion

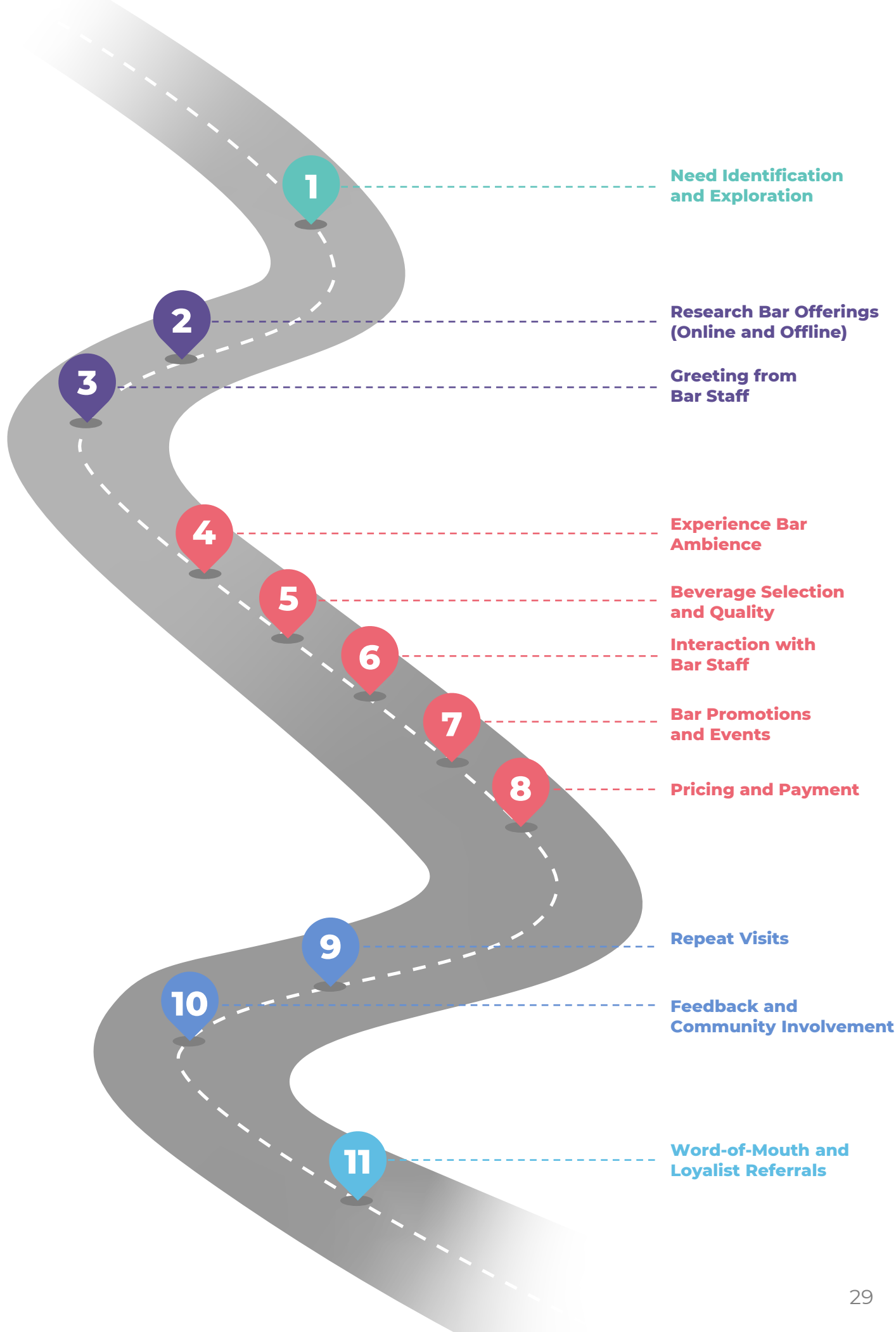
Chooses a product or service and makes a purchase

## Retention

Delivery, use, additional purchases of product or service

## Advocacy

Advocate, shares the positive experience with others



# CUSTOMER JOURNEY MAP: BARS





































The bar journey unfolds across five key stages that reflect how people move from intention to preference:

- **Awareness**
- **Consideration**
- **Conversion**
- **Retention**
- **Advocacy**

Each stage represents a different phase of engagement – starting with the initial idea of going out, moving through selection and the in-venue experience, and extending into repeat visits and recommendations shared with others.

Along the way, guests encounter a series of touchpoints that shape how the place is perceived: browsing reviews and social media, arriving and settling in, interacting with staff, ordering and reordering, and engaging with the overall atmosphere.

These moments give bars the opportunity to shape perception in real time – through clarity, pace, interaction, and environment. When each step feels smooth and aligned, the result is a place that stands out, feels right, and remains a preferred choice when deciding where to go.

Awareness	<p><b>Need Identification and Exploration</b></p> <p>Recognize the desire for socialization or relaxation, research local bars</p>	 Word of mouth	 Online reviews	 Social media	<p>Decide on the best bar for an outing</p>	 CSAT
	<p><b>Research Bar Offerings (Online and Offline)</b></p> <p>Visit the bar or check offerings online</p>	 Bar visit	 Website	 Social media	<p>Compare the atmosphere, drink selection, and pricing</p>	 CES
Consideration	<p><b>Greeting from Bar Staff</b></p> <p>Be greeted and assisted by bar staff</p>	 Bar entrance	 Staff interaction		<p>Feel welcomed and informed about specials</p>	 CES
	<p><b>Experience Bar Ambience</b></p> <p>Absorb the bar's atmosphere and design</p>	 Music	 Lighting	 Decor	<p>Enjoy a lively, fun environment</p>	 CSAT
Conversion	<p><b>Beverage Selection and Quality</b></p> <p>Review the menu, order drinks</p>	 Menu	 Bartender interaction		<p>Choose drinks that appeal to their taste</p>	 CSAT
	<p><b>Interaction with Bar Staff</b></p> <p>Engage with staff to receive recommendations</p>	 Bartender and server interaction			<p>Receive personalized service, drink suggestions</p>	 CSAT
	<p><b>Bar Promotions and Events</b></p> <p>Participate in happy hours, themed nights, or events</p>	 Event flyers	 Announcements		<p>Enjoy unique experiences, get value for money</p>	 CES
	<p><b>Pricing and Payment</b></p> <p>Complete the purchase of drinks</p>	 POS system	 Payment counter		<p>Smooth payment experience</p>	 CES
	<p><b>Repeat Visits</b></p> <p>Return for more visits, Join loyalty program</p>	 Loyalty program	 Email communication		<p>Continue to enjoy the bar's offerings</p>	 CSAT
Retention	<p><b>Feedback and Community Involvement</b></p> <p>Provide feedback on their experience, engage in loyalty programs</p>	 Feedback forms	 Surveys	 Social media	<p>Share their opinions, influence improvements, feel part of the bar's community</p>	 CSAT
	<p><b>Word of Mouth and Loyalist Referrals</b></p> <p>Recommend the bar to others, share experiences</p>	 Social media	 Referral program		<p>Advocate for the bar, influence friends</p>	 NPS

# CUSTOMER JOURNEY STAGES

## Awareness

The Awareness stage begins when customers decide to go out – to relax, socialize, celebrate, or explore new bar experiences.

## Consideration

In the Consideration stage, customers narrow down options based on their preferences, occasion, and expectations for the experience.

## Conversion

The Conversion stage is where intent turns into action, as customers move from selecting a bar to fully engaging in the experience. From arrival to ordering and enjoying their time, this phase confirms whether expectations set earlier align with reality. First impressions, ease of entry, and the overall atmosphere play a critical role in shaping confidence, while smooth service and a welcoming environment transform choice into a satisfying experience.

## Retention

The Attention stage reflects how the experience holds up after the visit, shaping whether customers remain interested and willing to return. Satisfaction, consistency, and memorability influence how the bar stays top of mind.

## Advocacy

Advocacy emerges when the experience is strong enough to be shared, turning customers into promoters of the venue.

Discovery happens through search, social media, and recommendations, where atmosphere, location, and overall vibe shape initial interest.

They review menus, photos, pricing, and customer feedback, comparing ambiance, drink selection, crowd, and service quality before making a choice.

During this stage, customers interact directly with staff, menus, and the environment, making real-time judgments about service quality and value. They evaluate waiting times, staff attitude, drink quality, and overall ambiance, while navigating ordering and payment processes. Clear communication, efficient service, and consistency across touchpoints reduce friction and enhance enjoyment. When execution is seamless, the experience feels effortless and engaging, reinforcing the decision and increasing the likelihood of repeat visits.

Customers revisit their experience through reflection, comparing it to expectations and alternatives. Follow-up communication, loyalty triggers, and consistent delivery encourage repeat visits and strengthen ongoing engagement.

Through reviews, social media, and recommendations, customers influence others by highlighting atmosphere, service, and overall experience, extending the bar's reach beyond the visit itself.

## SUMMARY

The bar journey unfolds as a fluid, experience-driven path, guiding customers from the initial decision to go out to the lasting impression they carry after leaving. From discovery and selection to arrival, ordering, and payment, each stage shapes how the venue is perceived in real time. Early expectations are set through online presence and reputation, while the in-venue experience confirms whether those expectations are met.

Beyond the visit itself, the experience is defined by atmosphere, service flow, and consistency. Music, lighting, staff interaction, and drink quality combine to create a cohesive environment, while smooth ordering and transparent pricing ensure ease and comfort. Small details, from the welcome to the final interaction, influence how seamless and enjoyable the experience feels.

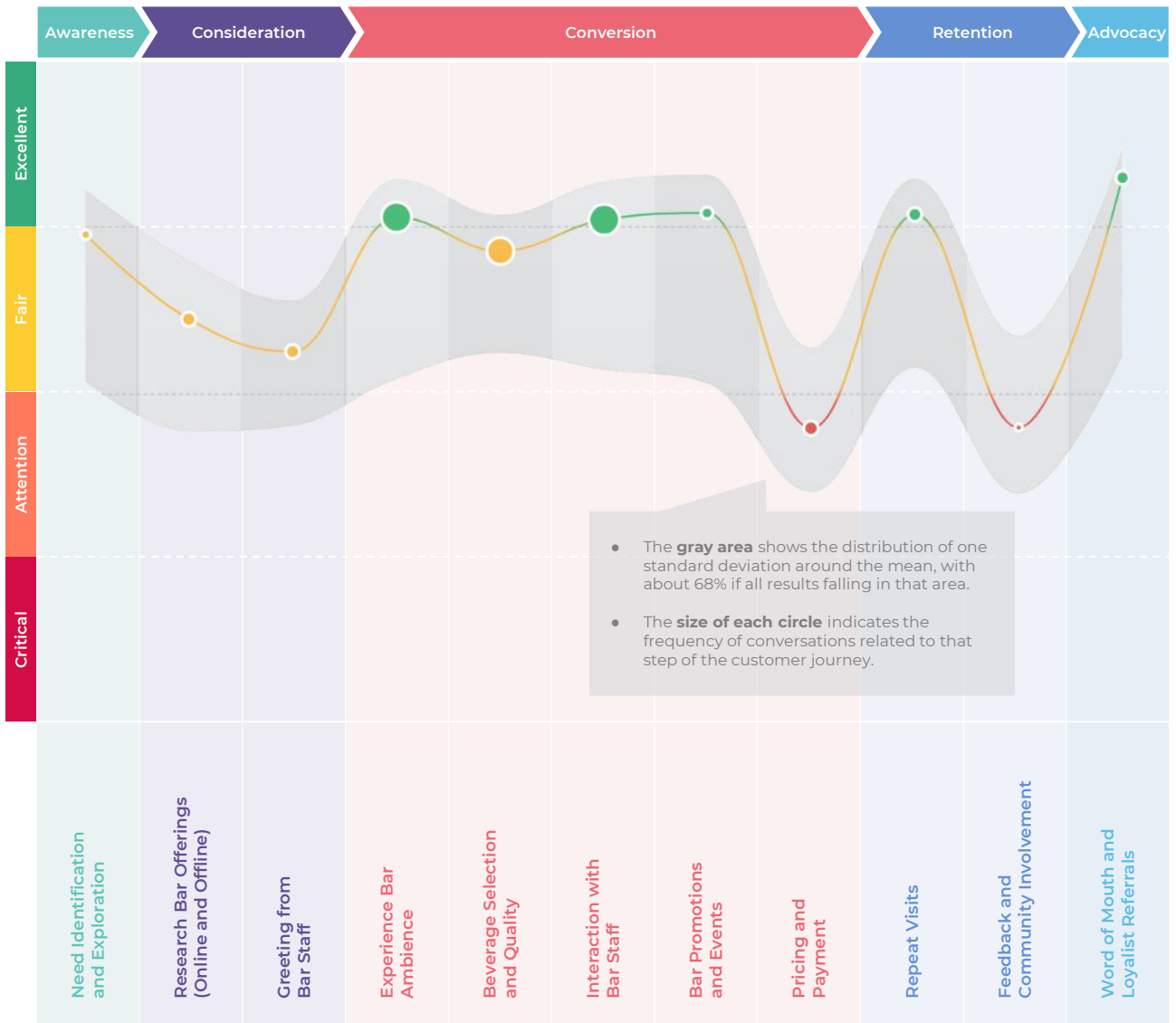
Sustained success depends on delivering reliably across every visit. Consistency in service, ambiance, and quality builds familiarity and trust, encouraging repeat visits. When experiences remain stable and memorable, customers are more likely to return, share their impressions, and contribute to the venue's reputation through recommendations and positive feedback.

# THE MOMENT OF TRUTH

The bar journey shows a clear contrast between strong in-venue moments and weaker transition points that interrupt the overall flow. Sentiment builds as guests move into the experience, **peaking around the bar atmosphere and interaction with staff**. These stages represent the core of what makes a visit enjoyable and are also among the most frequently mentioned, underlining their importance. At the same time, **noticeable drops emerge around pricing and payment, as well as post-visit feedback and community engagement**, where the experience loses momentum and consistency.

The chart illustrates customer sentiment during the various phases of the Customer Journey. Areas shaded in the graph denote the standard deviation from the average, highlighting the degree of variability at each step and signifying the need for more precise measurement techniques.

The circles on the graph correspond to the frequency of specific elements noted at each phase, with larger circles indicating steps with more frequently cited attributes. This visualization aids in identifying which areas to prioritize for strategic focus.



# CASE IN POINT

**Aspect-Based Sentiment Analysis (ABSA) is particularly effective for analyzing online reviews and ratings by providing detailed, aspect-specific insights.**

**A customer review may read:**



*I checked out this bar online, but the information was unclear and didn't set the right expectations. I went anyway. Once there the atmosphere was vibrant, with great music and lighting creating a strong vibe. The drinks were well-prepared and flavorful, and I really liked the bar specials, even though the selection felt a bit limited. The staff was friendly and engaging, which made interaction enjoyable. However, the ordering process felt slow due to long waits and the final bill seemed higher than expected, which affected my overall impression.*

Aspect	Modifier	Sentiment
Research & Information	Unclear, did not set expectations	Negative
Bar Ambiance	Vibrant, great music/lighting, strong vibe	Positive
Beverage Selection & Quality	Well-prepared, flavorful, appealing specials	Positive
Interaction with Bar Staff	Friendly, engaging, enjoyable	Positive
Order Fulfillment	Slow, long waits	Negative
Pricing & Payment	Higher than expected	Negative

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Aspect-Based Sentiment Analysis (ABSA) excels in extracting deeper insights from customer interactions by categorizing aspects of the product, service, or experience being reviewed. It then evaluates the modifying words or phrases in the review, assigning them a sentiment polarity – positive, neutral, or negative – to gauge customer opinions.

ABSA is not, however, without some limitations. Notably, complexity in language and expression: people who frequently employ idioms, sarcasm, or metaphors can pose difficulties for accurate interpretation.

# KEY TAKEAWAYS



The bar customer journey reveals a dynamic flow of rising engagement and sudden drops, where strong in-venue moments are offset by critical breakdowns at key transition points. While the core experience performs well, specific steps disrupt the rhythm and shape the final perception.



### **Win the First Impression:**

Early stages show moderate sentiment, with research and arrival often underperforming. Limited information, unclear positioning, or weak first contact can lower expectations before the visit begins and influence overall perception.



### **Eliminate the Critical Drop Points:**

The sharpest decline occurs at Pricing and Payment, where issues with cost, clarity, or process disrupt the flow. A second drop appears in Feedback and Community Involvement, weakening the connection after the visit.



### **Master the Core Moments:**

Sentiment peaks during ambience, beverage selection, and staff interaction. These high-impact stages define enjoyment and are frequently mentioned, making consistent delivery essential to meeting expectations and sustaining positive impressions.



### **Strengthen the Return Loop:**

Retention improves as guests return, but this depends on consistency and continued engagement. Without meaningful follow-up or connection beyond the visit, opportunities to build loyalty and advocacy remain limited.

By reinforcing early impressions, delivering consistency in core moments, and removing friction at key stages, bars can create a smoother journey that encourages repeat visits and stronger advocacy.

## MEET THE EXPERT



*Meet the experts featured in our podcast series. Discover their backgrounds, unique perspectives, and invaluable contributions to the field of Customer Experience.*

## DARREN DENINGTON

With a degree in Food & Beverage Management and certification as a Certified Food & Beverage Executive (CFBE), Darren Denington brings a strong foundation in hospitality education and industry expertise. His career spans key leadership roles including Owner, Executive Chef, Food & Beverage Director, District Manager, and General Manager, giving him a well-rounded perspective across operations, management, and business development.

Over the years, Darren has built extensive experience in the restaurant and bar sector, combining hands-on leadership with strategic insight. His deep understanding of operations and start-up environments has taken him across the country, where he has spoken at more than 300 seminars, events, and leading industry trade shows.

For over 27 years, Darren has owned and operated Service With Style, a company focused on mystery shopping, restaurant coaching, and hospitality team training. Through this work, he has supported more than 1,000 establishments nationwide, helping them better understand the guest perspective. By working closely with operators, Darren delivers practical solutions, implements effective systems, and drives improvements in service quality, team performance, and overall customer satisfaction.



**SERVICE WITH STYLE**  
SECRET SHOPPING & CONSULTING



## DRIVEN BY PEOPLE: TURNING SERVICE INTO UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCE

In the bars industry, customer experience unfolds in a fast-paced environment shaped by real-time decisions and human interaction. While atmosphere and product set expectations, it is staff behavior and engagement that define perception. In this setting, service is not just delivered – it is felt. As Darren highlights, simple, genuine interactions turn a standard visit into a memorable, repeatable experience.

*“What makes the biggest difference is the people.”*

– **Darren Denington**

Customer expectations in bars are largely functional – good drinks, a comfortable setting, and smooth service. What elevates the experience beyond that baseline is the human layer, created through simple, authentic interaction. As Darren explains, *“making them smile... making them feel welcome... the small simple things really go a long way”*. These moments are not complex or scripted, yet they define how the experience is felt and remembered, turning routine service into something more personal and engaging.

This is where experience shifts from transactional to emotional. Customers may not recall every detail of what they ordered, but they remember how they were treated and how the interaction made them feel. Darren highlights that *“the scoring genuinely comes from the personal interactions... what makes the biggest difference is the people”*. In a setting where atmosphere and product are often comparable, it is the interaction with staff that becomes the defining factor in how the visit is evaluated and remembered.

What makes these interactions powerful is how intentionally they can be created in just a few seconds. It is not about complex service techniques, but about simple, human gestures that open the interaction. As Darren describes, *“When I’ve already made you smile... and hopefully made you laugh in the first 15 seconds,”* the entire dynamic changes, creating an immediate sense of connection and ease. These moments – offering a drink at the right time, noticing something personal, starting a light conversation – are what set the tone for everything that follows, turning service into a natural, engaging experience rather than a transactional exchange.

At the same time, the absence of this human element is immediately noticeable. It directly impacts whether customers return or not. As Darren explains, *“When the scores drop and we find people are not coming back... it is because the people part of the business wasn’t there.”* This highlights a clear cause-and-effect relationship – when interaction is missing, there is no sense of belonging, good vibes, and feeling that make you want to return to the same place.



## FROM VISION TO EXECUTION: BUILDING A SERVICE PLAN THAT DRIVES CONSISTENCY

Delivering consistent customer experience requires more than good intentions – it requires structure. A clear service plan aligns teams around what matters most, translating broad ideas into specific, repeatable actions. In fast-paced environments where decisions happen in real time, this structure becomes essential. Darren Denington notes that the role of leadership is not only to define the vision, but to actively shape how it is executed.

*“The management team has to put the right plan together - and communicate it.”*

– **Darren Denington**

A consistent customer experience in bars does not happen automatically – it is built through clear structure and intentional design. In fast-paced environments where decisions are made in real time, relying on instinct alone is not enough to ensure consistency. Without direction, even strong teams fall back on individual habits, leading to variation in delivery. As Darren Denington explains, *“A lot of it goes to the planning from the leadership team, how they put together what they expect the service plan to look like.”* This highlights that experience is shaped through deliberate planning, where leadership defines what “good” looks like.

This plan acts as a foundation for consistency across every interaction. Rather than leaving service to individual interpretation, it defines what matters most – how guests are welcomed, how engagement is maintained, and how key moments are handled under pressure. As Darren notes, *“You need something first in place to create the plan, which is the expectation, so that all your team members know exactly what is important.”* By making expectations explicit, the service plan creates a shared understanding that aligns behavior and reduces variability.





Importantly, building a service plan does not require complexity. It can be approached as a focused, short-term initiative that brings clarity quickly. Darren suggests a practical approach: *“If you feel like you don’t have a great service plan... put a small committee together and look at it as a project. How can we continue to improve our service”*, encouraging teams to align and *“get on the same page of what you genuinely want to do.”* This makes service design actionable and manageable, even in busy operational environments.

Darren further reinforces this with a clear, time-bound approach, but also with a prerequisite – focus. As he explains, *“first, it is understanding that this has to be a priority... your owners, your key managers, have to put the focus on the customer experience.”* From there, he suggests

to *“work on it as a project for the next month,”* bringing a small group together to improve service step by step. This combination of priority and structure ensures that service is not treated as an afterthought, but as a deliberate initiative, where teams identify gaps, define priorities, and introduce practical improvements that can be quickly implemented.

The real impact, however, comes from communication. A plan only works when it is consistently shared, reinforced, and embedded into daily operations. As Darren emphasizes, *“the management team has to put the good plan together...and communicate it.”* This continuous communication ensures that expectations are not only defined, but also understood and applied in every shift.



## TURNING STANDARDS INTO SKILLS: TRAINING STAFF FOR CONSISTENT SERVICE

Even the most well-defined service plan will fail if it is not translated into daily behavior. The gap between intention and delivery often lies in a simple but critical assumption – that staff already know how to provide great service. In reality, without structured training and clear guidance, expectations remain abstract. Delivering consistent service requires more than direction – it requires actively building the skills and awareness needed to execute it.

*“The missing component is the training piece.. so staff are aware of the things that make a great, valuable experience.”*

– **Darren Denington**



One of the most common breakdowns in service delivery comes from assumption. Leadership may clearly understand what great service looks like, but that understanding often remains implicit rather than clearly defined for the team. As Darren explains, *“We assume that everybody understands what a wonderful guest experience is, but we’ve got to explain that to our team.”* When expectations are not explicitly communicated, staff are left to rely on personal interpretation, which leads to inconsistency in how service is delivered.

What feels obvious to management is not always translated into frontline behavior. *“Don’t assume that they know how you want them to greet the customers. Don’t assume they know how fast the drink should be served. Don’t assume that they know you should be promoting Friday night’s event,”* Darren added. These details define the experience, but without clarity, they are easily overlooked. Darren’s point is: *“Sometimes what we expect is hard to translate to the staff who then connect with the guests.”*

This is where training becomes critical. It acts as the bridge between expectation and execution, turning general ideas into specific, repeatable actions. *“The missing component is the training piece, so staff are aware of the things that ultimately make a great experience,”* Darren notes. Training ensures that what leadership envisions is clearly understood and consistently delivered by the team.

Effective training requires structure and clarity in how expectations are communicated and reinforced. It is not just about having a concept, but about ensuring that every team member can apply it in practice. As Darren emphasizes, *“It is the training manual that really sets people aside for their expectations on providing that*

*wow customer experience.”* This structured approach gives teams a clear reference point, helping them translate expectations into consistent behavior.

Importantly, training is not a one-time activity but an ongoing process embedded in daily operations. *“It is one thing to create a great concept and another to provide the right training program so that staff can comprehend all [of] the skills and provide great service.”* When training is structured, continuous, and supported by leadership, it turns standards into skills – ensuring that the service plan is not just defined but consistently brought to life in every interaction.



# IT'S ABOUT SERVICE

## SERVICE PRACTICES THAT KEEP GUESTS **COMING BACK**



**Exceptional service is one of the greatest competitive advantages in hospitality.**

When service teams operate with intention and awareness, they create memorable experiences that drive loyalty, referrals, and repeat business. The following five service practices represent key opportunities to elevate the guest experience from the moment they walk through the door

### **1. CREATING A STRONG FIRST IMPRESSION**

The guest experience begins long before the first bite. Within the first two and a half minutes, guests form a clear impression of how their visit is likely to unfold. The first two employees they encounter play a critical role in establishing that perception.

A warm greeting, confident body language, and genuine enthusiasm set the tone for the entire experience. When guests start their visit feeling welcomed and valued, they are far more forgiving of minor issues and are primed to enjoy their time with you.

### **2. PERSONALIZING THE EXPERIENCE FOR EVERY GUEST**

Every guest arrives with unique expectations – some stated, others unspoken. The most successful service professionals take the time to uncover these expectations and tailor their approach accordingly.

Imagine one server managing four tables:

- ▶ A business dinner
- ▶ A couple on an early date
- ▶ A family with children
- ▶ Two friends reconnecting

Each party requires a different pace, level of interaction, and style of service. A thoughtful question such as, “*What brings you in tonight?*” allows the server to adjust and deliver an experience that feels intentional and customized, rather than generic.

A study provided by Service With Style



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[www.servicewithstyle.com](http://www.servicewithstyle.com)



### 3. BUILDING GENUINE CONNECTIONS

Guest loyalty is rooted in emotional connection. People return to places where they feel recognized, comfortable, and known.

That connection might come from a favorite menu item or a memorable dining experience, but more often it develops through meaningful interactions with staff. A personal conversation, remembering a guest's preference, or a moment of shared humor can transform a routine visit into a relationship.

What is remarkable is how simple this is to do – and how powerful its impact can be. These small, human moments lead directly to repeat visits, positive reviews, and word-of-mouth referrals.

### 4. RESPECTING GUESTS' TIME

Time is one of the most important factors in dining decisions, and service teams play a critical role in managing it effectively. Guests deeply appreciate when their schedules and priorities are respected.

When guests share time constraints, acknowledging and acting on that information builds immediate trust. Smooth pacing, clear communication, and proactive service ensure guests leave feeling taken care of rather than rushed or delayed.

When staff remains attentive to timing, guests are far more likely to return – and to recommend the experience to others.

### 5. DELIVERING THE “WOW” EXPERIENCE

For many guests, dining out is entertainment. By the time they are seated, they are engaged, excited, and anticipating something special.

The server's first interaction is a defining moment. Rather than keeping it transactional, great service professionals use this opportunity to create energy, introduce signature offerings, and set the stage for a memorable evening. A confident, enthusiastic opening can turn a simple beverage order into an elevated experience.

Much like Disney's cast members, great hospitality professionals understand they are always “on stage.” Their presence, tone, and engagement add value for the guest – and contribute directly to higher satisfaction and stronger financial results.

### FINAL THOUGHT

Outstanding service is not accidental – it is intentional. By focusing on first impressions, personalization, connection, time awareness, and memorable moments, service teams can consistently exceed expectations and create experiences that guests are eager to repeat.

# THE BUSINESS PERSPECTIVE

*Ferg's*



# MARK FERGUSON

**Mark Ferguson** is the owner and visionary behind Ferg's Sports Bar & Grill, one of St. Petersburg, Florida's most iconic gathering spots. Driven by a deep passion for service and community, Mark transformed Ferg's into far more than a sports bar, it is a cornerstone of the city's social and sports culture.

Strategically located across from Tropicana Field, Ferg's has become a must-visit destination for fans, locals, and visitors alike. Mark's commitment to exceptional hospitality, high-energy experiences, and a welcoming atmosphere has helped shape Ferg's into a nationally recognized venue and a proud symbol of St. Pete's vibrant spirit.



# LEADING THE EXPERIENCE, NOT JUST DESIGNING IT

## THE LEADERSHIP DISCIPLINE BEHIND FERG'S EXPERIENCE

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At Ferg's Sports Bar & Grill, customer experience is not something designed once and deployed. It is something that is lived continuously, in an environment defined by energy, volume, and constant variation. In this context, consistency is not automatic. It needs to be actively reinforced through people, behavior, and daily execution.

When asked how he defines customer experience excellence, Mark Ferguson, owner of Ferg's, keeps the answer simple: *"It means exceeding expectations. We always want a consistent, high-quality experience that leaves guests feeling valued and appreciated."* The definition is clear, but the operational challenge behind it is significant. Different customers, different moments, and different expectations shape each interaction. What ultimately matters is whether the experience holds together despite that variability.

From the customer's perspective, the experience is intentionally immersive. When asked how he would describe Ferg's in a review, Ferguson focuses on what customers feel most directly: *"Ferg's is a vibrant sports bar with an electric atmosphere. The complex is massive, with several separate bar areas to enjoy. The staff is friendly and chatty. The menu offers something for everyone... Ferg's offers such a fun and enjoyable experience!"*

This reflects a core reality in the bar industry. Customers are not simply purchasing food or drinks. They are choosing an environment, a mood, and a social experience. Atmosphere, interaction, and energy are central to value.

## WHERE THE CX GAP APPEARS AND HOW IT IS MANAGED

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In hospitality, the gap between designed and delivered experience often appears when processes exist but are not consistently translated into behavior. Plans may be well defined, but execution depends on what happens on the floor.

When asked how they avoid this gap, Ferguson points to a more direct approach: *“We rely much more on regular discussions at manager meetings, reviewing details at shift meetings, and talking to our staff individually, as opposed to creating a plan.”*

This is not the absence of structure. It is a different way of maintaining alignment. Less reliance on static documentation, more emphasis on continuous communication.

As he adds, *“Everyone knows what type of service we are striving to achieve, and the verbal reminders are very effective to keep our team focused.”*

In a fast-moving environment, clarity is not something defined once. It is reinforced continuously, in real time.

## PEOPLE AS THE EXPERIENCE

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With a team of around 130 employees, consistency depends on how individuals interpret and deliver the experience in real situations.

Ferguson is direct on this point: *“Our staff are our brand. Their personality and enthusiasm for our guests are everything.”*

In hospitality, systems support the experience, but people define it. The tone of interaction, the willingness to help, and the ability to respond to each moment shape how customers perceive the brand.

Expectations go beyond standard service delivery. *“We continually encourage our staff to go above and beyond in helping our guests.”*

This level of discretionary effort requires the right environment. Ferg’s has achieved strong stability in its frontline and management teams, which is not typical in the industry. That stability supports consistency and reduces the gap between intent and execution.



## FROM FEEDBACK TO ACTION

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Customer feedback at Ferg's is used as a working tool, not as a reporting layer.

When asked why they adopted mystery shopping, Ferguson explains: *"We wanted to be known for providing great service and understood that we needed a lot of feedback on what we were currently doing."*

Guest feedback alone was not sufficient. The organization needed structured input to better understand performance.

When it comes to using those insights, the approach is focused: *"We really focus on the overall score first... We understand what an 88% secret shopping score means in relation to our actual guest's experiences."*

This alignment between measurement and reality is essential. Metrics only create value when they reflect what customers actually experience.

Ferguson adds: *"We regularly discuss the reports at our weekly meetings. We focus on specific points each time and discuss these with the staff."*

There is no separation between measurement and conversation. Insight is quickly translated into action.

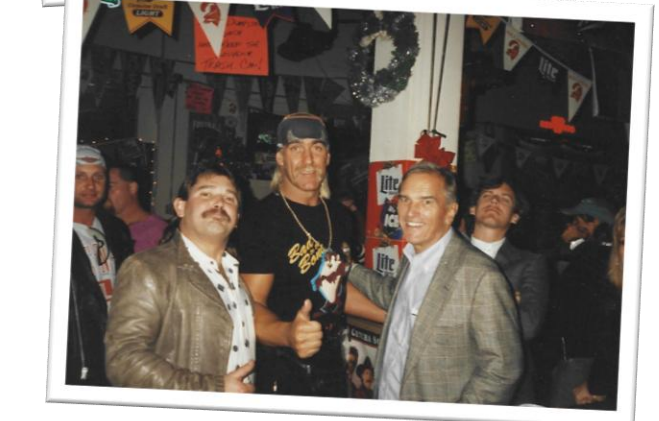
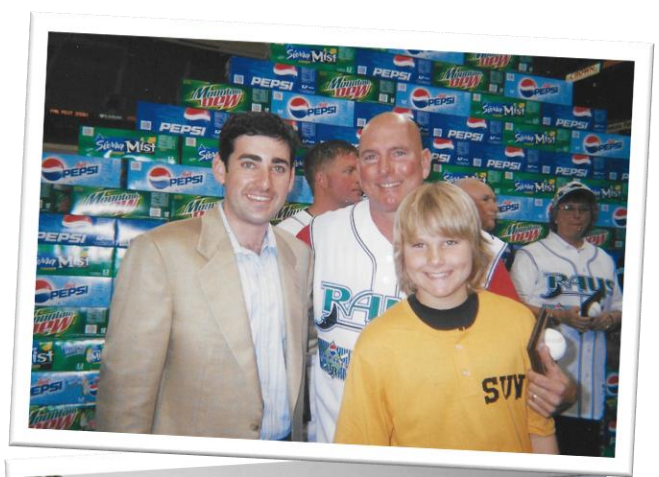
## LISTENING IN REAL TIME

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Beyond structured research, there is a strong emphasis on staying close to customer feedback as it happens.

Ferguson explains: *"We have one person dedicated to our online accounts and try to read all reviews immediately."*

Speed is part of the discipline. Feedback only creates value if it can still influence operations.





At the same time, the focus is balanced. *“We strive to improve on anything that did not live up to guest expectations... and we focus on positive comments to make sure we are repeating those aspects also.”*

Improvement is not only about correcting issues. It is also about reinforcing what already works well.

### **TURNING INSIGHT INTO EXECUTION**

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The critical step is not collecting feedback, but acting on it.

At Ferg’s, that transition is immediate. *“We review each secret shopping report as soon as they come in and quickly make the needed adjustments and provide additional training.”*

There is no backlog of insights waiting to be analyzed. Issues are addressed while they are still relevant.

This is supported by ongoing communication and training. *“Great communication with ongoing manager meetings... and continued staff training to focus on improvements.”*

Insight moves quickly through the organization because the mechanisms for action are already in place.

### **LEADERSHIP IN PRACTICE**

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Execution depends on leadership presence.

When asked what advice he would give, Ferguson keeps it practical: *“Talk to your staff. Be sure that you are involved in the operations when you are running a shift. Take the time to engage with the guests.”*

In this type of environment, distance creates disconnect. Being present allows leaders to reinforce expectations and address issues directly.



## SUSTAINING EXCELLENCE OVER TIME

After more than three decades, the core principle at Ferg's remains unchanged.

*"The entire staff at Ferg's is doing their best to make every person their number one customer."*

The idea is simple. Delivering it consistently, across hundreds of daily interactions, requires alignment and discipline.

Ferguson reinforces this with a final point: *"We make sure that the owners are interacting with the guests, and that our location is a destination for great food and wonderful service, in an iconic location."*

That combination – product, service, and place - is what turns a venue into a destination customers actively choose.



### FERG'S SPORTS BAR

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## CUSTOMER REVIEWS: FERG'S BAR



*"I drove 200 miles to go to this bar . . . I would do it again! I'm not one that frequents a bar. I have never wanted to return to any bar. I must go back to Ferg's. This is not a cookie-cutter joint. No suit would create anything like this."*



*"Ferg's is by far the most unique and well-tuned bar in America. Obviously, it's rated #1 in the country for good reason. The bartenders are constantly on top of your empty drinks. I've never been to a bar that you never have to wait for food or drinks and all the staff is pleasant from the bus boys all the way to the security staff. Whoever manages this place definitely should be commended. "*



*"Great place to catch a game. There's plenty of sitting but it is outdoors so dress accordingly. The service was fast as well. They have a pretty good system there despite the large crowd."*



*"As a sports bar it's simply AWESOME! Hard to explain the size, amount of bars inside, number of TVs and the size of the crowds that come. Surprisingly good food. Staff is fantastic and Ferg himself is always wandering around and fun to chat with."*



**"Ferg's: "Where Every Game Day Feels Like a Block Party Thrown by a Florida Man With a Megaphone."**

*Ferg's Sports Bar is the only place in downtown St. Pete where you can lose your voice, your dignity, and possibly your friends – all before halftime. It's a glorious maze of TVs, patios, chicken wings, and people who scream at referees like the refs can hear them. The energy is unmatched. The food is delicious and the beer somehow tastes colder. If you have not been to Ferg's, do you even St. Pete?"*

# A REFLECTION FROM THE CX CHANNEL TEAM

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Ferg's illustrates a pragmatic approach to closing the CX Gap in the Bars industry. Rather than relying on complex frameworks, the organization focuses on consistent communication, rapid feedback loops, and strong frontline engagement.

At the same time, its differentiation is not built on process alone. It is rooted in the uniqueness of the experience itself, an environment shaped by atmosphere, scale, and personality, where customers are not simply served, but immersed. This distinct identity creates a standard that is difficult to replicate and reinforces why customers choose Ferg's beyond convenience.

Customer experience cannot be managed on intuition alone. Leaders need objective visibility into what is actually happening across the journey, not what they believe is happening. Without structured research and reliable metrics, gaps remain invisible, and invisible gaps cannot be closed. This creates a risk where decisions are driven by assumptions rather than evidence, often reinforcing the very issues organizations are trying to solve.

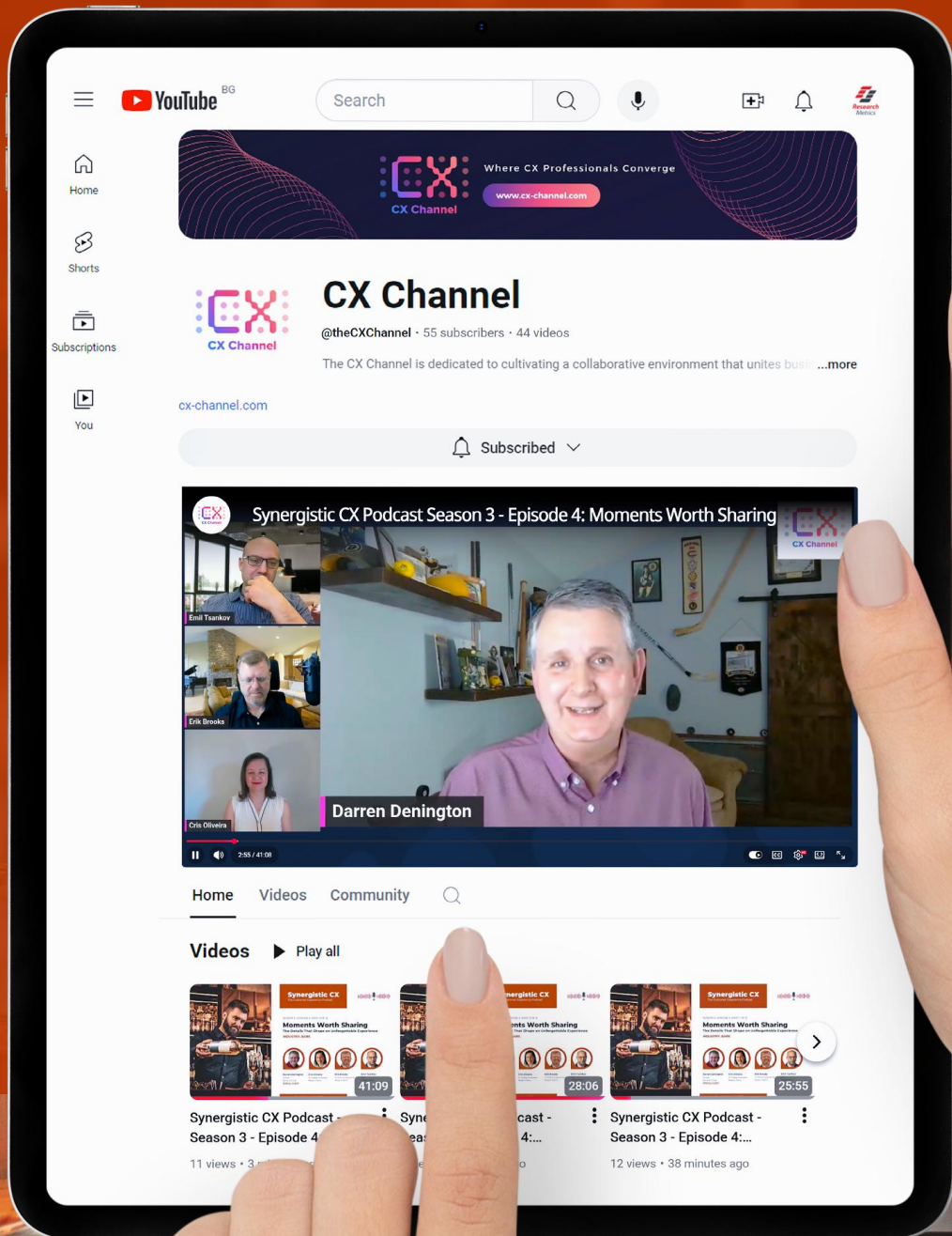
The discipline, therefore, is not only in execution, but in measurement. Leaders like Ferg's, who embed research into their operating model, using tools such as mystery shopping, customer feedback, and performance metrics, create the conditions to act with clarity, prioritize effectively, and sustain improvement over time.

Equally important is the visible role of leadership. Presence is not symbolic, it is operational. Owners and managers remain close to both staff and customers, reinforcing expectations, addressing issues directly, and maintaining accountability across the operation. This proximity reduces the distance between intention and execution, ensuring that standards are not only defined but consistently delivered.

In environments where experience is shaped in real time, customer experience is sustained through a combination of clear identity, disciplined execution, and accountable leadership that remains close to the reality it is responsible for shaping.



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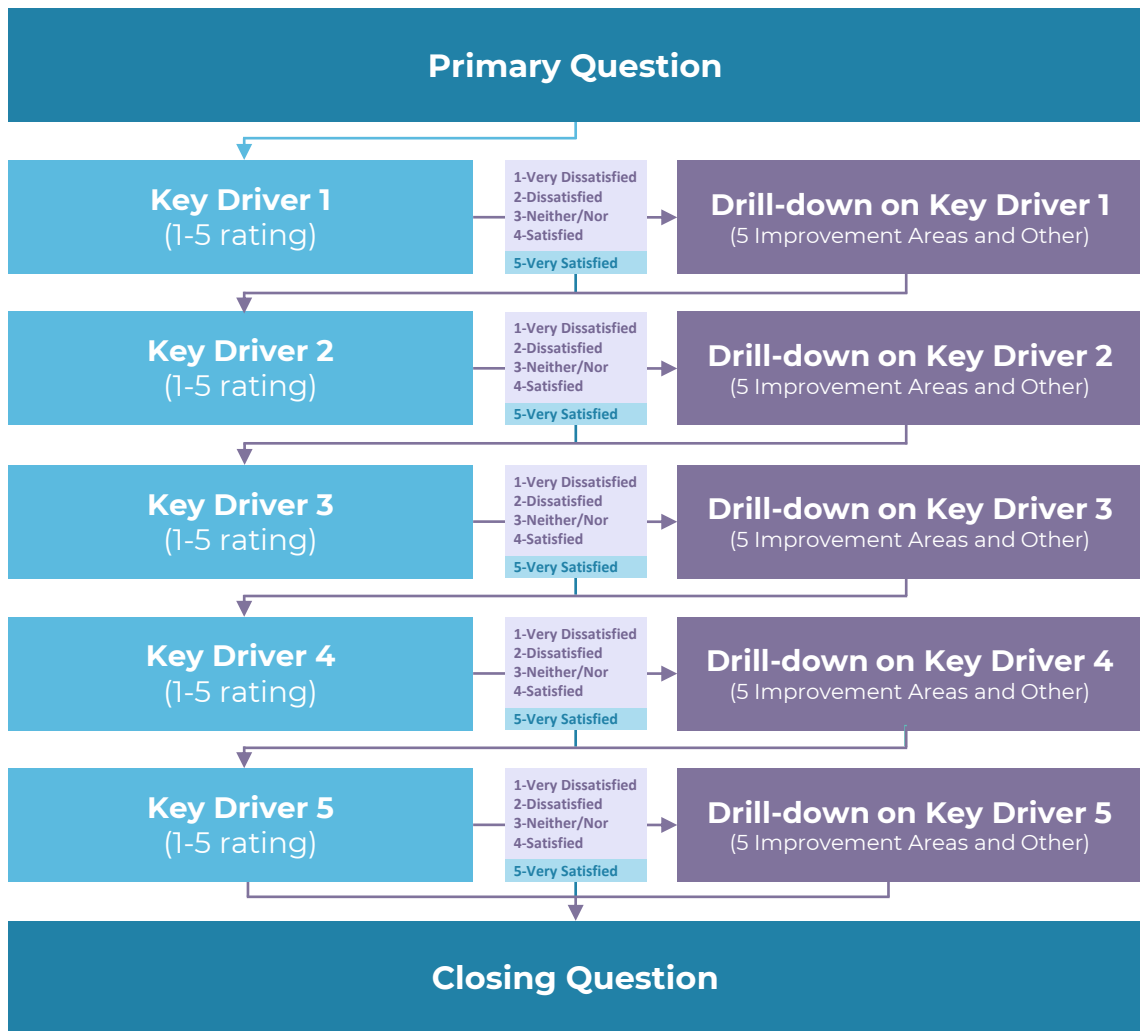
## Creating a Starter VoC Survey

Capturing feedback in bars requires a different lens – one that reflects the real-time nature of the visit. A well-structured VoC survey helps uncover what shapes guests' feelings and perceptions, from the first impression to the final stages of the visit. By collecting focused feedback across key moments, bars can better understand what drives satisfaction and where friction disrupts the overall flow.

This section introduces how to design a practical starter VoC survey for bars. It covers building concise, relevant questions around staff interaction, drink quality, ambience, ordering and serving, and pricing clarity; applying a simple satisfaction scale complemented by an overall impression or likelihood to recommend; and using the results to fine-tune the details that shape the customer experience.

# CREATING A STARTER VOC SURVEY

A starter VoC survey can be created by harnessing insights from customer sentiments, thoughts, and feelings expressed in their online reviews and **focusing on the topics customers discuss most frequently.**



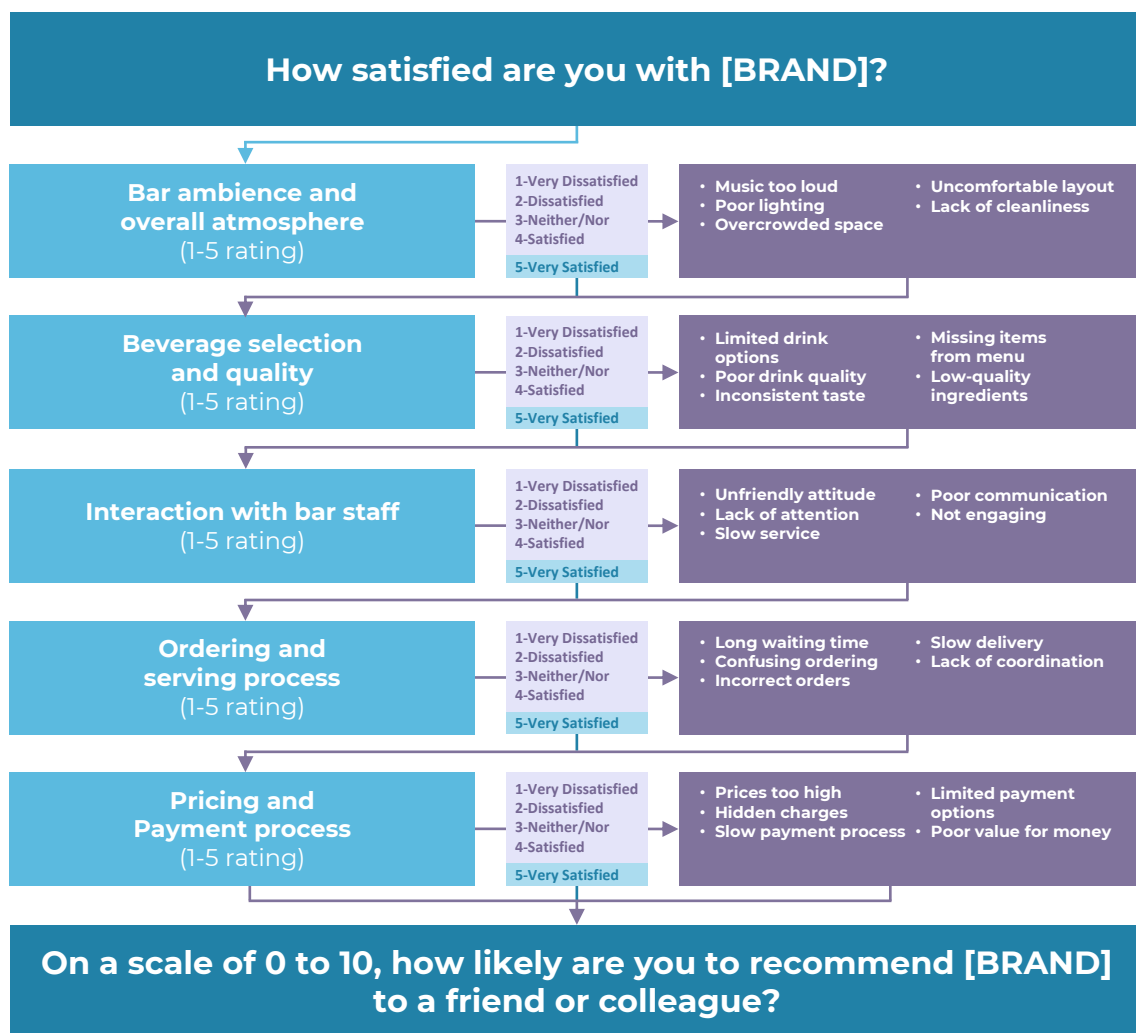
**Primary Question:** The starting point of the survey, setting the general direction and context. It gathers a quick overall snapshot on the customer's opinion of the brand, company, or product.

**Closing Question:** The final question posed to the respondent. This can capture valuable insights that might not otherwise fit the general format/structure of the survey.

# KEY DRIVER AND DRILL-DOWN QUESTIONS

**Primary Question:** Rate “How satisfied are you with [BRAND]” on a scale from 1 ('Very Dissatisfied') to 5 ('Very Satisfied')

**Closing Question:** Evaluate customer retention and advocacy potential, gaining insights into the customer experience.

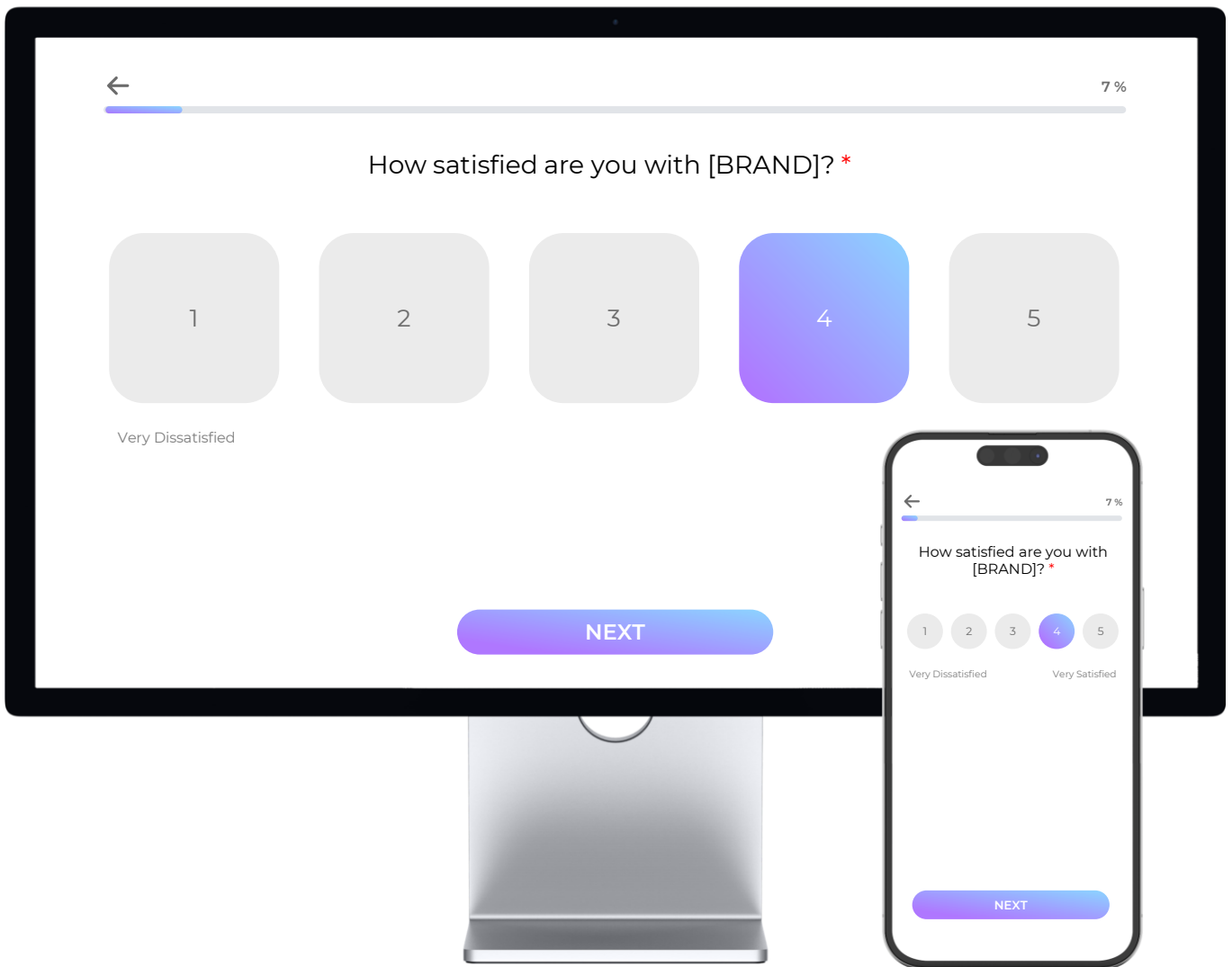


**Key Driver Question:** Used to assess user satisfaction on the top 5 critical industry topics using a 1-5 scale.

**Drill-Down Questions:** Respondents not fully satisfied identify their top dissatisfaction factors.

# A STARTER VOC SURVEY FOR BARS

Creating a starter Voice of the Customer (VoC) survey based on insights from online customer reviews ensures that the survey is relevant and focused on actual customer experiences. This approach leads to higher engagement and response rates, as it addresses the issues and trends that matter most to customers. Such a survey provides valuable data for prioritizing business strategies and improving customer satisfaction.



← 15 %

How satisfied were you with the BAR AMBIENCE AND OVERALL ATMOSPHERE?\*

1 2 3 4 5

Very Dissatisfied Very Satisfied

NEXT

← 23 %

What part of the "BAR AMBIENCE AND OVERALL ATMOSPHERE" fell short?\*

Music too loud

Poor lighting

Overcrowded space

Uncomfortable layout

Lack of cleanliness

Other

NEXT

← 30 %

How satisfied were you with the BEVERAGE SELECTION AND QUALITY?\*

1 2 3 4 5

Very Dissatisfied Very Satisfied

NEXT

← 38 %

What part of "BEVERAGE SELECTION AND QUALITY" fell short?\*

Limited drink options

Poor drink quality

Inconsistent taste

Missing items from menu

Low-quality ingredients

Other

NEXT

← 46 %

How satisfied were you with the INTERACTION WITH BAR STAFF?\*

1 2 3 4 5

Very Dissatisfied Very Satisfied

NEXT

← 53 %

What part of "INTERACTION WITH BAR STAFF" fell short?\*

Unfriendly attitude

Lack of attention

Slow service

Poor communication

Not engaging

Other

NEXT

← 61 %

How satisfied were you with the ORDERING AND SERVING PROCESS?\*

1 2 3 4 5

Very Dissatisfied Very Satisfied

NEXT

← 69 %

What part of the "ORDERING AND SERVING PROCESS" fell short?\*

Long waiting time

Confusing ordering

Incorrect orders

Slow delivery

Lack of coordination

Other

NEXT

← 76 %

How satisfied were you with the PRICING AND PAYMENT PROCESS?\*

1 2 3 4 5

Very Dissatisfied Very Satisfied

NEXT

← 84 %

What part of the "PRICING AND PAYMENT PROCESS" fell short?\*

Prices too high

Hidden charges

Slow payment process

Limited payment options

Poor value for money

Other

NEXT

← 92 %

On a scale of 0 to 10, how likely are you to recommend [BRAND] to a friend or colleague?\*

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not likely at all Extremely likely

NEXT

# VoC SURVEY NEXT STEPS

In this 'starter' VoC survey, we selected the top five key driver questions based on what customers talk about and frequently mention in negative aspects in their online reviews. The drill-down questions were chosen following the same principle.

## The VoC Survey Process

	Awareness	Consideration	Conversion	Retention	Advocacy
Place	0.32%	3.49%	15.17%	0.59%	0.43%
Product	0.08%	1.77%	16.67%	0.75%	0.28%
People	0.12%	6.62%	22.49%	2.10%	0.85%
Price	0.03%	0.27%	10.01%	0.37%	0.27%
Process	0.05%	2.06%	11.65%	1.27%	0.18%
Promotion	0.21%	0.16%	0.63%	0.85%	0.24%
Physical Evidence	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%

### Step 1: Data Analysis

We begin by analyzing online reviews and ratings to create a customer response score matrix. The Marketing Mix-Funnel matrix highlights how different Marketing Mix Elements perform across various Customer Journey Stages.

### Step 2: Identify Critical Areas

From the Marketing-Mix Funnel, we identify the top five areas showing the most critical feedback, based on their online reviews and ratings scores.

### Step 3: Key Drivers

These areas are selected for deeper examination in the VoC survey. They are converted to questions, following the pattern "How satisfied were you with...", used to assess user satisfaction using a 1-5 scale.

### Step 4: Key Driver Details

For each key driver, additional questions are designed and visualized if the driver is scored with a 4 or lower. This direct questioning helps to drill down into the exact reasons behind the customer negative experiences.

### Step 5: Data Collection

The VoC survey is distributed and data is collected.

### Step 6: Actionable Insights

The collected data reveals specific aspects that negatively affect the overall customer perception of the brand. With this detailed insight, the company can directly target improvements in the critical areas to enhance the customer experience and improve brand reputation.

**NOTE:** It is up to the CX professional to selectively fine-tune and adjust the key drivers and appropriate drill-down questions, considering the specific needs and objectives of the business.

# BAR AMBIENCE AND OVERALL ATMOSPHERE

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The atmosphere defines the first emotional connection with the bar. Elements such as music, lighting, layout, and crowd energy shape how guests feel upon arrival and influence their willingness to stay. When these elements come together seamlessly, they create a mood that encourages people to relax, engage, and fully enjoy the moment.

The top 5 key driver details, followed by an additional 10, offer detailed insight into areas where the **BAR AMBIENCE AND OVERALL ATMOSPHERE** key driver may fall short.



## Top 5 Key Driver Details

- Music too loud
- Poor lighting
- Overcrowded space
- Uncomfortable layout
- Lack of cleanliness

## Additional Key Driver Details

- No music at all
- Poor ventilation
- Unpleasant smell
- Too dark inside
- Lighting too bright
- Noisy environment
- Lack of seating
- Crowded bar area
- Outdated interior
- Uncomfortable temperature

# BEVERAGE SELECTION AND QUALITY

The drink offering is central to the bar experience. A well-curated selection combined with consistent quality allows guests to find something that matches their taste and expectations. Creative specials, signature drinks, and reliable preparation elevate satisfaction and make the offering more distinctive and memorable.

The top 5 key driver details, followed by an additional 10, offer detailed insight into areas where the **BEVERAGE SELECTION AND QUALITY** key driver may fall short.

## Top 5 Key Driver Details

- Limited drink options
- Poor drink quality
- Inconsistent taste
- Missing items from menu
- Low-quality ingredients

## Additional Key Driver Details

- Drinks not fresh
- Poor presentation
- Wrong drink served
- Limited non-alcoholic options
- Lack of house specials
- Drinks not cold enough
- Poor mix quality
- No variety in menu
- Low consistency
- Unbalanced flavors



# INTERACTION WITH BAR STAFF

Staff interaction brings personality to the experience. Friendly, attentive, and confident bartenders can turn a simple order into a positive social moment. Genuine engagement, proactive recommendations, and responsiveness help guests feel welcomed, comfortable, and valued throughout their visit.

The top 5 key driver details, followed by an additional 10, offer detailed insight into areas where the **INTERACTION WITH BAR STAFF** key driver may fall short.



## Top 5 Key Driver Details

- Unfriendly attitude
- Lack of attention
- Slow service
- Poor communication
- Not engaging

## Additional Key Driver Details

- Rude behavior
- Not approachable
- Lack of knowledge
- No recommendations offered
- Staff seemed overwhelmed
- Not responsive
- Dismissive attitude
- Lack of professionalism
- Poor problem handling
- No personal attention

# ORDERING AND SERVING PROCESS

The ordering and serving flow shapes how smoothly the visit unfolds. Efficient handling, clear communication, and reasonable waiting times are essential to maintaining a positive rhythm. Delays, long queues, or disorganization can quickly disrupt the overall experience and affect guest satisfaction.

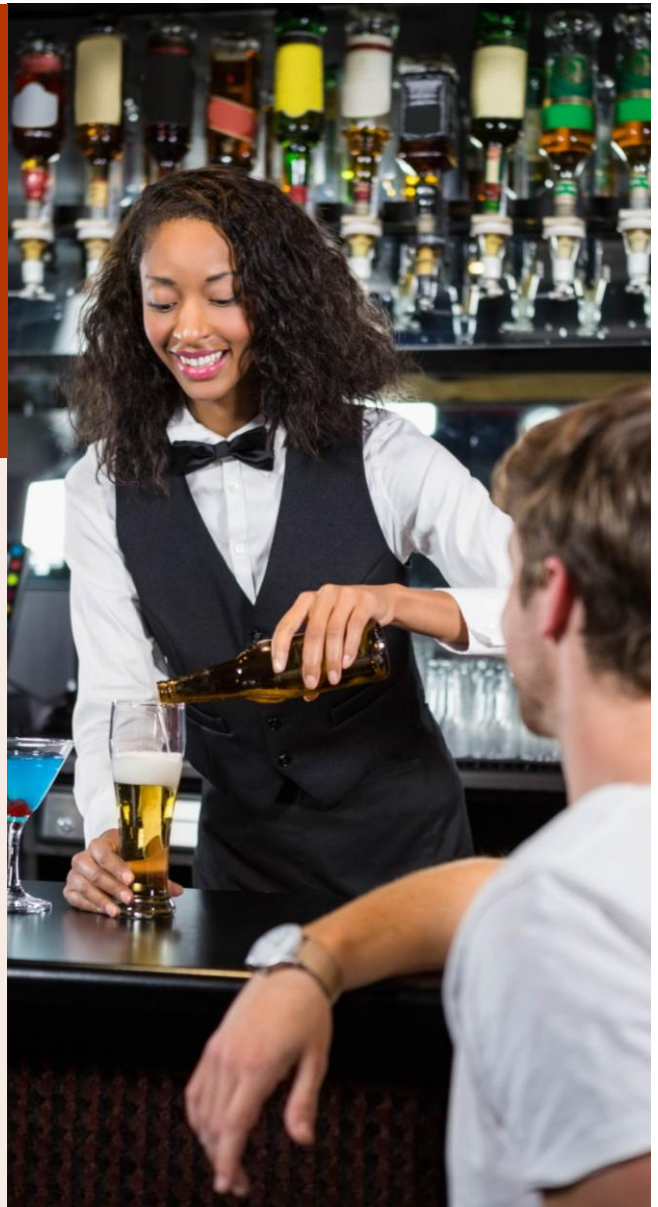
The top 5 key driver details, followed by an additional 10, offer detailed insight into areas where the **ORDERING AND SERVING PROCESS** key driver may fall short.

## Top 5 Key Driver Details

- Long waiting time
- Confusing ordering
- Incorrect orders
- Slow delivery
- Lack of coordination

## Additional Key Driver Details

- No clear queue system
- Orders mixed up
- Delayed service
- Hard-to-place order
- Staff not coordinated
- No order updates
- Disorganized workflow
- Drinks served late
- Missed orders
- Inefficient process



# PRICING AND PAYMENT PROCESS

The final stage leaves a lasting impression of fairness and value. Transparent pricing, accurate billing, and a smooth, hassle-free payment process reinforce trust and confidence. Clear communication of prices, absence of unexpected charges, and convenient payment options all contribute to a positive closure of the visit.

The top 5 key driver details, followed by an additional 10, offer detailed insight into areas where the **PRICING AND PAYMENT PROCESS** key driver may fall short.



## Top 5 Key Driver Details

- Prices too high
- Hidden charges
- Slow payment process
- Limited payment options
- Poor value for money

## Additional Key Driver Details

- Unclear pricing
- Unexpected fees
- Incorrect billing
- Overcharged items
- No price transparency
- Complicated payment
- Payment errors
- No split bill option
- Cash-only limitation
- Poor billing clarity

# BEYOND THE STARTER TWO MORE KEY DRIVERS

The Starter Voice of the Customer (VoC) survey for bars is extended with two additional drivers – **Greeting from Bar Staff** and **Researching Bar Offerings (Online and Offline)**. These reflect how decisions are formed before the visit and how quickly impressions take shape upon arrival. From browsing social media to the first interaction at the bar, both moments influence how guests perceive what follows.

These touchpoints set expectations and anchor the overall perception. When online content does not clearly reflect the atmosphere, selection, or pricing, guests arrive uncertain or misaligned. In the same way, a lack of immediate acknowledgment at the bar can disrupt the natural flow of the visit, even if the environment itself is appealing.

When bars present their offering clearly across channels and welcome guests with energy and attentiveness, the experience starts on the right note. Clear expectations combined with a strong first interaction create a smoother transition into the visit and support stronger engagement throughout.



# RESEARCH BAR OFFERINGS (ONLINE AND OFFLINE)

The research stage influences the decision to visit and sets initial expectations. Guests compare atmosphere, drink selection, and pricing through websites, social media, and online reviews. Clear, consistent, and appealing information helps build interest and confidence, while gaps or mismatched expectations can impact the overall perception before the visit even begins.

The top 5 key driver details, followed by an additional 10, offer insight into areas where the **RESEARCH BAR OFFERINGS (ONLINE AND OFFLINE)** key driver may fall short.



## Top 5 Key Driver Details

- Outdated information
- Misleading photos or description
- Menu not available online
- Pricing not visible
- Inconsistent information

## Additional Key Driver Details

- Hard to find information
- No clear concept presented
- Outdated social media
- Poor online presence
- Missing beverage details
- No ambiance preview
- Incomplete menu information
- Confusing pricing details
- Low-quality visuals
- No recent social activity

# GREETING FROM BAR STAFF

The greeting sets the tone for the entire visit and shapes the first impression of the bar. A warm, attentive, and confident welcome helps guests feel acknowledged and comfortable from the moment they arrive. When staff show presence, eye contact, and readiness to assist, it creates an immediate sense of connection and sets positive expectations for the rest of the experience.

The top 5 key driver details, followed by an additional 10, offer a detailed insight into areas where the **GREETING FROM BAR STAFF** key driver may fall short.

## Top 5 Key Driver Details

- No acknowledgment on arrival
- Unfriendly attitude
- Lack of eye contact
- Staff seemed disengaged
- Delayed attention

## Additional Key Driver Details

- Ignored at entrance
- No welcome gesture
- Staff not attentive
- Cold first interaction
- Lack of engagement
- No guidance offered
- Staff seemed distracted
- Unprofessional approach
- No sense of hospitality
- Felt unwelcome





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# PRINCIPLES OF CX: THE OUTSIDE-IN PERSPECTIVE



## WHY INDEPENDENT MEASUREMENT IS ESSENTIAL TO UNDERSTAND CUSTOMER REALITY

Understanding, in customer experience, is not assumed. It is measured.

Customer experience is often designed from the inside out. Organizations define journeys, map touchpoints, and establish service standards based on how they believe the experience should work. In many organizations, customer experience is not limited by budget. It is limited by how investment decisions are made. Yet customers do not experience intentions, but execution. The distance between the two is where the CX gap begins.

***In many organizations, customer experience is not limited by budget. It is limited by how investment decisions are made.***



Closing that gap requires more than internal alignment or well-crafted strategies. It requires a disciplined effort to understand how the experience is actually lived. This is where an outside-in perspective becomes essential.

At its core, an outside-in approach answers a simple but demanding question: what does the experience look like when viewed without internal context, assumptions, or constraints?

It shifts the reference point from organizational design to customer reality. In practice, this means challenging the narratives organizations naturally build around their own performance:

- "We are performing better than key competitors."
- "Recruitment is difficult in this market."
- "We have redesigned the menu and customers will appreciate the improvement."
- "We have invested significantly in our stores, so the environment must feel better."
- "Our processes are aligned with industry standards."

These statements may be true, but they remain internally constructed. They reflect intention, effort, and comparison. But they do not necessarily reflect what the customer experiences in a specific moment or if they are aligned with their expectations. And they do little to ensure long-term business sustainability and growth.

## **“You can’t deliver what you don’t understand.”**

- Indra Nooyi -



Many organizations operate with a strong internal logic shaped by processes, targets, and operational priorities. Over time, that logic becomes self-reinforcing. Teams measure what they control, optimize what they can see, and interpret results through the lens of their own responsibilities. The risk is not a lack of effort. It is a lack of objectivity. In many cases, it is also a lack of time. Operational pressure drives teams to focus on what is scheduled and immediately actionable, leaving limited space to step back and validate whether the experience is truly working as intended.

Independent measurement addresses that risk directly. Methodologies such as mystery shopping, Voice of the Customer (VoC), and operational audits provide structured ways to observe, evaluate, and quantify the experience as it happens. They do not replace internal metrics. They complement them by introducing a perspective that is not shaped by internal ownership, departmental priorities, or organizational bias.

Mystery shopping recreates the customer journey under controlled conditions. It enables organizations to assess consistency, compliance with standards, and quality of

execution across locations and channels. It captures behavioral detail, how employees interact, how processes unfold, and where friction appears in real situations. This makes variability visible and comparable, turning service standards into measurable performance rather than stated expectations.

Voice of the Customer adds scale and depth of perception. It captures how customers interpret their experiences across touchpoints. It reveals patterns that individual interactions cannot show, highlighting emotional drivers and moments that disproportionately influence satisfaction and loyalty. It also brings the customer’s language into the organization,

Audits, in the context of CX, provide an additional operational perspective. They evaluate whether the physical environment, infrastructure, and procedures support the intended experience. This includes elements such as cleanliness, maintenance, signage, accessibility, and process compliance and integrity. Audits often uncover structural gaps that are not immediately visible in customer feedback but have a direct impact on consistency and reliability.

*Individually, each methodology provides valuable insight. Combined, they create a more complete view. They connect what is supposed to happen with what actually happens, and how it is perceived by customers. This is where insight becomes actionable.*



Each methodology is a valuable part of **Synergistic CX**.



**The role of independence is crucial.** When measurement is conducted by third parties, it introduces a level of neutrality that is difficult to achieve internally. Their role is to observe and report against defined criteria, and this neutrality has practical implications: it reduces the risk of confirmation bias and creates a shared reference point across functions. Marketing, operations, IT, and finance can then align around the same evidence rather than competing interpretations or falling into a “blame game.”



*When measurement is conducted by third parties, it introduces a level of neutrality that is difficult to achieve internally. Their role is to observe and report against defined criteria.*

An outside-in perspective also strengthens accountability. When performance is measured against observed outcomes, gaps become visible in concrete terms. Variability can be quantified. Progress can be tracked over time, with clear benefits when results are linked to an Action Plan that can be tracked back in consecutive studies.

The connection to this month's Business Perspective is particularly relevant. In the case of Ferg's, the scale and complexity of the operation creates natural variability in execution. Multiple environments, different customer segments, and high-volume service moments increase the risk of inconsistency between what is designed and what is delivered.

What stands out is the presence of strong leadership attention and accountability. In such environments, independent measurement provides a consistent view across different parts of the experience and supports decisions that keep the operation aligned with its intended standards. Ferg's use of mystery shopping is a great example of how organizations can benefit from the outside-in perspective.

In any organization, especially those operating at scale, the experience cannot be managed effectively through internal visibility alone.

Without an external reference point, companies risk optimizing internal processes while the customer experience deteriorates in less visible areas.

This is why an outside-in perspective belongs among the core principles of customer experience. It enables organizations to detect the CX gap with precision, rather than assumption, and to anchor decisions in a shared, objective view of reality.

An outside-in perspective acts as a control mechanism. It forces a direct comparison between what is designed and what is delivered, between what is delivered and what is experienced. It challenges internal narratives and removes the comfort of assumption by making performance visible, comparable, and difficult to ignore. This is where the combined strength of mystery shopping, Voice of the Customer surveys, and audits becomes decisive. Mystery shopping verifies execution against defined standards. Voice of the Customer reveals how that execution is perceived at scale. Audits confirm whether the environment and processes are sustaining it. Together, they create a system of evidence that not only identifies the gap but makes it difficult to dispute and even harder to defer.

At that point, the question is no longer whether the organization understands its customers. It is whether it is willing to act on what it sees.

***Many organizations do not suffer from a lack of customer experience strategy. They suffer from a lack of visibility into how that strategy performs in reality.***



# EXCELLENCE IN PRACTICE: LESSONS FROM THE INDITEX GROUP

*A recurring feature exploring what customer experience excellence looks like in everyday businesses.*



## DESIGNING FOR REALITY, NOT THE AVERAGE CUSTOMER

*This month: Inditex and the discipline of customer segmentation in practice*

In customer experience, the idea of the “average customer” is one of the most persistent and costly assumptions. It simplifies decision-making and supports scale. It allows organizations to standardize journeys and align operations. Yet it does not reflect how customers actually behave. Customers arrive with different intentions, expectations, price sensitivities, and emotional drivers. Designing for an average often produces an experience that feels generic to everyone and meaningful to no one.

This is where customer experience maturity becomes visible. The **Inditex group**, with **net sales of €39.5 billion in 2025**, offers a clear example of this discipline in practice.

At first glance, Inditex operates within a single category: fashion retail, with global scale and an integrated supply chain. Beneath that shared infrastructure sits a more nuanced reality. The group has built a portfolio of brands that reflect distinct customer profiles, shaped by a combination of age, purchasing power, lifestyle, and life cycle.

**Zara** sits at the center. It balances trend relevance, accessibility, and speed. Its customer base spans multiple age groups and life stages, including families through extensions such as Zara Kids. The experience reflects this breadth. Collections evolve quickly, store layouts encourage movement, and the environment supports frequent visits. It is trendy and, even within the brand, spans multiple categories, some of which are more premium. Their sale season is iconic in Europe.

**Massimo Dutti** addresses a more mature customer with higher purchasing power and a preference for understated elegance. The environment shifts accordingly. Spaces are calmer, more structured, and designed for a slower pace. Materials, lighting, and visual presentation reinforce a sense of refinement. At the younger end of the spectrum, **Bershka** and **Pull&Bear** reflect a different relationship with fashion. Their audiences are driven by expression, immediacy, and cultural influence. Stores are more energetic, visually dense, and digitally influenced. The experience mirrors the rhythm and identity of their customers.

**Stradivarius** occupies a focused position, with strong appeal to younger female consumers seeking a balance between trend and structure. The environment provides direction without restricting choice.

**Oysho** introduces a lifestyle dimension centered on comfort, well-being, and movement. The experience becomes softer and more personal, closer to everyday routines such as exercise, rest, and home life.

**Zara Home** extends this logic into living spaces. The experience slows down. It becomes tactile and immersive. Customers are invited to imagine how products fit into their own environment.

### **A store sells experiences, not products.**

Inditex translates age, purchasing power, lifestyle, and life cycle into distinct environments, not just different products.

Across all these brands, the underlying logic remains consistent. The company is not adjusting a single experience. It is designing distinct environments, each aligned with a clearly defined customer profile.

These differences are immediately recognizable in practice. A woman who is a mother of three daughters, aged 14, 11, and 7 sees them play out across age, life stage, and preference, not only in physical stores, but across apps, promotions and newsletters. What captures the attention of her eldest is entirely different from what engages the youngest. The tone, visuals, and pace of communication all shift accordingly. Each experience feels distinct, almost like navigating a different country. Yet beneath that variation, the same language of excellence is consistently present.

### **Luxury versus Value-for-Money**

Excellence is not about luxury, but often the perceived value-for-money of the experience.

It is important to remember that excellence is not about luxury, but often the perceived value-for-money of the experience. What stands out is coherence. Product, space, communication, and pace reinforce the same positioning. There is little ambiguity about who each brand serves.



ZARA



Massimo Dutti



BERSHKA



PULL&BEAR



STRADIVARIUS



OYSHO



ZARA HOME

This level of clarity does not emerge by intuition. It is built through continuous study, structured research, and disciplined interpretation of customer behavior. Understanding segmentation at this level requires combining multiple sources of insight, including transactional data, in-store behavior, online interactions, and direct customer feedback. When integrated effectively, these inputs provide a dynamic view of how customer needs evolve over time.

This is where market research and data analytics become critical. They establish the foundation for identifying meaningful differences between customer groups and for validating whether those differences are reflected in the experience. Without this layer of evidence, segmentation risks becoming an internal construct rather than a reliable guide for decision-making.

Segmentation, in this context, is not a theoretical exercise. It is a set of decisions that shape the experience in concrete ways. Layout, assortment, pricing, tone of communication, and even the expected duration of a visit reflect a clear view of the customer.

When understanding is clear, execution becomes consistent and loyalty is high. Excellence, in this context, is not about adding complexity – it is about alignment. Alignment between who the customer is, what the brand stands for, and how the experience is delivered in practice.

Inditex demonstrates that scale doesn't require uniformity. With clear segmentation and disciplined execution, it reinforces differentiation rather than diluting it.

Customers do not evaluate experiences based on how they were designed for an average. They evaluate whether the experience fits their expectations, their context, and their moment. When it does, that is excellence.

## LESSONS IN CX EXCELLENCE FROM INDITEX

### CLEAR SEGMENTATION

Customer groups are defined with precision across age, purchasing power, lifestyle, and life cycle.

### EXPERIENCE DIFFERENTIATION

Each brand translates its target segment into a distinct environment, not just a different product range.

### OPERATIONAL ALIGNMENT

Store design, assortment, pricing, and communication consistently reflect the intended customer profile.

### BEHAVIOR-BASED INSIGHT

Customer behavior is continuously studied and translated into adjustments in product and experience.

### CONSISTENCY WITHIN SEGMENTS

Consistency is applied with precision, ensuring each experience remains coherent for the customer it is designed for.



# INDITEX

# CX CHANNEL IN ROMANIA



## Designed Journeys vs Lived Experiences

*What the Gas Stations Industry Reveals – And How Customers Redefine CX Across Sectors*



**Cris Oliveira**

CX Strategy Ambassador  
Research Metrics



The CX Channel was invited to present at a webinar hosted by 4Service Group, where we shared a study analyzing over 40,000 online customer reviews in the gas station industry.

Beyond the study, the discussion surfaced a number of relevant points for leaders.

As noted by Oleksiy Tsysar, many organizations still operate with fragmented research, where multiple initiatives exist without any integration or a clear link to decision-making.

It was also highlighted that some of the most widely-used CX frameworks focus on perception metrics, such as NPS, but fail to connect them to operational delivery. Organizations measure sentiment, but struggle to translate it into action.

Another key point was the role of methodology. One of the most important research questions is not in the survey. It is *"What is the best approach for this problem?"*. It is the choice of method used to address the business objective. Selecting the wrong approach limits the value of the insight.

The role of CX dashboards was also questioned. When not integrated into broader CX management systems, they become reporting tools rather than management tools.

Finally, as CX programs grow in complexity, a more disciplined approach is required. Progress often comes from identifying small, actionable steps. Marginal improvements, applied consistently, tend to outperform over-engineered initiatives that fail to deliver.

**In May, the CX Channel will be in Alicante, Spain. Where will the conversation continue next?**

## CX CHANNEL ON THE ROAD

# A LEADERSHIP CONVERSATION FROM MONGOLIA

## *Leading Customer Experience **with AI***

On April 27, we were live at a webinar with C-level executives from different industries across the Mongolian market. The session, Leading Customer Experience with AI, was organized by Sodtsetseg Ganbold, Founder & CEO of CMI, a leading Customer Experience consulting company. Presented by Cristiani Oliveira, part of the CX Channel Team, it was part of a series of global events preceding the CX Summit in Lisbon, an initiative supported by the CX Channel.

Mongolia offers a particularly relevant context for customer experience professionals. It is one of the least densely populated countries in the world, with a sharp contrast between highly concentrated urban centers such as Ulaanbaatar and vast rural areas where access, infrastructure, and service consistency present entirely different challenges. This dual reality creates a natural test for customer experience strategies. What works in controlled urban

environments must adapt to variability, distance, and operational constraints. In this sense, Mongolia reflects a broader global challenge: how to design experiences that are not only efficient but resilient and consistent across fundamentally different conditions.

One idea quickly aligned the room: **customer experience is not what organizations design. It is what customers live.**

From this starting point, the discussion moved quickly into execution. Organizations do not fail because they do not care. They fail when intention replaces evidence, and internal narratives become more convincing than customer reality. The issue is not the absence of data, but the discipline to use it effectively. This is why a strong data-driven decision model, built on credible and objective sources, is not optional. It is the foundation for clarity, prioritization, and consistent execution.



HOST

**Sod** (Sodtsetseg Ganbold)

CEO, CMI



GUEST SPEAKER

**Cristiani Oliveira**

Partner & COO, Lab Experience  
CX Summit Executive Architect

The discussion then moved to a more operational question: **Where does the experience most often break?**

Many organizations design customer journeys as linear processes, built on the assumption that everything works as expected. These journeys reflect ideal conditions, where each step flows seamlessly into the next. However, customer experience does not fail in ideal scenarios. It fails when delivery deviates from design.

At that point, the absence of ownership becomes visible. Responsibilities are unclear, internal dependencies surface, and resolution is no longer managed by the organization. Instead, the burden shifts to the customer. becomes fragmented, requiring customers to repeat information, navigate across channels, and actively pursue resolution.

Customer effort is one of the most critical drivers of satisfaction. Friction increases, confidence weakens, and dissatisfaction grows. What begins as an internal misalignment becomes a visible customer outcome.

**Customer Effort** is a leading indicator of experience quality that measures how much work a customer must invest to achieve a desired outcome. It captures friction across the journey (time, steps, repetition, and cognitive load) and reflects how effectively the organization absorbs complexity on behalf of the customer. Lower effort signals operational alignment and clear ownership; higher effort indicates breakdowns in process, handoffs, or decision-making.

The closing discussion of the session was structured around three interconnected themes, all of them with major impact for customer experience strategy and execution:

**Trust, People, and Technology.**

**The first takeaway** focused on trust as a foundational element of customer experience. In a context of increasing geopolitical uncertainty, trust is no longer a differentiator; it is a requirement. As AI becomes more embedded in customer interactions, the ethical dimension of its use will become more visible and more scrutinized. Transparency, fairness, and accountability must be embedded into operations, not defined as principles.

**The second takeaway** reinforced a principle often overlooked in technology-driven discussions: customers are people, and they value human interaction. AI does not replace this expectation; it increases the need to manage it effectively. People are essential to lead the AI transformation, not only through technical capabilities, but through what are now referred to as human skills. Empathy, judgement, communication, and adaptability become critical in environments where automation and human interaction coexist. Leadership, in this context, requires continuous upskilling.

**The third takeaway** addressed the conditions for success with AI. The organizations that will benefit most are not those with the most advanced models, but those with the strongest governance, the clearest decision-making discipline, and a consistent commitment to customer centricity. Technology does not create an advantage on its own. The way it is governed and applied determines its impact.

These three dimensions, **Trust, People, and Technology**, are not independent. They are interconnected levers that shape how organizations translate strategy into real customer experience outcomes.

*"The next era of growth will be led by organizations that earn trust, elevate human experience and continuously evolve. At CMI and Experience Hub we help leaders transform experience into a lasting competitive advantage and a more meaningful future."*

**Sodtsetseg Ganbold,**  
Founder & CEO of CMI

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