

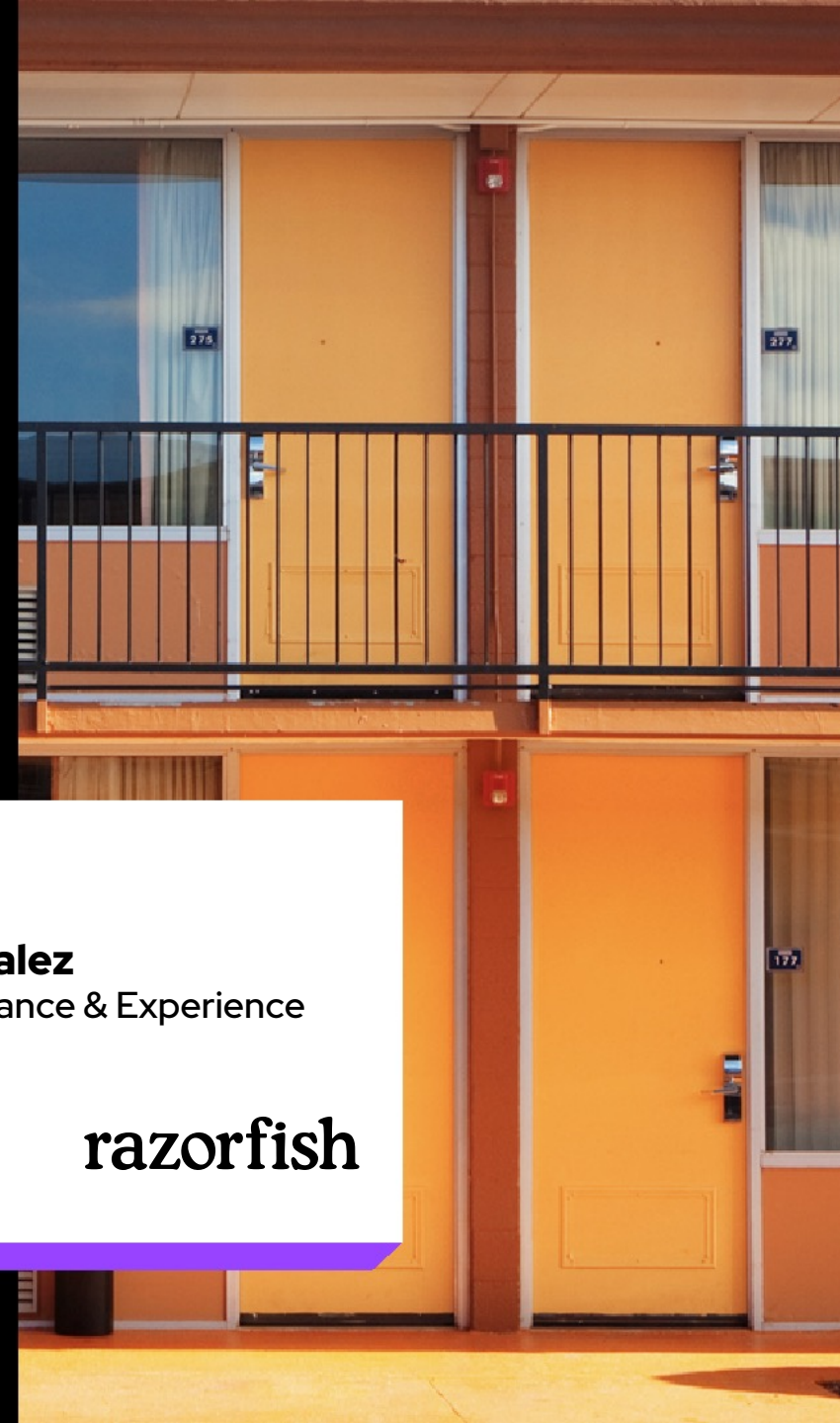
What brands
can learn from

1-star hotels with 5-star reviews

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Picture this: A hotel tucked away on the edge of a busy city. There's nothing fancy about its appearance or amenities.

At first glance, it's a one-star hotel.

But there's the twist. This hotel consistently gets five-star reviews from guests. Why? It's certainly not because of plush pillows or five-course meals.

It's all about the warmth and welcome from the staff, the little unexpected touches that make guests feel special, and a sense of belonging that lingers long after checkout.

This little hotel is pulling off something magical—creating memorable experiences without investing in luxury.



In today's world:

**Brands are
defined by their
experiences.**

What really defines a standout brand isn't what it sells, its flashy logo, or—dare we say it?—its ads.

It's about the experiences they offer. Thanks to the power of social media, a single moment or a simple act of kindness can make a brand shine in the eyes of the people who matter most—customers. It's all about connecting on a deeper level, making people feel something special.

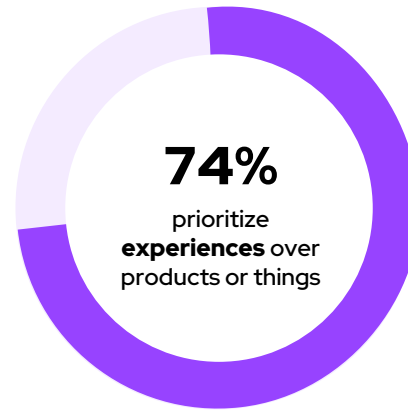
Consumers seek out that “special” feeling.

Search for Authenticity



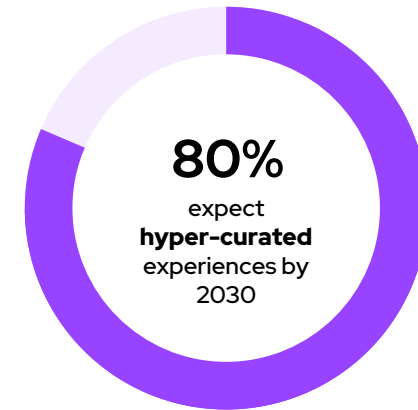
2023 Asendia's

Memories over Materialism



2022 Luxury Travel Advisor

Curated Experiences



2023 Synchrony Financial



Can a brand win our hearts with only authenticity and genuine care?

This story of the unassuming one-star hotel opens a larger conversation about what really matters in branding today. It's not just about luxury or looking the part; it's about creating experiences that resonate, about making every guest or customer feel like they're part of something special. And maybe, just maybe, it's the simplest gestures that speak the loudest.

We spent three months tracking small but impressive hotels, reading thousands of reviews to understand what made them unique. Once we had a shortlist, we sent our team of researchers undercover to experience the hotels themselves.

In full transparency, the hotels we stayed at had one to two stars, but all had to have average reviews over 4.8.* For simplicity, we called our study “One-Star, Five-Star.”

While our experiment specifically explored hospitality experiences, the following findings are category agnostic and can be applied to any brand looking to break through in a crowded landscape.

*At the time research was conducted. Average ratings fluctuate over time.

Hotels

Bluebird Spa City Motor Lodge
Saratoga Springs, NY

Daunt’s Albatross
Montauk, NY

Hotel 31
New York City, NY

Fat Sheep Farm & Cabins
Windsor, VT

The Overlook Inn
Chatsworth, GA

Henson Cove Bed & Breakfast
Hiawassee, GA

**We uncovered 5 key
learnings from our study.**

Key Learnings

Insight 1

A Reason to Smile

Insight 2

Participation Drives Preference

Insight 3

Limitation Turned into Differentiation

Insight 4

The Personal Touch

Insight 5

Engage the Senses

Insight 1

A Reason to Smile

Insight 1

A Reason to Smile

Mystery shopper

Jeff

Our first stop on the map took us to a beach town in New York. On his visit, Jeff brought along his Norwich Terrier, Toby. When registering for the stay, the website listed the pet fee at \$150 per animal.

When the duo arrived at the property, the hotel manager said they would sidestep protocol and discount the fee by \$100 during the off-peak stay. On top of that, Jeff received an upgrade to a more spacious room.

Perhaps standard behavior for the manager, the interaction nonetheless felt special to Jeff—a prologue to a personalized experience. To travelers, a hotel's bending of the rules creates a sense of empathetic, individualized service: They did this just for me?!

Testimonial

"We took a mini-vacation to get out of the city for the holiday weekend. It was also our anniversary weekend, and when we mentioned this they upgraded our room for free and without us asking! We were so grateful, especially because the hotel seemed packed."

—5 Star Trip Advisor Review

Insight

Sometimes it's ok to bend the rules to give them a reason to smile.





Recommendation:

Find ways—simple or complex—to give customers a reason to smile.

Go out of your way to surprise and delight. Doing so shows empathy and an unwavering commitment to service. It creates the perception that your brand will skirt rules to make a customer's experience as positive as possible.

Insight 2

Participation Drives Preference

Insight 2

Participation Drives Preference

Mystery shopper

Hailey

In remote Vermont, the owners of a collection of cabins share their family farm with overnight visitors. In the morning, guests have the option to take part in farm chores. The routine includes feeding, herding, and petting (very important) the three goats and flock of sheep. Spending two hours with the animals, you learn their names and their personalities -- Billy is a troublemaker, Brady is a chiller, and Gronk is...Gronk!

The opportunity to immerse yourself in the farm's way of life and with the people around you is what makes this experience stand out. You're connected to the location via its animals, people, and lifestyle.

Testimonial

"They are transparent about why they ask you to help with the cleaning: They want to keep the rental prices down. Unlike hotels that ask you to do your part for the planet and hang up towels to save water, this feels like a personal request that they wouldn't ask unless they felt it would make a difference."

—Hailey

Insight

The more they participate in the experience, the more connected they are to the brand.





Recommendation:
Build emotional connections by
encouraging participation.

The world continues to go in the way of automation, people still
crave the opportunity to do and create. Give them an
opportunity to engage and make your product their own.

Insight 3

Limitation Turned into Differentiation

Insight 3

Limitation Turned into Differentiation

Mystery shopper

Katey

A simple hotel in Saratoga Springs had a narrow room that could fit only two double beds end to end, making guests sleep toe to toe like the grandparents in Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory.

Knowing that many people visit the town with groups of friends for weekend trips, the hotel decided to convert its oddly shaped room into a coveted offering. Without space for funny business, it's been christened "The Friend Zone." It is one of their most popular rooms.

Testimonial

"It's been years, but I was pleasantly surprised, even excited, when I walked into the room and saw the beds. In the past, they reminded me of sharing a room with my sister. Yet they ended up being 'adult' and as spacious as my bed at home."

–Katey

Insight

Reframing the limitation became a key tool in differentiating these establishments.





Recommendation:

Use creative license to turn restrictions into selling points.

Whether the issue is space or breadth of offerings, be creative—limited inventory becomes an exclusive, curated collection.

Insight 4

The Personal Touch

Insight 4

The Personal Touch

Mystery shopper

Lauren

During our stays across multiple locations, our mystery researchers felt their overall experience was boosted when working with one familiar face. The reliability of the single staffer made everything feel seamless.

At a bed & breakfast in Georgia, the owners, Mariah and Dave do everything from manning the desk to cooking breakfast. Mariah's personality comes to life in every detail, from the hand-painted signage to the spare quilts that she knits. She cooks around dietary restrictions and makes breakfast in an open kitchen while telling stories about the history of the bed and breakfast and the travelers that have stayed there.

They've learned that getting to know their guests and having them know their stories, creates a deeper connection with that guest.

Testimonial

"Mariah did everything for us. She was also everywhere, but nowhere – there when you needed her and away when you were just relaxing. One time I sneezed in the common room, and she walked into the room to say, "bless you."

–Lauren

Insight

The personal touch of being cared for and valued on a personal level enhances the experience.





Recommendation:

Invest in building personal relationships.

Understand that customers are seeking more than just your product or service; they are looking for a meaningful connection that makes them feel valued, understood, and cared for.

Insight 5

Engage the Senses

Insight 5

Engage the Senses

Mystery shopper

Rylie

During preliminary planning, a motel surfaced with a significant number of excellent reviews that mentioned the shampoo. Once we stayed there, we understood why. When placed in a five-star context, the shampoo would be just another expected amenity. However, the contrast between the simplicity of the hotel and the quality of the soap sparked an overwhelmingly positive response. Rather than overhaul the entire bathroom, the hotel decided it could pick one sensorial feature of the bathroom experience and elevate it.

For guests, this made the entire stay feel less run of the mill and became something they would share with friends and family when recommending the hotel. This seemingly minuscule change transformed the motel from a bed for the night to a place to rejuvenate.

Testimonial

"The reviews didn't lie—their shampoo smelled amazing. I didn't expect a full-size bottle. It was such a relief, as the mini samples are never enough."

—Rylie

Insight

A single feature that generates cross-sensory engagement can have a significant impact on perception.





Recommendation:

Elevate your experience with an unforgettable sensory detail.

Find opportunities to focus on specific details of your experience that allow for cross-sensory engagement. One thing worth coming back for resonates greater than everything being “just fine.”

**Let's recap the
key insights and
recommendations.**

Key Insights

Insight 1

A Reason to Smile

Insight 2

Participation Drives Preference

Insight 3

Limitation Turned into Differentiation

Insight 4

The Personal Touch

Insight 5

Engage the Senses

Recommendations

Find ways— simple or complex—to give customers a reason to smile

Build emotional connections by encouraging participation

Use creative license to turn restrictions into selling points

Invest in building personal relationships

Elevate your experience with an unforgettable sensory detail

This research teaches us that the secret to unforgettable experiences is not about the bells and whistles, but the human connection.

Our findings challenge brands across industries to rethink engagement—encouraging participation, leveraging quirks, and focusing on sensory details to create memorable experiences. In a landscape where experiences reign supreme, the key to distinction lies not in consistency or perfection but in embracing and sharing the unique humanity of your brand.

Thanks.

razorfish