AI, the Economy, and Reviews Are Defining the Next Era of Hospitality

What the findings from our 2026 Consumer Survey mean for your business.

Welcome to **our report**

This report on consumer behavior in hospitality combines data from an exclusive survey of U.S. consumers by CGA with expert analysis from Reputation to provide insights into the fast-changing food and beverage industry–and identify what brands can do to stay relevant.

Our report explores change in three key areas: Artificial Intelligence, the economy and consumer engagement. It reveals how the forces of technology and inflation are rapidly shifting the way people choose restaurants and bars, and highlights the huge importance of reviews and recommendations in sustaining foot traffic. The results of our research lead us to recommendations for actions all hospitality brands can take to ensure their reputation in the market is a competitive differentiator rather than a liability to the business.

As we move towards 2026, we think the future of hospitality is bright—but only for brands that understand guests' expectations are evolving at a rapid pace, and have the ability to stay connected to the customer at every step.

Reputation and CGA by NIQ

Contents

Five big benefits of AI in hospitality

Our survey of US consumers reveals how AI is revolutionizing interaction with hospitality. From venue discovery to after-visit review, these are five of the biggest changes to track.

1. Research

After just a couple of years of life, generative AI apps like ChatGPT are already an integral part of consumers' online research. A fifth **(20%)** now use them to look for information about a bar, restaurant or similar venue, which makes them nearly as common a source as review websites like TripAdvisor and Yelp **(24%)**, or social media platforms including TikTok and Instagram **(26%)**. Google searches **(54%)** and word of mouth **(42%)** still dominate the discovery process. But at the current rate of growth, AI apps are likely to close the gap in 2026.

2. Reviews

Over the last decade and a half, online review platforms like TripAdvisor and Google have transformed the way people choose venues—and AI is adding a new dimension of change. Well over half **(55%)** already trust AI-generated review summaries, and **16%** trust them more than individual posts. These numbers are likely to grow fast, especially among younger, tech-savvy consumers.

3. Feedback

AI isn't just changing how consumers read reviews; it's also influencing when and why they write them. Nearly half **(47%)** say they would be likely to leave a review if an AI tool asked at the right moment and in the right tone. It's vital that venues act on this feedback, as thoughtful responses build stronger connections. Technology can help here too, because **86%** of guests say they would have a positive or neutral perception of an AI-generated reply, but those responses must be carefully considered and on-brand.

4. Communications

As AI-powered chatbots become a bigger part of everyday life, their role in hospitality grows. More than a third **(37%)** of consumers say they have interacted with one when contacting a venue or placing an order. However, as with many aspects of AI, there are trust and transparency concerns to consider (see page 5). Nearly three-quarters **(74%)** think it's important that they're told when their communications involve a chatbot rather than a person.

5. Personalization

AI has a powerful role to play in tailoring hospitality to individual needs. Nearly a third **(31%)** have already used ChatGPT or another AI tool to get specific recommendations, and **72%** feel comfortable or neutral about receiving them in the future, based on their past behaviors and known preferences. However, for the sizable cohort with privacy concerns, it's important to avoid imposing personalized recommendations on guests without consent.

20%

Of consumers use AI tools to look for information about a venue

AI on the frontlines

Many of AI's biggest impacts lie outside of actual visits to restaurants and bars. But our research shows there are many ways it can also improve guests' experiences while inside a venue.

Most relate to speed and efficiency. Asked about their favorite three AI-powered features, nearly a fifth cite easy payment options **(19%)** and faster and more accurate wait times (19%). There is a long tail of other potential benefits, like the ability to get order updates, obtain nutritional or dietary information, split bills and resolve issues. If AI strategies start with these end-goals in mind, staff can spend more time on delivering memorable experiences and guests are likely to leave venues more satisfied.

55%

Of consumers trust AI-generated review summaries

AI, trust and the human touch

In hospitality, AI has the potential to improve every step of the guest journey. But how much do people want those experiences to change? Our research reveals widespread concerns that operators need to factor into their tech strategies (see box).

Several of these relate to trust. More than a third **(37%)** of consumers have concerns about privacy and data security, while others worry about a lack of transparency over the use of AI or feel uncomfortable interacting with it. Concerns about facial recognition are even higher, as **45%** feel uncomfortable with it. Fears should ease as familiarity with AI increases. But for now, allaying concerns about privacy as new technology rolls out is a priority.

Some guests also question whether AI will impact the special experiences they have in bars and restaurants. Three in ten **(30%)** have concerns that over-reliance on AI might cause mistakes in service, and a quarter **(25%)** are wary that the expense of integrating AI may be passed on to consumers through higher menu prices.

But the biggest concern relates to what AI means for human contact. Two in five **(41%)** consumers worry about the loss of the human touch and personal interactions if AI reaches too far into service. Nearly a third **(30%)** flag the difficulty of resolving issues without human intervention, while a quarter **(25%)** are concerned about potential job losses if technology takes over.

This is a reminder of the huge value that people place on face-to-face contact in hospitality. Good, friendly service is integral to meals and drinks out, and guests don't want it compromised. In the years ahead, operators will have to prove that AI can genuinely improve guest experiences without sacrificing the personal moments that mean so much.

Top ten AI concerns

1. Loss of human touch and personal interaction **(41%)**
2. Privacy and data security **(37%)**
3. Mistakes in service **(30%)**
4. Difficulty in resolving issues **(30%)**
5. Uncomfortable or distrustful of AI interactions **(27%)**
6. Lack of transparency about use **(27%)**
7. Potential job losses **(25%)**
8. Increased costs passed on to customers **(25%)**
9. Over-reliance causing system failures **(21%)**
10. Environmental impact **(16%)**

41%

Of consumers are concerned that AI will lead to a loss of the human touch

55%

Of those aged 65+ worry that AI adoption may lead to job losses within a business

Tap into AI: Five Reputation recommendations

Hospitality needs to respond to the disruption AI tools are causing in the industry. Close to half **(43%)** of consumers feel that businesses that don't adopt it are going to fall behind. But where are the priorities, and what practical steps can be taken? Here are five quick wins that should be on every AI roadmap.

1. SEO—No longer enough

As sources of information and discovery, generative AI apps like ChatGPT are gaining ground fast, drawing on digital channels such as social media and review aggregators, as well as structured sources like business listings. This means it's no longer enough to just optimize content for Google. Treat AI visibility as the next frontier of "being found," and ensure that critical information like hours, locations, menus, and reviews are structured so that AI tools can find and summarize them accurately. Get ready to step up from SEO to GEO—Generative Engine Optimization.

2. Target reviews

Consumers are increasingly turning to AI-generated summaries of reviews as an alternative to scrolling through individual comments. With trust in them rising, venues need to keep their review volume high, respond well to feedback—whether good or bad—and recognize that since AI pulls from complete text, and not just star ratings, balanced and descriptive content is key. AI tools can also help to secure this valuable content via brand-aligned, well-timed post-visit prompts to guests.

3. Give customers transparency

While consumers are increasingly comfortable with AI in their lives, there are still trust and privacy issues. To ease concerns, it's important to disclose use and make opt-outs clear and easy—especially when it comes to personalization based on previous habits. Giving consumers control builds trust and engagement, but hiding AI's use risks backlash.

4. Get the tone right

The quality of AI-generated communications varies widely. More and more consumers accept them as responses to their reviews and messages—but only if the tone is right. AI-driven thank-yous and apologies are far better than silence, but they have to feel authentic and on-brand—and it's important that teams don't just rely on automation, but read and act on feedback. Tonal accuracy also applies to automated recommendations, which need to be tailored to past preferences.

5. Don't forget the human touch

Consumers' biggest concerns about AI relate to its impact on personal interaction. Most people still want friendly service when they eat and drink out, and to fix any issues face to face. It's essential to reassure guests that AI complements human touchpoints rather than replaces them. To cater to the gulf in preferences between young and old (see box), operations need both high-tech and human service.

Mind the age gap

AI adoption has exposed a major generational divide—between younger, tech-savvy consumers who embrace it and older adults who are much less convinced by its benefits.

For example, three in five **(61%)** of those aged 25 to 34 have already used AI tools to get personalized recommendations, compared to just **4%** of those aged 65+. Nearly nine in ten **(86%)** of this younger group trust AI-generated summaries—close to triple the figure of **31%** among the older cohort. There are similar gulfs in attitudes toward the value of AI-driven personalization and communications.

There are two big takeaways here. First, venues need to ensure that their implementation of AI throughout the guest journey doesn't alienate older people who are wary of negative impacts. And second, that with younger people so deeply engaged, AI tools are only going to get more prevalent in the years to come.

The economic picture

Going out to eat and drink is ingrained in life in the US. Well over half **(56%)** of consumers say it is one of their fundamental activities. More than two-thirds **(72%)** agree it's the treat they look forward to the most. Nearly as many **(62%)** say it is the main way they socialize with friends, family and colleagues.

But while bars and restaurants are integral to people's lives, not everyone has been able to enjoy them as they would like. The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically changed engagement, and the cost of living crisis that followed has brought more challenges. Here's what our research tells us about consumers' latest behavior in this tough economic landscape.

1. Going out less...

A squeeze on disposable incomes has inevitably forced some consumers to reduce their visits to bars, restaurants and cafes. Three in ten **(30%)** say they are going out for drinks less often than they were a year ago—11 percentage points higher than those going out more often. Among those cutting back, three in five **(62%)** say it's because of cost-of-living increases.

2 ... But spending more

They may be going out less often, but consumers are paying more when they do so. A third **(32%)** are spending more on eating and drinking out than they were a year ago, while only **21%** are spending less. This is partly due to sustained inflation driving up menu prices and partly because many consumers are ordering fewer drinks per visit.

40%

Of consumers spend more than $100 a month on eating and drinking out

3. Polarization

The last few years have polarized consumers in hospitality, between those who are spending freely and those tightening their belts. At the top end, two in five **(40%)** consumers say they typically spend more than $100 a month on eating and drinking out, but a fifth **(20%)** spend less than $30.

4. A local focus

COVID-19 forced consumers to stay closer to home, and economic difficulties have led many to keep up those habits. More than four in five **(84%)** like to support local businesses, and it's often because they like the sense of community these places provide. Venues that tap into the "buy local" mindset can get a competitive advantage when spending is tight.

5. Reasons to be cheerful

The market is undoubtedly difficult, but there are grounds for cautious optimism about 2026. About a third **(32%)** of consumers expect to eat and drink out more often over the next year—more than the **27%** who think they will go out less. Another encouraging sign is that the treat mindset is still strong. A quarter **(25%)** of those who are spending more than they were a year ago say it is because they are buying higher quality drinks.

20%

Of consumers spend less than $30 a month on eating and drinking out

Great expectations: The new age of demand

The cost of living crisis has substantially raised people's expectations of their meals and drinks out. When spending is tight, they want to be sure they get a good experience—and if they don't, they won't come back.

Nearly a third **(31%)** of consumers say their expectations of venues are higher now than they were a year ago, while just **5%** have lowered them. Expectations have been raised notably higher among younger demographics like 18 to 24 year-olds **(48%)** than older ones like the 65+ group **(6%)**.

This is a direct result of the higher cost of eating and drinking out. Relentless inflation has forced all venues to push up their menu prices—often at a rate that has outpaced salary increases. It's no surprise that when faced with paying more, consumers demand more too.

Expectations are rising on two key fronts: quality and value. Nearly half **(47%)** of those with higher expectations say they expect better quality food and drinks now, and nearly as many **(45%)** want better experiences for their money. These people know they have a lot of venues to choose from, and they're not willing to choose between value or quality—they want both.

This is reflected in consumers' lists of the things that matter most when choosing a restaurant, pub or bar (see box). As well as quality and price, they place a lot of value on things like the convenience and past experiences of a venue. What's also striking is how many factors relate to foundational elements of hospitality, like service and hygiene. When people say they demand more when they go out, they are often talking not about nice-to-have extras, but the basics done well. It's the venues that consistently deliver on the fundamentals that are likely to exceed expectations.

The ten things that matter most

Which of these considerations are important to you when choosing a venue?

1. Quality of food available **(55%)**
2. Price **(54%)**
3. Good service **(45%)**
4. Good previous visits **(39%)**
5. Type of cuisine available **(38%)**
6. How convenient it is to visit **(37%)**
7. Range of food available **(37%)**
8. Offers and discounts **(27%)**
9. Hygiene standards **(23%)**
10. Atmosphere and experience **(23%)**

31%

Of consumers have higher expectations of venues than they did a year ago

47%

Of those with higher expectations expect better quality food and drinks now

Thriving in a shifting economy: Five Reputation recommendations

A complex economic landscape means all hospitality businesses need to remain close to their customers in 2026. Here are five priorities for meeting and beating consumers' expectations.

1. Keep value and intent front and center

With the cost of living top of mind and AI search engines reshaping how people discover options, guests are more selective than ever about the experiences they prioritize. Managing prices in a high-inflation environment isn't easy, but providing affordable choices, bundles, and clear, transparent pricing in your business listings—and ensuring these details are echoed in reviews—helps AI engines surface those nuances. Don't overlook visuals either: photos and videos that showcase real guest experiences are increasingly prioritized in AI-driven discovery.

2. Make every visit count

Raised expectations and fierce competition mean one poor visit can sour a guest's impression and push them to a competitor. As spending rises, so do standards: every meal or drink counts. Consistent delivery of the basics—quality food and drink, attentive service, and spotless hygiene—is now non-negotiable. Without real-time visibility into customer sentiment, even a handful of negative experiences can quickly reshape how guests perceive your brand.

3. Segment the offer

Polarization of disposable incomes means venues have to cater to a wide range of spend. From premium offerings down to budget deals, it's hard to know what the next guest will want. The solution is to segment offerings as much as possible, maintaining value-driven choices like happy hours and smaller plates while also showcasing premium upgrades for those willing to spend more.

4. Go local

As people stay closer to home—first for COVID reasons, now for financial ones—support for local venues is rising. All venues need to lean into their neighborhoods, promoting their community ties, social responsibility and local suppliers. Good loyalty programs can also keep locals feeling valued and returning often.

5. Get ready for a bounceback

We're not out of the woods yet, but there's cautious confidence about a modest economic rebound in 2026. Now is the time to plan ahead and invest in review management, business listings and social engagement so that venues are discoverable, attractive and ready to serve when consumers loosen their purse strings.

Enduring love

Despite all the economic trauma, hospitality remains a top priority in people's lives. Asked about their plans if their spending were to be cut, **20%** say they would prioritize their regular visits to bars and restaurants. This is not far below clothing **(28%)**, and ahead of other big areas of spending like domestic vacations **(18%)**, vehicles **(16%)** and sporting events **(13%)**.

This is a welcome sign for hospitality as we move towards 2026. Consumers will stop eating and drinking out only as a very last resort, and venues will need to be ready to welcome lapsed users back when they are able to spend more, by positioning themselves as social anchors and the affordable, well-earned treats people crave.

The ways to win revisits and recommendations

With spending so tight and competition so fierce, it's more important than ever to earn revisits and recommendations. What matters most is the quality of previous experiences and brands' reputations for quality, value and service. But there are plenty of things that all venues can do to improve the chances of guests returning and telling others to come too.

1. In-venue incentives

It's important to remember that the recommendation process doesn't always happen after a visit to a venue—it starts inside it. A fifth **(20%)** of consumers say they recommend a venue to others while still there, and nearly as many rate it **(16%)** or share photos or videos of the food or drink **(14%)**. Venues that can encourage this kind of content while guests are having a good time at the table or bar can get a head start on recommendations.

2. Scrupulous hygiene

The hygiene of a venue is more significant to consumers than sometimes thought. A fifth **(20%)** of consumers say a good hygiene rating online would make them more likely to revisit—making it a top-three factor behind ratings and reviews (see box). It's also one of the things most likely to lead people to recommend a venue and cement their loyalty. Scrupulous cleanliness is essential.

3. Responsive communications

Venues need to be ready to engage on guests' terms. People expect to be able to contact them easily, especially via email, website, phone and—among younger adults in particular—social media platforms. And venues need to be quick: well over half expect a response either immediately **(19%)** or within a few hours **(38%)**, and only **18%** will allow longer than a day. Slow responses can damage repeat bookings and reputation.

4. Compelling social media

Platforms like Facebook, Instagram and TikTok are the new battlegrounds for recommendations. Well over half **(56%)** of consumers are more likely to visit a venue if their friends post about it on social media, and even more **(61%)** say they trust social recommendations more than reviews elsewhere. Anything that venues can do to encourage positive and authentic social media content helps.

5. Accurate listings

When people receive venue recommendations, it's vital to help them learn more, especially online. Two in five **(40%)** consumers look at online menus before a visit now, while more than a quarter check opening hours **(28%)** and locations or directions **(29%)**. This makes a compelling case for keeping listings accurate and up to date on every online touchpoint.

24%

Of consumers say lots of positive and recent **(26%)** online customer reviews makes them more likely to revisit

56%

Of consumers are more likely to visit a venue after friends' social media posts

Top eleven revisit factors

What would encourage you to revisit a venue?

1. High star rating online **(27%)**
2. Lots of positive online reviews **(24%)**
3. Good hygiene rating **(20%)**
4. Up-to-date online information **(20%)**
5. A good website **(19%)**
6. Lots of recent online reviews **(19%)**
7. Photos or videos of food or drink posted by friends or family **(17%)**
8. Photos or videos of venue posted by friends or family **(17%)**
9. Seeing someone I know 'check in' to the venue **(16%)**
10. Good responsiveness to negative comments **(14%)**
11. Easy online booking process **(14%)**

How to earn feedback

For many consumers, reviews have become a standard part of the hospitality experience. More than a quarter **(28%)** now leave them on platforms like Google and TripAdvisor every time or most times they eat or drink out, and a similar number **(27%)** respond with this frequency to feedback surveys shared by a venue.

Guests are ready to leave reviews, and venues need to be proactive in sourcing them. Well over half **(56%)** of consumers are very or quite likely to leave positive feedback, while far fewer **(37%)** are ready to give negative comments—which means asking for reviews is a big net gain. Here are five key considerations.

Platforms

Strategies for encouraging reviews need to segment and prioritize platforms. Our research shows there are three clear leaders: a business' own website, Google and TripAdvisor. Venues' Facebook, Instagram and Twitter feeds are smaller but still significant sources.

Responses

Guests have become accustomed to getting responses to their feedback. Two-thirds **(67%)** get these every time or most times they leave a review. This is an opportunity to create goodwill with guests or mitigate negative opinions, as **41%** think they would still be willing to revisit if they got a respectful and appropriate response. Poor communications in general are a major turn-off (see box).

Rewards

Sometimes guests need a little extra push to review. Being asked to do so by staff and incentives like deals and prize draws make people more likely to provide feedback.

Simplified Sharing

Guests leave feedback on a variety of review sites now, and more than half **(53%)** would post more reviews if they could easily share them all at once. For businesses, this highlights the value of pulling reviews towards all the platforms they can, including their own websites and business listings.

Recency

It's vital to keep reviews fresh and relevant. For **41%** of consumers, a review needs to be no longer than a month old in order to be trusted as accurate. This makes it even more important to keep volumes of reviews consistently high.

Top six hospitality bugbears

Which of these have you found frustrating before, during or after a visit?

1. Can't find information on a website **(32%)**
2. Out-of-date information **(29%)**
3. Difficulty viewing of menu on app or website **(27%)**
4. Lack of response to online inquiry **(20%)**
5. Lack of response to a negative review **(18%)**
6. Difficult online booking process **(18%)**

28%

Of consumers leave reviews every time or most times they eat or drink out

32%

Of consumers have been frustrated by being unable to find information online

Bring guests back:
Five Reputation recommendations

Revisits, reviews and recommendations: mastering these three Rs will be the key to growth and brand reputation in 2026. Here are five steps to earning them.

1. Stay focused on listings

Compiling business listings may not be the most exciting aspect of marketing, but it might be the most important. They are the primary way people and AI tools find the information they need to visit a venue, so it's essential to keep them accurate and up to date across every platform. Menus, hours, location and contact details are all key to capturing the silent majority who check details carefully before booking. Connecting social platforms to your listings is always a quick win to ensure high-quality visual content is available at the first touchpoint.

2. Drive more reviews

While online reviews are an integral part of hospitality now, there's more that could be done to generate them. It starts with encouraging more social sharing during visits via incentives and Instagrammable presentation, and continues afterwards by actively requesting feedback and reviews (see box). This turns guests into promoters and enriches data to identify operational improvements.

3. Use hygiene to build reputation

Hygiene is an ultra-important consideration to many guests and needs relentless focus. Demonstrating it at key touchpoints and communicating it through hygiene scores are powerful elements of reputation management.

4. Stay responsive

Venues now need an always-on approach to communications. It's critical to reply quickly to every contact, say thank you for positive feedback, and fix any negative comments to help turn disappointed guests into brand advocates. AI-powered automation can help to triage messages and respond fast.

5. Master socials

Social media now have an enormous impact on the venue choices of consumers—especially younger adults. Visual content is king, so venues need to be Instagram- and TikTok-ready. They also have to encourage posts, amplify user-generated content and ensure their own feeds showcase the quality of their food, drink and atmosphere.

Mastering these five pillars will feed the AI engines the right signals for your restaurants and dishes to show up when it matters the most.

Top five review drivers

What would make you more likely to post a review or feedback about your experience at a venue?

1. If I had a really great experience **(40%)**
2. If I had a really poor experience **(31%)**
3. Discounts or deals on future visits **(29%)**
4. Being invited to review via email **(22%)**
5. Vouchers for free drinks or food **(22%)**

About our research

All data in this report is taken from CGA by NIQ's exclusive Reputation survey of 763 nationally representative consumers in the US who have visited the On Premise in the last six months.

About Reputation

Reputation is the only platform that empowers companies to fulfill their brand promise by measuring, managing, and scaling their reputation performance in real-time, everywhere. Functioning as a business' eyes and ears in the spaces where customers talk, post, review, and recommend, Reputation AI-powered product stack analyzes vast amounts of public and private feedback data to uncover predictive insights for companies to act on, and improve their online reputations.

Visit **www.reputation.com** to learn more.

About CGA by NIQ

CGA by NIQ provides definitive On Premise consumer intelligence that reveals new pathways to growth for the world's most successful food and drink brands. With more than 30 years of research, data, and analytics, CGA by NIQ provides the Full View™.

CGA by NIQ works with food and beverage suppliers, consumer brand owners, wholesalers, government entities, pubs, bars, and restaurants to protect and shape the future of the On Premise experience. Using complete and clear understanding of measurement and insights, CGA by NIQ provides a competitive edge to guide winning strategies for On Premise businesses.

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