To optimize consumer experiences, don’t always rely on saving the best for last

A great day out is a very personal thing. For those who curate experiences, it’s about choosing the right elements, for the right people, in the right order.



October 28, 2026

“Save the best for last” is a familiar principle when it comes to creating memorable

©IESE Business School

experiences. The thinking is that people are more likely to remember the experience fondly if it ends on a high note. This is known as the peak-end rule, a psychological principle that helps explain why we save our favorite bite of a meal for last.

But is the peak-end rule peak strategy? Research by IESE professor Victor Martinez de Albeniz, together with coauthors Abhishek Deshmane (IESE PhD) of the Georgia Institute of Technology and Guillaume Roels of INSEAD, suggests otherwise. They find it is more complex: The optimal sequence depends on how people respond to individual experiences, how those experiences influence one another and whether the sequence can be adapted as it unfolds. These insights are particularly relevant in the age of AI, when businesses can increasingly measure customer sentiment and personalize experiences in real time.

The authors examined data from four experiential contexts — watching movies (IMDb.com), reading books (Goodreads), eating out and visiting tourist attractions (both Tripadvisor) — and developed a model to understand how activity order affected satisfaction, considering activity quality, individual preferences, previous experiences and the way people compare activities to one another.

Comparison, contrast and other factors that can make happiness spill over

One factor that challenges the peak-end rule is affect assimilation: the tendency for our feelings about one experience to influence how we feel about the next.

When an experience leaves us happy and excited, it can carry over into subsequent activities. Less appealing experiences may benefit from this emotional spillover, creating a halo effect. So, bringing in a star activity early on or in the middle of a sequence can, at times, create more satisfaction than saving it for last. Placed early, it can lift the mood; placed late, it might find a tired, unreceptive audience.

But the same principle can also work in reverse. Quality contrast — when people compare an experience to those that came before it — is also key. After an exceptional start, a pedestrian middle may feel disappointing because expectations have been raised beyond what later experiences can deliver.

So how and when should businesses bring out their best? One answer is to treat it as a wild card.

©IESE Business School

When an experience quality or an individual's reaction is uncertain, holding back the standout activity can serve as a buffer from disappointment. Start with something good, monitor how customers respond and bring in something exceptional when satisfaction starts waning. If satisfaction levels stay high, reserve a highlight for the end for a lasting positive impression. The key is less in the placement than in the way experiences interact.

Mood is key to satisfaction

There is no universal formula. The best order depends on how people already feel and how that influences what they experience next.

For some businesses designing experiences, closed-loop planning — planning ahead and adjusting along the way — may work well, but it isn't always practical, as many trips, events and reservations require booking well in advance. But advances in AI and sentiment analysis make it increasingly feasible to respond to customers' preferences as they emerge.

When the relationship is complex, monitoring reactions and changing the sequence can improve outcomes. Imagine an AI travel assistant that knows you love adventure but dislike crowds. Instead of listing the top attractions, it asks how you feel that day, learns which experiences you tend to enjoy and arranges activities. If you start getting tired or an attraction disappoints, it suggests a change of plan.

Benefits here can extend beyond the individual. By recommending different schedules and distributing visitors across attractions and time slots, businesses could help spread demand more evenly, avoid overcrowding and improve customer satisfaction. In a prior study by Martinez de Albeniz and Deshmane, Amsterdam's Van Gogh Museum was able to boost visits to underused parts of the museum by 20%, creating natural moments of compare-and-contrast between the heavy hitters.

In praise of the quiet moments

Wouldn't it be nice, though, if every experience were equally great? Surprisingly, the answer is, *not necessarily.* It turns out it isn't always that satisfying to have a uniformly excellent time.

When everything is exceptional, what once delighted us soon feels ordinary, leaving businesses under pressure to deliver even more next time. Sometimes, a sequence that

©IESE Business School

builds gradually toward a powerful finale is effective precisely because it creates anticipation. At other times, creating experiential peaks and valleys helps prevent fatigue and preserves the impact of standout moments. You don’t need to eliminate every dip in quality. You do need to understand what levels of contrast and variation are enriching, which are tiring, and how to build in moments where you can pivot the experience.

ALSO OF INTEREST:

Cheap and cheerful? Why low online ratings can actually produce better experiences

Using data to drive better business decisions

How the humanities can enrich your management



Victor Martinez de Albeniz

Professor in the Operations, Information and Technology Department at IESE. His areas of interest include retail, supply-chain management, procurement, innovation and product development.

©IESE Business School