



THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

The Fandom Formula

How brands can unleash the power of their most passionate supporters

 | FANDEX

This paper is based on research from The NRG Fandex. A comprehensive study of almost 250 brands, The Fandex represents a first-of-its-kind framework for measuring one of the most valuable brand assets: fandom.

National Research Group





Through fandom, brands unlock more enduring and valuable consumer relationships

To spark fandom, brands need to push beyond the rational and the transactional. They need to deliver on the emotional.



LINDSAY ANGELO
FUTURIST AND
GROWTH STRATEGIST

AT A GLANCE THREE KEY TAKEAWAYS

01

THE POWER OF FANDOM

Fandom now plays a major role in consumers' lives and sense of personal identity—and not just in the domain of media and entertainment. From fast food to fitness, fandom has become a dominant force in daily life as consumers seek out a sense of community and belonging.

02

WHY FANDOM MATTERS TO BRANDS

Fans are more likely to advocate for your brand, to spend more money on it, and to stick with you in times of crisis. As a result, fandom is highly correlated to the kind of behavioral outcomes that matter to brands, and can help them unlock more powerful insights about their most valuable customers.

03

DRIVING FANDOM

The single most powerful driver of fandom is the ability to consistently surprise customers and exceed their expectations. Only through a commitment to continuous innovation can brands create the kind of memorable and surprising experiences needed to cultivate an enduring fandom.

Fandom is one of the most powerful forces shaping our culture today. As long as humans have existed, we've had a basic need for community. But today, we're spending more time than ever by ourselves¹; and loneliness and isolation are becoming increasingly common social problems.

So it's no surprise that so many people have turned to fandom as the solution—seeing it as a way to reinject a sense of belonging into their lives and carve out an identity for themselves in an often alienating world. And social media has provided the perfect set of tools for fans across the word to find each other and come

together in virtual spaces to bond over shared passions. From Taylor Swift and her Swifties to the legions of Marvel and DC superfans, we've all seen the way that fan communities can reshape pop culture around themselves and act as the epicenter of major media narratives.

But fandom isn't just something that pop stars and media companies need to care about. While we might not be used to thinking of the products and services we use every day in terms of "fandom," the reality is that those brands can evoke emotional reactions in consumers every bit as intense as those created by film franchises or celebrities.



73% of US adults consider themselves a **superfan** of at least one brand

In a world that feels increasingly unstable and uncertain², fandom—for platforms, stores, products, or service providers—can provide an anchor of stability. Through fandom, consumers can create connections with others, find new ways of expressing themselves, and, ultimately, imbue their lives with a deeper sense of meaning and authenticity.

For businesses, therefore, learning how to measure fandom can unlock more powerful insights about the customers that should matter to them the most; the people, that is,

who connect with their brands on an emotional level. And the brands that invest in building and maintaining a fandom will be the ones best set-up for success when it comes to gaining engaged customers, launching new products, or weathering a crisis.

In this report, we'll unpack the mysteries of fandom: what it is, why it matters, and how to measure it. We'll explore the factors that drive fan engagement, the key moments along the pathway to fandom, and what separates the brands that have an active and engaged fanbase from those that don't.

1. Jacob Phillips, "The crisis of loneliness," The Critic, June 23, 2023

2. Max Fisher, "Is the World Really Falling Apart, or Does It Just Feel That Way?", The New York Times, July 12, 2022

IN THIS REPORT, YOU'LL FIND...

✓ What fandom is and why brands should care about it

✓ The key stages along the pathway to fandom

✓ The different ways that consumers express their identity as fans

✓ What builds brand fandom and how to measure and quantify it

✓ The brands that have done the most to build enduring fandoms—and the secrets behind their success



In an increasingly fragmented and polarized world, creating fans is more important than ever



Historically, the concept of fandom has most often been associated with the domain of media and entertainment; we’re used to thinking of ourselves as fans of pop stars, sports teams, or movie franchises, for example.

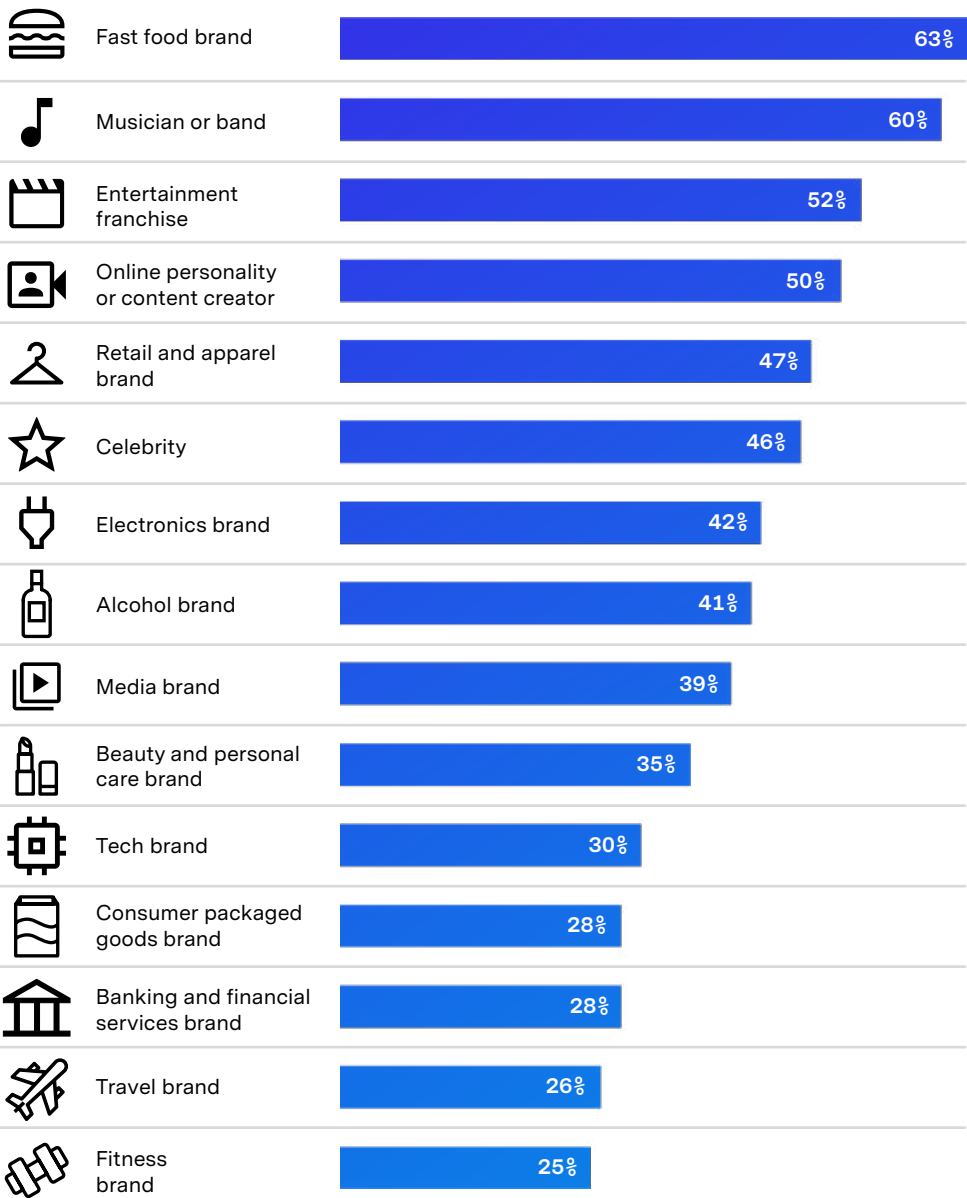
But today, it’s clear that fandom now extends well beyond the world of sports or pop culture. **Sixty-three percent of Americans, for example, describe themselves as “big fans” of at least one fast food brand; more than the number who identify as fans of musicians, celebrities, or entertainment franchises.** Around 4 in 10 consumers see themselves as a fan of an alcohol brand or a personal care brand—and smaller but still sizable pockets of fandom exist in almost every sector of the economy, from fitness to financial services.

3. Dr Amy Ross Arguedas, Dr Craig T. Robertson, Dr Richard Fletcher, Prof. Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, “Echo chambers, filter bubbles, and polarisation: a literature review,” Reuters Institute, January 19, 2022
4. Jason DeRose, “The importance of religion in the lives of Americans is shrinking,” NPR, May 16, 2023
5. Kim Parker, “About a third of U.S. workers who can work from home now do so all the time,” Pew Research Center, March 30, 2022

This speaks to a broader shift in the way that individual consumers relate to—and find meaning in—the brands whose products they consume. We live in a world that is fast becoming more culturally fragmented and polarized than ever before³, and one in which people are willing to share a huge portion of their lives online. Moreover, many of the traditional centralizing forces that gave structure to people’s lives and brought people together in physical locations—such as religion⁴ or the office⁵—are waning in relevance.

Against that backdrop, the products you choose to buy and the brands you choose to associate yourself with aren’t just a question of personal taste. Instead, they become an important marker of identity, a way of connecting with like-minded people and carving out for yourself a sense of community and belonging in an increasingly alienating world. In other words, they say something about you as an individual: your values, your style, and your tribe.

PERCENTAGE OF CONSUMERS WHO CONSIDER THEMSELVES A “BIG FAN” OF AT LEAST ONE...



Fandom ends up being enormously valuable. When you can create fandom, you’re going to see incredibly high retention rates. When you can create that level of passion, then suddenly the value of that customer, that curve, can really ramp up. You’re going to see a multiplying of the potential value of the consumption of the core product to all sorts of things.



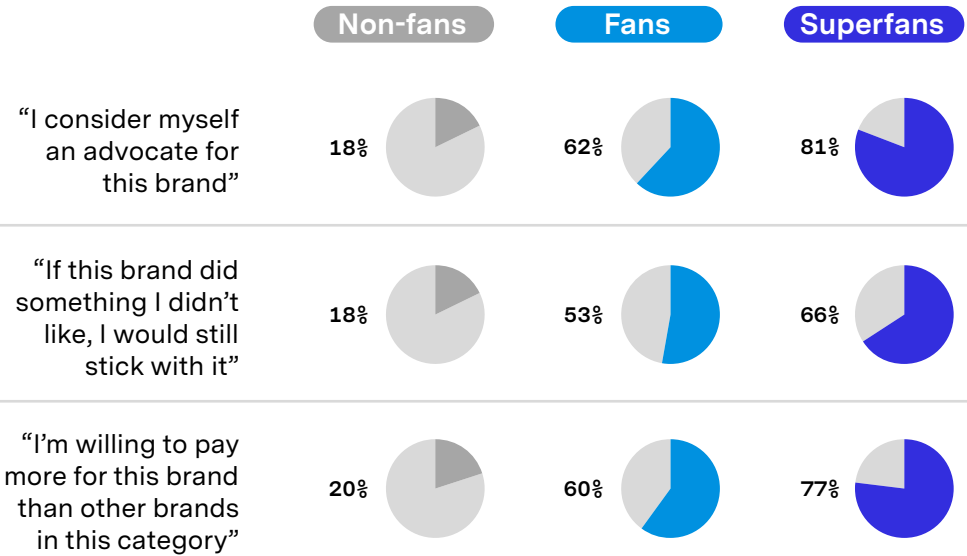
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This, in essence, is what separates a customer from a fan. In the case of ordinary customers—even the most loyal ones—their relationship with a brand is rooted in a transactional equation; a straightforward assessment of the value the brand’s products add to their life relative to the cost of those products.

But for fans, that relationship goes much deeper—and is underpinned by a strong emotional connection to the

brand in question. In their case, the value they get from their connection to a brand is far richer, because it stretches beyond just the direct interactions they have with a brand’s products. In some cases, fans may not even have had *any* direct exposure to the brand’s products; think, for example, of the Tesla superfan who avidly consumes and shares content they see about the brand online, but is still far from their dream of one day owning one of their cars themselves.

CONSUMER ATTITUDES TOWARDS BRANDS
Aggregated data for 247 well-known consumer brands





A fan, therefore, is much more than a loyal customer. They’re someone who treats their relationship with a brand as an outlet for self-expression, a reflection of their personal values, and a gateway into a community of people who share those values.

The upshot of this is that fandom is highly correlated with the kind of behavioral outcomes that matter to brands—even more so than many of the metrics that companies have traditionally relied on to understand consumer engagement with their products. Compared to non-fans, **fans are 3.5 times as likely to act as a brand advocate**. And they’re also far more likely to be willing to pay a premium for the brand’s products relative to alternatives in the same category.

Fans can also act as the vanguard through which brands are able to expand their product portfolio or move into new markets; **2 in 3 fans say that they’re at least willing to try whatever new products the brand comes out with**. Early fan reaction can often be make-or-break for a new product offering—which is why it’s critical that brands understand who their fans are and what they care about.

But there’s another reason that fandom should matter to today’s leading brands: resilience. In the era of social media, businesses are under the microscope in a way they’ve never been before. Consumers are constantly scrutinizing every decision they make, and are quick to punish any actual or perceived misstep. On both ends of the political spectrum, consumers have learned how to use their online voices to inflict lasting damage on brands that disappoint them in one way or another—as demonstrated, for example, by the recent conservative-led boycott of Bud Light⁶, or the backlash against Shein for its influencer partnerships⁷.

Having an invested fandom, therefore, can go a long way towards helping soften the blow of a reputational crisis. Fifty-three percent of fans—and a full two thirds of superfans—say they’re willing to stick with a brand even when that brand makes a decision they personally disagree with. This speaks to how deeply intertwined the notions of fandom and resilience truly are: fandom breeds resilience, and likewise resilient brands are better placed to build resilient fandoms that can stand the test of time⁸.



6. Emily Stewart, “The Bud Light boycott, explained as much as is possible,” Vox, June 30, 2023
7. Amanda Silberling, “How Shein’s influencer trip to a Chinese factory backfired,” TechCrunch, June 27, 2023
8. Roy Persson, “Resilience in Reputation,” NRG, June 29 2023

Of course, fandom also brings with it a heightened set of expectations. Fans may be less likely to abandon your brand than other customers, but their loyalty isn’t infinite. If they do ever feel that you’ve strayed too far from their values, or that your commitment to those values is inauthentic, then—as the Bud Light case demonstrates—their emotional investment in your

brand can contribute to a sense of personal betrayal or disappointment far greater than an ordinary customer would feel. Which is another reason why it’s so important for brands to invest time and resources towards understanding their fans’ values and learning how to faithfully and authentically embody them.

A brand fan is an advocate. They want to talk about you because they want to talk about themselves. And with how interconnected we are now, it’s all super amplified. We observe, we share, and we spread the love for these brands, products and services that we feel so powerfully about and that in and of itself creates a kind of 1+1=3.



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There is a powerful risk mitigation benefit of fandom for brands. Fans are more forgiving—they tend to think you’re awesome regardless of what happens. They’re the ones who will stick with you through PR issues, supply chain issues, product shortages, whatever it might be...they are your ride or die. Fans will see you through.



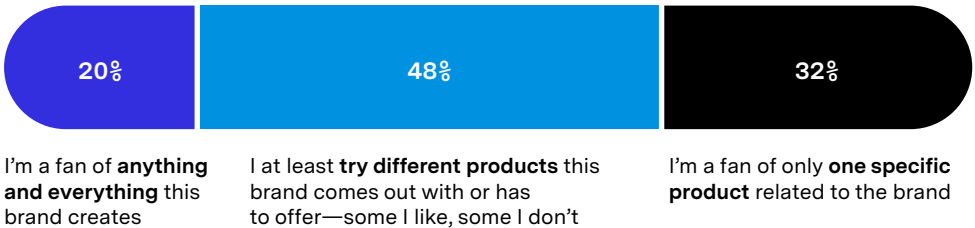
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Stories and narratives are often the starting blocks. These memories are the foundation of fandom. Brands have to have a product that is distinctive enough, unique enough, that the brand can create shared stories and narratives among people that form the foundation of these communities.



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Q: HOW MANY PRODUCTS ASSOCIATED WITH THIS BRAND ARE YOU A FAN OF?



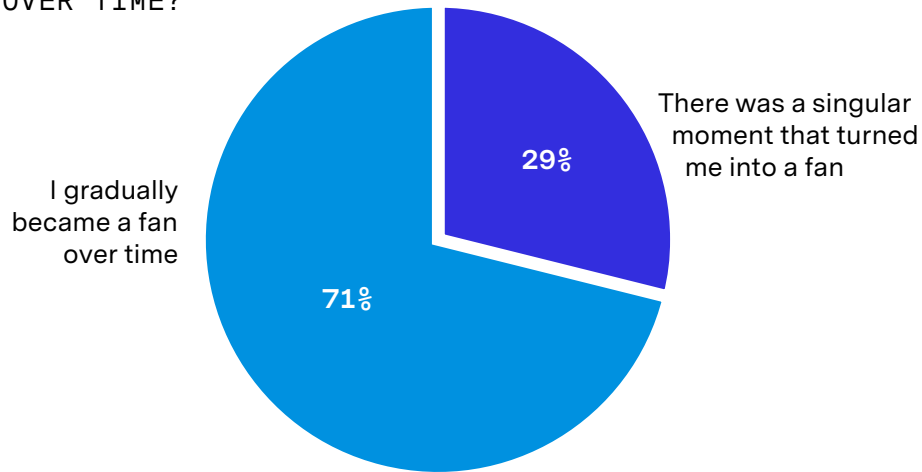


Fandom is a journey— not something that can be achieved overnight

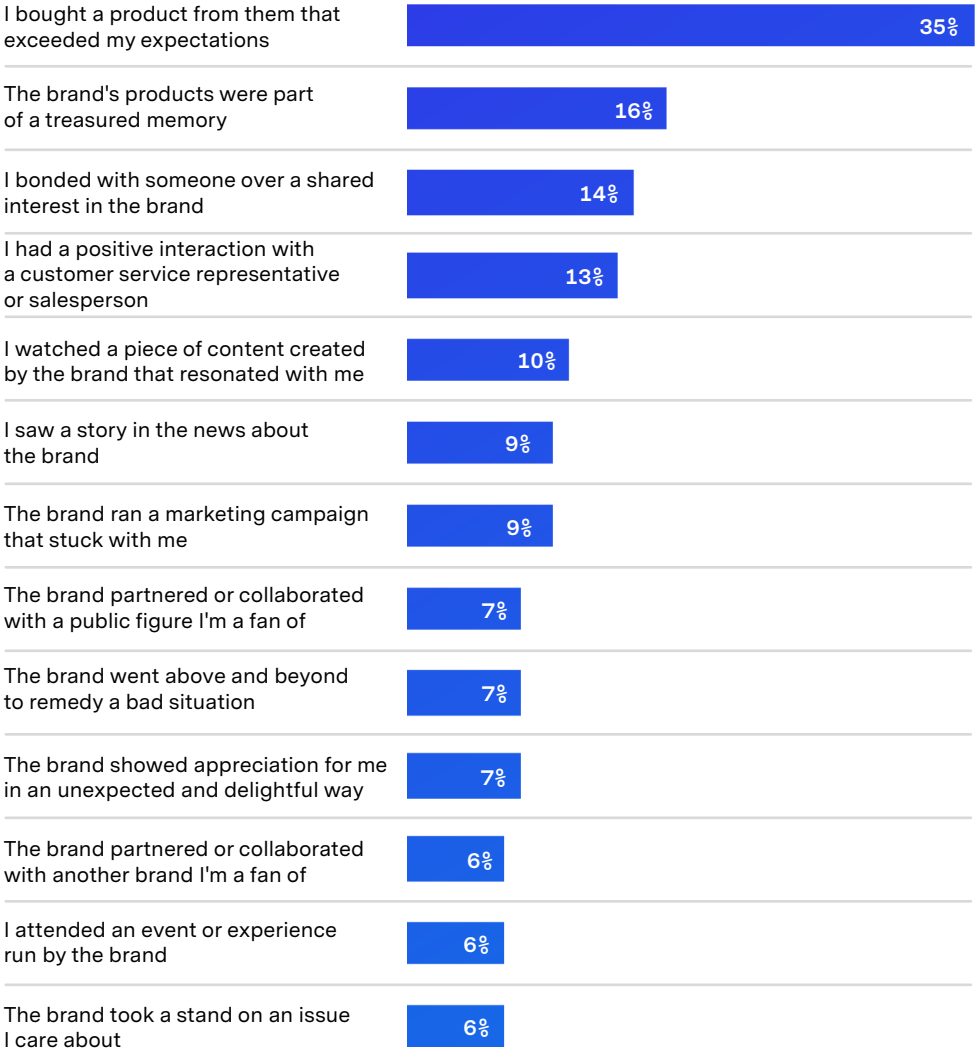
Cultivating that sort of fanbase, however, is by no means an easy task. In the vast majority of cases, it’s something that can only be achieved through a prolonged and consistent commitment to exceeding customers’ expectations and demonstrating an alignment with their personal values.

Fewer than a third of people say they can point to any one specific moment that transformed them into a fan of a given brand. **The vast majority, 71%, describe the process as something that took place gradually and organically over time;** the cumulative effect of many different points of interaction that left them with enduring positive memories.

Q: DID YOU BECOME A FAN OVERNIGHT, OR WAS IT A GRADUAL PROCESS OVER TIME?



Q: WHAT MOMENTS CONTRIBUTED TO YOU BECOMING A FAN OF A BRAND?



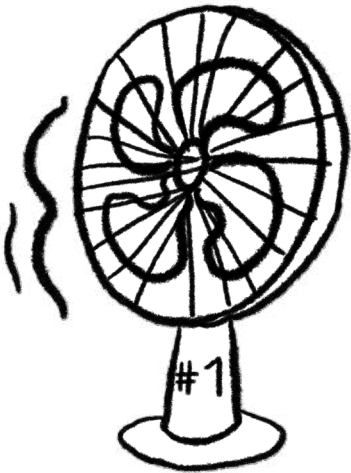
So, what does that journey to fandom look like? Most often, it involves a moment in which the consumer’s expectations were blown away by a product that they purchased from the brand in question; 35% of self-identified fans cited such a moment as a contributing factor in the development of their fandom, making this far and away the most common experience along that journey.

Beyond that, however, there’s a myriad of ways in which brands can generate the kind of positive memories that lead, ultimately, to fandom. Maybe there’s a specific marketing campaign or piece of content that manages to lodge itself in a consumer’s brain; or it could be an interaction with a customer service representative that leaves a lasting impression. In some cases, fandom might even be sparked by a moment of *disappointment* that the brand successfully manages to turn around by going above and beyond to remedy the situation.

One of the biggest components of community and fandom is intensity. The idea that you’re such an intense member of this group that you feel like “when this group wins, I feel like I won.” You see it in sports but I think it can extend to brands. The individual is so aligned that they feel like they are a part of the brand. The big question is can or how can the brand create that level of intensity?



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While there are many different types of experiences that can contribute to cultivating a sense of fanship, these experiences often take place along a relatively predictable pathway. **The most common journey to fanship can be broken up into four distinct stages**, each of which flows logically from the stage preceding it.

The path to fandom typically starts with *momentum*—the sense, among consumers, that the brand is one that is “on its way up.” Typically, achieving this sense of momentum requires a commitment to innovation, creativity, and continuous evolution, all of which need to be demonstrated both through the brand’s products themselves as well as the brand’s marketing efforts.

If sustained, this momentum eventually creates *buzz*; it gets people talking about the brand, and creates

the conditions for communities to start forming around their shared interest in it. Buzz, in turn, creates a sense of urgency for consumers to engage with the brand for themselves and find out what all the hype is about. And that engagement, if the experience is a sufficiently positive one, can create the kind of emotional connection with a brand that leads, ultimately, to fandom.

This process is by no means a hard and fast rule; there are certainly cases, for example, where consumers can become fans of a brand even without being exposed to buzz within their peer group. But it does represent the primary pathway for the majority of consumers. Understanding these four stages, and the transitions between them, is therefore of vital importance for any brand that seeks to develop a significant and lasting fandom.

The fundamentals of fandom are around passion, enthusiasm, and engagement. And when you have that level of passion, communities form around it.



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Brands have to have systems in place to cultivate and nurture fandom. Mechanisms to both identify and listen to fans, as well as let fans express themselves and connect to one another.



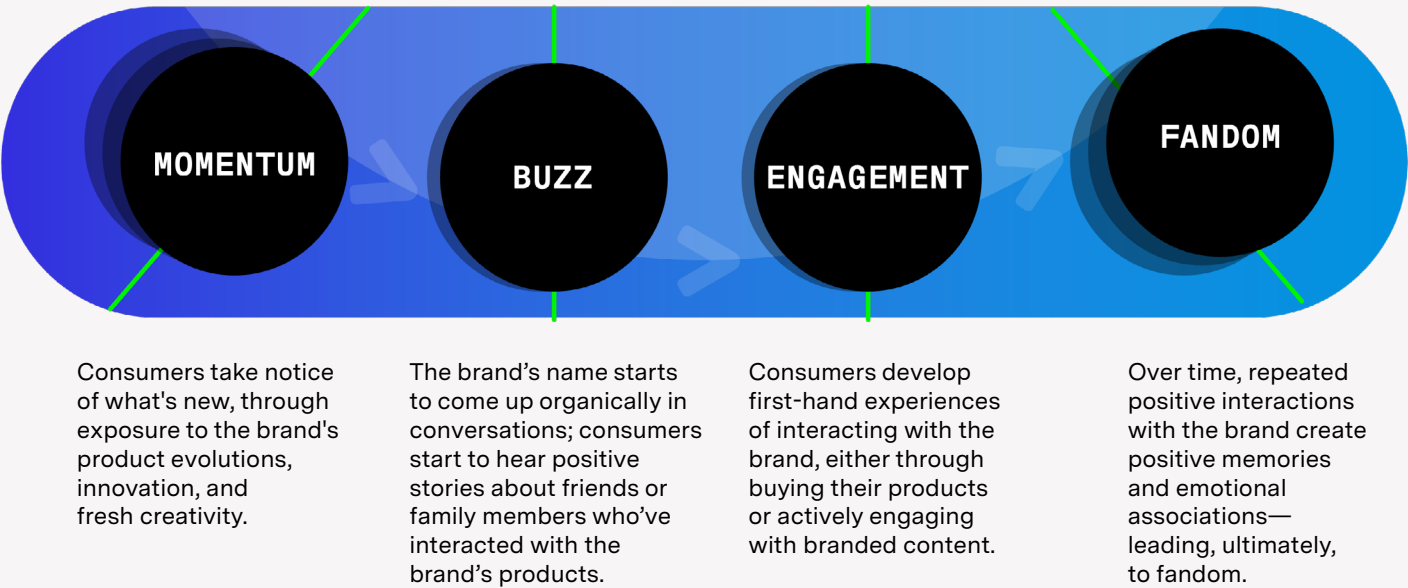
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STRATEGIST

By measuring fandom, brands can unlock deeper insights about their most important customers

By understanding their relationship with their customers through the lens of fandom, businesses can unlock a powerful new way of quantifying and evaluating the strength of their brands relative to the competition. Crucially, **fandom—unlike existing measures of brand health such as affinity or engagement—allows brands to understand not only the behavior of their customers, but also the emotional investment that underpins those behaviors.**

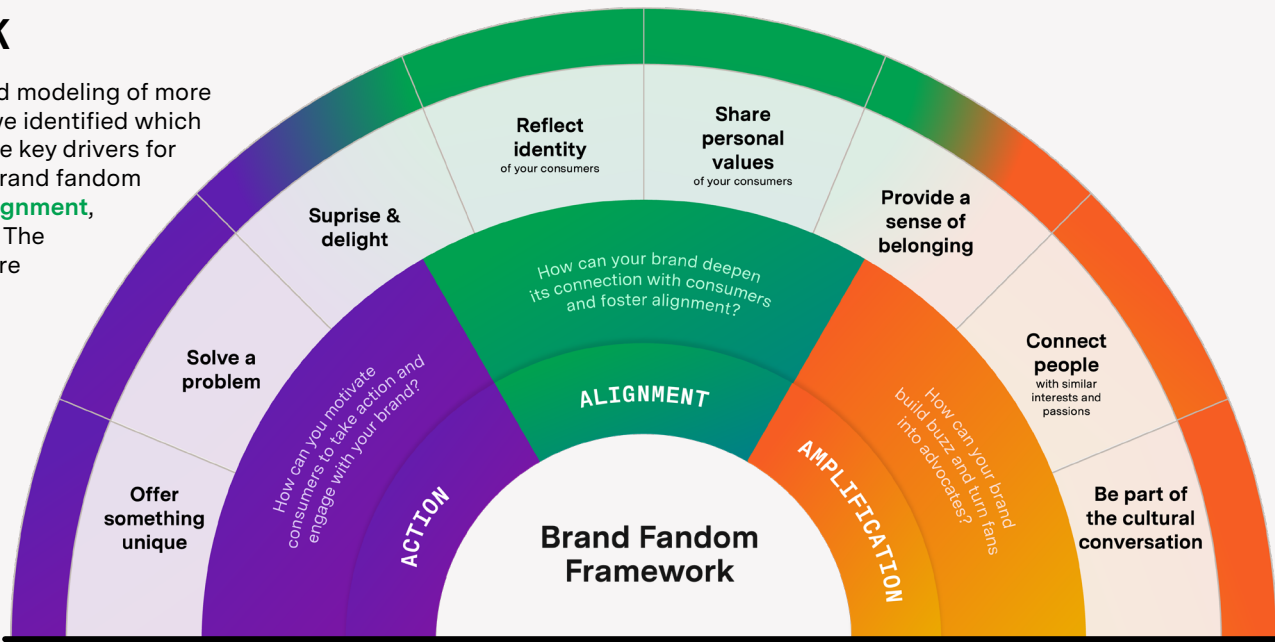
Finding an objective way to measure fandom, however, is easier said than done. After all, different people express their fandom in very different ways in different contexts. And this task becomes even more complex when trying to compare brands across multiple product categories; how can you meaningfully compare, for example, the fandom of a social media platform or streaming service against the fandom of a skincare brand or a retail chain?

THE PATH TO FANDOM



THE FANDOM PLAYBOOK

Based on advanced modeling of more than 200 brands, we identified which brand attributes are key drivers for each of the three brand fandom pillars—**Action**, **Alignment**, and **Amplification**. The attributes shown are the top-ranking drivers within each of the pillars.





Through a combination of statistical modeling and consultation with academics and marketing professionals, NRG has developed a measurement framework for fandom built around three key pillars—each of which represents a different facet of what it means to be a fan.

Action measures consumers’ direct engagement with a brand as demonstrated through purchasing preferences. **Alignment** captures the more nebulous, emotive aspects of fanship—the sense that a brand shares your values and speaks to your personal needs and priorities. And lastly, **Amplification** reflects consumers’ willingness to display their fandom in public and act as an advocate to others.

By combining these three pillars, we can create a composite fandom score that is more strongly correlated to revenue growth and financial performance than any one metric alone—and which allows for deeper and more meaningful insights than traditional measures of brand performance.

This approach to measuring fandom forms the basis of **The NRG Fandex**, a first-of-its-kind brand index that quantifies the intensity of the fandoms for America’s best-known consumer-facing brands. To create The Fandex, NRG surveyed 12,509 US consumers on their opinions towards 247 brands across 18 different product categories. From this, we have produced the inaugural edition of **The Fandom 50**—an annual ranking of the 50 US brands with the strongest fandoms.

The Fandom 50

Powered by The NRG Fandex

- Apparel
- Beauty & personal care
- Beverage
- Consumer goods
- Entertainment
- Fast casual/quick service restaurant
- Finance
- Food
- Household
- Retail
- Social
- Sports
- Tech
- Telecom

F50
NRG FANDEX
FANDOM FIFTY

RANK	CATEGORY	BRAND
1	Food	Google
2	Retail	Amazon
3	Food	Apple
4	Social	YouTube
5	Household	Dawn
6	Food	Android
7	Retail	Walmart
8	Entertainment	Netflix
9	Food	Samsung
10	Beverage	Coca-Cola
11	Social	TikTok
12	Finance	Visa
13	Food	Microsoft
14	Entertainment	Disney
15	Sports	NFL
16	Finance	PayPal
17	Fast casual/quick service restaurant	Chick-fil-A
18	Household	Febreze
19	Fast casual/quick service restaurant	Starbucks
20	Entertainment	Marvel
21	Social	Facebook
22	Entertainment	Nintendo
23	Entertainment	Spotify
24	Household	Clorox
25	Social	Instagram

RANK	CATEGORY	BRAND
26	Beauty & personal care	Dove
27	Apparel	Nike
28	Entertainment	PlayStation
29	Beauty & personal care	Crest
30	Household	Lysol
31	Household	Bounty
32	Beverage	Gatorade
33	Retail	Target
34	Beverage	Pepsi
35	Household	Tide
36	Fast casual/quick service restaurant	McDonald's
37	Consumer goods	Keurig
38	Sports	NBA
39	Food	Kraft
40	Beauty & personal care	Rare Beauty
41	Social	Snapchat
42	Food	Heinz
43	Beauty & personal care	Colgate
44	Telecom	Verizon
45	Food	Kellogg's
46	Household	Mr. Clean
47	Social	Pinterest
48	Apparel	Adidas
49	Beauty & personal care	Fenty Beauty
50	Sports	MLB



For more detail on the analysis and methodology underpinning The Fandom 50, download the full release from our website, or reach out to FANDEX@NRGMR.COM

9. Mane Kara-Yakoubian, "Massive meta-analysis finds loneliness has increased in emerging adults in the last 43 years." PsyPost. January 17, 2022

Another thing that many of these platform-based brands have in common is their ability to foster human connectivity. In an era of increasing social isolation and loneliness⁹, many of us are looking for a sense of belonging and community. Brands, therefore, that can bring people together and allow them to connect and bond over shared interests have a powerful advantage when it comes to cultivating fandom.



A word cloud of adjectives describing a product, with 'Quality' as the largest word. Other prominent words include 'Innovative', 'Fun', 'Reliable', 'Good', 'Great', 'Tasty', 'Creative', 'Valuable', 'Fast-paced', 'Trustworthy', 'Dependable', 'Easy to use', 'Comfortable', 'Diverse', 'Strong', 'Refreshing', 'Convenient', 'Stylist', 'Different', 'Leading', 'Healthy', 'Delicious', 'Entertaining', 'Nice', 'Creative', 'Energetic', 'Simple', 'Inclusive', 'Modern', 'Premium', 'Useful', 'Unique', 'Varied', 'Expensive', 'Affordable', 'Cool', 'Safe', 'Trusted', 'Clean', 'Trendy', 'Fresh', 'Cheap', 'Consistent', 'Smart', 'Popular', 'Awesome', 'Effective', 'Helpful', 'Beautiful', 'Luxurious', 'Amazing', 'Friendly', 'Durable', 'Yummy', 'Price', 'Classy', 'Exciting', 'Fast-paced', 'Trustworthy', 'Dependable', 'Easy to use', 'Comfortable', 'Diverse', 'Strong', 'Refreshing', 'Convenient', 'Stylist', 'Different', 'Leading', 'Healthy', 'Delicious', 'Entertaining', 'Nice', 'Creative', 'Energetic', 'Simple', 'Inclusive', 'Modern', 'Premium', 'Useful', 'Unique', 'Varied', 'Expensive', 'Affordable', 'Cool', 'Safe', 'Trusted', 'Clean', 'Trendy', 'Fresh', 'Cheap', 'Consistent', 'Smart', 'Popular', 'Awesome', 'Effective', 'Helpful', 'Beautiful', 'Luxurious', 'Amazing', 'Friendly', 'Durable', 'Yummy', 'Price', 'Classy', 'Exciting'. The words are arranged in a circular pattern around the central word 'Quality'.



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05 Provides me with a sense of belonging



Regardless of product category, however, building and maintaining a fandom requires a commitment to continuous innovation. Yes, you have to get the basics right; you have to offer a consistently high-quality product or service at an affordable price that addresses a genuine need in customers’ lives. But that, on its own, is rarely enough to generate true fandom.

In fact, NRG’s research suggests that **the single most reliable predictor of fandom is a brand’s ability to surprise and delight its customers.** Fandom is often deeply rooted in positive memories of brand experiences—so, to create memories that are going to stick with their customers, brands have to be able to offer them something out of the ordinary.

That element of surprise can take many different forms. It could be a product that dramatically surpasses a customer’s expectations; a promotion or loyalty reward they weren’t anticipating; or a particularly novel and engaging marketing campaign.


While there is no singular approach to creating fans that will work for every brand, the brands that have had the most success at cultivating a fandom have been those that have understood the importance of going above and beyond customers’ expectations. And it’s only by fostering a culture of continuous evolution, innovation, or creativity that brands can consistently create the kind of novel and surprising experiences that lead to momentum, buzz, and, ultimately, fandom.

Top brands by category

And what they can teach us about building a fandom...

Powered by The NRG Fandex



 Apparel	Nike	>
	Adidas	
	Under Armour	
 Auto	Toyota	
	Chevrolet	
	Tesla	
 Beauty and Personal Care	Dove	
	Crest	
	Rare Beauty	>
 Beverage	Coca-Cola	
	Gatorade	
	Pepsi	
 Entertainment	Netflix	
	Disney	
	Marvel	
 Finance	Visa	✓
	PayPal	
	Mastercard	
 Fitness	Crunch Fitness	
	Planet Fitness	
	Equinox	
 Food	Heinz	✓
	Kraft	
	Kellogg’s	

10. Salmaan Farooqui, “The story of sneaker culture: From niche obsession to multi-billion dollar reselling industry,” The Globe and Mail, December 16, 2022

11. Chris Sutcliffe, “Nearly 7 million people have visited Nike’s metaverse store,” The Drum, March 22, 2022

12. Anagrice Duran, “Selena Gomez becomes most followed woman on Instagram,” NME, March 28, 2023

13. Arielle Gerber, “Selena Gomez Talks about Rare Beauty’s Success, Challenges: ‘I Thought That Wasn’t Going to Sell,’” Music Times, December 19, 2022



Few brands have a fanbase quite as dedicated as Nike. In the 1980s, the apparel company played a major role in the development of “sneakerhead” culture¹⁰, a community it remains closely associated with to this day.

Nike has always understood the role that self-expression plays in facilitating fandom—and has carried this philosophy through from the physical world into the virtual with the launch of its Roblox store, “Nikeland.”¹¹

Rare Beauty

Founded in 2019, Rare Beauty is one of the youngest brands in the Fandom 50. Its success is a testament to the power of celebrity marketing; the company’s founder, Selena Gomez, is currently the most-followed woman on Instagram with over 400 million followers¹².

By building a brand centered around the values that matter to her fans¹³, Gomez has succeeded at converting her personal fame and credibility into an avid fanbase for her line of cosmetics.

VISA










Brands that are able to support a customer through multiple stages of their journey through life have a unique advantage when it comes to building fandom.

Many Visa fans, for example, said that their affinity for the brand was rooted in the sense of financial independence they felt when they took out their very first credit or debit card.



A long track record of memorable and quirky advertisements has helped Heinz to build a devoted fanbase.

Their most recent campaign—inspired by true stories sourced from social media about consumers’ sometimes obsessive love for the brand’s products¹⁴—demonstrates the power of putting fans front and center in a marketing strategy.

 Household	Dawn	>
	Febreze	
	Clorox	
 Luxury	Supreme	
	Balenciaga	
	Hermes	
 Fast Casual / Quick Service Restaurant	Chick-fil-A	✓
	Starbucks	
	McDonald's	
 Retail	Amazon	
	Walmart	
	Target	
 Social	YouTube	
	TikTok	
	Facebook	
 Sports	NFL	
	NBA	✓
	MLB	
 Tech	Google	
	Apple	
	Android	
 Telecom	Verizon	
	T-Mobile	
	AT&T	
 Travel	Uber	
	Marriott	
	Southwest	

14. Samantha Nelson, “Heinz’s First Global Campaign in 150 Years Tells True Stories of Obsessed Fans,” Adweek, June 1, 2023

15. Hailey Winslow, “Rescuers use dish soap to save oil-slicked animals in California,” Fox Weather, April 23, 2022

16. Gaby Del Valle, “Chick-fil-A’s many controversies, explained,” Vox, November 19, 2019

17. Shaker Samman, “What’s All the Fuss About NBA Top Shot?”, Sports Illustrated, March 17, 2021

18. Jay Peters, “The NBA app is going to let you digitally possess a live player,” February 17, 2023



As the only non-platform brand in the top 5 of the Fandom 50, Dawn’s success speaks to their ability to marry a high-quality product with a clear sense of social purpose.

Many of the company’s fans cited their efforts to help clean up animals affected by oil spills as a key reason for their affection towards their products¹⁵.



Chick-fil-A’s strong Christian ethos has, at times, made it a magnet for controversy¹⁶—but it’s also allowed the brand to carve out a unique niche for itself and build a fanbase who share its religious values.

Many of Chick-fil-A’s most devoted customers cited their charitable donations and their long-standing tradition of closing on Sundays as key reasons for their fandom. Even consumers who aren’t themselves religious may find something to admire in the brand’s willingness to stick to its principles in the face of adversity.



The NBA has maintained its position as one of America’s best-loved sports franchises, in part, through its commitment to innovation.

In recent years, the NBA has been a pioneer of using technology to create new ways for fans to interact with the game and show off their loyalty to the sport. In 2020, they launched NBA Top Shot, one of the first officially licensed marketplaces for digital collectibles¹⁷; and more recently, they’ve been experimenting with tools that let fans digitally insert themselves into games¹⁸.

For consumers, fandom can fulfill a wide range of emotional needs

Just as there are many different factors on the brand side of the equation that drive fandom, there are also many different emotional needs that compel consumers to seek out fandoms to become a member of.

NRG's research on fan identities suggests that the vast majority of fans fall into at least one of 10 overlapping identity categories. For some, their association with a brand acts as a kind of status symbol—a badge of honor that tells other people something about themselves. Others are drawn to fandom primarily to feel a sense of companionship and community. And for some, the most rewarding part of fandom is the opportunity to spread the message of the brand and introduce it to friends and family.

One of the most common types of fan, however, is The Nostalgic: someone whose love of a brand is motivated, to a large extent, by the memories and the life experiences they associate with it.

Given that fandom is something that, for most people, develops slowly over a period of many years, it's hardly surprising that it's often deeply intertwined with a strong sense of nostalgia. For many fans, the brands they love act as a living link to the past—connecting them with some of their most treasured childhood memories and providing a sense of continuity through to the present.



There's an important distinction between brand fandom, or what I call identity loyalty, and something like repeat customer loyalty. Fandom is about something deeper. Once you invest your concept of self into a brand, there's a bond. It's about your tribe, your community—and people will fight to protect whatever it is they believe that community stands for.



AMERICUS REED II
PROFESSOR OF MARKETING AT THE WHARTON SCHOOL,
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A deep desire for community and connection drives fandom. People are craving authenticity, imperfection, and tight, intimate communities. Fandom serves this.



LINDSAY ANGELO
FUTURIST AND GROWTH STRATEGIST





THE NOSTALGIC

It's all about the memories. This brand has been in my life forever and is connected to important and valuable life experiences.



THE STATUS SEEKER

This brand makes me feel like I've arrived.



THE PRIVATE

I'm a big fan of this brand, but I don't like other people knowing that.



THE COMMUNITY BUILDER

Being a fan of this brand makes me feel connected to a community of people who share my interests.



THE CONNECTED

I feel a personal connection to this brand. They just get me; they stand for something that's important to me.

THE TEN TYPES OF FAN IDENTITY



THE O.G.

I was a fan of this brand before they became popular; I was there from the beginning and helped contribute to their growth.



THE BROADCASTER

It's important to me that everyone knows I'm a fan of this brand.



THE FAIRWEATHER

I'm hot and cold; sometimes I'm all about this brand, but other times I need a break.



THE BANDWAGONER

I'm mostly a fan of this brand because lots of other people are.



THE SHERPA

I love explaining this brand to people and teaching them about how it can benefit their lives.

Over the past few years, nostalgia has become a highly potent force in our society. The chaos of the pandemic, coupled with the rapid pace of social and technological change, has led to a widespread sense of disorientation and discontinuity¹⁹. Faced with a world that feels increasingly unpredictable and uncertain, many people are turning back to the past to provide them with a sense of stability they feel is otherwise missing from their lives. As a result, they’re increasingly seeking out products and experiences that remind them of childhood experiences or which harken back, in one way or another, to an imagined simpler moment in history.

And it’s not just older consumers for whom nostalgia is often a core component of the fan experiences. Recent research suggests that Gen Z and Millennials can feel a sense of nostalgia every bit as powerful, if not more so, than that experienced by older generations²⁰. This means that, regardless of who your brand’s core demographic is, nostalgia can be a powerful tool for converting customers into dedicated and lifelong fans.

In practice, there are many ways that brands can leverage the power of nostalgia to help build a fandom, from re-releasing beloved older or discontinued products to partnering with celebrities or other brands that customers have fond childhood memories of. It’s important, however, that this process of tapping into an audience’s nostalgia doesn’t come at the expense of innovation; otherwise, brands risk losing the ability to generate the momentum and buzz necessary to cultivate the next generation of fans.

The brands that have the most success at cultivating a fandom are those that understand the value of both innovation and nostalgia—and know how to thread the needle between them. It’s important to continually evolve and keep consumers on their toes; but brands also need to do so in a way that doesn’t alienate or estrange their most entrenched fans.

19. Shelley Hepworth, “Years of rapid tech change and the pandemic disruption are driving a wave of nostalgia,” The Guardian, January 7, 2022
20. Emily Vega, “Technology fuels Gen-Z’s nostalgia,” Pipe Dream, May 4, 2023
21. Charles Lange, “The Power of Nostalgia Marketing: Tapping into the Emotions of Your Audience,” Marketing Unplugged, March 30, 2023

Understood correctly, nostalgia can be a powerful tool for creating marketing campaigns and narratives that acknowledge and celebrate the past, while also inviting customers to think about how much has changed and how much progress the brand has made since then²¹. Ultimately, the brands with the most enduring fandoms are those that evolve and grow with their customers; the ones that are there for them at multiple different stages of their lives, and innovate to meet the needs of those different eras.



THE POWER OF NOSTALGIA

How consumers say they first became fans of their favorite brands



“This was always the go-to drink at family gatherings and reunions when I was a kid.”

SOFT DRINK BRAND



“I bought my first ever cell phone from them—and I still remember how easy and enjoyable the salesman made the experience.”

TELECOM BRAND



“I had it for the first time at a Christmas party and loved it. Now, whenever I drink it, I associate it with the holidays.”

ALCOHOL BRAND



“I went to their store with my grandmother just a few days before she passed away. So eating it now reminds me of the time I got to spend with her and the happy memories we shared together.”

ICE CREAM BRAND



“My mom introduced me to it; it was one of her favorite brands. Now I have adult daughters of my own, I’ve been passing her love of it down to them as well.”

FASHION BRAND



“My dad bought one of their cars when I was a kid. I remember being so impressed by the luxury of it—and it made me want to buy one for myself one day.”

AUTOMOTIVE BRAND

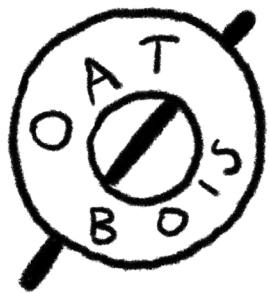


“I used to work in a restaurant, and I often had to do the dishes. Their products were the only ones that worked reliably; it actually made me enjoy doing the washing up!”

CLEANING PRODUCT BRAND



Through fandom, brands can elevate their relationships with consumers beyond the transactional dimension



Over the past decade, as online communities grew more connected and more influential, fanship became a defining part of consumers’ identities across the globe²². But the decade to come looks set to be the one in which brands—especially those outside the domains of media and entertainment—truly begin to appreciate the power of fandom, and start to put their fans squarely in the center of their marketing and growth strategies.

In the future, knowing how to create and nurture a fandom will be pivotal to the long-term health and success of a brand—even more so than it is today. By measuring and tracking fandom, brands can uncover deeper and richer insights about their most important customers; the people who are both your most effective advocates and the ones most likely to stick with you in times of crisis.

22. Aja Romano, “Fandom went mainstream in the 2010s—for better and worse,” Vox, December 30, 2019

Ultimately, the reason that brands should care about the concept of fandom is that it captures a dimension of the consumer/brand relationship that cannot be picked up through traditional metrics of brand health. For fans, their relationship with a brand is not just a transactional one; it cannot be boiled down to a straightforward value equation. Instead, it’s the product of a deep emotional investment—one that is often bound up with their own sense of identity and their relationship to the communities they care about.

Building and maintaining a fandom is no easy task. It requires a serious commitment to excellence and innovation over many years—which, over time, builds up the kind of positive memories and sense of nostalgia necessary for customers to become emotionally invested in the relationship. But the brands that are willing to take on this challenge will find themselves far better placed to weather whatever challenges may come their way.

FIVE WAYS THAT BRANDS CAN DEEPEN THEIR RELATIONSHIPS WITH FANS

- 01

Create ways for fans to find each other and build a sense of community—either in the real world or online.
- 02

Give fans the ability to express themselves through the way they choose to interact with your product, enabling them to create highly personalized and unique memories of their brand experiences.
- 03

Lean into the power of nostalgia in your marketing, reminding consumers of the pivotal role your brand played in key moments of their lives.
- 04

Develop a culture of continuous innovation, delivering brand experiences that surprise customers and exceed their expectations.
- 05

Tap into the equity of existing fandoms by partnering with celebrities or other brands that have a strong alignment with your brand’s values and identity.

Fandom is not serendipity. It’s not blind luck. The great brands go deep in understanding their consumers—their lives, thoughts, and feelings—and with that richness of understanding they can think about how to deliver a value proposition and tell a story that translates into this kind of aspirational gestalt their consumers have.



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A leading global insights and strategy firm at the intersection of content, culture, and technology. The world’s most powerful marketers turn to us for insights into growth and strategy for any content, anywhere, on any device.

METHODOLOGY

Unless otherwise specified, data in this report is based on a study of 12,509 Americans in a nationally representative sample of adults 18-64, conducted online in April and May 2023. This study tested consumer attitudes and stated fandom towards 247 nationally-recognized brands; on average, each brand was evaluated by 1,477 respondents.

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