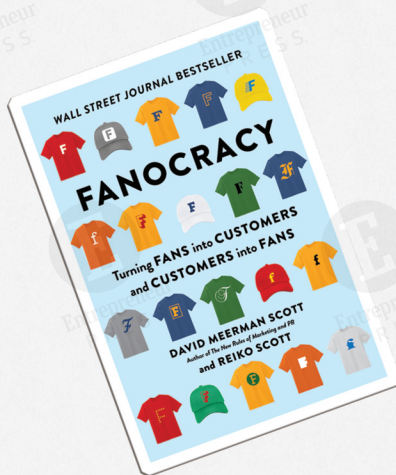




THE FANDOM PLAYBOOK

How to **CREATE PASSIONATE
FANS** in a World of Online Chaos



The Official
Companion to
The Wall Street
Journal bestseller,
FANOCRACY

DAVID MEERMAN SCOTT

Entrepreneur Press, Publisher

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PART I

What Is Fandom and How Can You Create Fans?



IN DECADES OF STUDYING FANDOM, I've learned that it exists wherever people feel seen, valued, and part of something meaningful, no matter the industry or mission.

Building a tribe of like-minded people isn't exclusive to music or entertainment. Some of the most inspiring examples of vibrant, enduring fan communities I've seen come from organizations you might never expect—companies selling software, insurance, handcrafted surfboards, tea, dental office design, and everything in between.

Organizations like yours.

CHAPTER 1

Fandom Now!

I wake up every day grateful to be living an extraordinary life, one powered by passion. Whether I'm creating art, helping people market their organizations and creations, advising an emerging company, or delivering a talk, I'm all in. That's the source of my energy and purpose. It's what lets me help others succeed at what truly matters to them.

I love the true human connection of sharing a meal with a colleague, meeting with attendees after my talk at an event, or dancing to a live band. We humans crave personal connections. Building ways to connect with others is a fabulous way to market an idea, a product, or an organization, and that's exactly what fandom is.

If this approach to business sounds worlds apart from your daily grind, your inbox, your epic marketing and business growth to-do list, or your doomscrolling feed, you aren't alone. In fact, you're exactly whom I wrote this playbook for.

Online Chaos and the Search for Belonging

The playbook you're holding comes at a time of real reckoning. Toxic AI algorithms, relentless social network outrage machines, and the rise of influencer culture have left us polarized, skeptical, and burned out. What Silicon Valley built to bring us together is often pushing us apart. Is it any wonder that so much of what we see feels fake and unsatisfying, or that people, especially young people, are desperate for something real?

Over the last decade, our online landscape has become both a marvel and a mess. Sure, the tools to create, share, and join the virtual conversation are within everyone's reach. In this world, it's easy to know thousands of people, yet harder than ever to feel seen and to belong. The voices in your social feeds are louder but often hollower, the content sharper but more fleeting.

Partly because of toxic social media algorithms, the democratization of content didn't bring us together the way we hoped. Instead of being thoughtful, millions of people just toss out more. Instead of connecting with others, many people are just broadcasting their pitches and come-ons. Marketers the world over have become slaves to the social algorithms rather than creating content that truly matters. We're boxed into echo chambers and swept into endless cycles of outrage or distraction. Social media platforms don't incentivize empathy, understanding, or nuance. Instead, they often push us apart.

As the internet barrels forward with a relentless force, the noise only grows. The addition of generative AI in the mix now means you can't always know if what you're seeing comes from a real human or a sophisticated bot. That blurring of lines between authentic and artificial, between a personal voice and machine-generated chatter, makes trust more elusive than ever.

It is in this context, a world teetering between abundant connection and rising loneliness, that the hunger for real human interaction, actual belonging, has never felt so urgent.

Genuine human connection, powered by shared excitement, has always
been hardwired into our brains.

Our current world is one of online chaos; it's a landscape where everyone can share but almost no one gets heard, at least not in the way that matters. With the easy availability of ways to shout your message, attention has become an increasingly scarce commodity. It isn't enough to get your ideas "out there"; the real question is, does anyone care? We surf algorithms built to grab and sell our attention, fueling outrage, division, and radicalization. We're more polarized than ever, and the sense of community, of knowing and being known, feels like it's slipping away.

At this time of so much confusion and noise, one thing stands out as a radical alternative: fandom.

It's what those goose bumps at a packed stadium, that feeling at a sold-out concert, or the rush at a conference full of like-minded people are all about. It's meeting your tribe at the bowling league, or at your favorite fly-fishing spot, or on the social dance floor.

I believe, more strongly than ever, that the antidote to online chaos is building fans: fans of your business, your art, your idea, your movement—even fans of you and your personal passions.

The Post-Pandemic Reality: The Craving for Human Proximity

Soon after my book *Fanocracy* was first published in early 2020, we were in peak COVID. My coauthor (and daughter), Reiko, and I asked the question: Can the power of true human connection survive in an online-first world? A world that, overnight, had been forced apart by a global pandemic? Suddenly, group gatherings, concerts, live sports, and even huddles in the breakroom disappeared. We logged into endless video calls, scrolled in search of community, and learned, sometimes painfully, that online connection is no substitute for face-to-face belonging.

But out of that strange, isolating period, something amazing happened. People realized what they'd lost and began searching for it again when the world reopened. Today, the signs are everywhere. Concerts and sporting events are selling out. Social dances—including my own passion, the Lindy Hop, long nearly extinct—are back and booming with new generations. Churches and faith communities are quietly regaining relevance. Team sports leagues such as pickleball and kickball clubs are thriving, as adults are desperate to play together. Annual business conferences such as UNBOUND, which I've attended and delivered talks at for many years, are chock-full because we want to spend time with like-minded people, not just sit through Zoom calls.

The longing is unmistakable. As the US Surgeon General warns of a loneliness epidemic, people everywhere are relearning a truth our online culture made us forget: Human proximity is powerful. The closer we are to others, the stronger and more resilient our bonds, and the louder our fans will cheer.

The new competitive advantage isn't found in the next social platform or the latest life hack. Hiring the viral influencer of the moment to send an Instagram post for you will barely move the longer-term needle. Instead, success is found in trust, generosity, storytelling, and the courage to share the spotlight with the people who care most: your fans.

A Global Signal: The Rise of K-Pop Shows Us the Way

Nothing in the last decade demonstrates the power of fandom, and what we can learn from it, better than the meteoric rise of K-pop, a phenomenon born from the passion and creativity of a relatively small country in East Asia. Groups such as BTS, BLACKPINK, Stray Kids, TWICE, and NCT 127 from South Korea have gone global. Despite slick music videos, extraordinary choreography, and youthful energy, the real global appeal of K-pop lies in fandom.

The secret is real connection. K-pop stars go out of their way to break the invisible wall between artist and audience. They deliver songs, but they also live stream their struggles. They post silly photos, respond to fans, and reveal the hard work and human side behind the glamour. They encourage fans to remix their songs, to organize fan events, to create their own art, and to spread the word.

The result is a worldwide ecosystem built on co-creation, participation, and belonging. Reiko is living proof. She recently traveled from Boston to Orlando just to see Stray Kids, her favorite K-pop band, live. And in early 2026, she invited me to join her to see the IMAX version of *Stray Kids: The dominATE Experience*, a concert film featuring the group's sold-out SoFi Stadium performances. K-pop fandom is an important part of Reiko's identity, her community, her creative outlet. To illustrate how widespread and deep her passion is, Reiko even wrote the first officially sanctioned K-pop graphic novel, *Limitless*, in partnership with the band NCT127 and their team, including Universal Music Group and Korean label SM Entertainment.

The K-pop fandom explosion also transformed Korea's place in the global imagination. It elevated the nation's culture, language, and products. Fans learned Korean phrases through lyrics and live streams and developed an appetite for Korean fashion and beauty products. Many began to see Seoul not as a distant capital but as a creative nerve center because K-pop functions as a cultural gateway drug, inviting millions of people in.

When I visited Seoul way back in 1988, I encountered very few foreigners, and the city felt underwhelming in comparison to Tokyo, where I was living at the time. I wouldn't return until years later, when, in 2023, I was invited by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea to deliver a talk to the business community in Seoul about tapping into fandom. By then, Seoul had transformed into a vibrant international hub. Government officials and business leaders told me that K-pop was a major driver of the city's growth and development. Korean culture became something global audiences expected to encounter, explore, and take seriously. And when *Squid Game* exploded globally, it arrived on fertile ground already prepared by years of fandom-driven exposure.

Korean brands that got it right built not just customers, but ambassadors who spread the word, exactly the transformation we all want and the proof that today's most powerful marketing is about genuine participation.

Any Organization Can Build Fans

It might be tempting to assume that building this kind of devoted community is reserved for global superstars, massive brands, or flashy creative fields.

However, I've learned that fandom is for everyone. Fandom is for you.

Take HubSpot, for example. You might think a company offering business-to-business (B2B) software for marketing, sales, and customer service would struggle to generate enthusiasm beyond users logging in to check their dashboards. Instead, HubSpot has cultivated a global community of enthusiastic fans. Their annual UNBOUND conference attracts thousands of people from around the world, eager not just to learn about software but also to connect with one another, share ideas, and celebrate the collective journey. HubSpot's commitment to education, through free courseware, certifications, vibrant online forums, and insider stories, turns customers into lifelong fans. They host user groups and warmly invite the community to help co-create the future of the platform. As a member of the HubSpot Advisory Board since 2007, I've seen firsthand how genuine two-way engagement can transform business relationships into powerful, lasting fandom.

Do you love car insurance? When I ask that question at my talks, nobody's hand goes up. We don't like to spend money on car insurance because all we get is a policy. And it's no fun at all to use the product because it means your car crashed or was

stolen. Hagerty, a company that insures classic cars, realized their customers weren't just buying policies; they were passionate about car culture, restoration, and road trips. So Hagerty leaned all in, building community through events, driving tours, online content, and car shows. They created an entire ecosystem celebrating car love, connecting collectors of all stripes, sharing restoration stories, and even launching their own magazine. Hagerty isn't just an insurance provider; it's the center of a movement. When your company's hats and jackets show up at car meets and clubhouses, you know you've built real fans, even in an industry people hate.

Organizations can nurture passionate fans even in industries that customers hate!

Fandom also drives success at small organizations. Grain Surfboards, tucked away on the coast of Maine, has built a strong following around handcrafted wooden surfboards. They open their workshops for people to build their own boards side by side with the artisans. They share their process, celebrate custom boards on social media, and invite past students to join a growing community of surfers and storytellers. As a customer, when you buy one of their surfboards, you also join the Grain Surfboards family, one that rides the waves together.

Fandom is also for professional service providers and nonprofits and restaurants and, well, you. Because any organization can build fans.

In these pages, you'll learn how these organizations and many others created fans. I'll share the plays they used and how you can do the same.

Whether you sell to businesses or individuals, offer services or products, operate locally or globally, the ingredients for fandom are the same. When you build real connections, invite participation, and give people a sense of belonging, you transform buyers into advocates, and advocates into fans for years to come.

A Fans-First Approach

When Jesse Cole was a baseball-loving kid growing up near Boston, he dreamed of playing at Fenway Park. The Savannah Bananas, the baseball team he's owned since 2016, played their debut at Fenway in 2024, delighting one of the largest crowds at

the storied ballpark that year. Cole invited me to the game as his guest, and it was a fabulous, fan-friendly experience. I loved being a small part of his homecoming and the fulfillment of his dream.

Cole had already created a viral sensation by transforming baseball games into a fans-first experience, including dancing umpires, players on stilts, choreographed multiplayer pitcher windups, and much more. Savannah Bananas players sometimes wear kilts and sometimes wear underwear outside their uniforms. Cole created Banana Ball, with rules that make watching a game more fun. For example, there's no bunting, and batters can steal first base. And then there is my favorite rule that transforms fans into active participants in the games: When a fan catches a foul ball, the batter is out!

Some of the things I loved at the game I attended were the Dad Bod Cheerleading Squad, who flaunted their bellies at second base during a break, and the Banana Nanas, a group of grandmothers who led cheers. The home plate umpire frequently broke into dance between pitches and was an expert at twerking.

And the merch! There was so much merchandise for sale, and it seemed like everybody there was already sporting Bananas gear.

At the game I attended, everyone got into the fun-loving spirit of Banana Ball. I spoke at length with a Boston police officer assigned to Fenway for events of all kinds, who told me he's never seen anything like what's happening with the Savannah Bananas. He told me he had a smile on his face the entire evening.

I wanted to know what Cole did to go from a few hundred spectators per game back in 2016 to playing in front of a million fans on tour in 2024, with a waiting list of over 2.7 million people who want tickets. How did the Savannah Bananas attract more than eleven million followers on TikTok, more than any Major League Baseball team?

How did they create so many fans?

"It starts by eliminating things customers don't like," Cole told me on the field at Fenway Park. "It's attractive and fun and sexy to talk about all the fun and innovative things, and we're proud of those. But the first thing we did was to eliminate every friction and frustration point from the fan experience: no ticket fees, no convenience fees, no service fees. We entertain the whole game, we play music the whole game, we have fun the whole game. We eliminated all the boring parts of baseball. If you want to create fans, sometimes you just stop doing what your customers and your fans hate."

I've been following Cole's progress from the beginning. He didn't copy what Major League Baseball was doing. Instead, he created something new, something focused directly on fans.

"I'm constantly thinking about how I can bring this game of Banana Ball to more and more people," Cole told me. "People say they can't believe a small, little team from Savannah is now selling out major league stadiums. But we have even bigger plans, and they all involve putting fans first."

You can do the same in your business if you focus on fans!

Why The Fandom Playbook, Why Now?

Over the past several years, since my book *Fanocracy* became available and the new edition of my book *Marketing Lessons from the Grateful Dead* was released, hundreds of people have said to me something like, "I love the idea of building fans. But how do I start? What, exactly, do I do?"

That's what this book will answer, and why it's a playbook specifically. You don't have to do every play in here at once. You don't need a big budget or a huge team. You just need to take a few concrete, intentional steps to build human connections, and keep going.

The organizations, creators, and entrepreneurs who put genuine human connection at the heart of what they do create fans.

Your first play could be as simple as using photos of your team and your customers on your website and marketing materials instead of inane stock photos. Or maybe you will choose to invite people behind the curtain of secrecy to see how you work. Over the past year, I've helped everyone from artists to CEOs to nonprofit leaders pick and choose a couple of plays that fit their mission, culture, and bandwidth. This playbook will show you how I do it.

When marketers and entrepreneurs ask me for advice, I tell them it's no longer enough to generate attention or close the next sale. If you want staying power, relevance, and real-world impact, you should spark a sense of belonging. Your role becomes the instigator of something bigger than a transaction or a viral moment.

There's an added benefit. When people are your fans, they're loyal. They stick with you even if a lower-cost or flashier competitor emerges.

As I write these words, I'm more convinced than ever that the best antidote to our online chaos is genuine, human connection. It's about coming together, building trust, sharing meaning, and thriving. Shared passion brings us together.

Throughout this book, you'll use worksheets to assess, prioritize, and plan your plays. You can scan the QR code here, or the one in the appendix, to access the free, printable versions of these worksheets on my website.



Thank you for joining me on this journey, and thank you for betting, like I have, on a more human, more passionate, and more connected future.

Your fans are waiting.

CHAPTER 2

Using *The Fandom Playbook* to Grow Your Business

The Fandom Playbook is designed to meet you where you are. There's no single right path. Creating fandom can look like small, steady changes or bold, public moves. It can be as simple as hosting an event for your best customers or as intricate as letting your biggest champions co-create the next version of your product.

Think of it as a set of building blocks, tested and refined by organizations that have thrived by putting fans first. As you learn about each of the plays, give thought to those that resonate, pick a few, and make them your own. Your job, reader—change-maker, community builder—is to get started. This playbook will help you find your entry points and give you the structure to make fandom real.

Throughout these pages, you'll meet people who turned customers into fans, friends into passionate ambassadors, and employees into the lifeblood of community. I want to thank the many people who have agreed to be interviewed. For more than a decade, I've been studying how fandom works, and throughout, I've been eager to share examples of success.

If you get just one thing out of this playbook, let it be this: You can do this. Strong, authentic fandom is not reserved for big organizations or K-pop idols. It's for software startups, nonprofits, manufacturers, indie creators, local governments, and emerging brands. It's for anyone who wants to build something that lasts, excites, and multiplies, even amid relentless change.

How *The Fandom Playbook* Is Organized

This isn't a book you read and shelve. While I do talk about the roots of fandom, including what we can learn from neuroscience, this isn't an academic tome. It's a playbook, which means it's meant to be used, marked up, and acted upon.

In part II, you'll find nine plays. Each one is a proven approach to building fans, drawn from organizations of all sizes and industries. Some will feel like a natural fit for you. Others won't. That's exactly how it should be!

You don't need all nine plays. You don't even need five. The goal of this playbook is for you to find one or two (or maybe three) plays to get started. As you read, you'll find details to help you figure out which plays genuinely fit your business, your resources, and your personality. I don't want you to try all nine plays half-heartedly. It's much better to commit to implementing several plays with real intention. Once you know which plays fit your needs best, your only job is to commit to trying them for the next ninety days or so.

Here are the nine plays you'll be evaluating in part II:

1. **Show Real Faces to Build Authenticity:** Replace stock or AI-generated images with photos of the real humans who are an important part of your organization.
2. **Unleash Your Passions:** Share what you genuinely love, even if it has nothing to do with what you sell.
3. **Behind the Curtain:** Let people see how you make things, warts and all.
4. **Give Away What's Most Valuable:** Offer something valuable with no strings attached and watch trust grow.
5. **Cultivate Brand Advocates:** Turn your happiest customers into your most powerful form of generating attention.
6. **In-Person Connections Ignite Tribes:** Bring people together face-to-face and let the power of proximity do its magic.
7. **Make It a Game:** Create progression, achievements, or collectibility that keeps people coming back.
8. **Hand Over the Keys:** Let your fans remix, create, and make your products and services their own.
9. **A Culture of True Believers:** Build fandom from the inside out, starting with your own team.

Some of these will excite you immediately. Others might seem like a stretch. A few might not fit your situation at all. That's fine. The point isn't to do everything. It's to find what works for you.

Part II is where you explore and evaluate. Each chapter includes details about one play that gives you what and why, stories from organizations that have done it well, and then something most business books skip entirely: exercises to help you figure out if this play is right for you.

For each play in part II, you'll work through two levels of exercises.

Level 1 is a quick compatibility check. It takes about five to ten minutes and helps you answer one question: Do the basic conditions exist for this play to work in my business? This process is intended to let you know whether the fundamental ingredients are there. Some plays require repeat customer interactions. Some require a team that's comfortable being visible. Some require a budget for events or travel. Level 1 helps you spot deal-breakers early, so you don't waste time on plays that were never going to fit.

If you pass the level 1 checks, you move to level 2.

Level 2 is a deeper dive. Each play takes twenty to thirty minutes to evaluate and may involve some research and analysis. You'll look at your market, your competitors, your resources, and your opportunities. By the end of level 2, you'll have a much clearer picture of whether this play has real potential for your specific situation.

It's completely normal to be excited about several plays. That's a good sign! It means you're seeing opportunities. But excitement isn't the same as commitment. After level 2, you decide: Either eliminate the play, or add it to your Prioritization Worksheet for further consideration.

Part III is where you implement. Once you've chosen the plays you want to implement, you'll find detailed guidance on how to put them into action.

An important note: I've created the chapters in part III in a way that you only need to read the implementation chapters for the plays you've selected. If you're interested in the details of implementation for all the plays, you can certainly check out all the chapters in part III. But you can also feel free to skip those you are not implementing. The Prioritization Worksheet will help you compare, prioritize, and, ultimately, choose.

Your Prioritization Worksheet

As you work through the nine plays, you'll need a place to track the ones that make it through your level 1 and level 2 evaluations. That's what the Prioritization Worksheet is for. I've included a copy at the end of this chapter, and another in the appendix for easy reference. The Prioritization Worksheet has four slots for "active consideration." That's it. Four. You don't need to fill in four either; it could be one, two, or three plays. The limit of four is intentional. It forces you to prioritize rather than build a wish list of plays you'll never get to.

For each play you add, you'll note three things: your gut appeal (how excited are you about this?), the potential business impact (how much could this move the needle?), and whether it's realistic for you right now (do you have the resources, the culture, the prerequisites?). Don't overthink these. Trust your gut.

There's also a parking lot at the end of the worksheet. This is for plays you liked but had to bump when something better came along. They're not dead, just parked. You might come back to them after your first ninety days. Or you might revisit them in a year or two.

Here's what this looks like in practice: Imagine you're on chapter 8 and you've already got four plays on your worksheet. But the In-Person Connections play really excites you. Now you have a decision to make. You look at your four active plays and ask yourself, *Which one am I willing to bump to the parking lot to make room for this?* Maybe that play you added from chapter 3 or 4 doesn't look as strong now that you've seen more options. Maybe your thinking has evolved. That's the point. The worksheet keeps you honest and forces the trade-offs that lead to real commitment.

At the end of part II, you'll look at your active plays and make your final choice: Which two are you committing to for the next ninety days?

You have the playbook. You have the process. You have the worksheet. Now, it's time to meet the plays. Turn to part II and let's find out which ones you want under consideration for action.



Play Prioritization Worksheet

Use pencil. Only four slots—adding a new play means bumping one to the parking lot.

ACTIVE CONSIDERATION

PLAY	Gut Appeal (H/M/L)	Business Impact (H/M/L)	Realistic Now? (Y/M/N)	Notes/Why This One
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				

PARKING LOT

Play I liked but bumped:

PLAY	Why I Cut It

MY FINAL TWO PLAYS FOR THE NEXT NINETY DAYS:

1.

2.

About the Author

David Meerman Scott is best known for *The New Rules of Marketing & PR*, a *BusinessWeek* bestseller and *Publishers Weekly* starred selection that's a trusted guide for entrepreneurs and marketers, as well as required reading at colleges and universities worldwide. Now in its ninth edition, *New Rules* has sold over five hundred thousand copies in English and is available in twenty-nine languages, from Albanian to Vietnamese.

His other international bestsellers include *Fanocracy*, a *Wall Street Journal* bestseller; *Real-Time Marketing & PR*, also a *Wall Street Journal* bestseller; and *Marketing Lessons from the Grateful Dead*.

As the internet has become louder, sharper, and more relentless, David believes in building the genuine human connections that create fans and grow businesses. Rather than chasing social network algorithms, he focuses his energy on sharing marketing and business growth strategies that make the world a better place while helping people achieve success.

Early in his career, David worked in the municipal bond department at a Wall Street investment bank and soon moved into the financial information business. He served as Asia marketing director at Knight-Ridder Financial based in both Tokyo and Hong Kong. Returning to the US, he served as VP of marketing at several publicly traded information companies, most recently Thomson Reuters.

Now he helps innovative companies as an advisor and investor, helping them transform their industries by delivering disruptive products and services. He has been working with HubSpot (NYSE: HUBS) since 2007, when the company had a handful of customers and fewer than ten employees. David helped the HubSpot team

with rapid sales and marketing strategies that have grown the company to more than 275,000 customers in 135 countries and more than \$3 billion in revenue. In addition to HubSpot, his current portfolio of advisory clients and investments includes over a dozen organizations, including several AI companies. In past advisory work, he contributed to successful exits of companies as a member of the board of directors of NewsWatch KK (sale to Yahoo! JAPAN) and served on the board of advisors of Eloqua (IPO followed by a sale to Oracle).

David is also recognized as the pioneer of newsjacking, the art of injecting your ideas into breaking news to generate media coverage, get sales leads, and grow business. Newsjacking has become so influential that the term is now in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

David's book *Marketing the Moon* inspired two films. The three-part PBS American Experience documentary *Chasing the Moon* premiered in July 2019 for the fiftieth anniversary of Apollo 11. *Fly Me to the Moon*, a romantic comedy starring Scarlett Johansson and Channing Tatum, was released in July 2024 and follows a marketing strategist planning a fake moon landing video in a NASA warehouse.

David has presented at over five hundred conferences and events in more than forty-five countries and on all seven continents.

Visit www.davidmeermanscott.com to learn more.

Stop Chasing Algorithms. Start Building Fans.

In his *Wall Street Journal* bestseller *Fanocracy*, David Meerman Scott revealed why die-hard fans are the most powerful marketing force on earth. Now, with the world hungrier than ever for real human connection, he's back with details on how to implement fandom around any idea, business, art, or product.

The Fandom Playbook is for entrepreneurs, marketers, and business leaders who want to build the real loyalty that grows business—not just clicks. David interviewed hundreds of founders, executives, and community builders across industries, including the arts and the nonprofit world, to distill fandom into concrete plays that any organization can adopt, regardless of size, budget, or industry.

Pick a few plays that fit your mission and your people. Commit to them for ninety days and watch what happens when customers stop browsing and start belonging. *The Fandom Playbook* shows you exactly how.

True fans stick with you when cheaper competitors show up. They tell their friends. They show up for you.



David Meerman Scott is a business growth strategist, advisor to emerging companies, and author of fourteen books, including the international bestsellers *Fanocracy* and *The New Rules of Marketing & PR*, published in twenty-nine languages. He travels the world to speak at conferences and events, surf, and dance the Lindy Hop.

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