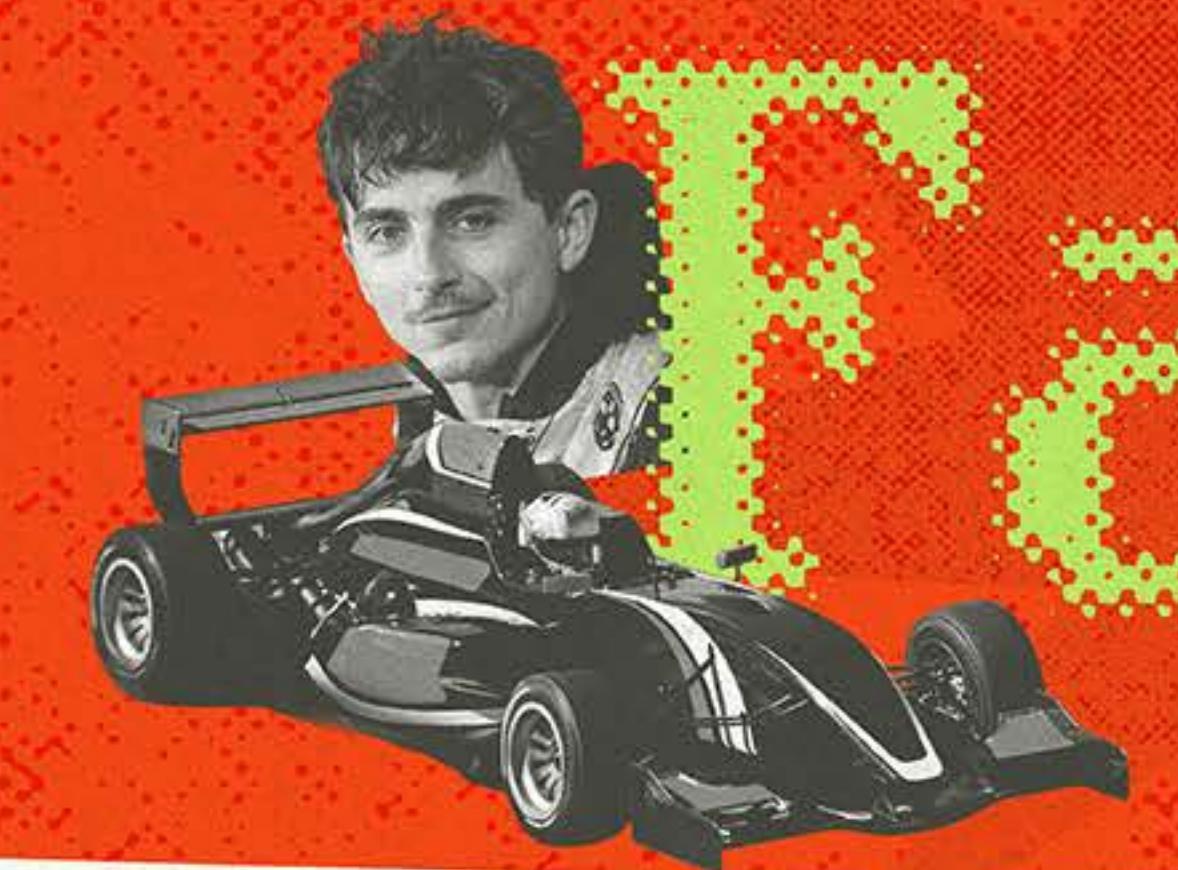


PETERMAYER

20
26

The
Year
of the
Rat



Fandom has reached bedrock

In 2026, people will tune into world sporting events, national pastimes and major releases on the cultural calendar in record numbers.

For millions, perhaps billions, of casual viewers, the moments will come and go. But for die-hard fans, they'll serve as emotional anchors of the year.



1/3 of US adults describe themselves as “die-hard” fans.

Source: Brand Joy Lab

Fandoms are changing how and where we see ourselves.

Our sense of community increasingly springs from sources of our choosing. Traditional anchors like nationality and religion share significance with chosen communities built around passion – for a sport, a pursuit, a creator or even a brand.

This shift, from inherited to chosen community, is changing the bedrock on which we build our identities.

In “The Year of the Fan” PETERMAYER’s Brand Joy Lab reveals why fandoms are such durable sources of joy, crucial needs for brands entering the fandom landscape, and how to engage once there.



MAJOR FANDOM EVENTS IN 2026



January

A\$AP Rocky "Don't Be Dumb" launch



February

Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympics, Super Bowl LX, WB's "Wuthering Heights" + Charli XCX album launch



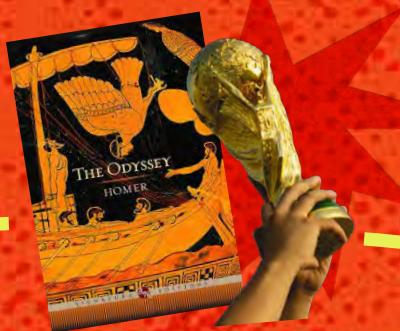
March

Formula 1 Australian Grand Prix



April

Bruno Mars "The Romantic Tour", Coachella, WrestleMania 42



July

America 250, Christopher Nolan's "The Odyssey", FIFA World Cup Finale, San Diego Comic Con



June

FIFA World Cup 2026, UFC White House, Steven Spielberg's "Disclosure Day"



May

Star Wars: The Mandalorian and Grogu



November

GTA VI (allegedly)



December

Greta Gerwig's Narnia on Netflix, Dune: Messiah, Avengers: Doomsday

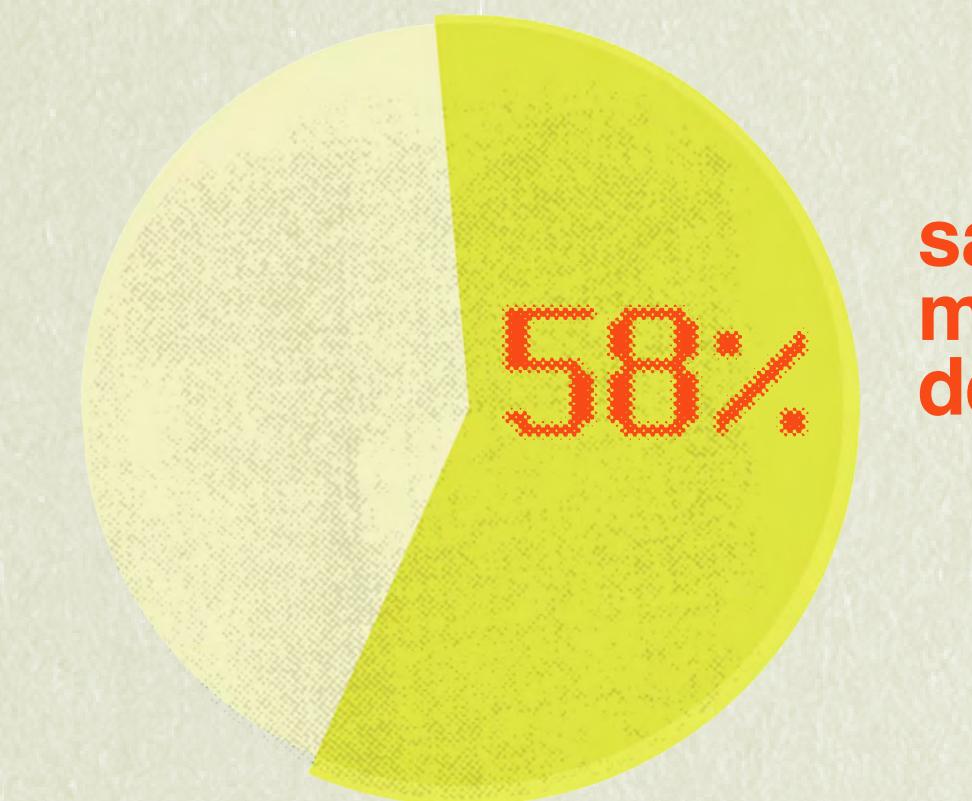
Fandoms as a center of individualism

As we attempt to make sense of our spaghetti bowl of a cultural landscape, fandom has taken on a new role. Even as institutions feel unstable and identities are in flux, fandom offers something rare: a solid place to land.

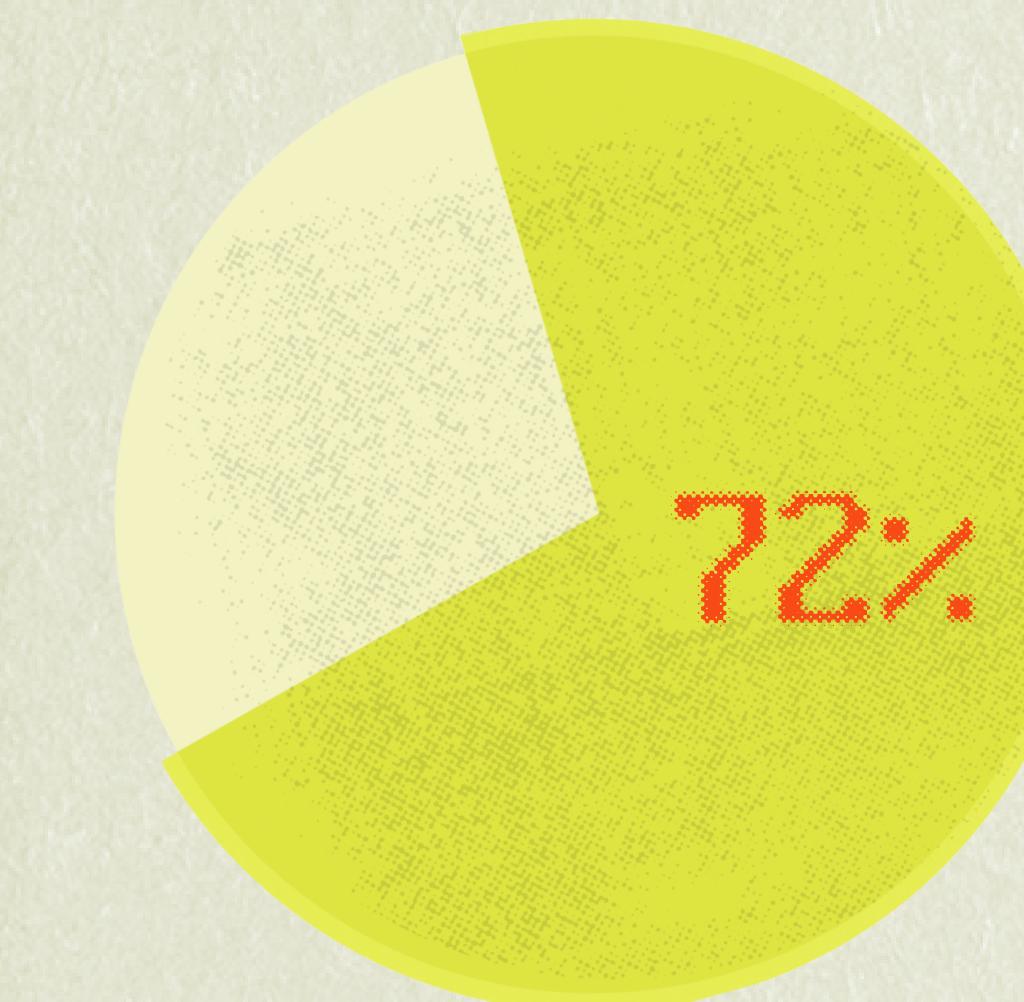
Fandoms act as a crucial connector

In PETERMAYER's most recent Brand Joy Lab research, fans consistently describe their "number one" team, athlete or celebrity as part of who they are—not just something they love. Among sports team fans, a majority agree that being a fan of their #1 is part of their identity, with die-hard fans showing the strongest agreement.

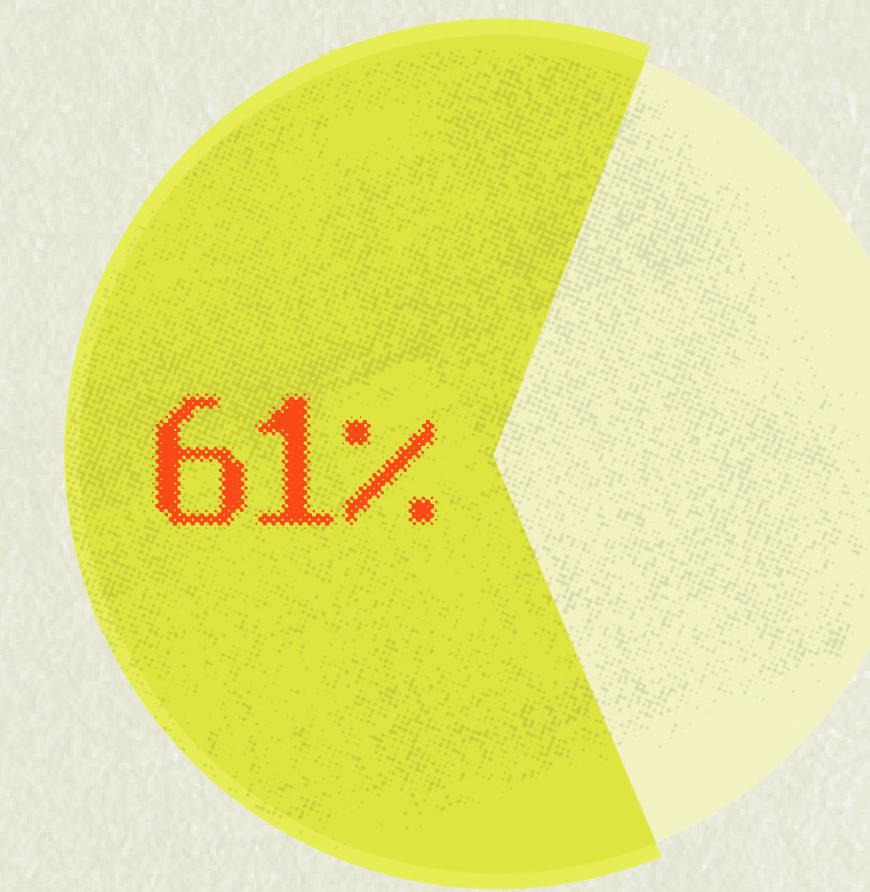
OF ALL AMERICANS



say others would mention it when describing them.



feel "part of something bigger than myself."



say their fandom brings them real joy

Fandoms as a center of individualism cont.

Fandom provides a lifeboat

Rather than existing solely to entertain or engage, fandom increasingly functions as a stabilizing structure – one that helps people orient themselves socially and emotionally in a fragmented world.

Of the general population:

59% say fandom is “part of who I am”

Among die-hard fans, that figure rises to **81%**.

55% say their fandom “helps me get through tough days or stressful times.”

Among die-hard fans, that number rises to **73%**.

Source: Brand Joy Lab

Fans aren't describing fandom as something they dabble in then move on from. They're describing it as a reliable source of joy, like the way some people describe religion, nature or even family members.

From audiences to asset classes

Because of their durability and emotional draw, fandoms have evolved from audiences to distinct asset classes that can provide measurable return on investment. Our data shows that fans are willing to accept brands into their cultures if brands engage respectfully.

58% of fans say their fandom influences the brands and products they choose “somewhat” or “a lot.”

That climbs to **69%** among die-hard fans.

Source: Brand Joy Lab

Deloitte research suggests fandom can materially shape brand preference: nearly 70% of consumers say they're more likely to buy from brands that deliver personalized digital experiences, and 66% say they want brands to engage with the fan communities they belong to.



Evolving community, new playbook

For brands, fandom is often treated as a passion point or a high-value audience. But to the people inside it, fandom serves a broader function – creating belonging, recognition, and a shared sense of time. Understanding these functions helps explain why fandoms endure, why they matter and why brands that engage them thoughtfully are welcomed while others are quickly tuned out.

Fandoms unite us from URL to IRL

Fan communities exist across physical and digital spaces, but they are unified by shared rituals, language and moments that create continuity over time. Within fandom, people find enjoyment and recognition – being understood without explanation in a world that's constantly asking "why?"

64%

of Americans say they feel connected to other fans even if they don't know them personally.

84%

for die-hard fans.

Source: Brand Joy Lab

Unlike communities of the past, these ties aren't decided by where you live or how far you'll drive. Fandoms are built in Reddit threads and Facebook groups, on Discord chats and Letterboxed reviews, just as they continue to flourish in sports bars and IRL events.

Culture/s run on their own timeline

Continuity has traditionally been understood as shared history – traditions passed down, memories accumulated, eras remembered. And that continuity has now opened up beyond proximity. Yes, fans tie their fandom to family, childhood and hometowns – but now more than ever, identity.

But continuity also runs forward.

Just as fans remember together, they anticipate together.



Source: Brand Joy Lab

The same shared experiences that bond fandoms together also drive them forward, because each member anticipates on a deeply personal level while simultaneously sharing that emotional connection with many others.

In the modern fan experience, participation is loyalty

This participatory nature of fandom generates measurable business value in a few ways: It drives repeated engagement, helps communities self-sustain without constant external stimulation, and amplifies organic visibility because fans themselves act as advocates and distributors of content.

In this way, fandoms function like cultures, or even nations, where individual contributors come together to create rituals and codes.

Fan rituals drive repeat engagement

Nostalgia, tradition, shared memory and joy – experiences often associated with family or lifelong friends – drive consistent participation among fans. Release parties. Game nights. Season openers. Group chats. Annual trips. Weekly routines. All serve to keep us engaged and create with each other.

44%

of fans say they have “rituals or traditions” tied to their fandom.

That climbs to

62%

among die-hard fans.

Source: Brand Joy Lab

Shared stories become shared social anchors, offering intimacy and the feeling of being seen. In this way, fandom functions less like content and more like a container – something people organize time, emotion and relationship around.

But participation has always been the point

Fandoms thrive because of the democratic nature of participation that fuels a shared cultural currency.

Vevo's research shows that fans convert passion into visible signals – taste, style, memes, references and shared knowledge – that communicate who they are and who they belong with. Fluency inside a fandom operates as a social shortcut, enabling recognition and connection without prior relationship.

Carat's 2025 study found that 87% of fans are engaged in participatory activities tied to their fandoms – not merely consuming con-

tent but actively creating, sharing and interacting around it – and that 50% of Gen Z now create content related to their fandoms.

Fandoms function like groups of collaborators who share a key interest.

Like society, fandoms self-regulate

In fan-owned spaces, the experience is actively maintained. Platforms like Reddit rely on tens of thousands of volunteer moderators, and transparency reporting shows moderators remove a meaningful share of content – evidence that self-regulation is part of what keeps communities usable.

Reddit relies on 60,000 daily volunteer moderators

Moderators remove 1.6% of content to protect communities

Source: Reddit



You won't own, but you can join

This distinction—between participation and control—is the central fault line for brands entering fandom. Fandoms already have governance: shared rituals, insider language, norms and expectations that predate brand involvement. Brands that attempt to manage or reframe these systems around brand

objectives are often rejected, not because fans are anti-brand, but because ownership threatens the integrity of the community.

Our data shows that fans are willing to accept brands into their cultures if brands engage respectfully.

59%

of Americans say they like to see branded content related to their fandom.

Among die-hard fans, that climbs to

77%

Source: Brand Joy Lab

TOP DRIVERS

Fans say they appreciate brand involvement most when brands:

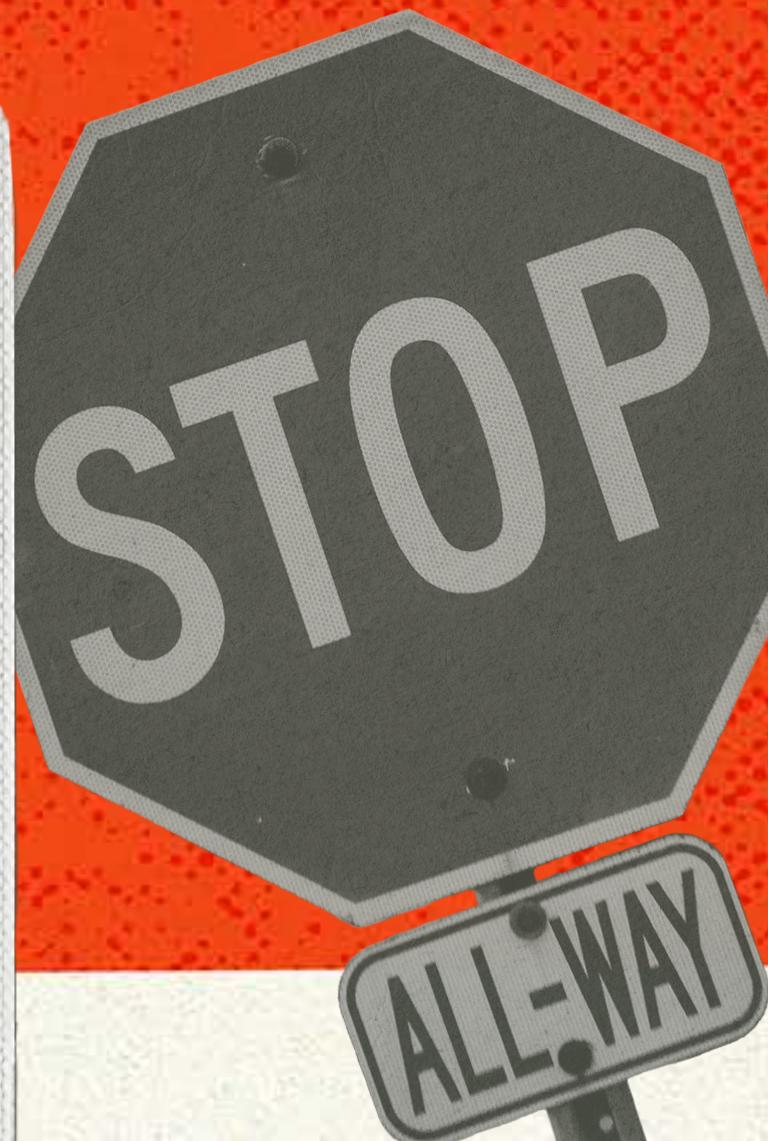
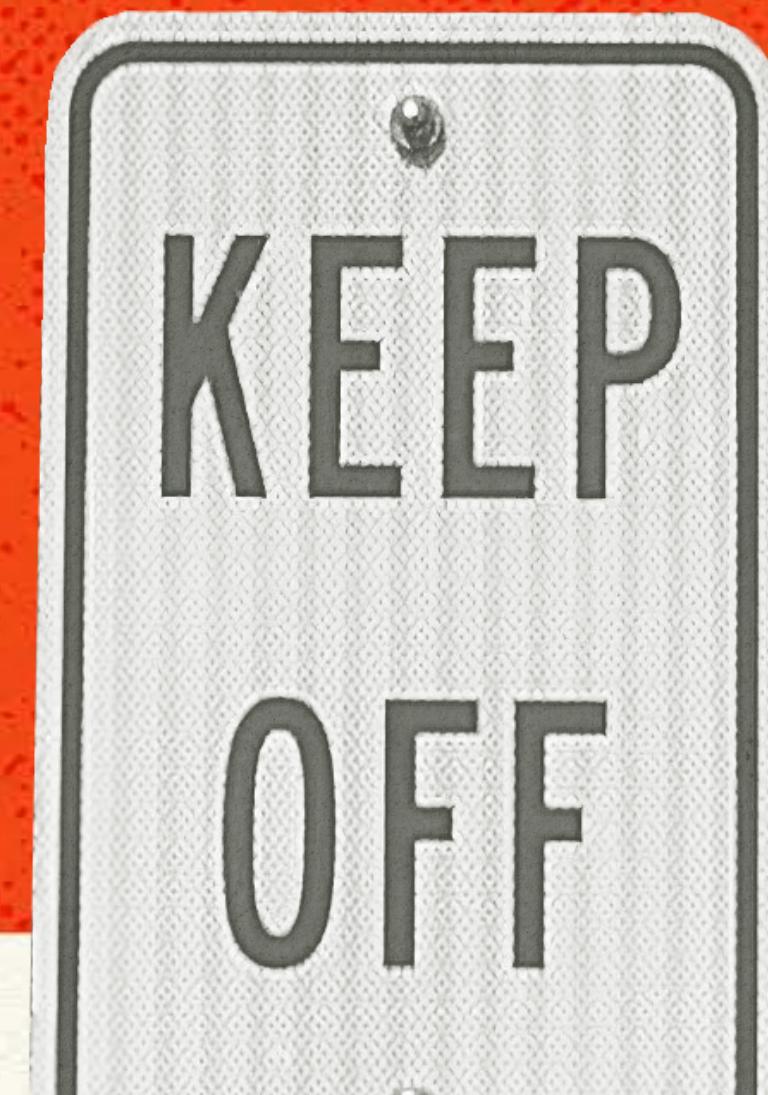
1. Respect fan traditions & culture
2. Show they genuinely understand the fandom
3. Listen to the fans & what they want
4. Make the experience easier, more fun or more joyful
5. Celebrate the community rather than taking over



TOP TURN-OFFS

Fans dislike brand involvement when:

1. They bring too many ads or interruptions
2. Act like fans without understanding the culture
3. Become overly commercial or salesy
4. Speak in an inauthentic or “cringe” tone
5. Engage in tokenism or shallow gestures





2026 will be the
year of the fan.
Brands must
pay attention—
and pay respect.

Produced by PETERMAYER,
a New Orleans-based creative agency
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Research Methodology

Data in this report, except where noted, is drawn from the Brand Joy Lab at PETERMAYER, which conducts a monthly online survey of 400 or more adult residents of the United States. Findings presented in “The Year of the Fan” are based on data from November and December 2025, from a total of 825 respondents. The term “die-hard” fans refer to individuals who self-identify as “die-hard fans” of their favorite athlete, celebrity or other subject when asked in the survey.



External Sources

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