

The Fandom Advantage

What brands can learn
from the sports playbook

Decreasing loyalty and increasing price sensitivity are driving consumer brands to chase the holy grail of fandom harder than ever before. Most rely on one-off activations that drive short-term spikes of engagement but not lasting fandom. In contrast, sports teams have mastered the art of fandom, using long-term digital ecosystems as the foundation.

Our independent research, spanning 1,400 consumers across four European markets, uncovers why brands should invest in fandom ecosystems and the six plays they can apply to nurture deep connections.

Fandom Works Hard For Brands Too

Our research reveals that brands can gain as much from fandom as sports teams and organisations. Fans don't just buy more, they also share their passion with others and are less sensitive to price increases.

■ SPORTS

■ BRANDS

Likely to purchase merchandise or brand products	59%	61%
Buy gifts for others	56%	60%
Actively recruit new fans	52%	54%
Fans of consumer brands are less price sensitive	47%	52%

You Can't Buy Fandom

You need to earn it

Brands are right to invest in fandom, but one-off activations aren't enough. Our data suggests that although consumer brands have invested heavily in fandom activations, they are still missing a piece of the puzzle. When we compare fandom between sports and brands, a significant gap is revealed. In other words, brands don't fuel nearly as much fandom as sports teams and organisations do.

71% When asked about sports teams or organisations, 71% of respondents say they are a true fan of at least one.

53% When asked about consumer brands, only 53% of respondents say they are a fan of at least one brand.

Why do sports organisations succeed where brands don't?

Because they think beyond the spikes of obvious fan engagement. They earn fandom over time, across every interaction, by investing in tech, data and content at scale.

- True fandom is a rich, complex concept.
- Different fans have different expectations.
- You can't employ a one-size-fits-all approach.

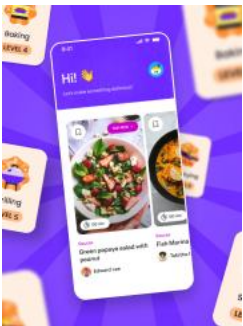
The solution? Investing in long-term digital ecosystems that power the fan experience, ensuring deep connections across community, content, commerce and care.

The Sports Playbook

A digital ecosystem is the foundation, not the fix. To truly earn fandom, brands must activate it through six plays that are proven to build deeper connections across every interaction.

🕒 Enable Close Encounters

- Focus on fostering intimate connections between friends and families, instead of aiming for fan engagement for the masses.
- Shift from mass reach to smaller communities.
- Provide access to small groups and exclusive forums rather than just focusing on social media reach.



Kraft Heinz's 'What's Cooking' app connected friends and family through their love of food, letting friends and families cook, learn and create together.

📖 Root Them In Your Story

- Tap into your history and traditions rather than fleeting viral trends.
- Brand heritage is the foundation for strong emotional ties.
- More behind-the-scenes content allows fans to connect with the brand's story and identity.



Star Trek's redesigned site celebrates decades of fandom with an immersive digital experience that prioritises personalised, exclusive content.

😊 Personal Means Pride

- Emotional pride stems from participation and recognition.
- Coupons, points and discounts only foster transactional loyalty.
- Fans don't want a 10% discount; they want to feel part of something bigger.



Parkland's 'Journie' loyalty platform uses personal connections to improve fan engagement, transforming simple transactions into rewarding experiences.

🎮 Bring Your A-Game

- Gamification, exclusive perks and premium access deliver joy and active engagement.
- Passive experiences and tokenistic rewards fall flat.
- Functionality should be replaced by fun. For example, more exclusive product drops, gamification and perks such as priority access.



McDonald's 'Side Missions' loyalty campaign combined retro graphics with gamified quests to incentivise exploration and drive repeat engagement.

🔍 Always Look Alive

- Deliver "always on" engagement through fresh content and innovative mobile apps.
- The experience doesn't end at the point of purchase.
- Embrace a multi-channel ecosystem that includes a mobile app to engage however and whenever customers want.



Kraft Heinz needed to deliver more of the content that fans would love. 'TasteMaker AI' enabled the brand to reduce content production time while ensuring fans still enjoyed the premium, realistic visuals that they'd become accustomed to.

💖 Fans Over Franchises

- Look for brand collaborations with your fans instead of pursuing expensive movie or entertainment partnerships.
- Empower fans to shape your brand.
- Engage directly with your fans and encourage them to contribute, collaborate and co-create.



We reimagined a leading entertainment brand's loyalty platform so that digital and physical rewards, combined with AR and fan-driven experiences, converted passion into ongoing behaviour.

Playing the Long Game

Sports teams know that there's no single play that builds fandom. Winning brands build ecosystems, not just campaigns. For consumer brands, that means playing the long game.

- Investing in tech solutions and digital ecosystems to fuel fan experiences.
- Going beyond short-term spikes with recognition, storytelling and participation.
- Applying the six plays of sports to transform one-time buyers into lifelong fans.

Methodology

Censuswide conducted research between August and September 2025. We spoke to 1,400 respondents, across four European markets (UK, France, Germany and the Netherlands) with 250 sports and 100 non-sports fans per country.

✉ Let's Chat

Apply Digital is a global experience transformation consultancy. We work with sports and consumer brands, from the NFL to Kraft Heinz, to build long-term, comprehensive digital ecosystems that nurture fandom.

Ready to turn your customers into fans? We're here to help. Get in touch at dennis.claus@applydigital.com and let's start the conversation.