

Turn Fans into Customers and Customers into Fans

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“Insurance sucks,” says McKeel Hagerty, CEO of Hagerty Insurance Agency, a specialty provider of classic car insurance, “Nobody wants to buy insurance. It’s not fun.” Rather than just talk up the company’s insurance products like everyone else in the industry does, Hagerty came up with a knock-out creative idea: Builds human connections between the classic car owners and his company that insures them.

“As I started reflecting on the opportunity that we had in front of us, I thought that this isn’t about insurance. Instead, it’s really about protecting a person’s passion for their car,” McKeel Hagerty told me. “I didn’t have to invent the car and I didn’t have to create the passion, I just have to tap into it and tie together the spirit around it. And, that’s the core idea for us. It’s the mechanism around which we have a

much more emotional, relationship-oriented connection with our clients and how we get and keep our fans.”

At over 100 car shows around the country each year, Hagerty employees are onsite, providing activities for classic car enthusiasts such as car valuation seminars, programs for young people to judge car contests (which gets car owners’ families involved), and even a place where couples drive up and have their wedding vows renewed while they sit in their beloved vintage vehicle. Hagerty employees dress up as bridesmaids and groomsmen and a photographer captures the moment. If that isn’t innovative, what is?

➔ Bond with your customers by taking an interest in the things they love.

Get Closer Than Usual to Your Customers

What is it about being around other people, like Hagerty does, that drives connection? Why does physical proximity make such a difference? Cultural anthropologist Edward T. Hall has answers to those questions.

It’s not just a matter of being close or far, or that the closer we get the better it is. Rather, *the significance of each level of proximity can be precisely predicted and managed so as to create the most optimal outcomes*. Hall described “public distance” as more

than 12 feet away from others, a distance that lacks any sense of precise interaction among those involved. He identified “social distance” for interactions among acquaintances as being from four feet to 12 feet, “personal distance” for interactions among good friends or family from about a foot and a half to four feet, and anything closer as “intimate distance” for embracing, touching, or whispering.

The most rewarding interactions in our lives occur in our social space and personal space. Those people sitting near one another at a game or at Starbucks or standing near each other in a line at a movie theater or a live music show? They’re well within each other’s social space and as such each person can feel the human connection in a positive and safe, unconscious way.

The significance of proximity isn’t just a matter of convenience or utility, but rather the emotional significance of any given exchange. *The closer you get, the more powerful the shared emotions are*. We’re wired as humans to have more emotionally significant responses to people we’re close to. And whether we’re 12 feet, 4 feet, or even 1½ feet apart leads to decidedly different emotions.

Remember the importance of proximity because that can lead you to a better understanding of how to attract and keep potential fan interested in your product or services.

Mirroring and Your Fans

How can businesses that can’t possibly have a direct personal connection with every customer achieve similar success? It turns out that you can still use the power of connection in a virtual way. Our unconscious brain can respond to what we see as if it is our own experience, even if it is on social media, film, or a screen through something called “mirror neurons.”



➔ The degree of human proximity ties to shared emotion and has an enormous effect on how well we do in business.

Mirror neurons are a group of cells in the premotor cortex and inferior parietal cortex of our brain. These neurons are fascinating because they not only activate when we perform an action—biting into an apple, smiling, or getting near to somebody we enjoy being with—they also fire when we observe somebody else performing the same action. When those around us are happy and smiling, our unconscious brain tells us we're happy and we often smile too. When we're at a rock concert, our mirror neurons fire based on what the performer is doing on stage *and* what other audience members are doing.

This mirroring helps to explain both the positive and the negative aspects of social media. We can relate to people via images on their Facebook and Instagram posts. Our brain tells us we're close to them because of the photographs or the video they share. Perhaps that's why social networking posts with photos and video of people tend to have many more social interactions than those with just plain text.

People unconsciously bond with actors and artists they see on screens because of mirror neurons. Mirror neurons also help to explain why we feel that we “know” movie stars and television personalities. Our brain tells us that we've been in their personal space because of the feeling of proximity to them as we are seeing them up close on the screen.

A critical aspect of understanding mirror neurons is to remember that it's how we're hardwired. It's our ancient brain at work helping us to cope with the world around us. It's not something we can choose to turn on or choose to ignore. It's innate. *We can't help ourselves to react in the way that we do.*

A practical application of mirror neurons in the insurance business is the creation of a video channel, something that Hagerty has done very successfully. Nearly 800,000 people subscribe to the Hagerty YouTube channel, eagerly awaiting videos such as those from the popular Barn Find Hunter series where

viewers ride along with renowned automotive author Tom Cotter as he scours the countryside for forgotten classics and digs up everything from Porsches, Corvettes, and Mustangs to Packards, Hudsons, and the occasional Ferrari. We feel we know Cotter from these videos and that helps to build fans even though people don't meet him in person.

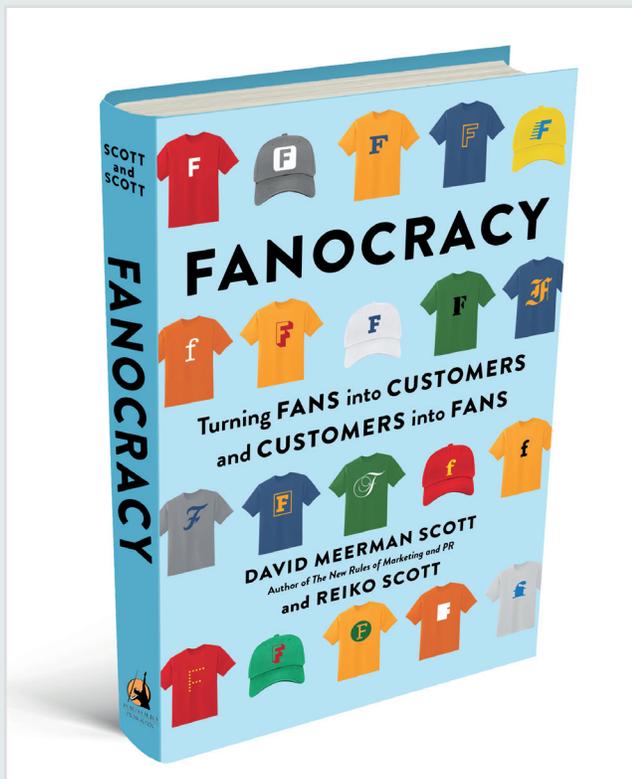
Hagerty Insurance: It's Not Products and Services, It's People

Hagerty developed fandom around a product "everybody hates," car insurance, and that effort has greatly benefited their company's bottom line. They are now the largest classic car insurer, with double-digit com-

pound growth since the inception of the business and in the coming year they expect to add 200,000 new customers!

"We went out and expressly challenged ourselves, how could we build fans," McKeel Hagerty says. "We discovered we're pretty good at it. We have fun doing it, and it matters, because that is our word-of-mouth growth engine."

It's up to us to create what we do around whether it brings people together. To succeed, we must become masters of seeing things from other people's point of view and understanding how other people work independently from ourselves. It's a simple, yet powerful concept, that any organization can implement. 



➔ **David Meerman Scott** is co-author of *Fanocracy: How to Turn Fans into Customers and Customers into Fans* which will release January 7, 2020 from the Portfolio division of Penguin Random House. He is an internationally acclaimed business strategist, entrepreneur, advisor to emerging companies, and public speaker. He is the author of ten previous books, including *The New Rules of Marketing & PR* (now in its 6th edition and in 29 languages). In his spare time he surfs and travels around the world for great live music.

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