

# WHAT IS THE NEW RELATIONSHIP ECONOMY?

We are morphing from the online creator economy to the relationship economy. This is the next wave.

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“My vision is to have strangers become acquaintances, then have acquaintances become friends, and have friends become family.” These words were said by branding and marketing icon Gary Vaynerchuk in front of thousands of attendees in Los Angeles during his closing remarks for Veecon 2024.

Most of us spend more time staring at screens—phones, laptops, flatscreens—rather than each other these days. An almost imperceptible shift is happening. While intelligence from tech gets more artificial, people are balancing it by seeking more authenticity and connection.

We are morphing from the online creator economy to the relationship economy. This is the next wave. With over a billion people with phones that take photos and videos and record songs, everyone can say they are a photographer, musician, influencer and public figure. Often a majority of people have never heard of them. So how does one step out of this cacophony of online noise?

Music artist Amanda Palmer is one early example of this transformation. Her Kickstarter campaign in 2012 was heralded as the first to raise over one million dollars for a musician. Her subsequent book and TED talk, “The Power of Asking,” demonstrates her relationship economy savvy. She would rather stay with fans (at the time) than rent hotel rooms during tours.

Another example of the relationship economy is physical, not digital. Spago the swanky restaurant brand, birthed by legendary chef Wolfgang Puck and Barbara Lazaroff, his business partner and former wife, has locations around the world. I went to their Beverly Hills location and was amazed to find Mr. Puck himself moving from table to table, chatting with his customers. It felt like seeing a celebrity, one who took care of making a complete stranger like me feel like I was dining in his home, not in public.

Barbara Lazaroff also introduced herself and when we said we would return, she even gave us her contact information. When we returned to celebrate my birthday, she had the waiter surprise us with a cake and she sat down to sing Happy Birthday. Who does that? I’m a complete stranger but now feel the makings of having a new friend.

The film and television industry post-Covid is also experiencing huge shifts. Blockbuster franchises, while appealing to many, leave just as many great script ideas unmade. To fill in the gap, start-ups like Legion M are utilizing a new model of crowdfunding. Movie fans can invest in the company and become stakeholders. “By giving fans an ownership stake in the company and a voice in the process, we’re cultivating an audience that is both financially and emotionally invested in the success of our projects. An audience like this has the potential to create authentic grassroots buzz that a studio would kill for, but money can’t buy,” it says on its website. (I do not have any relationship with Legion M beyond having bought a ticket to one of their films.)

As creators of every stripe are forced out of their creative bubble to become self-publicists, self-marketing gurus vying for attention, it can feel overwhelming. It’s too much for our brains to compute. Add in artificial intelligence and it’s easy to want to get in bed, pull up the covers and hide rather than write that next heartfelt song, make that new painting, write that book or start that new company to dent the universe.

We form communities based on commonality — religion, sports, music, festivals, bands, etc. Now with the freedom of a click, we can swim into the online multi-verse. Thousands of fans around the world traveled to Europe over the summer of 2024 to see Taylor Swift in concert. The cost of flights, hotels, food and concert tickets and effort *is* the relationship. As much to the tribe of fellow Swifties as to the megastar herself.

So, what’s the takeaway for you? What steps can you the reader take to embrace this cultural shift? The answer is if you can’t join a tribe, how about starting your own? A photographer friend recently started a community for other photographers. They host meet-ups in Brooklyn where they share their work, and connections happen organically.

You could also join a charitable organization in your professional field. The people you work alongside may very well be your next business partner, investor or even lucky break. My personal way of forming relationships is by hosting once-a-month dinner party-type salons in my Los Angeles apartment. I invite a regular circle of friends but open the invite to acquaintances who I want to transform into friendships.

Circling back to Veecon 2024, rather than hanging in the air-conditioned green room behind security with famous guest speakers like Will.i.am, Nick Cannon and Arianna Huffington, Mr. Vee was outside in the hot sun. For hours each day, he was shaking hands with what some might call the common folk. The attendees who traveled far and wide, paid money to come to Veecon, now in its third year. His mother, father and fiancé were there with him but had to share his time and attention with the thousands of people who have become enrolled as his world ‘soul’ family. Most waited all day just to shake his hand and snap a selfie. This person-to-person connection forms bonds that no click funnel, no online course, no book can create.

Clicks and likes are not what will be inscribed on our gravestone when our time is done. It’s the people, the relationships we’ve made, experiences we have shared. That is the gold at the end of the rainbow.