

# Module 3. The Rationale for Fan Engagement

## Unit 3.1

### 3.1.1 Is Sustainable Attendance Growth Possible in Football?

This unit will explore what we mean by 'sustainability' and whether it is possible for football to achieve sustainable growth.

What do we mean by sustainability?

The Cambridge Dictionary defines it as follows:

"The quality of being able to continue over a long period of time" ("Sustainability", n. d.).

When you apply this to the leisure industry, a definition you get is the following:

"Sustainability focuses on meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs" (Grant, 2020).

Therefore, in the football field this could be defined as football clubs remaining viable entities and growing participation and attendance through engagement, without regard to on-pitch performance and achievements.

In effect, we are talking about growing without winning matches, but by practising fan engagement and adopting it as a future strategy. We are talking about a future where clubs will have two functions:

1. to develop good players, to play good football, to win, and to achieve sporting glory; and
2. to engage the fans, the local community and all relevant stakeholders

By separating out these functions, we address the biggest barrier to sustainability, and that is the prevailing culture of 'winning' in football. As we have already said in other units of this course, the focus on winning and the aggression associated with it often infect

other parts of the club's operations (because it is the dominant culture) resulting in fans (and other community groups) receiving poor service, indifference or ignorance.

"Our justification for that is the data emerging from surveys, focus groups and other research we have conducted in our 15 years of existence"<sup>1</sup> (Mark Bradley;s.n). Becoming wholly sustainable based on fan engagement requires an unlikely culture shift; that is why we talk about a two-tier approach, where the two key functions of the club are separated out so that two distinct cultures can co-exist to the benefit of fans, club employees and the wider community.

Is it possible for clubs to achieve sustainable growth?

Let us examine this by looking at the fortunes of Colchester United, currently, a 4<sup>th</sup> tier English team.

In an interview with Colchester United's former Head of Marketing and Communications, Matt Hudson (2020), we learned about how the club's fortunes 'off the pitch' improved while their fortune on it deteriorated, to the point they were relegated from Tier 3 to Tier 4.

Matt described how Colchester United had moved to a new stadium in 2008 and, after the initial boost in interest from supporters, crowds were beginning to return to their previous levels after a few seasons at their new home.

The club had always had a strong family heritage but, in the summer of 2014, the U's made a conscious decision to really ramp up its family engagement efforts and to try and build both a current and future fanbase.

Despite limited revenue streams, the club made use of its strong position within the local community to work with other local organisations to enhance the physical environment in and around the stadium. This was backed up with some hard work from its staff around digital and matchday engagement to provide a much better matchday experience than in the early years after the stadium move.

With the team struggling on the pitch - losing 47% of its home games in 4 seasons and its first relegation to the bottom tier of the EFL for the first time in eighteen years - the U's still managed to enjoy 17% crowd growth in that time, and in their first season after relegation, exceeded the 30-year club attendance average by 12%.

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<sup>1</sup> Go to [www.fanexperienceco.com](http://www.fanexperienceco.com) for blogs and other data on fan opinion.

The Colchester United example shows us that sustainable attendance growth is possible, even with limited resources. It convinces us that, if these fan engagement approaches were to be adopted globally, and all of the club's fan-facing functions were to adopt the principles of customer engagement football, at all levels of the game, clubs could look forward to long-term sustainability. In effect, football clubs could prosper without being dependent on the success or quality of football.

This, of course, is especially beneficial to those clubs outside of the elite whose main income sources are ticket revenue, player sales and income provided by the League (such as the solidarity payments made in UK football.) Each season, the Premier League distributes a financial payment to each English Football League (EFL.) These funds are calculated and distributed using two mechanisms: Parachute Payments and Solidarity Payments. The payments are linked to the value of the Premier League's broadcasting rights. In the 2017/18 season, the Premier League paid £243m in Parachute Payments split amongst 8 clubs, and £100m in Solidarity Payments split amongst the remaining 64 clubs.

Naturally, the potential financial rewards of selling a player, engaging a new commercial sponsor and gaining promotion to a higher level will all remain key revenue generators. But the smaller the club is, the more important maintaining an actively-engaged and interacting fan base (i.e. purchasing extras, such as shirts and membership) is, the more likely the club will remain viable after relegation<sup>2</sup>.

One consistent and common message in fan engagement is to recognise that we cannot control results on the pitch. Elite clubs will do well, they will qualify for the Champions League, for the Copa Libertadores, and they will always be successful. It is very unlikely, other than in circumstances where a billionaire or nation-state purchases a second tier football club, that a club could emulate what Nottingham Forest achieved in 1978-80: achieving promotion to Division One in 1977 and then going on to win the First Division Championship in 1978 first and then consecutive European Cups in 1979 and 1980. However, for the majority of leagues and clubs with whom the Fan Experience Company works, sustainability depends on maximising ticket sales. That is where the major opportunity lies.

Now, if our approach is simply to rely on winning, we cannot control that. That is a factor of football. When we do win, it is fantastic, and we do fill our stadiums because people want to be part of something successful. But we all cannot win; in fact, fewer clubs than you might imagine win.

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<sup>2</sup> When we engaged Colby Cox to research the connection between fan engagement and the bottom line, Yoshida's 'transactional and non-transactional' descriptions of fan engagement came vividly into play. There is no substantial financial formula for fan engagement, yet everyone we meet in football agrees that it is the right thing to do.

Let us examine this example. In our work across Europe, we (Fan Experience Company) provide detailed fan experience assessments for many different leagues and associations.

Between the 24 & 26 August 2019, the Fan Experience Company undertook assessments of the Fan Experience for five European leagues. In the 75 games played in this period, how many teams won?

The answer is 33%. Only one third of the teams playing won. It's simple really. If a third of the games are drawn, then there are no winners there and if the rest have a winner, then only half of them prevail. So, in effect, winning is more infrequent than you might imagine (Young, 2020)<sup>3</sup>

It is self-evident that, without breaking the law, we cannot control the result of any game. So, to pursue sustainability, we must look to areas we can control or influence.

The key area that clubs **can** control is the fan experience. The result may not go the right way, but the club has control over all of the various touch points and other services, such as communication and service recovery. So, it follows that by ensuring these services are delivered to a high quality consistently, across the entirety of the experience, fans' levels of trust in the club will rise and so will their levels of emotional loyalty (Cox; 2019).

Another benefit of focusing on the experience is that it allows the club to grow by diversifying its reach. An experience that caters for the needs of families will likely increase the number of those attending while allowing fans who could not otherwise attend, an excuse to go to the match ('I can bring the kids!')

Our work with the English Football League on growing family attendance continues to show positive results<sup>4</sup>, as clubs recognise that certain 'touch points' are particularly important to families, including the following:

- Dedicated information for new fans/families on websites and social media
- Detailed travel and parking advice to take the stress out of the visit
- A match day schedule so the new fan/family knows what is happening when (including chances for their kids to meet a player or the club's furry mascot)
- A kids' menu (with 'treats' and healthy alternatives)

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<sup>3</sup> The Fan Experience Company's Darren Young in a presentation to the Scottish Football Association and their key partners on 27 February 2020.

<sup>4</sup> To read the article "Record-breaking number of EFL Clubs achieve Family Excellence status" (2019), go to <https://www.efl.com/news/2019/april/record-breaking-number-of-efl-clubs-achieve-family-excellence-status/>

You can subscribe to the *Fan Experience Experience* podcast series (which launches June 2020) for interviews with practitioners like Shaun Lockwood of Doncaster Rovers, whose club currently holds the honour of EFL Family Club of the Year. <https://fanexperienceco.com/resources/podcasts/>

Diversifying the fan experience allows the club to embrace all parts of the local community, be they women, students, disabled people or different ethnic groups, whose perceptions of football may be particularly negative. We will look at some examples of how clubs are doing this in other parts of this course.

The following case study relates to JK Narva Trans, an Estonian team based on the town of Narva, close to the border with Russia<sup>5</sup>.

Narva plays in a summer league, as the conditions are too difficult for Estonian football to take place during the winter. Not only were there very low attendances at top tier games (100-200) but also football was not one of Estonia's favourite pastimes: primarily, because it can often be cold outdoors, even in spring, but also because Estonians prefer other sports, such as cross-country skiing, ice hockey and basketball.

Before the UEFA pilot project began in 2018, Narva was regularly seeing no more than 60 fans in attendance. There had been no focus on fans. The club existed to qualify for European competition, the facilities and match day experience reflected that.

Aleksandr Dmitrijev was appointed Community Development Officer at the club, as part of the project, in July 2018, and he set out to transform external perceptions of the club so that a more diverse audience would be interested in attending.

Such was his success that, in spite of a six-game losing streak and changes of coach, the club quickly achieved attendances in excess of 400 (even achieving 800 on a game where the country's President came to see what the fuss was all about.) (Bradley, 2019)

There is more detail to be read<sup>6</sup>, but the project proved that even in the most difficult of circumstances, when clubs are losing, managers are being replaced and European qualification is distant, it is still possible to grow club attendance through fan engagement. This is being achieved because fan engagement allows clubs to evolve into

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<sup>5</sup> JK Narva Trans was one of the [www.premiumliiga.com](http://www.premiumliiga.com) clubs participating in one UEFA's GROW programmes for Leagues, where UEFA provide support, expertise and resources to address areas such as community engagement, club identity and improved fan experiences. <https://fanexperienceco.com/estonian-league-programme/>

<sup>6</sup> Mark Bradley's monthly column for FC Business Magazine ([www.fcbusiness.co.uk](http://www.fcbusiness.co.uk)) in January 2019 covered this topic in detail.

community hubs where there is something for everyone and where, for many of these groups, winning becomes less important.

One final example in this unit shows that engagement cannot only improve the fan experience for existing fans, but also begin to transform external perceptions of the club.

Cardiff City is currently in the 2<sup>nd</sup> tier of English football, one of only three Welsh teams playing in the League (alongside Swansea City and Newport County.) Over the years, Cardiff City's reputation was that their fans displayed high levels of anti-social behaviour, so external perceptions of the club were largely indifferent or negative.

In 2009 the club began to explore how they could begin to address this problem. While consultation took place with various existing supporter groups, they also sought to create a welcoming and engaging family experience. The success of this commitment became clear when, over the four seasons before they were promoted to the Premier League in 2012, the club's number of Family Season Ticket holders increased from 459 to over 7,000 (Cardiff City achieves EFL Family Excellence Gold Award, 2018).

Cardiff City saw that by attracting families and improving the family experience, they could change the way the world saw them. They could change external perceptions. They continued to consult families (asking what would keep families happy on a match day.) The current experience at the Cardiff City Stadium is a testament to this, with activities for kids, competitions, opportunities to meet the mascot, opportunities to meet players, basketball practice and locally-sourced refreshments, all supported by club employees who all bought into the direction the club was taking.

In conclusion, when we ask if sustainable attendance growth is possible in football, the evidence that we have seen would suggest that, when clubs pay attention to the opportunities and address improvements in the spirit of fan engagement, the answer is a resounding 'yes'.

### **Exercise:**

Review the websites of several clubs and identify examples of services, experiences and activities designed to diversify the club's reach by meeting the needs of a wider group of potential fans.

## **3.1.2 Fan Engagement as a Method of Improving External Perceptions**

This unit gives us the opportunity to show how fan engagement adopted operationally, strategically and culturally can transform external perceptions of football and its clubs.

We have examined the importance of specific external stakeholders in other units of this course, so in this particular unit, we will explore the perceptions of the 'general public.'<sup>7</sup>

One of the problems we have identified is that, as an industry, football lags others in subconsciously focusing winning as the most reliable method of growing attendances, and this is then emphasised by the sports media where little, if any, focus is on the fans' experiences.

If you are a journalist and you work for football newspapers like *Sport*, *Mundo Deportivo*, *AS* or *Marca* in Spain, you are only interested in football. This, of course, is natural and to be expected. However, to not even put 5% of the available print space aside to consider the fan's perspective on things like the stadium experience, levels of engagement from the club, etc., means that, as a concept, it is barely understood or acknowledged by the public.

If you buy *Mundo Deportivo*, everything is about football, nothing is about fan experience, nothing is about what the club means to fans, because we have created a world where it is all about football. We will know who is injured, we will know who FC Barcelona might be signing, and we will be able to get an update on Lionel Messi's recent injury, but we will not hear anything about the experience at the Camp Nou and anything the club might be doing to improve it.

There is a problem: if we cannot get the media to be interested in the things we are doing off the field, then it will be very difficult to change the way the public sees this.

So, how do we begin to address this?

One way is to create recognition programmes within different leagues. At the Fan Experience Company, we specialise in such programmes. They are based on the results of multiple fan experience assessment visits to clubs in the League to measure the level of engagement visible in the fan experience and then to re-visit clubs to review the progress made.

In the Eredivisie in the Netherlands, the programme ran over the 2018/19 season with Vitesse Arnhem<sup>8</sup> emerging as the Eredivisie's most family-friendly club and the website evidencing their commitment to the next generation of fans at the Gelredome Stadium. The regional newspaper carried the story on the day of the award, thus portraying the club positively to the residents of that wonderful city.

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<sup>7</sup> You can consult the Cambridge Dictionary for a definition of 'general public' in <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/general-public>

<sup>8</sup> You will find the "MET DE HELE FAMILIE NAAR VITESSE" section available in <https://www.vitesse.nl/nl/families>



In the English football, it has been possible for clubs to win recognition for their approach to recruiting new fans and families in three ways:

1. Achieving 'Family Excellence.' This has been possible since the EFL Family Excellence scheme first began in the 2006/7 season. Clubs who reach a predetermined level of excellence in the match day experiences that they provide receive recognition, together with assets to display around their club physically and also in their digital communications.
2. Achieving the 'Family Excellence Gold Award'. The very top-performing clubs in the EFL receive additional recognition for their efforts<sup>9</sup>.
3. Being voted 'Family Club of the Year.' An independent panel of judges reviews submissions from the best family clubs in England. This carries with it the huge potential for recognition, especially when it is a club who have worked extra-hard to achieve this in very difficult circumstances (Muro, 2017).

The media awareness potential of such schemes is very big, as is also the case when a club engages directly with an ethnic group within their own community, which was the case when Fulham FC, the English Championship club, introduced a Polish-language match day programme for a growing group of their supporters. Although the culture of football varies across different continents and countries, the rivalry between fans is consistent, and yet, this can sometimes be counter-productive, leading to negative media coverage and external perceptions.

In countries like the U. K. where the distances allow fans to travel to see their team play away fixtures, the contrast between these 'fans devotion to the cause' and the way they are perceived by society and, as a result, treated by the security forces, does not help to enhance perceptions of the game.

The truth, at least in the EFL, is that host teams benefit financially from the tickets they sell to visiting supporters. So, would not it make financial sense to treat them better so that more supporters travel?

The host club's reputation among the nation's travelling fans would quickly be improved while the atmosphere across the leagues would get better and better.

To address this, the EFL introduced the Away Fan Experience programme several seasons ago. It exists to help clubs to better understand the away fan and his/her devotion to the travelling club and to meet their needs in a more engaging way, rather than 'treating them

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<sup>9</sup> You can go to <https://www.scunthorpe-united.co.uk/news/2019/april/iron-achieve-epl-family-excellence-status-and-also-win-gold-award/> and read the article "Iron achieve EFL Family Excellence status and also win Gold Award" (2019).

like criminals’ –a phrase often used by supporter groups such as the FSA (Football Supporters Association)<sup>10</sup>–.

In this programme, genuine travelling fans complete a detailed assessment of their experiences of the ‘touch points’ that are within the control or influence of the host team and which matter most to the home clubs.

Some clubs have now produced ‘visiting supporters guides’ to ensure any away fans get the best possible experience out of their trip. EFL Championship club Reading FC has produced one of the most comprehensive ones<sup>11</sup>. Teams achieving the best results are recognised each season, with the aim of not only increasing the numbers of travelling fans but also improving external perceptions of the game.

Another way in which football can influence external perceptions is by being very visible in key parts of the community. Right across the world, the impact of players undertaking hospital visits to greet sick children is known to be powerful. Players accept that this is part of their responsibility as professional footballers, but outside of Christmas time, there is little media focus on this. To counter this, clubs are becoming more imaginative in the way they support their community.

During the pandemic, Sunderland player Luke O’Nien created a weekly fitness video for followers of the club, all the while raising funds for National Health Service charities and elsewhere. Players response to COVID-19 has been remarkable. Another good example is England Captain Harry Kane’s donation of the costs of displaying support for the National Health worker ‘heroes’ on the first change and third kits of his first professional club, 4<sup>th</sup> tier Leyton Orient, to National Health charities<sup>12</sup>. This –perhaps, because of the national profile of the England Captain– received instant media coverage.

Another way in which football is influencing external perceptions is in the women’s game. Because the women’s game does not have the limitations of the men’s game in terms of external perceptions, it has found it easier to create media interest and positive external perceptions.

There have also been remarkable developments regarding inclusion and equality in the women’s game. FA Women’s Championship club Lewes FC provides the same budget for both their men’s and women’s first teams<sup>13</sup>. The club is now pursuing also the challenge

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<sup>10</sup> The Football Supporters Association official website is [www.thefsa.org.uk](http://www.thefsa.org.uk)

<sup>11</sup> For more information, go to <https://www.readingfc.co.uk/siteassets/site-structure/fans/visiting-supporters-guide/2019-20-rfc-visiting-supporters-guide-st5.pdf> and read the “VISITING SUPPORTERS’ GUIDE.”

<sup>12</sup> For more information, go to <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2020/may/14/harry-kane-donates-leyton-orient-shirt-sponsorship-to-good-causes> and read the article entitled “Harry Kane donates Leyton Orient shirt sponsorship to good causes” (2020).

<sup>13</sup> The Lewes FC official website is <https://www.lewesfc.com/>

of equality of broadcasting rights<sup>14</sup> while Finland's recently launched top tier of women's football will be called 'The National League' without the word 'women' even appearing<sup>15</sup>.

It has become clear that if football pursues global issues such as inclusion, equality and accessibility, external perceptions will improve and leagues will have better opportunities to grow.

**Exercise:**

Please reflect on this unit and consider three ways in which your club could improve its external perceptions.

	Ideas
1	
2	
3	

### 3.1.3 Emotional Loyalty: Creating Value for Fans

Once again, we go back to our definition of 'fan engagement':

“Everything done to understand, respect, protect and grow the fan's emotional investment in the club”

As we have emphasised throughout this course, what makes a fan's relationship so much more different from that of a customer and service provider is the emotional element.

If a club were to base its engagement strategy on strengthening that emotional connection, then that would lead to greater levels of trust, which is, after all, the greatest currency of them all. Moreover, it is also about 'doing the right thing': a concept that has finally entered business parlance, as it is the best way to seal an emotional connection with a customer.

In football, there are many ways in which the fans display their emotional connections. These involve the following:

- Renewing season tickets
- Attending junior, B and reserve team fixtures

<sup>14</sup> For more information, go to <https://www.lewesfc.com/article/equal-broadcast-rights-for-women> and read the article entitled "Lewes FC (2020) Equal (Broadcast) Rights For Women!" (2020).

<sup>15</sup> For more information, go to <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/football/2020/02/27/finlands-womens-football-league-given-gender-neutral-new-name/> and read the *The Telegraph's* article entitled "Finland's women's football league given gender-neutral new name" (2020).



- Travelling to away fixtures, purchasing products from the club
- Being in the stadium early and spending money on refreshments
- Advocating the club to friends and family
- Defending the club on social media
- Forgiving it when things do not go so well

Many clubs have introduced 'loyalty programmes' to recognise their fans' unwavering support and fidelity, and these often include providing a discount off certain purchases (e.g. 'renew your season ticket and take 25% off the new replica shirt'.) Of course, this is fine and will have appeal for certain segments of the fan base. However, what it does not do is recognise what fans would define as loyalty (see bulleted list above) – and that is 'emotional loyalty'.

In some businesses outside of football, loyalty is often 'bought' through reductions, offers and free gifts. The problem with this is that once another supplier exceeds this, then the customer will move their business. Financial inducements only work as long as there is no competitor offering better ones. Now, clearly in football, fans are unlikely to move clubs. More people change religions than change football clubs. However, this does present an opportunity for clubs which wish to strengthen the fan's emotional commitment by recognising and rewarding it in ways that respect the fan's definition of loyalty.

This is a very important part of fan engagement because it is an area that exposes the gap between what clubs, leagues, and the industry see as loyalty and what fans see as loyalty. We all have different relationships with our clubs, but if you ask a club to define what loyalty is and then you ask a fan to answer that same question, the results can be surprising.

From a club's perspective, you may see loyalty as buying a season ticket, buying membership, turning up to games, buying food and buying the club shirt. Buying is the key because clubs see loyalty as transactional, and the good thing about that is that you can reward transactions.

If you ask fans to define loyalty, they will see behaviours. They will not see transactions, they will see beliefs, attitudes. They will talk about things like going to the home games and also going to the away games. They will say a loyal fan is one who turns up to see the low category game on a Tuesday evening in the first round of the cup in terrible weather. They will describe loyalty as the fan that keeps coming to games when the team are going down the league and everything is going really wrong. They will see loyalty as the fan who is actually talking about the club positively, defending the club on social media.

There are some interpretations of loyalty that both groups would perhaps agree on. A fan who comes to the game two hours before kick-off goes to the clubs bar or the clubs social club and enjoys a drink. That is part of the ritual of the pre-match. They are spending money there. The club is benefiting. But there is a gap there, and that gap highlights the opportunities that clubs and football more widely have to grow this concept of ‘emotional loyalty.’

Instead of only offering financial rewards, how about giving them access to the magic? The reward points on your club’s loyalty can be used by some fans not only to get discounts on official club products but also to access the ‘magic.’

How about giving them access to the magic?

This is what MLS club Philadelphia Union does with their reward programme:

The Union Rewards Program for Season Ticket Members is back for 2020 and better than ever! There are tons of opportunities to earn points that can be redeemed for awesome game day rewards and prizes. Unique Union rewards and prizes include autographed, game-worn jerseys from your favourite players, access to exclusive Union events and experiences, and much more! (Major League Soccer, n. d., para. 1)

When we attended a Philadelphia Union v. Colorado Rapids match in 2011, this focus on fans was not only visible through the rewards screen but also through an actual match day experience that focused on what fans needed. It is a clear example that when a club ‘gets’ fan engagement, then it becomes part of the club’s culture. Just as re-setting loyalty programmes with fan engagement in mind, there are also opportunities within the match day experience to do the same thing.

Of course, for some segments, like children and families, this could be as easy as arranging for the child to meet the mascot, get a picture or receive a small gift, but when it comes to the established, long term adult fan, what can you do?

First, speak to fans. We will cover fan dialogue and consultation in another unit, but why not ask fans what is ‘magic’ to them? In our 15 years’ experience<sup>16</sup> we have found there are many ways in which clubs and players can deliver these ‘lifetime memories’ both on a match day and at other times.

Here is a case study that explains how this can be done.

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<sup>16</sup> This experience is based on fan feedback via ‘real fan’ experience assessment programmes, focus groups, supporter groups and feedback from national fan organisations like Football Supporters Association ([www.thefsa.org.uk](http://www.thefsa.org.uk)).

In the close season period, when the manager is building the team for next season, one of our fans is always on social media berating the club for not making any signings. Of course, the process of signing a player is far from easy, but we understand fans are impatient for news and sometimes a 'news coming soon' message isn't enough.

So, this fan kept posting messages like 'when are you announcing a signing?' every day, multiple times, with many other fans seeing his posts and liking them.

We had an idea. We would invite the fan in; introduce him to our first signing of the summer and then let him make the signing announcement through his own personal social media accounts.

Not only did that create some magical content for the club, but it also created a lifetime memory for the fan and converted the fan into a genuine advocate for the way the club does things. (Lockwood 2020)

Other examples of creating 'magic' for existing, committed fans include one introduced by Tom Gorringe<sup>17</sup> when he was working at Portsmouth FC<sup>18</sup>.

Tom told me that he had noticed a regular-attending family sitting in their seats some 45 minutes before kickoff (at a time when the club was performing very poorly on the pitch and had suffered consecutive relegations) he decided to thank them for the loyal support.

He did it by inviting them to spend the pre-match warm up period by sitting in the dugout (where the manager, coaches and substitutes would be during a game). As the father's 'thank you' letter later explained, his son (who was receiving treatment for leukaemia) described it as 'the best thing that has ever happened to me. (Gorringe, 2009)

Given that, through the Family Excellence Awards platform<sup>19</sup> created by the EFL<sup>20</sup>, clubs have an opportunity to hear about and share best practises. This idea has been adopted by many other clubs, including <https://www.swindontownfc.co.uk/>, which make this part of the 'first time fan' experience they offer to younger fans and their families.

What we are trying to explain is that if we wish to create a fan base who exhibit behaviours and attitudes that benefit the club, we must understand that their loyalty needs careful curation.

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<sup>17</sup> Commercial Director at Bristol Rovers. Bristol Rovers official website is <https://www.bristolrovers.co.uk/>

<sup>18</sup> Portsmouth FC official website is <https://www.portsmouthfc.co.uk/>

<sup>19</sup> For more information, go to <https://www.efl.com/news/2018/june/efl-family-excellence-scheme-earns-recognition-at-sports-business-awards/> and read the article entitled "EFL Family Excellence scheme earns recognition at Sports Business Awards" (2018)

<sup>20</sup> EFL official website is [www.efl.com](http://www.efl.com)



If we wish to create more trust within our fanbase, then recognising and meeting fans' needs for 'magic moments' and 'lifetime memories' is surely a part of this.

### **Exercise:**

Reflect on your own relationship with your club and answer the following questions:

1. How could the club create 'magic' for you on a match day?
2. How could the club create 'magic' for you digitally?

## **3.1.4 Measuring the Impact of Fan Engagement**

Let us begin this unit by again reflecting on our definition of 'fan engagement':

"Everything done to understand, respect, protect and grow the fan's emotional investment in the club."

It is not possible to create an exact formula that says, for example, 'if you invest €20,000 into fan engagement, then attendances will rise by 5%.' It is not possible to say that because there are very many variables affecting that supposition.

### **Exercise**

Let us review the following list. How many of these elements can be controlled/eradicated/addressed by the club? What could you do to mitigate some of the effects of these variables?

- Bad weather (strong winds)
- Bad weather (heavy rain)
- A run of poor home team performances
- A game played on a winter's evening
- A game played at the same time as a national celebration
- A public transport strike

If you work to better understand the impact of each variable and the way it affects attendance levels, you can begin to take more control of the correlation between better fan experiences and levels of retention.

First, let us look at feedback. In our experience, clubs should seek to undertake surveys and other research to understand the drivers of behaviour.

AZ Alkmaar<sup>21</sup> deploy a post-match survey to everyone purchasing a ticket for this Eredivisie club's games two hours **after every game**, and it is the frequency of the survey

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<sup>21</sup> AZ Alkmaar official website is [www.az.nl](http://www.az.nl)



that means that, over time, the club can better understand the impact on attendance behaviours that elements such as stormy weather might have. They may not be able to change the weather, but they might be able to emphasise some of the services they have: an excellent museum to visit, plastic ponchos<sup>22</sup> may be available to shelter fans, and while they may have to close their fan zone (as they did on our visit in December 2018), there will be other activities inside the stadium to compensate for this.

It is also true that, in other businesses, every business case for investing in customer service begins with research: What do customers think? What do they like? What do they dislike? What would take away some of the hassle? What would make it easier for our customers to do business with us?

One of the main functions of fan engagement is to move football away from believing that clubs can only increase attendances when they win and that there is nothing else, beyond discounting, that can be done to address attendances when they do not win.

This mistaken belief<sup>23</sup> prevents clubs from instinctively turning to research and fan consultation. When they do, they often restrict surveys to once a season or even less frequently than that.

The basic information required, based on a survey aimed at key segments of the fan base, the following:

Based on your most recent attendance at our club's games:

1. How do you rate the experiences? (use a numerical scale)
2. Why do you say this?
3. What could we do to improve the experience for you?

By deploying these questions regularly to defined segments of the fan base, it will be easily possible to determine a prioritised list of improvement opportunities, capable of lifting levels of engagement of the different fan groups.

We will explore fan consultation in other units, but the principle is this: clubs must stop believing that all the fan wants is for wins. This is evidently not true. There are lots of aspects of the club – fan relationship which, if addressed in the spirit of engagement, would create stronger levels of emotional loyalty among the fan base, leading to the benefits we describe throughout this course, including higher levels of retention; higher

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<sup>22</sup> They are 'ponchos' (the Mexican garment) made out of plastic and offered to fans as shelter when it rains.

<sup>23</sup> This data is based on the Fan Experience Company, which has worked on the sport field for 15 years.

levels of advocacy; and greater levels of external perception and better capability to diversify the club's reach.

Now, the impact of implementing such approaches may not be felt in the short term, but over time the club should expect to see the following:

- Fans complaining less because they know the club have their best interests at heart
- Fans forgiving the club when something goes wrong, because the club is trying to do something good, we understand
- Fans feeling that they can talk to the club, they feeling that if they have an idea, they can share it with the club
- Fans being more likely to support new initiatives or new ideas of the club

Another point is that if you are going to improve fan engagement, you must focus on the experience, not attendance only. This simply takes the IPO model<sup>24</sup> (input, process, output), which, to put it simply, focuses people on the process rather than the results. If the quality of input is right (fan surveys, focus group data, assessor feedback), the process is better (improvement of the fan experience), and the results will be trustworthy.

Our fear for football is that a broadly 'sales-based' approach is used to sell tickets. Targets are set and, in the absence of any material process to engage fans, it comes down to 'offers' such as 'free tickets', 'discounted tickets', 'free for kids at school'; 'if you come, you can bring a friend for free'.

We should be saying to clubs 'Do not focus on the numbers, focus on the experience', because, if you invest time in understanding what matters to fans and you improve their experiences, then eventually the numbers will go by themselves.

It would be inappropriate to name any specific national associations or clubs who practise these sales-based approaches, but by developing insights on the needs of existing and potential fans and using that to inform ticketing and marketing approaches, the chances of success are magnified.

In other business sectors, especially those relying on customer advocacy for growth, the Net Promoter<sup>25</sup> model has gained credence in recent decades as the best way to use customer feedback ratings as an indicator of future growth.

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<sup>24</sup> For further information, consult the following article (2017), by Brendan Bailey: <https://towardsdatascience.com/the-ipo-model-90c24535b543>

<sup>25</sup> For further information, go to <https://www.netpromoter.com/know/>

Put simply, the customer's own rating for their intention to recommend (your business) to friends and family should indicate a level of future buying behaviour. Customers have to answer the following question 'Based on your recent experiences and on a scale from 0-10, where 10 is the highest, how strongly would you recommend NN to friends and family?' Those scoring 9/10 are considered to display such high levels of delight in the service received, that they will remain loyal, they will continue as advocates and buy more services from the provider.

As a result of the predominance of this tool/philosophy in modern progressive businesses, the connection between good customer service and 'the bottom line' is taken for granted. However, as the need for fan engagement confirms, football does not have tools to assess the connection between the supporter's experience and his or her level of engagement, emotional loyalty or trust.

Several years ago, the Fan Experience Company undertook some research where we asked fans of one club, at quarterly periods over the season, to rate their experience in two ways:

1. Using Net Promoter
2. Using an adaptation of Net Promoter, where we asked 'How valued do you feel?', rather than 'How strongly would you recommend it?'

The results were interesting. It became clear that, because of the intrinsic 'love' for their club, when fans answered the 'How strongly would you recommend it?' question, their answers were artificially inflated and almost always positive.

Imagine if someone asked you if you would recommend your team to someone new to football. Of course, you would say yes! We are, after all, all recruitment officers for our clubs.

However, when we asked the same fans, at the same frequency, how 'valued' they felt, the results were not as positive as the former. In fact, it became clear in the research that winning has less of an impact on levels of personal value than other factors such as 'feeling like I matter to the club' or 'having a say' would.

While there were clearly limitations to this research, it did lead us to ask ourselves the question 'Are we seeing the first evidence of a fan engagement-surveying model that could link feedback to future attendance habits?'

In this course, we are arguing for a more informed approach to linking fan feedback, experiences, ideas and perceptions to lifting attendances, rather than just relying on result. Post-COVID-19, this will become a core activity at clubs, as the reality of trying to

persuade people with far less money<sup>26</sup> to commit to spending it at their local club hits home.

**Exercise:**

Conduct a short online survey among friends to see if you can identify any common improvement opportunities for the clubs you follow (both match day and otherwise.)

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<sup>26</sup> For further information, read *The guardian's* article (2020) "Half of world's workers 'at immediate risk of losing livelihood due to coronavirus", available in <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/29/half-of-worlds-workers-at-immediate-risk-of-losing-livelihood-due-to-coronavirus>



# Unit 3.2

## 3.2.1 Retaining Existing Fans/ Re-engaging Lapsed Fans

In this unit we are going to look at two types of fans, describe them and then explore ways in which we can add value for them, so that the following occurs:

1. The existing fan feels valued and is retained.
2. The lapsed fan re-engages with the club and begins to attend again.

### Existing Fans

We will describe existing fans as those who attend matches currently, whether infrequently or continuously. If you have a database which records match ticket purchase, for example, you will be able to understand the fan's attendance habits.

However, without engaging with the fan, through research, feedback, consultation, etc., it may be more difficult to understand their motivations.

Several seasons ago, the Welsh club Cardiff City<sup>27</sup> devised an exercise where they personally telephoned every season ticket holder who had not renewed for the next season. They thanked them for their support, asked them what was preventing them from renewing and then sought to meet their individual needs.

What the club—one of the most progressive in Europe—learned was that it was unwise to make assumptions about the drivers<sup>28</sup> of attendance and non-attendance. They might have expected affordability and team performance to be key factors, but what they found was more nuanced.

Some of the reasons offered for non-renewal were the following three:

- Changing work patterns
- Moving house (to further away from the club)
- Not being happy with the location of their existing seat

While not all of those contacted could be 'rescued', this initiative was welcomed positively by the fans (thereby influencing their perceptions of the club.) With the help of the club, many of them were retained, thus justifying the investment in the project.

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<sup>27</sup> Cardiff City FC official website is [www.cardiffcityfc.co.uk](http://www.cardiffcityfc.co.uk)

<sup>28</sup> Drivers are those influencing factors that affect behaviours

On a related project, the club also sought to 'dig deeper' into data that appeared to show that the following were the key influencers of match day attending fans in the most supportive and noisy parts of the stadium:

- Affordability
- Beer
- Standing

It would be very easy, and perhaps tempting, to draw conclusions from that information, perhaps believing that the first two were about making things cheaper and the last was about addressing something more complex to address.

In order to do this, the Commercial Manager organised a series of focus groups with different 'ultra' fans. The discussions that ensued confirmed how unwise the club would have been to simply make assumptions based on the basic data.

When it came to affordability, the fans recognised that the cost of season tickets had to be maintained to help the then Championship<sup>29</sup> club mount a campaign to return to the Premier League. They recognised that the price could not be reduced without negatively affecting the club ambitions on the pitch. So, what was the issue?

The problem was that many of the fans found it difficult to make a single payment for their season ticket at a time of year when they had lots of other competing costs. What they wanted the club to consider was allowing fans to make monthly payments over the course of a season. This was something the club could fix and, soon, fans were able to make several interest-free payments over the season, thereby meeting their expressed specific needs.

The more structured, consistent, transparent and frequent the dialogue and consultation, the more value that emerges for fans and the club alike. Seattle Sounders operates the Sounders Alliance and Alliance Council<sup>30</sup> to do exactly this.

The Sounders' website describes the scheme and its benefits:

### **Alliance Goals**

Provide Alliance members with a voice in the overall direction of the organisation, including but not limited to the following:

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<sup>29</sup> Tier 2

<sup>30</sup> For further information about the Sounders Alliance and Alliance Council, go to <https://www.soundersfc.com/supporters-and-alliance/alliance>

- A vote on retention or lack of confidence in the Club's General Manager approximately every four years
- The right to advise on the Club's charitable contributions
- The right to advise on matters regarding game-day experience
- The right to advise on matters that primarily affect fan experience

### **How to get involved**

- Nominate yourself for Alliance Council
  - Council members will serve terms up to two years
  - Members interested in participating on the Council must receive 25 votes from Alliance members
1. The Council meets in the Pioneer Square area of Seattle on the first Tuesday of each month in addition to the Annual Business meeting
  2. Each Council member will serve as a liaison from the Alliance to the ownership group

### **Why Join the Council?**

- Your Voice. Your Club.
- Represent all Alliance Members in key decisions impacting matchday
- Get an inside scoop of your club
- Meet with ownership three times a year
- Connect with other Sounders FC supporters. (Democracy in Sports, n. d., para. 3-5)

## **Lapsed Fans**

Engaging lapsed fans is more difficult, as the details of those who stopped attending several seasons ago may no longer be held<sup>31</sup>.

So, when the lack of data or contact details means that the above approaches are inappropriate, it is therefore worth considering more innovative approaches to re-engaging lapsed fans by understanding their motivations for lapsing and engaging them in a dialogue about returning.

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<sup>31</sup> Of course, with all data requirement matters, the requirements of GDPR must be met. For further information, see <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/>

In 2018, Brøndby IF, the famous Copenhagen-based club, took an experimental approach by asking two members of the Fan Experience Company's team to accompany two lapsed fans to a Friday evening game.

I was personally involved in this initiative so here is my recollection of the evening:

After having spent the pre-match period in Brøndby's world-leading purpose-built fan zone (2018) and identifying that one fan had not attended in more than 10 years and the other in more than 5 years, we experienced the match together, asking questions like:

How does it feel to be back?

Naturally, with the purpose-built fan zone with a theatre, bars, dining, heaters, entertainment and interviews with former players, the two fans were very impressed with the current experience.

As the game progressed, we discussed their obstacles to attendance. And just like the Cardiff City example given (above) some of the factors could be addressed while others couldn't.

One barrier to attendance was the fact that, due to TV requirements, not every team's games kicked off at the same time every weekday (something which is the reality for every televised league that we know.) (Mark Bradley experience)

This small act informed wider fan consultation work so the value of small exercises like this should never be underestimated.

This example shows us the importance of the balance between changes required to meet the needs of broadcasting and streaming partners, and the risk to attendance numbers created by the flexibility required.

However, the bigger and more elite the club, the less of an issue it is. If you are a huge club like Barcelona, you have got a global fan base that will not be attending. Their access is by TV or streaming, so they will adapt accordingly.

As a fan, you will tune in from wherever you are and now you can understand why La Liga, for example, would want to put games on in the morning for people in Southeast Asia to watch an evening. Equally, they may put a game on late at night so someone in America could watch it during the early evening.

For clubs outside of the elite, exercises like those described at Cardiff City and Brøndby IF are important in informing subsequent wider-scale research and marketing campaigns. They should never be underestimated more than anything else –because they stop us from making assumptions about what matters to fans: one of the biggest errors football makes.

We recommend you to read Fiona Green's excellent book *Winning with Data: CRM and Analytics for the Business of Sports* with a particular interest in the use of fan data in sports<sup>32</sup>.

### 3.2.2 Attracting New Supporters

A popular misconception<sup>33</sup> is that clubs do not need to consider attracting new fans. It is simply good enough to ensure that existing fans return and that a winning streak will ensure lapsed fans come back. What do you think about this?

One thing that is clear is that most clubs need to attract and retain new fans to remain sustainable. If clubs are to grow, they must acknowledge that part of this growth will come from new fans.

We see this as a huge opportunity for football, but sometimes the fixation on winning prevents clubs from seeing it too. By diversifying the club's reach, engaging different parts of the community and adapting the match day experience to engage them, it is possible to continually grow a club.

*The main requirement here is to put oneself squarely in the shoes of the potential fan.*

Let us examine the fan who enjoys watching football on TV and would like to go to a game. What could be the reasons why he or she does not come?

What is needed is a compelling proposition where the club demonstrates in its communications and in the experience itself that new fans, whatever their interests and needs, will have a great day out and will soon feel part of the club.

We also need to consider that, in the leisure industry of today, experiences are of a high quality. Families with children will not come back if the toilets are poor, that one thing is known for sure, but what is less appreciated is that families will not come back if their kids get bored.

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<sup>32</sup> *Winning with Data: CRM and Analytics for the Business of Sports* is available in <https://winnersfdd.com/winning-with-data-book>

<sup>33</sup> This is based on Mark Bradley's experience and many of his conversations with people from clubs outside of the elite over the years.

We know that there are barriers to attendance that affect new fans. Some are based on external perceptions: the game is fierce, the atmosphere is not appropriate for kids, fans may engage in anti-social behaviour, and it may be expensive. However, some barriers are also to do with how the experience will be: can I easily park there? Are there things for kids to do? Will there be a chance to meet the mascot?





A common perception we hear is that football 'is a closed shop'; it does not make the required effort to understand the needs of new groups. It expects them to adjust. It does not adjust the experience for them.

This situation is changing rapidly. Clubs are developing elements of the experience to meet the needs of different fan groups: from the sensory rooms, to ensure children on the spectrum can enjoy a game, to the creation of family areas, to ensure younger kids have lots to do and begin to associate the match day with magic.

With new supporters, there is a lot of work to do. The main point here is changing the way you present yourself to those new supporters and the key thing here is *first point of contact*.

One good example is Brentford Football Club and their dedicated family website<sup>34</sup>. They have their own official club website, but they also have a dedicated family version.

Parents will look at this and immediately understand that the club regards itself as an enjoyable family destination. Here is a list of other clubs which equally focus on addressing the potentially mistaken perceptions of new families at the first point of contact:

-  OHL Leuven (Belgium) (ohleuven.com)
-  Vitesse Arnhem (The Netherlands) (vitesse.nl)
-  OB Odense (Denmark) (ob.dk)
-  Peterborough United (England) (theposh.com)

The latter club, currently in the 3<sup>rd</sup> tier of English football has created a downloadable *New Fan Guide*<sup>35</sup> that answers all of the questions anyone attending their first game would have, with information on the following topics:

- Tickets
- Travel
- Stadium parking

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<sup>34</sup> Brentford FC Family website is [https://family.brentfordfc.com/?\\_ga=2.168055527.799528486.1589711866-1178451753.1588936827](https://family.brentfordfc.com/?_ga=2.168055527.799528486.1589711866-1178451753.1588936827)

<sup>35</sup> Peterborough United FC's *New Fan Guide* is available in <https://www.theposh.com/siteassets/documents/fans/new-fan-guide.pdf>

- Fan zone
- Shop
- Family stand
- Food and drink
- Match day timetable
- The mascot's guide (for children)
- Contact details

There are activities, competitions, the guide tells you what food is available, what you can do on a match day, etcetera. It is almost not about the football, but it is as good as any holiday destination, any entertainment destination, and that does change people's perceptions, because normally if you are thinking of taking kids to the football, you think things like, "is this a good game to go to?", "can I find information about food?", "what time does the club shop open?" This information is just not there. So, what happens? These people do not come.

How are clubs attracting new supporters?

One of the best ways is to recognise the very first time a new fan comes and make them feel special. Imagine the following scenario: a possible new fan buys tickets for their first game and brings their children. As a club, you know that they are coming to their first game either because they are not on your ticketing database (his/her name is new) or because they are buying a ticket for a junior.

What can you do? If you are a small club, you can make that kid feel like a king or queen for a day: that little child goes with their parents, gets to meet the manager, gets to put the corner flags in, gets to wave the flag on the pitch in front of everybody.

If you are a bigger club, then you can offer a first match experience: all the kids get together, they meet a former player and they have something to eat.

Because the prevailing culture in football is about winning, it has been hard to establish these new ways of thinking in the game. To be able to do this, you need people who think like customer engagement professionals.

If we talk about inclusivity, we have to talk about women and football, because women's interest in football is growing (Women's interest in sport continues to grow, n. d.). Women love men's football as well as women's football, but there is little evidence that football is working hard to better understand what women want from the men's game.

Back in 2015, with the noted Sports Academic and Journalist Carrie Dunn<sup>36</sup>, we undertook some qualitative research into women's perceptions of the EFL live football experience over three seasons.

Although only for internal purposes, the final report offered some useful data on attendance habits and other elements, including the following:

- 7% of women go to games on their own.
- 86% attend football games with family members.
- 36% said that cost would be a factor in stopping them from attending games.

Most importantly, 82% of respondents would recommend football to other women **but** only 66% felt valued as a female supporter.

What the programme appeared to be telling us is that at the deeper level of club connection, the 'filter' of gender highlights no significant difference. That People of different gender experience their love of football equally!

However, once we focus on the different touch points within the match day experience, we can begin to see the 'gaps' that have naturally arisen as a result of clubs not yet fully engaging with their female supporting communities.

Only 2 of the 92 clubs in the top 4 tiers of English professional football have a female match announcer. That is something we can easily change.

To summarise, attracting new fans (and we have only examined a couple of segments here) requires a shift in thinking as well as a readiness to engage in research; adapt the match day experience and related communications to meet their needs.

### 3.2.3 Attracting Visiting Supporters

Where it is geographically possible, one of the best ways of generating additional revenue for clubs outside the elite is to increase the number of visiting supporters. This unit will look at the barriers to engaging away fans and, in detail, describe a programme that aims at the following:

- improving the away/visiting fan experience;
- encouraging more fans to travel;
- increasing positive word of mouth within the travelling community; and
- generating additional revenue for host clubs

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<sup>36</sup>Dunn's profile is available in <https://www.theguardian.com/profile/carriedunn>

In countries like Germany, The Netherlands, England and Argentina many fans travel to 'away games', and, although there are occasional security problems, it is a custom that highlights just how loyal many fans are to their team. They will travel anywhere to support it.

If we first look at security issues, the development of the Supporter Liaison Officer (one of the requirements of UEFA's Financial Fair Play regulations<sup>37</sup>) has helped not only to manage security and travel issues but also to lift levels of engagement between the travelling fans of one club and the club hosting them.

The handbook UEFA published in 2011 has set the tone for better communication between clubs and fans, club-to-club, clubs and away fans, and on the FSA website (the English Football Supporters Association) an interview was published with a UEFA representative explaining the role:

### **What would that day-to-day role involve?**

They need to be able to communicate what really annoys fans and help resolve those tensions. They should be involved with security and police meetings too. At present clubs meet with police pre-game, and we think SLOs could make a real contribution to this on behalf of fans, giving our perspective on things. They should have regular meetings with security officials but if they're pinned down only to discussing violence or hooliganism issues it just doesn't work. It needs to be about general fan issues and communication as well as prevention of disorder.

### **And how might it work on match days?**

On matchdays the away SLO will travel to the game with the fans and be on hand should any problems arise. He or she will check whether there are any problems getting in the ground and mediate if necessary. Home SLOs will liaise with their colleagues from the visiting club to make sure everything is OK and offer assistance if needed. In Germany most SLOs now take part in a concourse meeting with police and stewards and their opposite numbers about 45 minutes before kick-off to establish whether everything is running smoothly. (What is a Supporter Liaison Officer?, 2011, para. 10-11)

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<sup>37</sup> For further information, see the article entitled "Supporter Liaison Officers – improving fan dialogue and match experience" (2107), available in <https://www.uefa.com/insideuefa/stakeholders/supporters/news/newsid=2527690.html>

Several years on from this interview and the role of SLO has evolved according to the needs of each specific country.

In England, for example, the role is mostly to do with ensuring existing fans have someone to engage if they have a question or an issue with the club to be resolved as well as liaising with visiting clubs and ensuring that their fans receive the best possible welcome, as illustrated by the following mini-case study.

In Doncaster Rovers, everyone knows who the two SLOs are, as they are dressed in a uniform on a match day that makes them easy to spot. They also have their own page on the club's official website, which describes the role in detail:

Doncaster Rovers continues to enjoy a unique relationship with its dedicated and fantastic supporter base and as such the club recognise the invaluable contribution made by each and every supporter in the ongoing success of the club.

Through the fan engagement programme *In Rovers We Trust*, the club has opened various outlets and channels of dialogue to make the club as accessible and open to its supporters as it can be.

As such, the ongoing supporter liaison officer (SLO) project has played a vital part in the communication flow that exists between both the club and its supporters in the last two years.

Throughout this season the SLOs work extensively both behind the scenes and on match days, communicating with both Doncaster Rovers fans and fans of other clubs on social media, message boards and email as well as meeting with several fans on match days and during the week.

The SLOs attend regular meetings with the senior staff at Doncaster Rovers and communicate feedback from supporters, as well as advising the club on decisions that may affect supporters. (Supporter liaison officer, n. d.)

As well as having an email address, the SLOs at Doncaster Rovers can also be contacted by Facebook. They also have their own official Twitter account whose immediacy is very useful on match days. Here, they communicate issues such as road closures, and they also add to the visiting fans experience by promoting the Social Club where fans of both clubs can mix.

This—and many other clubs— does this because it wants to make sure that, when fans of other clubs in their division are deciding which ‘away games’ to attend, they always choose Rovers. Of course, that makes financial sense with English football regulations allowing the home club to retain 95% of the funds raised through ticket sales to visiting fans (Section 5. Fixtures, n. d.). The financial motivation is clear.

If you had 300 visiting fans paying €30 each and another 200 come as a result of the experience, then that adds €6000. Multiply that by the number of games in a season, and you could see an overall increase upwards of €120000.

Other clubs are now producing ‘visiting fan guides’ to ensure that they, like Doncaster Rovers, are not going to be missed off the seasonal away fan travel plan. Some clubs, like Swansea City, of the EFL Championship—and one of the more geographically remote clubs in the League in south west Wales— even have a video guide<sup>38</sup>.

The EFL supports all of this with an Away Fan Experience <sup>39</sup> season initiative, where the following touch points are assessed by a genuine travelling fan:

1. Planning & travel
2. Arrival & welcome
3. Social & refreshments
4. The turnstile (entrance) & concourse
5. Away fan accommodation (seating/standing provided)
6. Away fan engagement
7. Host club personnel (including stewards)

The ‘assessor’ responds to a series of questions at each touch point and offers overall scores, including his or her recommendation intention (i.e. to what extent they would recommend this club to other travelling/away fans.)

The emerging data is helping the League, the clubs and, most importantly, fans.

The accumulation of all of this pro-active engagement of away fans is beginning to address pre-existing negative perceptions based on historical issues in the U.K. and other parts of Europe. However, we are only at the start of the journey and there are still many clubs with a culture of treating away fans poorly, as if they were ‘the enemy.’ Sure, their singing in the stadium will be in support of their team and occasionally insulting to the home club, but why deny the financial benefits that come from treating them well?

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<sup>38</sup> To see Swansea City AFC Home & Away Visitor Guides video, go to <https://www.swanseaafc.com/fans/home-away-visitor-guides>

<sup>39</sup> The EFL Away Fan Experience Project is available in <https://www.efl.com/supporters/supporter-faqs/>

In other parts of the world, there is still danger associated with travelling fans, such as Boca Juniors fans, or River Plate fans. These clubs are the best-known clubs of Argentina, and as in the rest of Latin America, the most dangerous fans have a name: 'Barras bravas<sup>40</sup>.' These fans demonstrate extreme passion for their team, and there are regular fights with the rival team after the games. In fact, the government and the AFA (Argentinian Association of Football) have prohibited the presence of the rival fans in the stadium since 2013. If you are a Boca Juniors fan and you want to attend to a classic game (Boca vs. River) in the River stadium, you will not be able to do it.

Getting this right is difficult for a sport where fans have always been kept at arm's length. Away fan experiences can still be poor: unfriendly welcome or indifference, poor quality food, no beer, etcetera.

However, if you boil it down to its absolute basic point, if you can get more away fans to come to your stadium or to choose to come your stadium and not others, you will benefit, you will get more money.

The actual business case for fan engagement of away fans is the clearest of them all, but it also highlights just how badly football can treat people that love it.

We accept that there is a rivalry. As football fans, we know that the higher the number of away fans, the more intense the spectacle. However, it does not take away from the fact that if you were to understand how to improve the experience for away fans, two things would happen.

The ones that come will keep coming and they will also spread the voice. They will tell their friends, "Come this is really good, they look after you here." The external perception changes.

The thing that clubs will learn is there are some things that are important to away fans that we **can** influence, but there are some things also important to away fans that we cannot influence.

For example, we can influence the information we give them, we can influence the warm welcome they get when they arrive, we can influence the accommodation where they are sitting or standing, their view, their comfort, their shelter, the quality of the toilets.

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<sup>40</sup> For further information, read Cox's article (2018) "El lado oscuro de las barras bravas en Argentina: una mirada a la violencia en el fútbol", available in <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2018/06/14/el-lado-oscuro-de-las-barras-bravas-en-argentina-una-mirada-a-la-violencia-en-el-futbol/#0>

Importantly, we can influence the food. The away fan wants more than that. The away fan wants to enjoy time in the town, go out to a club, have a few beers. We cannot influence that. The key is to focus on what you can influence.

### **3.2.4 Engaging other Key Fan Segments**

Just as businesses recognised the best way to remain competitive and sustainable was to build reputation on customer relationship management, football must also recognise that not all of its fans are the same.

In the past, only disabled fans experienced something different when they attended (in dedicated disabled fan areas), but now clubs are beginning to see the value of segmenting their fan base.

While social media is still largely unsegmented in its approach, clubs are finding ways to ensure that the match day experience is diversifying their reach by meeting the needs of a wide range of fans: both existing and potential.

This unit looks at a couple of examples and offers clubs at all levels ways to ensure the different groups they are targeting find that their needs are being met just as well as those of the existing traditional fan base.

First of all, let us look at the needs of 'high school kids', that is, kids from the age of 12 to 16. They are way past the 'mascot' stage of fandom and are looking for something in tune with their other needs. As we know from the unit in which we explore the modern fan, many people in this age group consider themselves to be fans, but do not attend. They may play FIFA, stream games, play fantasy football or even bet on games in countries where gambling on sport is legal.

For clubs relying on ticket revenue for their viability and sustainability, the ability to understand these fans' needs and meet them must be an important part of their growth strategy going forward.

At Danish Superliga club FC København (Copenhagen), they are accomplishing the aim of increasing the percentage of high school age kids in their stadium by providing entertainment that will appeal to this group, including a DJ and Rapper.

The DJ positions himself behind the goal while the Rapper takes the mobile microphone and walks around the stand engaging and entertaining. When we attended a game there in the 2018/19 season, it was clear that this strategy was working: there were lots of kids

of that age present. The club was simply extending the range of in-stadia entertainment to address the needs of older children.

So, how do you engage a particular group?

Over the past few years, we have been working as one of UEFA mentors to assist with one of their UEFA GROW projects in Estonia, with the Premium Liga.

In Estonia, football is far away from being the number one sport. The cold weather means that football is played in the summer (March – November), and, even then, games can be postponed because of snow as late as May, with the cold weather often returning in September. Cross-country skiing is the major outdoor pursuit there, so, how do you increase attendance in a football league with those major challenges?

The challenge was three-pronged:

- Club identity
- Community engagement
- Fan experience

### **Club Identity**

Each club in the league would need to focus on its own identity:

- How is it regarded/perceived within the community?
- If it does not already have a purpose and/or set of beliefs or values, how could they be created?
- How could this 'purpose' and 'identity' be manifest so that the local residents see that it represents a key part of the community?

One club, Paide Linnameeskond<sup>41</sup>, was able to link the club to medieval history, when knights defended the town. Some sporting clubs might just pick up on the word 'knights' because it sounds good or fits within their intended brand. Paide's CDO (community development officer, a role introduced as part of the project), Arto Saar, saw this as a way to give the club a special identity while finding a way that would connect it to potential new fans as well as existing ones. The idea of the 'Paide Knights' was born, and a real sense of identity helped him to engage local schoolchildren.

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<sup>41</sup> Paide Linnameeskond official website is <https://www.paidelinnameeskond.ee/>



## **Community Engagement**

Aleksandr Dmitrijev, the CDO of JK Narva Trans<sup>42</sup>, worked with players to go into 'early years' education and use the players' skills, languages, travel and football experiences to entertain and engage young children.

As a direct result of this, more and more kids wanted to see these new heroes 'in the flesh'. Alex devised a system whereby kids were given vouchers to allow them to attend games for free (with parents paying.) When they turned up to attend, their vouchers were taken.

This allowed the club, over the course of the season, to understand their 'conversion rate' of kids in schools to kids attending games. Sometimes as many as 40% of the kids visited in schools would turn up to games, a fact that partly explains the club's significant rise in attendances (from a low of 60 the previous season to 800+ in September 2018.)

## **Fan Experience**

Katrin Lagerest, the CDO at current Estonian champions FC Flora Tallinn, created a kids' entertainment zone outside of the National Stadium (A Le Coq Arena), where the team played, with arts, crafts, entertainment, a mascot and a fire engine to visit and explore (with the help of the local fire department.) The retention of these kids meant that levels of attendance at Flora were the best in the League last season.

Another way of engaging a particular group is to provide social media content that will appeal directly to them. However, this presents a problem, because, if the needs of that group are such that the message must be very different (for example, a club reaching out to families and children to tell them about mascot activities at the game coming up,) this might seem out of place for older more established fans.

The answer is simple: just like other businesses create channels for individual customer groups, so must football create channels for the audiences it seeks to engage. One of the best examples of this is Doncaster Rovers (EFL Family Club of the Year 2019.) You can learn more about their work with families by checking out the following video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PNGMSiUOEE>

In order to ensure that their younger fans feel engaged and entertained outside of the match day, they created Donny Dog TV, with videos aimed at entertaining young families: <https://www.doncasterroversfc.co.uk/ifollow/donny-dog-tv/>

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<sup>42</sup> JK Narva Trans official website is <https://www.fctrans.ee/>



If you want to create the impression that your match day experience is designed for a particular group, then you need to hammer home the message through all of your communications channels. Donny Dog, Doncaster Rovers' mascot, even has a Twitter account: a safe and entertaining way for kids to engage with the club and see the excitement that a match day brings and for parents to know the club genuinely cares for fans.

Twitter account: [https://twitter.com/Donny\\_Dog\\_DRFC](https://twitter.com/Donny_Dog_DRFC)

As these examples have shown, one cannot simply 'market' to new segments and expect them to turn up. Football needs to understand that the experience must match the value being promised by the marketing. These mini-case studies show that, whoever the intended audience, there are many imaginative ways to bring the magic of football to them.

**Exercise:**

There is a university in your town. If you were working at the local football club, how would you set about attracting more students to games and ensuring they returned?



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