

Module 4. Building a Fan Engagement Strategy

Introduction

In this module we are going to talk about the key elements that make up fan engagement.

- ✚ We will talk about how important it is to identify your audience, to understand your community, to have a plan built around your club identity.
- ✚ We will also look at understanding fans, so we will look at which the different fan groups are: What is important to them? What opportunity do they represent for us?
- ✚ We will then look at the experience. We will create a system to identify ways of improving the experience for our different fan groups, and we will explore how we will measure that.

Our aim is not just to increase attendance at the next match. Our aim is to transform the way the club is seen by current and future fans and local and national stakeholders. It is, in effect, to create a new culture of fan focus that will contribute to future sustainability and ensure that everyone connected with the club is proud of their relationship with it.

All of this is based on the quality of fan experience and on the spirit of fan engagement.

Unit 4.1

4.1.1 Fan Engagement for Clubs

We will explore how fan engagement can help associations and federations in other units within this program, but the focus of this first unit is on clubs and, of course, the Leagues in which they operate.

If the aim of football is to respect and grow the fan's emotional investment in clubs, then that is where fan engagement must start and, to do that, we need a clear definition of what we mean by it.

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

When we examined how businesses outside of football have embraced concepts like “customer engagement” and “relationship management”, we dwelt on two key necessities:

1. Organisational design
2. Organisational culture.

We used the analogy of the F1 car in which even a tiny change to the weight of a part or the design of a very small bolt can produce the infinitesimally small improvement needed to get an edge on the competition. That is an example of an organization designed to do one thing: to win.

Football, as another competitive business, also needs to win, but not at the cost of losing its fans nor, for the majority of clubs, their viability. Football clubs need to pursue winning, but also engagement, not just because it is the right thing to do to respect the fan’s emotional investment, but also because there comes a time for every club when poor performance may reduce levels of attendance to numbers that risk the club’s very existence: when ticket revenue is the only thing that matters.

Presently, the majority of clubs are **not** designed to foster a spirit of engagement either because it does not matter to the owners (maybe, everyone studying this can think of a club where it seems the owner does not care what fans think) or because they have not sufficiently embedded it into their organizational design.

The potential benefits in terms of improved advocacy, improved retention and transformed public or external perceptions are massive. So how might clubs start to do this?

Here are four ways in which fan engagement could be woven into the design of football clubs:

1. leaders should honor the history and identity of the club. If a decision goes against the club’s intrinsic values, then the club’s values should come first¹;
2. there should be structured supporter dialogue and consultation in a transparent and constructive way, where fans are able to influence decisions that affect them and the things that matter to them²;

¹ Clubs like Borussia Dortmund and Seattle Sounders have used ‘Brand Filters’ to ensure all decision-making respects their club’s brand, values and beliefs. ‘Brand Filters’ are a process whereby decisions are checked against a series of statements showing how the club relates to its key stakeholders.

² You can read about how 3rd Tier English club AFC Wimbledon do this here <https://www.afcwimbledon.co.uk/club/club-charter/>

3. execution of the fan experience should continuously improve to add value to fans and to ensure the club diversifies its reach; and
4. everyone working at the club should be recruited, developed, rewarded and promoted according to the club's values.

These statements correspond to our four pillars of engagement:

1. Identity & leadership
2. Consultation & engagement
3. Execution of experience
4. Colleagues and volunteers.

In terms of organizational design, what could clubs specifically do, within this framework, to make a difference and to sow the seeds for a future shaped by fan engagement?

Our experience (of both football and wider business) suggests a fundamental change to the way football clubs are designed in organizational terms. If the whole club is set up to 'win', then, as we have said in other units, this aggression and determination may 'infect' fan-facing parts of the club and result in experiences that are either poor or dismissive.

Having said that, clubs cannot suddenly become Disney. Disney's focus on delighting customers is built into their DNA, it is their brand, it is what they do, and everything flows from that. Therefore, what we believe is necessary is a plan that takes football clubs from a singular focus on winning to a dual focus: winning and engaging.

One could argue that, as clubs cannot 'control' winning, then the whole club should be about engagement, but we believe that in the short term a shift to a club based on the following model would accelerate the growth of fan engagement.

Table 1: Model to accelerate fan engagement in short term

The Football Club	
<u>Winning</u>	<u>Engaging</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director of football • Team coach • Academy director • Club secretary • Players • Physio staff • Coaches • Scouts • Ground staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chief executive • Fan engagement director • Supporter liaison officer (SLO) • Ticketing • Marketing & communications • Digital • Retail & merchandise • Social & refreshments • Match day colleagues & volunteers



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kit supervisor • Player liaison officer • (Etcetera) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stewards • Stadium operations • (Etcetera)
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From the League’s perspective, arguably, there is far more to do to drive engagement than to influence each club’s performance on the pitch. Naturally, factors such as attendance, advocacy and revenue are key to leagues, but elements such as public, media and government perceptions are very important.

The EFL created a Family Excellence programme in 2006/07, and, since then, it has helped clubs to attract, engage and retain more families and younger fans. A rise of the 37% in junior attendance in its first ten seasons of operation shows its value: 6 million more children attending football Tiers 2, 3 and 4.

The elements in this programme –which is still running today– are the following:

- detailed Fan Experience Assessments for each of the 72 participating clubs, containing two detailed reports per season for each club on what it was like for a **first-time family**, together with recommendations, best practice and benchmarking;
- recognition, awards and national media coverage for high achieving clubs; and
- learning and improvement events for clubs.

By creating interventions over long periods of time (+5 years), the focus supported starts to become part of the culture. The competitive element of schemes such as this also ensures that family engagement, in this case, remains a priority for clubs. Besides, the fact that the clubs are being helped in their efforts to grow family attendance is also appreciated, and that leads to further engagement.

So, when the League takes responsibility for helping the clubs with engagement – whether through recognition, training support, feedback or otherwise –, it is helping to promote a culture of fan engagement, where clubs have a heightened focus on strengthening fan relationships and improving their experiences.

Exercise:

Clubs in Denmark’s Superliga have a First Time/Family scheme aimed at improving new fan/family experiences and lifting levels of attendance. Please visit www.superliga.dk for a list of clubs, work through their websites (all of which can be accessed in English), and do the following two activities:

- identify one club whose website shows they are focused on attracting families, and



- describe what they are doing.

4.1.2 The Components of a Fan Engagement Strategy

We know that advancing fan engagement is both operational and cultural in nature. Clubs need to have processes and services in place that serve fans better, but, as we have seen, unless the right organizational culture is in place, results will be inconsistent.

Yoshida, Gordon, Nakazowa & Biscaia (2014) described fan engagement as follows:

“A sport-consumer’s extra-role behaviours in non-transactional exchanges to benefit his / her favourite team (...) and other fans” (Yoshida et al, 2014, p.403)

The focus on ‘non-transactional behaviours’ stresses that fan engagement, by nature, is not commercial. An engaged fan may make further purchases, but it would appear that what is more important is the way they ‘feel’ about their club and their connection with it. It appears that Yoshida et al. recognise that there is an emotional element to the fan experience definition.

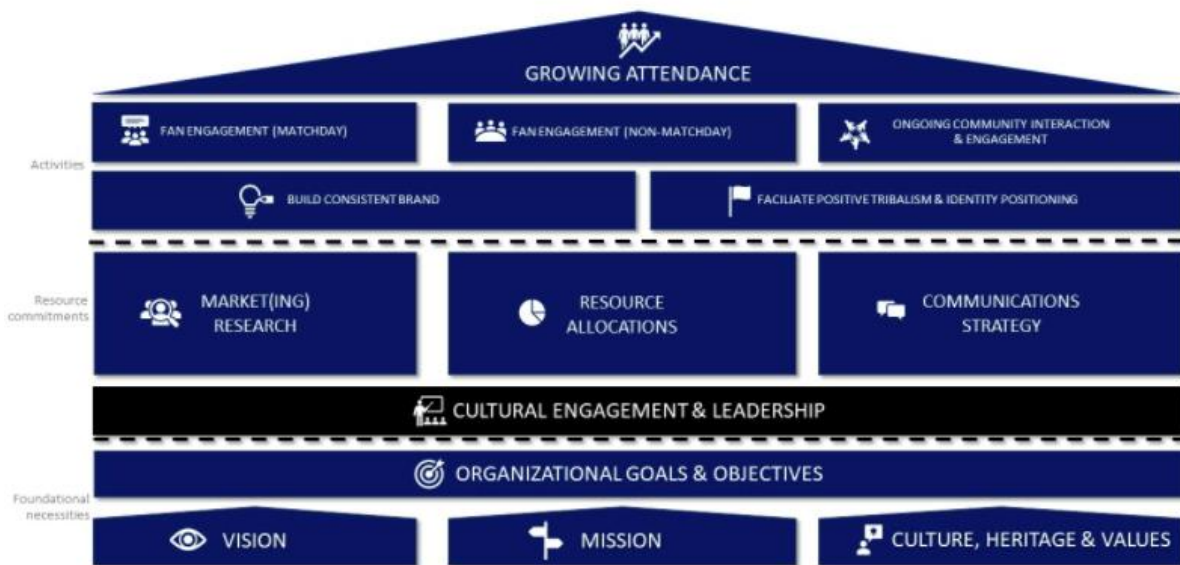
Geoff Wilson³, a sports strategist from Northern Ireland, and Bas Schnater, a data management expert from The Netherlands, both have extensive experience of working in football. Together, they have created a model for fan engagement, and we re-print it here with their permission.

We have undertaken research to see if there is a connection between fan engagement, as defined by us, and measurable financial outcomes.

³ You will find Geoff Wilson profile in <https://www.linkedin.com/in/geoffwnjwilson/>



Figure 1: Model for fan engagement



Source: Schnatter & Wilson, 2019.

What is particularly powerful about this model is that it combines both operational and cultural elements (such as engagement and leadership, heritage and values) to drive attendance.

In our research, with senior club practitioners across Europe, Colby Cox (2019) began by undertaking a literature review under the subject of fan engagement.

Focusing more specifically on sports, fan engagement is a specific form of customer engagement within the sports industry as it forms emotional bonds through the desire to engage in emotional and captivating experiences created by the sport (Yoshida et al., 2014; Fenton, 2018).

Relative to the desire of captivating fan experiences, Funk (2017) proposed a consumer-centric framework, titled the Sport Experience Design (SX) Framework, that focuses on three major elements when attempting to increase the engagement of fans: Sport User (consumer needs), Sport Context (user experience) and Sport Organisation (business goals).

Much like Johnston and Kong's (2011) Experience Roadmap, the Sport Context element emphasizes the importance of touchpoints to enhance the fans experience leading to more involved fans. In relation to fan engagement, the terms "fanship" and "fandom" are often used.

According to Reysen and Branscombe (2010) cited in Cox (2019, p12) "fanship" refers to one's individual connection to a sports team, whereas "fandom" refers

to one's individual connection to other fans of that sports team. However, Yoshida *et al.* (2014) cited in Cox (2019, p12) state that sports marketing literature uses the term "engaged" to refer to the level of sport fandom as well as the behavioural patterns of the fan.

To us, the phrase 'a specific form of customer engagement within the sports industry' suggests that by analysing the operational and cultural movements customer-facing businesses have made over the past 60-70 years, we can apply a modified model to meet the needs of a sport like football.

One of the four objectives of our research was to: "investigate what non-transactional factors increase sustainable fan engagement."

Our findings underlined the importance of ensuring any fan engagement model and/or strategy that prioritises the emotional element. Presented in the form of a thematic network (overleaf), Colby Cox identified three types of emotional connection:

- transparent communication,
- community engagement, and
- sincere relationships.

The practitioners identified 'trust' as the key currency generated by a strategic focus on fan engagement, and, as our research indicates, there are clear ways in which a club can build a fan engagement strategy to deliver this.

Figure 2: Types of emotional connection

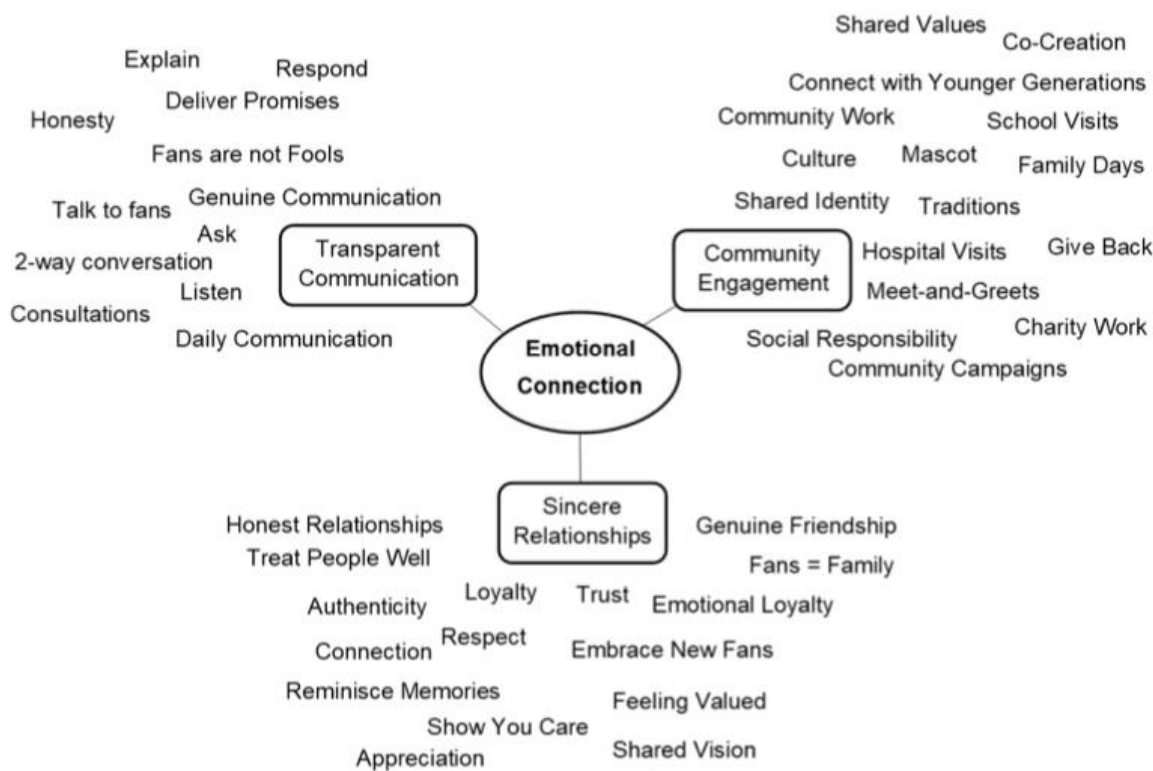


Figure 4: Objective 1 – Thematic Network

Source: Cox, 2019.

Exercise:

Sincerity has emerged as a key driver of trust and, therefore, needs to be accounted for in any fan engagement strategy.

If you were to design a strategy for a football club, what activities, services or behaviours would you emphasise to convey sincerity?

4.1.3 Who Are Your Stakeholders?

In other units of this course we have described the different stakeholders that clubs and leagues need to recognise, communicate with and engage.

Here is an (incomplete) list of potential stakeholders whose perceptions of football, your club and your fans may be material to your club's reputation and, ultimately, viability.

Table 2: List of potential local and national stakeholders

Local Stakeholders	National Stakeholders
Town/City halls	Government
Schools & colleges	National sport bodies
Security forces (including police)	National security organisations

Business community	Health & safety legislators
Hospitals & clinics	National media
Ethnic group	Fans of other clubs
Politicians	National fan organisations
Local media	General public
Local residents	Major brands

We know that there is a positive correlation between sport and cognitive development in schoolchildren. The study from Aberdeen University⁴ (Scotland) shows the following:

(...) hand and eye co-ordination, developed in the playground, may have a beneficial role in the classroom. Co-authored by Aberdeen University's Dr Justin Williams, the research reveals primary school pupils good at hitting an object are up to 15% better at maths. (Why playing football makes children better at maths, 2018, para. 1-2)

There are also many examples of clubs (and national associations) creating school programmes to support child development and cognitive skills. For example, former England international player and current Chelsea FC Manager, Frank Lampard, has authored a series of football-related children's books for early years readers⁵.

There are also examples of clubs responding to the pandemic by putting out education and learning for children who otherwise would be at school. For example, Manchester City striker Sergio Agüero has used his bilingual skills to present Spanish language classes:

Argentine Agüero will use his bilingual skills to host virtual Spanish lessons. Content will be available online and on TV from Monday, April 20, when children would have usually returned to school following the Easter holidays, and will run for two weeks. (Murphy, 2020, para. 1-4)

I am sure that all students of this course will be able to point to several examples of how their clubs, leagues and associations take their responsibility to use the power of football to engage schoolchildren. But how often do you see a school-focused project aimed at getting kids to start attending matches?

As we have stated before, for clubs who wish to grow, simply counting on re-engaging lapsed fans will not be enough. Part of that growth must come from people who are new to the club. One key group, therefore, is children.

⁴ You can read the article "Exercise in schools can help children pay attention in the classroom" (Williams, 2010) in the following link: <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/news/3600/>

⁵ You can find them on the next website: <https://www.lovereading4kids.co.uk/author/Frank-Lampard/gd/Frank-Lampard.html>

In other parts of this course we have focused on what needs to be done to create an experience that will entertain them, create magic for them and keep the youngest from becoming bored, but how do you engage with schools to attract them to their first game?

Dublin's Bohemians football club⁶ has a reputation for community engagement. Back in 2010 the club re-invented itself around a series of strong values based on relevance, recognition in the community and authenticity. This re-focus away from winning football matches to 'standing for something' has led them to become one of Europe's most innovative and achieving clubs.

One example of this is the way they engage with local schools. Their Run the Club project involves visiting schools and explaining how a football club is run: who works there, what they do and how they put on a match day and engage the local community.

The children who participate are then invited down to Dalymount Park to receive their certificates and to see how it all happens on a match day.

Let us explore the experiences of Estonia's Premium Liga⁷: the top tier of men's football in this progressive Nordic country. For those new to Estonian football, it is played in the summer months from March to November. This means that it benefits from the good weather conditions that many other European Leagues wish they had.

The origins of this work were in the first GROW for Leagues programme that UEFA had launched. Previously, their GROW⁸ work had focused on helping National Associations to grow participation and attendances at their national team's games. However, as many leagues in Europe are managed by their National Association, UEFA wished to take existing best practice and involve its mentors in supporting clubs in Estonia, and to add this to their GROW portfolio.

A Community Development Officer (CDO) was recruited for each club; their responsibility was to use creativity, drive and establish best practices to grow attendances at each club. They did this primarily through two key areas of focus:

1. Schools and Community Engagement, and
2. Improved Fan Experiences.

For the Schools and Community Engagement area, plans were drawn up to better understand how to connect football to schools (there were no existing links) and then to

⁶ The Bohemian FC, <https://bohemianfc.com/>

⁷ Estonia Premium Liiga, www.premiumliiga.ee

⁸ <https://www.uefa.com/insideuefa/football-development/grow/>

better understand how to connect the club to the pupils in ways that would encourage attendance.

Key to this were the players and the local CDO Aleks Dmitrijev, with an approach characterised by fun and excitement. By deploying the players, teaching younger kids skills and then offering them a voucher to attend a game for free, it was hoped that when they go there, the fan experience would compel them to return.

As the following video shows, this was a resounding success, with attendances increasing by 200-300% over the months following the start of the schools engagement initiative:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q2BTogVHziM>

Another idea is to connect club challenges to the high school curriculum⁹ so that interest in attending grows. For example: How do football clubs attract more kids of high school age to games? This is a question that many clubs are asking, so, why not engage local students to work on the issues?

Finally, there are also huge benefits to public perceptions when clubs engage with schools. In the first part of the 2019/20 Premier League season, Everton was among those clubs doing something really special and unique.

⁹ The Fan Experience Company staff hope to begin such a project in 2020/21.



Figure 3: Everton's Twitter post



Source: Brantford Football Club official website [Fans supporting the Brantford Football Club] (n. d.) Retrieved 20 June 2020 from https://family.brentfordfc.com/?_ga=2.145083895.27445222.1588936827-1178451753.1588936827. Screenshot by author.

As the image shows, they invited a local junior school to re-create player images for the evening's match-related Twitter posts.

The response was incredibly positive: the club received great praise from its own fans; the school became known to the Everton fanbase; people smiled, and the kids had a lifelong memory. What is not to like about that?

Finally, let us look at another approach, that of South Bend Lions¹⁰. One of the things the club did upon first launching was to agree a partnership with the School Corp. This related to more than just field rental, with players assisting in a mentoring programme for local students and other initiatives to support them.

Exercise:

Consider the educational challenges in your part of the world. How could your club (or your League or National Association) support schools and colleges in ways that would not only benefit the child's development but also encourage match attendance?

¹⁰ South Bend Lions Football Club was announced as a new United Soccer League (USL) expansion franchise in 2019. The team were due to play in the Great Lakes Division of USL League Two in 2020, the country's top pre-professional men's soccer league.

4.1.4 Measuring Fan Engagement

In this unit we are going to explore ways to measure fan engagement, because if you measure it effectively, you can benefit from the following:

- understanding how it can be improved;
- understanding how it impacts on levels of trust and emotional loyalty;
- understanding how it affects fan attendance behaviours;
- understanding how it can transform local community perceptions of the club;
- identifying areas of priority to fans and thereby saving wasted resources on less important areas; and
- testing how successful any new fan experience intervention has been.

As we have stated in other units, the definition of “fan engagement” is the following:

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

It therefore follows that our fan engagement measurement plan should be aimed at understanding the obstacles to the creation of trust and emotional loyalty and addressing them.

First, we must consider the mechanics of implementing a fan engagement measurement scheme, and this is covered further in this module. We must also recognise that, with football’s historic tendency to keep fans at arm’s length, we must be persuaded of the value of asking for their feedback. If we simply believe that all they want is for the team to win, then all we can ask about is if they like what the manager or coach is doing.

If we believe in the power of engaging supporters, we must recognise the value of measurement. If you want to change your business for the better, you need to measure it, you need a key performance indicator, and you need to understand if your changes are working and if you are making a difference.

In football, this is not as easy as it seems, because if you want to increase attendances, how do you know that an increase in attendances is purely down to fan engagement and the series of specific improvements you have made?

However, it could also be down to things like good weather, the time of the year, the kick-off time, how good the team is playing. There are many explanations as to why crowds may increase and crowds may fall.

That is why it is important to have frequent survey interventions. In this way, you can begin to understand the variables that influence the way fans feel about the club, their relationship with it and their experiences.

As for the cultural elements, the problem you have is that you are speaking to fans about something they love. When a football club thinks about getting feedback and fan things about giving feedback, there is that barrier.

We have to create the conditions where fans feel that providing feedback is a responsible thing for them to do and for clubs to overcome their fear of asking for feedback, because that is another important point. Some clubs fear feedback.

They worry that all they will receive is criticism, so they either do not survey at all or do it infrequently. If they do not get the results they want, they do not do it anymore.

The question of measurement is addressed in a blog Mark Bradley wrote in 2013 (which is currently not available, but planned to appear on www.fanexperienceco.com soon):

Any football fan hearing the phrase 'net promoter' might be forgiven for recalling the hilarious attempts of 4th tier German side FC Magdeburg's fans to direct their players towards the goal with giant arrows. Certainly, a form of 'net promotion', but not quite what I had in mind.

Net Promoter (and the accompanying NPS® – explained later) emerged from research undertaken by service excellence guru and writer Fred Reichheld, Satmetrix and Bain & Co. For me, as a customer service practitioner, it was an epiphany of sorts, for it allowed us to create a business case for investment in the customer experience.

Prior to then, there was data connecting culture to employees to customers and profit (the Internal Service Profit Chain) and also some excellent models such as the Unisys / Management Today Service Excellence framework.

However, in spite of the revelatory nature of this work, the simple question 'how much money will an improvement in customer service give us' still eluded those of us who were beating a path to the Finance Director's door.

Simply put, Net Promoter allows you to calculate the net difference between those customers who 'love' your organisation and those who don't. By asking the specific Net Promoter question 'On the basis of your recent experiences and on a scale of 0-10 where 0 is lowest & 10 is highest, how strongly would you recommend us to your friends and family?' you are able to produce a single score



which is an accurate leading indicator of future annual sales and business growth.

Those who mark you 9 or 10 in response to the Net Promoter question are your 'promoters' (advocates): customers with a strong emotional connection to your organisation who, without prompting, would recommend it. Those who mark 0-6 may range from those who are hostile to your organisation (where I'm going with BT, as you ask) or simply indifferent to it. Either way, they are 'detractors'.

Subtract the percentage of respondents who are detractors from those who are promoters and you produce a Net Promoter Score or NPS®, which you then track over time.

What the originators of the research could prove (and which was subsequently acknowledged by the London School of Economics) was that there is a direct correlation between this score, as it moves over time, and your future sales and business growth.

What about those who marked you 7 or 8? Well these respondents are known as 'passives'. In other words, they make, for example, routinely describe themselves as 'satisfied' with the level of service they receive – and research has existed for many years now to provide that there is no reliable connection between simply 'satisfied' customers and future loyalty and / or repurchase. Which is why I always laugh when a bank CEO announces that customer satisfaction levels are at, let's say, 80%. All that means is that the vast majority of your customer base is at risk.

Net Promoter is now acknowledged to be the most common global customer experience measure, used as it is by the likes of Apple, First Direct, Disney, Sony as well as all business sectors. Well I say 'all' but one area it's yet to penetrate is sports and leisure. And this is what interests me. You see, as someone who advocates Fan Engagement as the most sustainable growth strategy for sport, anything which proves the business case for focusing on this area, is more than welcome, especially in a sector that sees attendance levels as the only metric worth thinking about.

For the last few years I have been working with clubs with the added objective of collecting data to help them understand and influence the link between fan experience, engagement, benefits, sales and growth. So, what have I learned?

It's early days but there are some factors that are appearing obvious to me and which help sports clubs understand the potential for Net Promoter use in their organisation.

Let's take football as an example.

A football club's 'customers' range from new ones to existing ones and lapsed ones. It also has fans of every age and type: from those who come for a day out, to those who come once or twice a season, to those who are regulars and those who are utterly devoted to their club – whose loyalty does not depend on a Champions League placing but which is simply a badge of honour to the thing that connects everything they love (family, friends and life's true heartbeat).

And it is this emotional connection that weakens the case for comprehensive use of the Net Promoter question, since those most devoted supporters will find it difficult to separate their individual experiences and interactions with the Club from the deeper love they hold in their hearts for it.

I saw that in a project I was involved in at a national Football Association, where the most devoted fans would probably accept a slap in the face at the turnstile and yet still love their country's best eleven, come back and talk it up with friends.

But there are other 'customers' of a football club for whom the Net Promoter question is absolutely appropriate, and they are those who by nature of their status are more likely to be able to address the question objectively. They may include guests of hospitality hosts, fans attending for the first time (accompanied by an existing fan or not), 'away' fans supporting the visiting team (likely to only happen once a season) and, naturally, clients of the club's conference and banqueting services.

The fact that few clubs even collect feedback from these groups, never mind use Net Promoter, is probably of more concern to me now, but if a club wanted to build a growth strategy over time a measure of progress is required and for these groups I believe My Reichheld's formula holds sway.

So, what about the 'core fraternity' then? They must represent the biggest segment of supports for most clubs and the above would appear to rule out applying this philosophy to measuring their engagement and advocacy. Well, in my view, you simply need to ask a question that better reflects their emotional connection to the club and one that allows them to separate out the emotional and rational strands of their relationship.

It's early days, but I believe the question is 'based on your recent experiences, how valued do you feel as a supporter of (club)?'

In my experiences with Doncaster Rovers and other clubs (on behalf of several of whom I'm currently collecting this data) then the results are interesting to say the least. Asking the Net Promoter question to core groups often produces a NPS® that would put the club on a par with some of the country's best customer service providers in any industry.

This is curious, as I'm often called in to help clubs whose fans feel a huge sense of disconnection and disenchantment with them at that very moment. Well, I believe this 'softening' of responses is simply a result of you using the wrong question, since when I add the 'value' question, the results are, in my view, much more representative (and score much lower).

That's not to say I have the 'scientific' proof to absolutely justify the wording of my 'value' question and also the scale and formula I'm developing. However, what I can point to is some hugely positive benefits when this approach is deployed, as it gives you a 'true' reading of levels of engagement amongst the group who, arguably, are the most influential when it comes to future fan 'recruitment'.

Tracked over time and using both approaches side by side, also gives you an insight into how 'on field' performance affects levels of advocacy. It's too early to call right now, but early indications are that 'off pitch' factors wield far more of an influence of levels of continuing sentiment than 'on field' factors do. And the more clubs I work with, the more persuasive the theory becomes.

If you do some research into Net Promoter, you'll see that it's often marketed as the 'only question you need to ask'. Well I doubt that. What I'd do is to encourage clubs to invest in FEEDBACK and MEASUREMENT first.

Collect feedback, find out what matters to different groups of fans (generally and at each 'touch point' that's important), understand what their club means to them and how they see its identity, engage them in discussions and begin a dialogue in earnest. Share my philosophy with them, see what THEY think about it and urge them to help you collect the data that will help you build a persuasive case for growth.

I'm seeing good evidence in the work Doncaster Rovers has done with some attendant benefits that have genuinely been 'head turners' (including a softening of message board tone, a broader acceptance of the more difficult decisions and a willingness for fans to partner with the club on researching further improvements to the club's relationship).



It also strikes me that the Supporter Liaison Officer role could be instrumental in creating some momentum around this approach, as well as the Supporter Consultation / Liaison groups that many clubs have established.

Net Promoter isn't, by itself, the answer, but a curiosity about how supporter experiences affect levels of engagement and future behaviour is long overdue and maybe, just maybe, in addition to an affection for the Black Cats, the introduction of a compelling 'sport-specific' alternative might be the legacy I leave my kids.

What we propose as the best measure of fan engagement is something that identifies 'how valued' a fan feels, as this would appear to be the precursor to those two vital currencies of trust and emotional loyalty.



Unit 4.2

4.2.1 Fan Engagement as a Key Business Priority

As our research paper (Cox, 2019) showed, practitioners in football across Europe all believe in the power of fan engagement:

- It can improve external perceptions of football at a national level.
- It can improve local community perceptions of a club.
- It can strengthen the value that fans feel and ultimately deliver increased attendances to local clubs and especially those outside of the elite for whom ticket revenue is so important.

Now, if this were any other business and you wanted to embark on a course of action that was going to have a big impact on your business, then you would make it a key part of your activity. It would become a key business priority.

How do organisations outside of football do that? Well, to start with, the leaders talk about it at board meetings. They make it a priority. What else?

- Feedback becomes essential.
- There are key performance indicators linked to financial performance.
- People are recognized and rewarded for doing the right things.
- You have coaching, and personal development is targeted to actually deliver the outcomes we want.
- More than anything else, it is talked about at board level at every meeting.

It is therefore likely that where fan engagement is absent, inconsistently practised or ineffective, one of the reasons is that it is not regarded as a key business priority, and/or the club or league does not recognise the practices required to do this.

Back in 2005, when Fan Experience Company started, there were no football club names with 'fan' in their title. There were no fan experience directors or supporter liaison officers, and the concept of 'engagement' was not as widely discussed and referred to as it is now.

As we have set out in other units, if anything was built into the club's DNA, it related to winning on the pitch. This has led to a culture of indifference to supporters, because (1) they are assumed to be only motivated by winning, and (2) their loyalty can be relied upon.

In the intervening years, the more enterprising clubs have recognised that if they are to successfully strengthen relationships with fans, the activities and behaviours associated with this need to have a high profile within the club.

What would happen in a club where fan engagement was part of the culture, part of 'the way we do things'? What about training and motivation? What about encouraging your match day staff to think not just about security, and think more about engaging with people? What about encouraging your staff to listen carefully to what fans tell them and to note down any potential improvement areas?

The fact that these things don't happen consistently across football is because they're not seen as a priority.

The two-tier club model we introduced earlier in this module proposed two principal functions for a football club:

1. winning and achieving sporting glory, and
2. engaging and growing the fanbase.

In this course, we are not focusing on the playing side. We are focusing on the engagement side. So, what would this look like?

What we have learned as an organisation is that if you design a club around the strategies that have driven forward every successful business in other sectors, you will have the most elusive of rewards in your hand: a sustainable football club whose growth depends not on what happens on the pitch, but on its loyalty to more enduring and meaningful principles.

For more than 30 years now, the most sustainable and profitable organisations have led a customer-driven path. Designing their organisations around their customers' needs, and basing their growth strategies on adding value, they have ridden out the fallow years, soared when others have slumped, and consistently attracted and retained the best people out there.

Fan engagement leadership, however, is still largely notable by its absence in football. Without leadership, of course, nothing happens. What leaders espouse will influence the focus of those around them. What leaders measure (we know) gets done, and what leaders reward is replicated. Yet in football, fan engagement still fails to have the focus it needs to be effective and to be part of the culture. This needs fixing.

Fan Engagement Leadership

Businesses in sectors other than sport which develop a competitive advantage (and are most likely able to ride out difficult economic periods) do so largely as a result of 4 factors:

- ✚ Leadership & values: It has to do with having strong principles that are apparent in the decisions they make, the priorities they give their employees and the experiences enjoyed by customers.
- ✚ Understanding customers: It consists of prioritising feedback and dialogue to the extent that they understand what matters most to different customer groups and are able to pinpoint what elements of the experience/product/service drive advocacy and repurchase intention with each group
- ✚ Customer experience: It is related to using innovation and feedback to ensure that every touch point delivers hassle-free, added value to customers, as well as ensuring that service recovery (complaints and problems-solving) drives continuous improvement.
- ✚ Employee engagement: It is to do with creating a working environment where people look forward to giving 'extra' at work because they are encouraged, motivated, supported and recognised.
In spectator sports like football and rugby, we see these principles eschewed in favour of strategies such as basing future growth on 'either winning or discounting'.

Yet, when you consider the emotional power of the sporting connection between a supporter and his or her team, it is unsurprising that many clubs are now developing sustainable growth strategies.

“There is no such thing as the typical Middlesbrough¹¹ fan” said Mark Ellis¹² (2017), Chief Operating Officer at a 2nd tier football club that has worked hard to understand the needs of different groups. They, like many other clubs, have discovered that one particular group – families – are less reliant on a winning team than on other factors when stating what they need from a match day experience.

This means that clubs can 'control' the experience for them, with safe, enjoyable family zones, added activities, entertainment and services, and, more than anything else, friendly pro-active match day staff and volunteers. Middlesbrough always sell out their +4,200

¹¹ The Middlesbrough FC official website is <https://www.mfc.co.uk/>

¹² M Ellis, interview on internal company video, 27 November, 2017

Generation Red Family Zone while Cardiff City achieved an astonishing increase in family season ticket holders from 459 to 7,200 in four seasons (a period when the club won nothing on the pitch.)

Taking a similar approach to other sports fan audience segments can reap similar rewards, and, while a poor streak on the pitch will always lead to understandable dissatisfaction, keeping the lines of dialogue open, ensuring fans have a say and creating good value experiences at the match will drive up engagement, increase or sustain attendances and deliver other benefits, such as the following:

- fans become more understanding (and therefore more forgiving) of club decisions;
- fans become more likely to take up new club/league offers;
- fans become more likely to share constructive feedback with clubs;
- fans become more likely to respond to requests for input/feedback; and
- fans talk positively and proudly about the club on social media.

In order to create the conditions for sustainable growth, we know that sports leaders need to address the following –our four pillars of fan engagement:

Identity & Meaning

Focus on what makes the club ‘special’, explore and agree what the club’s natural values are. Although all fans want to see a winning team, very few leaders can continuously deliver that. However, the deeper connections will always endure. What a grandfather passes down to a granddaughter continues, regardless of how poorly the team performs. A club that only focuses on winning (to the exclusion of what other things might matter to fans) may see short-term increases in support, but that tends to be fickle, and, history shows, they will be the first to abandon ship when the club really needs them.

The best example of this is Dublin’s Bohemians¹³, a club that has transformed itself in less than a decade. The club operates around a series of values –a very distinct identity that allows it to transcend everything a club does and become a genuine ‘community hub’. We will explore this case study in more detail in course 2, but the result of their innovations has been a 120% increase in attendance (the stadium is now full and no more fans can fit in) and a 450% increase in merchandise.

Dialogue

The best way to explore the connections that transcend what happens on the pitch is to work closely with the local community of supporters. Start with informal discussions and

¹³ The Bohemian FC official website is <https://bohemianfc.com/>



then start to add structure to the dialogue. Make it clear what is 'below the waterline' (i.e. discussion topics 'off the agenda' –specific size of budget for new players, etc.) and focus on meaningful areas like what might matter most to the different fan groups and how best to represent the fan's voice inside the club.

If working with social media, why not encourage engagement, respond to posts and ask for feedback? Most clubs we see just 'put out' and do not 'receive': an attitude that undermines any sense that 'we're all in this together'.

There are many quick wins to be had here, including getting fans to agree on what represents 'loyalty' (so you can reward it with 'money can't buy' experiences) and establishing voices for under-represented groups such as women, fans who travel to away games and disabled supporters (which would signal intent and create much positive PR as well.)

Execution & Experience

Explore the different 'journeys' your fans make, understand what they need from the different 'touch points' and make it easy for fans to give feedback on their experiences. Look to segment your stadium according to the needs of different groups and benefit by having families together in less 'boisterous' areas while core fans can bring a concentration of colour, noise and passion in other parts.

Explore the commercial and community partnerships that spring naturally from such concepts. Finally, consider the following 'touch points', learn from best practice (i.e. us) and seek out opportunities to deliver an experience that is hassle-free, well executed and value-added, since there is a capacity for *magic* in sport that is unparalleled in all other businesses:

- Merchandise and retail
- First impressions (finding information, webpage and purchasing of tickets)
- Travel (principally 'the last mile')
- Social media
- Refreshments
- Stadium vicinity (all that occurs before the entry, including the different activities, entertainment, fan zone, among others.)
- In the stadium (all that occurs in the stadium, including comfort, facilities, toilets, signage the mascot, atmosphere, mascots, among others.)

Undertaking regular assessments of the experience (we recommend clubs that they combine professional assessments with 'real fan' snapshot reports) will provide useful

data and keep the focus high until it becomes part of the 'way you do things' at your club: *part of your culture*.

Match Day People

Ensure your match day people (staff and volunteers) are not only prepared with the correct information and able to perform their duties, but that they are supported, encouraged, motivated and rewarded to place the fan first: to seek out opportunities to pro-actively engage with supporters and to create moments of magic. 'Training' alone has not worked. Match day people need a purpose purer than simply leaning against a wall, waiting for an infringement.

If consistently prioritised by leaders, these four strategic components will deliver a new focus on engagement and sustainability as well as any number of business benefits. Add a regular survey; asking how valued fans feel (and why they say that) will ensure that your resources are effectively targeted and will give you an overall KPI of progress (see Fan Engagement Measurement in this module).

Those adopting fan engagement leadership will not only deliver increasing sustainability for their clubs but also soften external perceptions, strengthen supporter relationships and grow the beautiful game in their part of the world.

If you are a leader at a football club (or indeed any sporting organisation,) you should be asking yourself, 'Why aren't we doing this already?'. This Course provides the information that any leader of any club could easily put into place to begin to harvest the benefits that an engaged fanbase represents.

Exercise:

- Identify roles with "Fan" in the title in football clubs across the globe.
- What do their roles entail? What are their accountabilities and responsibilities?

Record the most common ones and create a 'job description' for a fan engagement manager at the club you support.

4.2.2 Digital Fan Engagement

This unit explores how digital platforms and services, including social media, can be used to support improving fan engagement. It explains how it can contribute to strengthening the fan's relationship with the club, how it can support the establishments of two-way dialogue and feedback, how it can support the globalisation of fanbases for elite clubs but also help smaller, less resourced clubs to build advocacy and attendance.

Naturally, there are many digital solutions out there, from FRM (Football Relationship Management)¹⁴ services to fan/club applications and from social media to club websites, so we will aim to ensure this unit recognises the breadth of applications and the way these can be used to maximise fan engagement.

Back in 2015, Performance Communications & Canvas8 published a report, *The Future of the Sports Fan*, where they noted eight fan motivations:

Table 3: The eight fan motivations

Motive	Explanation
Entertainment	<i>The enjoyment that comes from watching sports as a leisure activity</i>
Escape	<i>The use of sports as a diversion from everyday stress or boredom</i>
Eustress	<i>The highs and lows fans experience as teams are winning and losing</i>
Aesthetic	<i>The beauty of watching a highly skilled athlete perform</i>
Learning	<i>The fan watching to learn from and be inspired by the participants</i>
Achievement	<i>The feelings of vicarious achievement fans share when their team wins</i>
Connecting	<i>The sense of belonging fans feel by being connected to a larger group</i>
Bonding	<i>The use of sports to bond and spend quality time with family</i>

Source: Adapted from Performance Communications & Canvas8 (2015)

It is clear that, in its many present forms, digital can support all of the above. I note the achievement motive (above) and the way victorious fans use social media to ‘gloat’ over their rivals or opponents. I also note the way we seek likes on social media from other fans of our teams when we post something of interest.

Digital can magnify the social belonging¹⁵ aspect of being a football fan and allow us to share our allegiances as Brown illustrates:

“The fortunes of (our) group become our fortunes: its misfortunes our misfortunes”
(Brown, 2020, p. 3).

It is also clear that Digital can help clubs to globalise their fanbases. Of course, this is most often seen being practised by larger elite clubs, but there is also potential for smaller clubs to do so, especially one with a story to tell, something that makes them unique.

What would need to happen to facilitate this?

¹⁴ The best source of information on how football can maximise fan relationship management with data is Fiona Green’s book: *Winning with Data: CRM & Analytics for the Business of Sport* (Gower Publications, 2018). https://www.amazon.com/Winning-Data-Analytics-Business-Sports/dp/1138090638/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=fiona+green+winning+with+data&qid=1590073100&sr=8-1

¹⁵ Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)

If by this exchangeability we see the 'modern fan' as operating in a global free market economy, then 'telling the story'; revealing the processes that built the club and continue to grow it; communicating the values it stands for and making decisions that reflect these principles, then surely this will strengthen both the physical and the virtual fan relationship.

It also helps make the club less ephemeral, more unique and more able to connect with aspects of the fan's own image of his or herself. It becomes less of a commodity and more of a belief system. (Bradley, 2019, pp. 46-47)

The ways clubs, leagues and associations use Digital is growing, as the full potential presented by fan engagement becomes known.

For clubs aiming to connect, engage and develop relationships with fans, there are plenty of good examples. I am indebted to my friend, the sports strategist Geoff Wilson¹⁶, whose outstanding work in the football digital marketing community has led to a separate course available in FC Barcelona's Innovation Hub¹⁷.

Let us examine some specific examples. First of all, let us examine using social media to generate interest and engagement.

Juventus, "La Vecchia Signora" of Italian football, recently held an interactive social media game show for China:

Italian soccer champions Juventus' first-ever interactive game show for their China fanbase scored a total viewership of 11.2 million viewership, as well as 30,000 engagements and two million reads.

Part of Juve's J-Squad initiative, the two-hour live stream saw supporters put into teams and compete against each other. Billed as an online soccer match, including two halves, a half-time segment, and a post-match review, the event featured audience participation through Weibo poll voting to help decide the outcome of the show, plus dedicated hashtags.

The presentation was an original format for a European soccer club in China and was broadcast live on Juve's official Weibo account, via Yizhibo, and WeChat, as well as on Douyin.

Regarded as a key strategic market for the Serie A outfit, China boasts 37 official Juve fan clubs, the most for the team outside of Italy, while there are also four

¹⁶ You can learn more about his work in www.geoffwilsonconsultancy.com

¹⁷ You can learn more about this in <https://barcainnovationhub.com/product/digital-marketing-in-sports/>



million followers across the team's social media accounts in the country. (Dixon, 2020, para. 1-4).

Second, let us examine eSports¹⁸. Any club can have an eSports team as the recent pandemic has shown with Leyton Orient's FIFA20 tournament¹⁹, and here is a list of other clubs who you may not know operate eSports teams (Spencer 2017).

- ✚ Besiktas (Turkey)
- ✚ FC Copenhagen (Denmark)
- ✚ Sporting Club (Portugal)
- ✚ CF Valencia (Spain)
- ✚ Schalke 04 (Germany)
- ✚ West Ham United (England)
- ✚ Manchester City (England)
- ✚ VfL Wolfsburg (Germany)
- ✚ AS Roma (Italy)

Those clubs who are able to convey their values and beliefs via social media will create fanbases that connect to the club's DNA rather than its ability to win games of football.

Of all of the clubs out there, AS Roma have a reputation for using their Twitter account for doing a lot more than promoting a football club. As many people will know, they accompanied news on new signings with videos of missing children. This has now been taken up by lots of clubs and will be celebrated on Missing Children's Day.

Therefore, when we review what football is capable of with its use of Digital, we can identify the following areas:

- ✚ Virtual Reality / Augmented Reality
- ✚ Fantasy & Mobile Games
- ✚ Live Streaming
- ✚ Social Events
- ✚ Player-generated content
- ✚ eSports
- ✚ Online betting
- ✚ Imaginative Content

¹⁸ It refers to competing via the use of computer gaming.

¹⁹ For further information, read the following article from the *Skysports* magazine: <https://www.skysports.com/football/news/11095/11958789/leyton-orient-spark-128-team-fifa-20-tournament-amid-football-suspension>

As we have argued, these approaches have been used to create and engage global fanbases and also to ensure the connection is strong with more local ones. But how do we use social media to encourage attendance at matches, and how do we use it to enhance the match day experience?

One of the problems associated with football's use of social media is its tendency to be used simply to put information out and not to promote dialogue. This, perhaps, is understandable, as the dialogue can be 'tense' in certain contexts, but that does not completely explain why clubs do not do it more.

Here, we reprint a section of a Mark Bradley's blog wrote in March 2018²⁰ on the difference between communication and engagement.

We live in the first age of Social Media, but the 'open goal' that this represents for leagues and clubs desperate to grow is being missed due to us putting all our efforts on the 'media' bit and missing out on 'social' altogether.

Official club websites have spent years hinting at this decidedly one-directional approach. From what I see, they mostly appear to be designed for use by clubs' core supporters (containing club history, statistics, etc.) in spite of the fact that few of those fans might ever use their club's official website.

Those people who probably do rely on them most are likely to be new fans, occasional visitors or even away supporters. And while we've had a hand in encouraging clubs to include the information needed (how to get the best out of their first match day and match day schedules for the uninitiated, for example) it seems many clubs still expect potential new fans to already know critical information, perhaps through the medium of some strange sporting telepathy.

For a disabled supporter, the information provided in advance by a club is critical as (from the assessors we deploy) we know that access challenges can make any journey to the match a feat of endurance. And yet, so few clubs have easily accessible disabled fan information available on their websites.

Most fans expect independent social media sites to provide for their more intensive discussions, seeing the club's channels as 'official' and therefore, somehow, less authentic and more commercial in tone.

²⁰This blog is currently unavailable but will soon appear on the re-launched www.fanexperienceco.com



So, efforts to personalise communications and to reflect the club's identity (most importantly: the fans' perception of the club's identity) are welcome. Bayern Munich's rapidly created post-Besiktas image of a big ginger cat taking a selfie with the first team (thanks to Jon Burkhart for sharing that with me) is a great example of this. Naturally, this will have made many fans smile, as well as influencing external perceptions of the club and its identity'.



@FCBayern, 2018.

Doncaster Rovers' posting of 27 uninspiring seconds of 0-0 action v Fleetwood Town in 2015 (players enter the pitch, referee blows whistle, game kicks off, goalie clears, referee blows full time whistle and players leave the pitch) has so far just short of a million views on YouTube (when it would otherwise have received around 2,000) while the popularity of @crap90sfootball on Twitter emphasises that, for many fans (especially those supporting clubs with a history of underachievement), 'muck and nettle' always outmuscles the prawn sandwich.

But all of this is still *broadcasting* with very little *receiving* going on. How many actually use social to generate feedback, encourage conversations around improvements or tap into different groups to explore their match day experiences?

You've noticed that there's not been a huge response to the launch of your season ticket renewal campaign, for example. Why not ask people via Twitter? A League One club just did that and the results, while not necessarily statistically reliable, did strongly indicate that the fact that we hadn't reached pay day yet had much to do with it.

How many club mascots have their own Twitter, Snapchat or Instagram account, for example? There is no better way to keep the conversation with the next generation going.

We know that social media represents a massive opportunity, but only if clubs remember the significance of the word 'social'. That's what turns communication into engagement.

What social media needs to do, if it is to attract people to come to games, is to provide not only content that is interesting but which makes people want to attend matches.

This point was well made by the USWNT player Megan Rapinoe in an interview in 2019:

“If the only thing that’s said about us is how inspiring we are to little girls, then our marketing plan is a complete and utter failure,” said Rapinoe. “Make me want to go to the game.” (Megan Rapinoe calls for more investment in US women's game, 2019, para. 14)

Approaches, such as that of English 3^d tier club, Doncaster Rovers, whose mascot has his own social media hub²¹, provide content designed to appeal to families and young children. The club’s Marketing and Communications Manager, Shaun Lockwood (who appears explaining this on a podcast on www.fanexperienceco.com), believes that by segmenting their existing and potential audience and then providing segmented content, the club can ensure the message is not generic, but mindful of the expectations and desires of the different groups within his South Yorkshire community.

That takes us to the match day. How do you use social media effectively on a match day (and immediately before and after)?

As stated above, there are opportunities to provide information for people:

- Any changes that might affect travel (including roadworks, bad weather, closure of car parks, etc.)
- Updates of the match day schedule to name the particular player who will be available for autographs and selfies; and
- Information on activities happening, with a special emphasis on the needs of new fans

But there are also opportunities to engage different groups of fans. As Shaun Lockwood (2020) says, having content designed for kids means that they are less likely to become bored during the game and lead to their parents considering future attendance.

Finally, there are opportunities to elicit feedback. As has been stated in other units, there are many ways in which clubs can ‘overcome their shyness’ and find ways to understand what fans think of their match day experiences, what matters most, how well the match day is delivered and how it could be improved. It is very easy to deploy a short 3-question survey via a link or to ask people to preface any brief feedback with an agreed hashtag.

²¹You can find the mascot, Donny Dog, Twitter official profile in the following link: https://twitter.com/Donny_Dog_DRFC



This unit has set out to summarise the position of Digital in football and its role in engaging fans. It is true that when we see the words 'fan engagement' in print, in the majority of cases it is referring to digital developments, but it must be stressed that Digital is just one of the ways in which football can add value for its followers.

Exercise:

How could you use Digital to encourage attendance at matches for the following groups?

- Students
- Families
- Disabled fans

4.2.3 Fan Experience: Excellence in Touch Point Management

This unit will consider 'touch points' and the way maximizing the experience at each one can lead to more retained fans.

First, let us explore the methodology from which the idea of 'touch points' has emerged: mapping the customer journey (Weir, 2018).

The customer journey map is a tool to illustrate and visualise the experience of interacting with your organisation from the customer's point of view. It is important to present it as a map because it forces you to compare the way customers see your organisations with the way you see it. It follows that by better understanding your customers, you can meet and exceed their expectations, build advocacy and retain them.

Within this journey, there are occasions where the customer comes into contact with the business provider or elements within their control or influence:

A **touchpoint** can be defined as any way a consumer can interact with a business, whether it be person-to-person, through a website, an app or any form of communication. When consumers come in contact with these touchpoints it gives them the opportunity to compare their prior perceptions of the business and form an opinion. (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016)

The benefits of football taking this approach are clear. If we understand the journey the fan makes in relation to attending a match, we are in a better position to improve the experience, engage fans and build trust and emotional loyalty.

Remember fan engagement can be defined as everything done to understand, respect, protect and grow the fan's emotional investment in the club.

It therefore follows that by understanding and improving how the fan interacts with the club, we can make improvements that will increase levels of engagement.

So, how do we apply this methodology to football?









This, in fact, is how the Fan Experience Company was born. Mark Bradley and Darren Young had extensive experience of using Customer Journey Mapping in their work with business outside football. Once it became clear that there was value in applying it to the 'beautiful game', our work began.

In 2006/07 the English Football League²² asked us to undertake some qualitative research on what it was like for a first-time family to experience a match. To do this, we undertook visits to 30 EFL clubs and collected data on the following:

- (1) The different touch points that formed the journey of the First-Time family
- (2) How well each touch point accounted for and delivered against the needs of the First-Time family

This led to the creation of the 'New Family' assessment template which has evolved into the document we use today in the UK and across Europe. (EFL, 2020)

The reality is that there are hundreds of touch points in any significant customer experience, so Bradley and Young's job was to concentrate them down to the most important ones and then to group them around particular stages of the match day experience. Over the years, they have evolved into the following stages:

-  First Impressions
-  Ticketing
-  Social Media
-  Travel
-  Outside the Stadium
-  Retail/Merchandise
-  Social/Refreshments
-  Inside the Stadium

To these we add a stage which has an impact **throughout** the entire experience: the employees and volunteers working for the club. To illustrate how this works, let us examine the touch points covered by one of these stages, First Impressions, and share some of the questions we ask when we undertake assessments:

²² The English Football League website is www.efl.com

Table 4: Touch points covered by the First Impressions stage

'First Impressions' (New Family Experience)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Please rate the ease of access to relevant family information on the club's website (where 1 is poor and 5 is excellent)?• What information does the club's website provide for new families? For example, is there a first-time fan page, a new fan page or a family section?• Does the website make it clear that the club provides a family zone or family stand in the stadium? If so, how well is this promoted?• Is it possible to book tickets for the family zone / stand online (desktop, smart phone or tablet)? If not, is it clear why this service is not available? For example, is this to ensure only families access the family stand?• What was your purchase method?• Please describe your telephone purchase experience here: (including comments on time taken, any time on hold, etc.)• Please describe your online purchase experience here: (including ease of purchase, how intuitive the experience was, etc.)• If you purchased by telephone, did the club representative pick up on the fact that you were bringing children and mention / promote any aspect of the family experience at the club?• How much did you pay for tickets?• Were there any special 'family ticket' offers?• Did you receive any info before the game to help you to get the most from your visit, such as a match day timetable, stadium map, or travel advice?

Source: own elaboration.

As a result of taking this approach in England in 2006/07, it became clear that many of the needs of a first-time family (or, indeed, any first-time fan) were not being accounted for or delivered.

A senior colleague at the Premier League, Cathy Long, observed:

"What clubs need to do is to have a 'first time fan' button on their websites" (Long, 2001).

By this, she meant that if club wanted to make sure new fans (including families) got all of the information they required and, therefore, felt reassured to attend the game, then clubs should create a space on their website to present this information.

It is again important to respect the methodology of the Customer Journey by taking the external (i.e. customer) perspective and looking at the game through the eyes of the potential fan. For example, a parent taking her kids to their first game may need to know

information that is not relevant for existing fans and, in some cases, not even relevant for other adults attending their first game.

Let us visit a club website and see how they do it.

Walsall FC plays in the 4th tier of English football. The club, founded in 1888 (as a merger of two other clubs and becoming Walsall Town Swifts) has a 'Junior Supporters and Families' section in its 'First Time Visitors' section on the website²³, where you can find further links to the following information:

Where to Sit 🏠	+
Free Football for Under-18s 🎟	+
Family Tickets 👤	+
Junior Fan Zone 🎮	+
Swifty 🐣	+
Swifty Book 📖	+
Swifty Toy 🧸	+
Pocket Money Items ✂	+
Baby Changing Facilities 🍼	+
Snack Boxes 🍷	+
Enjoy the Match 😊	+

Source: Walsall Football Club official website [Families and Young Supporters section] (n. d.) Retrieved June 2020 from <https://www.saddlers.co.uk/club/junior-supporters--families/> Screenshot by author.

'Swifty' is the club's mascot while 'Enjoy the Match' is an EFL campaign to create safe and welcoming areas in stadia for groups such as families, where adult language is not permitted and where access is only allowed for accompanied children.

As clubs begin to use a methodology like Customer Journey Mapping and the Fan Experience Assessment support that the Fan Experience Company provides, they become better able to anticipate the needs of different groups (especially, new ones), which leads to higher attendances. The job then becomes different: **how to keep them coming back?**

Exercise:

Consider the experience of an existing fan, perhaps a fan who likes to meet friends before the game, have a beer and sing loudly in support of his or her club during the game. Consider his or her experience.

²³ The Walsall FC Families and Young Supporters section is available in <https://www.saddlers.co.uk/club/junior-supporters--families/>

- What are the stages of the fan experience that are the most important to him/her?
- At which specific touch points could the club improve this fan's experience?

4.2.4 Fan Experience: Future Innovations

This unit could be full of lists of innovation, both digital and analogue, aimed at helping clubs to engage more effectively with their fans, but it is important to look at the bigger picture first and examine the challenges for clubs, especially in the post-COVID-19 world.

Once we reach a point where fans can attend games again, we will have reached a point where people's leisure spend will be squeezed, and where it will be difficult to convince people to leave home activities, like eSports and gaming, streaming and subscription services such as Netflix.

The challenge for football clubs wishing to create a platform for growth is to maximize the following:

1. Relevance
2. Engagement
3. Experience²⁴.

So, let us examine, in turn, how clubs can apply fan engagement in the future to secure their viability, ongoing sustainability and attendance growth.

Relevance

This is the most important one of all, since it has never been as easy to simply consume from home, whether streaming, eSports, betting or via TV. While many larger clubs and leagues are looking at how they can monetise digital services, the success is linked to their achievements as elite clubs. But what about the rest of us?

Being relevant to the local community and fanbase is now more important than ever. Clubs have to find a way to play a bigger role in people's lives. So, it is foreseen that more and more clubs will be looking to be perceived less as football clubs and more as 'community hubs', where wider needs are served. One of the best examples of this is the member-owned Dublin-based club Bohemians²⁵. For more than a decade now, they have been pursuing a growth plan based on their values and, taken from an interview with Marketing and Communications director Daniel Lambert, they have clear aims:

²⁴ See the website introduction in www.fanexperienceco.com (May 2020), which covers the importance of these factors..

²⁵ The Bohemians FC official website is <https://www.bohemianfc.com/>

- ✚ To increase attendance
- ✚ To attract high quality fans
- ✚ To rely less on results
- ✚ To become integral to the community

They do this by ‘standing for something’, and these values have led them to develop services and programmes that clubs based on ‘winning’ will struggle to embrace. Most importantly, it has helped them to attract and retain ‘high quality fans’, i.e., not those who only attend when the team is playing well but those who ‘buy into’ the club’s values and attend ‘to be part of something’.

The more the club ‘gives back’ the community, the more it embraces them, and Bohemians (‘Bohs’) do this in some remarkably effective ways, including having a club poet. The term is two years and the club is now onto its second one. Here is an extract from a local news report.

It was Daniel Lambert, a former director of the club, who came up with the idea that the Phibsborough club should have a poet in residence.

Most football clubs were set up as social clubs rather than football clubs, says Lambert. Getting poets and artists involved in Bohemians was a way to recognise that tradition, and to give them a platform.

“A lot of the traditional Bohs fanbase I suppose would be male and wouldn’t engage with poetry,” Lambert says, by phone. “And this kind of maybe opens them up to the arts in a way that’s relatable.” (Finnan, 2019)

The club also recognises that, with the fall from importance of social institutions like the Church and Unions in Ireland, this reinforces the club’s rationale for stepping forward and becoming the new ‘Community Centre’.

In order to do that, the club has focused on giving back and, to demonstrate this, they take a very ‘local’ approach, which includes what follows:

- ✚ Giving a percentage of raffle ticket revenue to local community groups
- ✚ Choosing a local kit supplier (more expensive, but with a greater impact)
- ✚ Having the pies made by a company based less than a mile away from the stadium
- ✚ Having beer from a brewery less than a mile away from the stadium (which has now incorporated the stadium’s floodlights into their branding)
- ✚ Supporters funding a bus to bring recent migrants to games (the club pays for their tickets)

- ✚ Turning down sponsors and other commercial partners who do not ‘fit’ the club’s beliefs and values
- ✚ Getting involved in human rights issues (that football clubs usually eschew), like supporting gay rights^{26,27}

The community impact has been measurable, with all games sold out, but the commercial impact has been even bigger: they have sold €100,000 of merchandise in 2 months (during the COVID-19 lockdown): a remarkable achievement.

The media impact has been powerful too. There is always a story at Bohemians. It could be the famous local comedian who has been working with the club to provide comedy masterclasses to prisoners or the international Graffiti competition the club is currently running. Their embracing of graffiti is just another one of their ‘differentiators.’

By taking a values-based (**not** football-based) approach, Bohemians are relevant to the local community, diverse in their reach and sustainable in difficult times.

Engagement

As football begins to discover the value of fan engagement, we will see more new innovations emerging with the aim of strengthening a fan’s emotional connection to his or her club. Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality will allow fans to be among the players as they prepare for a game, to see how they prepare and to learn the exercises that keep them match fit.

South Bend Lions Football Club was announced as a new United Soccer League (USL) expansion franchise in 2019. The team were due to play in the Great Lakes Division of USL League Two in 2020, the country’s top pre-professional men’s soccer league.

The community-focused club has been driven forward by a local group of soccer enthusiasts headed by the respected Coach Thiago Pinto – the club’s Technical Director –, Soccer Marketing and Communications Consultant Chris Rivett, and the club’s owner and principal investor Ritchie Jeune.

Its approach to engaging fans digitally is ‘next generation’, combining immediacy, humour and self-deprecation to ensure it builds a meaningful presence in the area.

²⁶ For further information, see the BBC article (2015) “Same-sex marriage is now legal in Republic of Ireland”, available in <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34810598>

²⁷ It is perhaps naïve to think that football and politics do not mix, so it is expected that more clubs will see taking a stance on issues as a way of solidifying local support and strengthening sense of social belonging

As the inaugural game of their first season could not be played due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they decided to take the phrase ‘I was there’ –a matter of pride for fans who boast that they attended era-defining games– and twist it. The result? A T-shirt bearing the message ‘I wasn’t there’ was produced and is currently available from the club’s online store²⁸.






This is where the story would end with most club stores, online or otherwise, but South Bend Lions are acting in a way that may shed light on how clubs will support in the future their own communities: they are considering the logistics of opening up www.repthebend.com to local aspiring entrepreneurs or people with lifestyle/hobby businesses with something to sell.

Is part of football’s future ‘giving back’ to communities where they can use the club’s online store to sell to other fans –other people like them? One can imagine how memorabilia could be exchanged, old replica shirts sold and funds raised for deserving causes.

This engaging tone continues in the club’s communications today. Most leagues in May 2020 were engaged in difficult conversations on how outstanding league fixtures would be resolved. Do we void the league? Do we base the finishing places on ‘points per game’ or do we try to play out the game? One of the ways South Bend Lions is considering to do this is by simply throwing dice!

When it comes to future developments in fan engagement, it is clear that clubs will be finding innovative ways to promote and enact their purpose and to deliver local community value. How will your club do this in the seasons to come?

This takes us to the match day experience and how it might look in the near future. Of course, there are services now designed to meet the needs of fans in a number of ways, including the following:

-  Removing hassle/making it easy
-  Creating magic and lifetime memories
-  Connecting fans to each other
-  Interacting with fans
-  Providing important information.

Many clubs are now offering fans applications that do all of the above:

²⁸ You will find it available in the next website: <https://repthebend.com/collections/frontpage/products/i-wasnt-there-commemorative-t-shirt-preorder>

✓ Removing hassle

It is common to have applications that help to manage queues at refreshments outlets during games. They will tell you where the nearest outlet with the shortest queue is (or, allow you to order from your seat), either inside or inside the stadium's external vicinity.

✓ Creating magic and lifetime memories

There are applications now where, if the fan's data are held, can recognise that it is the fan's birthday (or another important anniversary) and use that detail to offer something special to that supporter.

Some clubs' mascots are online. They are messaging families so that their children are aware of activities and surprises are designed to enhance their match day.

✓ Connecting fans with each other

Sporting Kansas FC (an MLS side), back in 2011, way ahead of other clubs, was developing an application that would connect the club to fans' social accounts, meaning that you could have a scenario where a fan, on his or her way to the game, would receive a message from the club saying, for example, the following:

"Hi there, Anna. We noticed that your friends Donna and Jacqui are sitting together in Block A. There's a seat next to them waiting for you if you'd like to upgrade. Click to accept the upgrade and to pay the difference."

The potential of using apps like this to help clubs to fill stadia by pulling on friendships and common interests will help grow the game.

✓ Interacting with fans

Brighton and Hove Albion calculated how many miles each fan had travelled in support of the club two seasons ago and shared this with individual fans as a 'badge of honour' – a way to show their friends just what a fantastically loyal supporter he or she was.

Immediately, this data was being shared socially, as fans vied with each other to show who had travelled the most. For a sport whose roots are in social identification, this is a very effective way to reward and recognise that and, in the process, to encourage positive club-based interactions based on factual data.

A season later, a national football talk radio show picked up on this and applied it to fans of all clubs²⁹.

One can imagine how, in the future, fans' attendance behaviours will be used to capture the competitive aspect of fandom with the result that more fans travel to both home and away games.

- Providing important information

The immediacy offered by digital technology and social media platforms means that changes to the norm can easily be communicated to anyone buying a ticket, holding an app or through the club's database or social platforms.

If there are traffic difficulties, clubs can offer alternatives. If car parks are restricted, others can be offered. If the weather is going to affect planned events, then this can be communicated in plenty of time.

More fundamental changes are also envisaged, with many clubs recognising that offering football alone will not be enough to ensure their viability in an ever-changing leisure market where spend is squeezed.

It is likely that values-based marketing will become the prime way clubs of all sizes retain their existing fans and find their future fanbases. The social aspect of fandom and the power of social identity can best be maximised where clubs stand for something and are integral to their communities.

By abandoning indistinctive marketing in favour of using meaning to engage, and by taking the courage to move the focus from football to a more inclusive message, clubs will be able to diversify their reach and create a sustainable model for the future.

Exercise:

Identify 3 clubs who have produced smartphone applications (apps) for their fans. Compare these apps and write a short assessment of the strengths and weaknesses for each one.

²⁹ For further information, review Stanley, A. (2019, 21 May). AWAY DAYS How far every Premier League club's fans travelled this season. TalkSport. <https://talksport.com/football/546390/how-far-every-premier-league-club-travelled-this-season-miles/>

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