

Module 3. Community/Stakeholder Engagement

Unit 3.1

3.1.1 The media

Each of the themes in this unit will look at a different club, league or association stakeholder from the perspective of fan engagement. We are going to look at this from two perspectives: how we can improve their own levels of engagement, through the application of what we are learning in this certificate and also how we can encourage them to contribute to our work, how they can help us to attract and retain more fans, to grow our reach and to improve external perceptions of the club.

We begin with the media. At a macro-level, the relationships between clubs and traditional media have changed. Where once the relationship was inter-dependent, with the traditional media, the main channel through which a club engaged with its community, the advance of social media and also the fact that clubs are effectively becoming media outlets themselves (with their own YouTube channels, for example) mean that there has been a paradigm shift.

Not only that, but as digital technology advances, clubs consider various new options, including creating their own OTT solutions and bypassing traditional broadcasters, and new broadcasters such as Amazon enter the fray; there is no sign of the rapid changes in this area stopping any time soon.

One of the areas that this is helping clubs to address is the traditional media's lack of focus on fan engagement and what associations, leagues and clubs are doing to promote this in favour of a 100% focus on 'football' news. Football clubs, leagues and associations are continuously putting out stories of positive community engagement, for example, but the traditional media usually ignores this in favour of speculation on which player the club is interesting in signing.

So, let's look at ways in which clubs can use their media to increase engagement.

As we have done throughout this certificate, we must begin with identity and values. Having an internally controlled communication channel gives clubs the opportunity to get



key messages about the club's vision and mission across and, to put it simply, to tell the story of the club.

Our study of concepts such as social identity and customer engagement shows just how important the wider meanings within the club matter. By definition, fan engagement aims to transcend what we cannot influence, by focusing on what we can. We cannot control what happens on the pitch, however hard we strive to build a winning team, but we can control our story: what it represents and, importantly, how we tell it.

In 2017, Liverpool FC put out a video to tell its own story. This was part of a season ticket renewal campaign, but, instead of choosing to focus on the prospects of a winning season, the club focuses on its own history, heritage and values.

You can watch the video clicking on the following link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1gf5RjtwjKA>

When you are watching the video, consider your own personal reaction to it. For younger fans of the club, this is an education, and for those who have many years of support behind them, this is a reminder of what their club stands for and why they love it so much.

Perhaps, it is therefore surprising that few clubs take this approach at key times of the season, such as a season ticket renewal, in favour of focusing on the football. Promising excitement and winning seems to be a much riskier approach than focusing on a promise to maintain the values that have formed the club.

The advantage that clubs have—by effectively becoming media outlets themselves—is that they can have complete control over the content they put out. Consider the example of the EFL Family Excellence scheme and the accompanying EFL Family Club of the Year award.

In spite of the scheme increasing junior attendance across the three divisions of the League by an estimated 37% over the first ten seasons of the scheme, this was not reported on by any traditional media outlets. In fact, the only time it ever prompted media interest was when Millwall were elected Family Club of the Year. Because Millwall was always perceived to be a club associated with violent and anti-social behaviour, its celebration as a family club was deemed newsworthy.

The reality, of course, was that the club had been, for many seasons, addressing and overcoming some difficult social challenges in its vicinity. It has also created a family experience that overcame negative external perceptions and attracted a new generation of young supporters.



Compare the traditional media report at the time with the actual story and you can see the value of clubs controlling their own media.

The opening line in a newspaper's report of the news was 'Football fans have responded with utter disbelief that Millwall have been named 'Family club of the year' by the Football League' (People are absolutely gobsmacked that Millwall have been named EFL 'Family Club of the Year', 2017, para. 1).

Its headline was even more negative: 'People are absolutely gobsmacked that Millwall have been named EFL 'Family club of the year'(People are absolutely gobsmacked, 2017).

It is true that this report did go on to describe in detail why the club had been successful, but in its attempt to 'grab' the attention of the reader, it simply reasserted tired assumptions about football, thereby contributing to the negative external perceptions that many hard-working community-focused clubs have to overcome.

The football industry magazine *FC Business* reported the news very differently:

Millwall Football Club has been named Nickelodeon Family Club of the Year at the annual EFL Awards in London on Sunday evening.

The Lions collected the prestigious award for the first time in the club's history.

A complete overhaul of the club's strategy in attracting new young supporters and families to The Den began in the summer of 2013 when the new Zampa's Family Stand was opened in The Dockers Upper.

For the first time it provided a dedicated area for families, equipped with games consoles, confectionary stalls, a mock dugout as well as face painters, regular drawing competitions and so much more. (Millwall Football Club Family Club of the Year FC, 2017, para. 1-4)

Clubs, leagues and associations are now taking advantage of the proliferation of communications tools to broadcast and interact over subjects closer to the heart of local supporters and also helping to address negative external perceptions by focusing on how they are bringing their values to life and making substantial contributions to their local communities.



Exercise:

Review how traditional media outlets approach football news in your country. From what you can see, how does the focus break down between 'football-related' and 'non-football related'?

Can you find examples of how clubs are using their own media channels to challenge negative football stereotypes and highlight their positive contributions to their communities?

3.1.2 Commercial partners and sponsors

There is a LinkedIn post about a club's positive relationship with its commercial partners. The person writing it talked about how it was important to relate well to the club's clients. The opinion expressed in the first comment made was that using the word 'client' actually put some distance between the club and its partners. How about using terms like 'friend' or 'customer'?

In this theme, we look at how clubs, leagues and associations can strengthen commercial partner relationship, in the context of engagement.

Just as the media industry has been transformed by advances in digital technology and the entry of new broadcasters, so has the way the football world works with commercial partners. Gone are the days when partners wanted simply to have their names on a piece of property in the stadium, be it the shirt, the advertising hoardings or LED assets. Partners are now looking for so much more. This has implications for clubs who must respond by considering clients to be major stakeholders and ensuring that they also need to have a strong emotional connection with you as a club.

In a light-hearted remark made to me recently, a friend commented on the way that global elite clubs are amassing commercial arrangements around the world. He had seen numerous press releases announcing the appointment of a particular club's new insurance partner in a particular overseas territory. He speculated on just how much that meant, especially when the release was accompanied by a comment on how the new partner 'shared our values'. The values were not mentioned at all. We could all be forgiven for thinking that this relationship had nothing to do with values and everything to do with financial expediency.

So, it is vitally important that clubs lead on their intrinsic values when trying to find or strengthen a relationship with a partner. This means that we level up the playing field,



that smaller clubs with a much lower history of achievement can still fight alongside the global elite if they can find a shared value with a particular partner.

One of the best examples of this is the shirt-sponsorship relation between the 4th tier English club Stevenage FC and the international burger brand Burger King. When the burger brand's instantly recognisable logo appeared on the club's shirt, many people saw this a coup. Many assumed it was a local relationship, perhaps with the branch in the town of this club (some 30 kilometres north of London).

But once the activation became clear, the magic emerged clearly. Please enjoy the following clip: <https://vimeo.com/403724977>

What Burger King knew was that, even though Stevenage FC was bottom of tier four, they were still part of EA Sports FIFA. This gave the brand a chance to have the best players in the world displaying their brand on their shirts 'for free'.

The Burger King and gamer relationship was so successful that the club quickly became the most popular team to manage. It signed the best players, it won the most trophies and became known the world over. Why?

Because the connection between an experienced brand with clear business objectives and a club with strong values of fun, self-deprecation and fan engagement was dynamite. This has quickly become one of the most instructive case studies of the modern football age.

What this shows is that *any* club, regardless of its size, budget or success on the pitch, can find ways to work with commercial partners in which both parties benefit enormously.

The motivations behind the attraction of a football club to a business are many and complex, just like the relationship between a customer and a supplier. They may choose the club for several different reasons – or a combination of those. For example, it could be any of the following:

- The company has been in the town for many years and feels an obligation.
- The owner of the company and the club have been friends or associates for many years.
- The company feels the club's access to the community can help it with future employee recruitment.
- The company believes a relationship with the club might help it to improve its brand coverage, recognition or simply direct sales.



But finding shared values allows for the emergence of 'game changing' initiatives.

The key elements of a fan engagement strategy, therefore, apply to our commercial partners, too. We must understand their deeper motivations, find out how they perceive us, co-create and review regularly to ensure the relationship is strong. And if this is built on a platform of shared values, we will have an automatic built-in advantage.

Exercise:

Review some of the most well-known commercial relationships in football. Think about federations (FIFA, UEFA), associations, leagues and clubs. Which, in your view, demonstrate the best 'values fit' and what advantages does this give both parties (the football entity and the commercial partner)?

3.1.3 Charities and social enterprises

Many clubs have charitable arms, trusts or organisations whose aim is to 'give back' and to use the power of football to improve people's lives. The social contribution of football continues to evolve, and understanding this must be a key competence in the fan engagement leader.

However, it is important to recognise that, while football strives to improve lives, it must also consider how to use these interventions to strengthen relationships with fans, transform external perceptions and increase attendances.

We are going to explore one case study in this theme which does all of these things. It is a partnership that stretches back several years now and has become part of the host club's culture and something which, when fans are asked to think about what comes to mind first when they think about their club, is often top of the list.

Not only that, but this partnership allows fans to become directly involved in an activity that they take part in with club representatives (including the CEO and the commercial director), thereby strengthening personal relationships, improving perceptions and getting more and more people to be aware of the purpose and vision of the club.

First of all, let's learn about the charity partner in this case study (Huddersfield Town Partners 2019/20, n. d.):

The Yorkshire Air Ambulance Charity relies on the generosity of individuals and organisations to help save lives across Yorkshire. To keep both of Yorkshire's air



ambulances in the air, the charity must raise £9990 per day. This is equivalent to £3.6 million per year.

The YAA serves a population of approximately 5 million people across 4 million acres, and the swift medical interventions provided by the air ambulance crews have a major impact on a patient's chance of survival and subsequent quality of life.

On average, when a patient has been received by the YAA, they will always be only 10 minutes from the nearest hospital and 15 minutes from the most relevant treatment centre. In some cases, this can save people's lives.

Both helicopters cover the whole of the region seven days a week, 365 days a year. (para. 1-4)

So, from 2009 to the present time, every year the Huddersfield Town (currently in the 2nd tier of English football) and the Yorkshire Air Ambulance combine to run the Keep It Up campaign.

The unique initiative has seen hundreds of Huddersfield Town supporters cycling, walking, running and fundraising to benefit various local charities, including the lifesaving Yorkshire Air Ambulance. One of the key elements of this campaign is an annual-long cycle ride in which fans, club employees and other members of the community can apply to enter by raising money through sponsorship.

Each year the cycle race has a different hashtag (Pedal for Pounds 7, for example) and each ride has a different format.

In 2019, the ride saw over 200 cyclists go on a 323-mile European adventure and, on the club's website, Commercial Director Sean Jarvis spoke about what it has meant to him to participate in every single one of these events.

This will be my 10th and they are truly fantastic. They are very challenging, but the camaraderie and the atmosphere is second to none; it's a really special event.

Our Pedal for Pounds rides have been amazing for the last 10 years and have raised over two million pounds. (Pedal For Pounds 10 Starts Today!, 2019, para. 8-9)

You can hear more about the event by watching this video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IpoU2Tx5uN0>



Because this ride happens every year, it has become something of an institution. Participants can purchase a specially-designed cycle wear –based on the design of the club’s famous blue and white stripes–, which ensures that, as the group completes it ride, everyone can see who they are and what they represent.

Being able to participate in something with the club’s CEO is also very meaningful to fans, especially as this is a perfect way of addressing perceptions that clubs and their key personnel are not accessible.

What the Keep It Up campaign shows is that it is possible to create a partnership that meets the aims of a charity while creating ‘magic’ for fans of the club. It is a benchmark in the area of social contribution.

Let’s now learn about another social initiative. One is directed at a part of the community with special needs who often do not attend football matches because of this: we are talking about children on the autistic spectrum. For these children the noise of the football match can often be overwhelming.

Kate and Peter Shippey live in the northeast of England and are supporters of Sunderland AFC. They have three sons, all of whom are on the spectrum. This means that their enjoyment of the live match is affected to the point that they cannot attend. If it could be possible to create a safe space within the stadium, protected from the loud sounds of the game, then it would be possible for the family to attend, for the boys to show their support and, importantly, for others to do the same.

The experience of their eldest son’s first game was a pivotal moment. The family explains:

Our eldest son, Nathan, developed a love of football. As a result, he was desperate to visit our local stadium to watch a ‘live’ match. We explained to him that it would become very busy and very noisy but still he wanted to go.

So, in May 2014, armed with ear defenders, headphones with his favourite music, hats, ear plugs and a bag filled with his favourite comforters, off he went with dad, Peter, to his first match.

It wasn’t successful.

Nathan had been very excited when he’d arrived at the big stadium, but by the time the second half was kicking off we were on our way home. Nathan had been unable to cope with the noise and atmosphere inside the ground due to his autism.



His mam, Kate, came back to collect us early from the game and Nathan was devastated.

We as parents thought that was it, he couldn't cope with being inside a noisy stadium, so that was that. (What Is The Shippey Campaign?, n. d., para. 3-7)

Having unsuccessfully tried to attend as hospitality customers, they had their 'eureka' moment, when the idea of a sensory room first occurred to them: a space in the stadium equipped with sensory equipment to make it possible for children to enjoy football without any of the difficulties they would experience were they to be pitchside.

They approached their local club and, after a long period of lobbying, learning about equality legislation, collecting signatures and working through their ideas with the club, the sensory room was launched at the start of the 2015/16 season.

There are now at least 24 clubs, mostly in the UK, but also in Australia and Qatar, with this facility¹. It has expanded beyond football into rugby and other sports, and more and more clubs are planning to implement the idea in their own stadia.

What this case study shows is that there are still many opportunities for football to find ways to 'give back' with the added value of increasing attendances. Equality, diversity, inclusion and accessibility all represent opportunities to engage football's audiences in new and innovative ways.

Exercise:

Identify a cause or opportunity that your own club could adopt and show how it (1) addresses a community need and (2) could contribute to increased attendance.

3.1.4 Schools and other educational establishments

One of the ways in which engagement strategies can help to attract and retain more fans to your club is through schools, especially primary ones (e.g. children's ages from 6-11).

Again, as we have emphasised in the other themes within this unit, it is important to focus not only on the ability of football to improve children's lives, to help them overcome challenges and to educate them about key issues like self-esteem, anti-racism and

¹You can find clubs with sensory rooms in <https://theshippeycampaign.com/clubs-with-sensory-rooms/>



inclusion, but also to see these interventions and partnerships as tools to build your club's family and to increase attendances.

We have, in other parts of the course, examined how clubs engage families and young children through the media of the match day experience itself and digitally, too. Initiatives like Doncaster Rover's Donny Dog TV² (a communications channel dedicated to the club's youngest supporters) have helped to bring the club and its many benefits into the community's youngest residents. It has also helped to create a channel for family communication, as the tone required for this often does not suit the usual official channels. It is also a fantastic example of how clubs are developing their own media presence (see Theme 1 in this unit).

But how do we connect with primary education establishments and create partnerships that both aid the children's development while encouraging them to commit to attending games with their families?

The UEFA Grow programme –which we study in several different parts of this certificate– is the European football federation's central business development support platform, used to support member associations in the drive to grow the game. It has four key dimensions:

- Image
- Participation
- Engagement
- Revenues

The Engagement dimension is a key element of the strategy and also, in the way, it is delivered for participating national associations. In Estonia, for example, support began in 2017 and has continued to date, helping the association and its Premium Liiga to, among other things, grow attendances.

Three years after commencement, attendances are up significantly. All of the participating clubs have achieved their record attendance as a direct result of the work of the community development officers (CDOs) appointed to support them.

Engagement is therefore key in growing attendances. The underlying philosophy, based on previous pilot work in Ireland (in 2008) and then tested across Europe with several other nations, is that, for developing football nations, growing attendances is based on supporting improvement in three key areas:

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BaVgFZdvesI>



- Club identity and brand
- Schools and community engagement
- Improvement of the fan experience

Clubs like Narva Trans, Viljandi Tulevik, Paide Linnameeskond and Parnu Vaprus have developed connections with local schools not only aimed at 'giving back' and using football as a catalyst for improving interest in sports, nutrition and physical development, but also at going wider than that typical curriculum and really unleashing the potential of connecting youngsters with the players of their local team.

A typical engagement may see the club approach the school director to begin to transform perceptions of it. In Estonia, football is not a leading sport. The National Team has never qualified for a major tournament; the Nordic weather conditions mean that winters are long, which has led to the inhabitants of the country to prefer other sports (indoor and winter-based, for example).

The club shares its vision and ambition, explains how it wishes to grow attendance by helping the school to deliver its curriculum, potentially in a very innovative and effective way, identifies opportunities, such as freeing up teachers to focus on, say, planning, while taking classes, and shows how a young African player, for example, can clearly teach football skills, but can also educate the kids about their culture, their language and their footballing journey.

Once the engagement is agreed, it is typically characterised by the club CDO accompanying players (and often the coach, too) to the school to deliver a combination of player skills exhibitions and coaching and creative ways to help the kids to engage with different parts of the curriculum.

Again, we are seeing the value of having someone specially in the role of the engagement leader in the club, since the traditional (and now widespread) charity arm of clubs is clearly focused on helping the kids, but it often lacks the impetus to encourage the kids to attend.

When a class is delivered, the kids are handed tokens that allow them and their parents free admission to a game (with lots going on for them, including a chance to meet the players again and see how they play).

On the day of the game, one of the responsibilities of the CDO is to collect the vouchers, use them to calculate the conversion rate from each visit and overall and to speak to the



kids and their parents to ask them what they thought about the experience and if they would like to attend again in the future.

It must be stressed that we are talking about leagues and clubs with low attendances, where football would benefit from a renewed focus, rather than more elite leagues, where the development of relationships between the club and its educational partners are rather more sophisticated.

The results across the Premium Liiga have been extremely positive (Bradley, 2020), with the learning now informing about the next Grow for Leagues project (UEFA Grow aimed specifically at Associations who are responsible for the top tier of their football league system) in Moldova, where CDOs Ivan, Mihai and Stas are taking these approaches into their clubs: FC Petrocub, FC Codru and Sheriff Tiraspol.

The benefit of re-thinking traditional club/community relationships through the prism of engagement is that it opens up new opportunities: both to strengthen such relationships and innovate them to meet future challenges, and to re-focus outcomes on increasing attendance.

Exercise:

Engaging with local primary schools is not without its challenges. Sometimes, schools are unwilling to link to the local club, and sometimes the fact that the teachers are not football fans can create difficulties. With this in mind, briefly summarise how you would ensure that the introductory meeting (for a project such as that described in Estonia above) was a success and that you obtained commitment to working in partnership with the school.



Unit 3.2

3.2.1 Civic engagement: local history and heritage

This unit continues to look at community engagement and some other aspects that we perhaps may not have explored. For example, local heritage.

How important is it for the club to reflect local heritage? How important is it for the club to celebrate that, and how important is that in solidifying relationships with other parts of the community?

Again, we return to one of the four key pillars of fan engagement: club identity and meaning.

Exploring the club, league or national association heritage and history can lead to the uncovering of particular themes, beliefs or ideas. We cover the Norwegian FA and their use of national symbols to bring to life international games in another part of this certificate, but here we are going to look at how a team from the Netherlands' Eredivisie has taken a key moment in its city's history to create a permanent and annually-celebrated memorial.

The Battle of Arnhem (1944) was a very important battle of the Second World War at the vanguard of the Allied Operation Market Garden. It was fought in and around the Dutch towns of Oosterbeek, Driel, Arnhem and Wolfheze as well as in the surrounding countryside. The battle lasted from 17 September to 26 September.

As part of the effort, the British 1st Airborne landed at Arnhem to secure bridges across the Nederrijn. They were supported by men of the Glider Pilot Regiment and the 1st Polish Parachute Brigade.

The events that followed were thus:

After the British airborne forces landed a little far away from their objectives, they were hindered by resistance that took them by surprise, especially by elements from the 9th and 10th SS Panzer Divisions. On the outskirts of the town, the main body of the division was halted; only a small force managed to reach the Arnhem Road Bridge.

Meanwhile, British XXX Corps was unable to advance northwards as fast as they had planned, and could not relieve the airborne troops as prearranged. Four days later, the



only small British force that had reached the bridge was overwhelmed, and the rest of the division was caught in a pocket in the north of the river. When the Poles or XXX Corps arrived at the southern bank, they could not reinforce the small force as needed, nor could the RAF's resupply flights.

Nine days they fought, until the devastated remains of the division were withdrawn in Operation Berlin. It was impossible for the Allies to advance farther without counting on secure bridges over the Nederrij and having the stabilised front line south of Arnhem. Nearly three quarters of its strength did the British 1st Airborne Division lose; it never engaged in combat again.

The courage, bravery and heavy losses of the British Airborne Division are celebrated annually by Vitesse Arnhem, the city's professional football club, in increasingly emotive and engaging ways.

One of the now established features of this commemoration is the annual creation of a specific shirt, to be worn by the club, with special dispensation from the Eredivisie, for a league game every September. Always woven into the shirt are the words "Lest We Forget", and the club arranges events to honour the fallen and the survivors of this immensely intense battle.

At the start of the 2019/20 season, the club celebrated the 75th anniversary of the sacrifice in several different moving ways. The annual shirt was launched in the blue and maroon colours of the Airborne and bearing the distinctive Divisional Pegasus badge. It was then delivered by parachute, after which it was handed over to the Mayor of Arnhem, Ahmed Marcouch.

You can see the video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qtvhpwCGHQo>

A year later, during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, the club visited Wilf Oldham, one of the heroes of 1944, at his home in Lancashire, England, and presented him with a commemoration shirt. Again, the club created a moving video of the event to show just how much the heroes of the Battle of Arnhem are part of the club's history.

You can see this video and more information about the club's commemoration of the heroes of the Battle of Arnhem here:

<https://www.vitesse.nl/nl/nieuws/detail/8641/vitesse-presenteert-airborne-shirt-2020-2021-never-forget-our-heroes-video>



While not every town with a football team has such a remarkable feat of heroism to honour every season, there are always other sources of history or heritage that the club can celebrate, bring to life or use as an opportunity to reinforce values through education.

For non-elite clubs looking to transform external perceptions and to engage the wider community, the example of Vitesse –incidentally, the Eredivisie’s first ever Family Club of the Year– should be embraced.

Figure 1: One of the details of the shirt



Source: Vitesse Arnhem. (n. d.). [Vitesse Arnhem shirt] October 2020. Screenshot by author.

Exercise:

Is there an aspect of your town, city or region’s heritage or history that your favourite club already celebrates and/or honours? If not, please suggest one and show how the club could engage its community by embracing it.

3.2.2 Volunteers and interns

Throughout this certificate, we have focused on the importance of one of the four pillars of fan engagement: people and the working environment.

We have shown how leading customer-focused organisations understand that valued and supported co-workers are a proven key link in the chain that links the company vision with excellent customer experiences. We have shown how clubs can adapt this for the football setting in a number of different ways.

We have also shown the value of engaged employees in the cycle of improvement: the feedback they provide to help the continuous improvement of the fan experience.

Moreover, while elite and established clubs have developed the processes and systems to develop employees and to help them map out their football career opportunities, these are also big opportunities for non-elite clubs too.

Many clubs, especially those outside of professional league systems, depend on volunteers for their ongoing survival. The clubs are often volunteer-run, with everyone, from the chairman to the turnstile assistant, giving their time for free. Their commitment to the club

–turning out in all weathers– is an example of how football clubs rely on their communities, so clubs should always be looking to show these valuable people just why their support matters and to find ways to value them.

One of the ways in which this could be done is through a recognition programme. One such programme was created by the Vanarama National League: the 5th tier of English football, where 24 professional and semi-professional clubs fight for promotion to the EFL (English Football League).

The League enjoys national TV coverage and, before the 2018/19 season, had worked with its TV partner and sponsor (Vanarama) to celebrate the manager of the month and the player of the month.

CEO Michael Tattersall then introduced a Volunteer of the Month award at the start of the 2018/19 season and asked clubs not only from the 5th tier but also from its two feeder divisions (the National League North and the National League South) to put forward their candidates for the award.

In many of the clubs in the National League –and in all clubs of the two feeder divisions–, volunteers are vital in running the club and ensuring match days take place. They may



manage the club's merchandise outlets. They may run the catering. They may even help to sell lottery tickets; work the turnstiles or even help to prepare the pitch before the game. Without them, their clubs could not survive; so, it was important to the league and its clubs that their commitment should be recognised.

Not only were the awards shown via the League's TV coverage with BT Sport, but they also gave the clubs opportunities to celebrate their volunteers too.

At Salford City FC, for example, the monthly award to their club Shop Manager Tony Sheldon created a very positive news story.

The club told Tony's story thus:

Tony has been running the club shop at Moor Lane for quite a few years now. Over that time many supporters have contacted us to say how much they have enjoyed meeting him.

Ever helpful and amiable, Mr. Sheldon has a quip for any occasion and the club nominated him for the National League's new award. Happily, the panel agreed with us that Tony deserves recognition for his huge contribution to Salford City's cause.

This award is very much deserved, and the club would like to congratulate Tony and thank him for all that dedication and hard work.

The money raised in the shop was always vital to the club's finances and Tony's new outlet is a huge success.

Pop in and see Tony the next time you visit The Peninsula Stadium. His shop is situated in the fan-zone, behind the West Stand terracing. We're sure he'd be happy to show you his award and have a chat at the same time.

A volunteer in the truest sense of the word. (Club Shop Manager Tony Sheldon Wins Volunteer of the Month Award, 2018, para. 1-6)

Therefore, if you are working in non-league football or grassroots football, volunteer engagement can be supported through recognition schemes such as this.

Interns are usually students or unemployed people (often young) looking to build experience by working full time or part time with an organisation of their choice. In



football, many leagues, clubs and associations offer internships to young people or students.

Interns often focus on the elite clubs without recognising that they can, perhaps, get more authentic learning opportunities, for example, by working for a small non-league or grassroots club, and, rather than making a minor contribution to the club, they could do something substantial, like running the club's social media or fulfilling the fan engagement manager role.

With more and more universities offering football-based degrees and further education, this presents an opportunity.

The National League not only runs recognition schemes for its own volunteers but it also, through a partnership with UCFB, offers students valuable internships to strengthen their experience and to allow them to contextualise the theory they are studying.

In the article, the following is explained:

Work experience opportunities for UCFB at National League clubs will include the chance to film and produce footage for North and South matches televised on BT Sport in the weekly National League Highlights Show.

The partnership will also allow students the opportunity to gain experience in their fields of study including football marketing, psychology, coaching and event management.

UCFB chairman and chief executive Brendan Flood said: "This new partnership will give UCFB students unparalleled access to clubs around the country in a wide range of departments which will supplement their studies perfectly, as well as giving them the best possible chance of a successful career once they graduate.

Our lead partner role with the National League U19 Alliance will be extremely valuable for students in that league also, providing these ambitious young players an exciting route to study a university degree in the global football and sports industry." (The National League, 2020, para. 1-3)

While many clubs do not operate specific fan experience or fan engagement positions, the availability of experienced trained interns can help the clubs to lift the profile of engagement in the club, league or national association.



This can also help clubs to transform external perceptions by showing how they are offering work experience opportunities in times when youngsters find it difficult to get work anywhere, let alone in football.

Exercise:

Imagine you are working at a club. How would you persuade a CEO of the value of recognising volunteers and/or offering internships?

3.2.3 Using social media to drive community engagement

On several occasions, we have referred to the UEFA Grow programme as an example of how a federation can work pro-actively with its member national associations to develop the game, grow participation, engagement and attendances.

One of these areas is that of social media and engagement. As students will know, being able to engage communities is a key aim of social media in football. But what is less appreciated is the emerging evidence that it is non-football content that may be just as important as, or more important than, football-based content.

So, when we consider our wider community, we are not only talking about our fans, but also about other local stakeholders, including community partners, schools and colleges, commercial partners and municipal organisations.

It may seem natural that non-football content would appeal to those not directly associated with our club or not part of our fan base. However, the fact that evidence is emerging from the strength of non-football content among our fan bases is significant, not only because of its comparative ease of production but also because it helps clubs of any level (and current performance!) to re-connect and engage with supporters and the wider community.

To illustrate this, we are going to look at an unplanned but fantastic example of the responsiveness, creativity and humour of the admin team at England's Hull City and at how, in the most unpredictable of ways, the 'football family' can come together, outside of traditional digital content, to create a wave of interest and a globally-acknowledged 'magic moment'.

First, let's set the scene. Just as English 2nd tier football was about to pause for the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and the club was preparing for a crucial 'six pointer' against fellow strugglers Charlton Athletic, something happened.



All over the world, fans were contemplating what the coming period would bring. Would football return? Would fans return to stadia? In those early days, the lack of football left many Saturdays devoid of excitement; people missed the habit so much. What could be done?

As the local newspaper reported (Jackson, 2020), what began as a way of filling in some dead time quickly escalated into one of the most memorable Twitter storms ever seen.

Whilst some club accounts hopped on to Football Manager 2020, others engaged in games of 'noughts and crosses', with Manchester City and Southampton playing out an entertaining draw.

Hull City, however, went one step better, engaging in a bizarre yet thrilling match of Connect Four with Bundesliga outfit Bayer Leverkusen.

Over the course of nine hours, Hull City's posts achieved a total of 27,125 likes (at the time the article was written), and, when the Tigers (Hull City's nickname) won the game, nearly 16,000 people liked the tweet.

The Match of the Day twitter account, Amazon, a betting company and others all joined in to like, share and/or comment on the bizarre competition with Hull City's own fans revelling in a rare European victory!



Figure 2: Twit of Match of the Day



Source: Match of the Day official twitter account. (n. d.) Retrieved October 2020 from <https://twitter.com/bbcmotd>. Screenshot by author.

As we have studied in other parts of this certificate, football has the power to make a difference even in areas not directly associated with it. In the area of disability, football



can shine a light more brightly than many other approaches. As we have shown in other parts of the certificate, clubs can design fan experiences with the needs of disabled fans in mind, but sometimes, by featuring the story of just one fan, the impact can be huge.

Woody O'Rourke is a 6-year-old boy in west London whose team would not let him play. His disability involves finding it difficult to communicate, which presents a challenge to those who do not have the skills, experience or facilities to support him.

One day, disappointed at Woody's predicament and his sadness at not being able to join a team, his mum, Natalie, tweeted. This was picked up by lots of other people and, eventually, one of them tagged Brentford Football Club in a tweet, alerting them to Woody's frustration.

The club linked him up with Brentford Penguins, a football programme for those with Down's Syndrome, supported by Brentford FC Community Sports Trust: the club's charity arm. Nonetheless, the club wanted to do more, and their Fan Engagement Manager, Ryan Murrant, organised for Woody to have the day of his life and to walk out with the team for a game in September 2018.

As the local online newspaper reports, his mum was overwhelmed with the impact of the club's intervention:

"It all happened so quickly. I shared that he had been unable to join in with a local club and on Friday night my comments were being shared. By Saturday morning it had gone so wide that Brentford had seen it and I had a call asking if Woody could come down and be the mascot. Normally there is lots of red tape, but Ryan just made it happen.

"Woody can't talk but he uses Makaton sign language. He was so excited when I told him, he was jumping up and down. From start to finish, the day was amazing. I can't explain how good everyone was to us. Woody was on cloud nine, it was the best day of his life. Everyone at Brentford just made sure he was included, sadly that doesn't always happen.

"Football is all he talks about. Brentford is our local team and I made the decision that we would support The Bees. We bought him a shirt and showed him about Brentford on the internet. He knows he is a Brentford fan and can sign it. It's all he has talked about ever since. For Christmas we will buy him tickets to a match and we will go when he can. It is all he is interested in and I want to get him to Griffin Park as much as I can." (Brentford FC help young fan to re-connect with the game, 2018, para. 5-7)

Ryan, who no longer works in football, continues to stay in touch with Natalie and her soon. Looking back, he sees the experience as an example of the true power of football. 'It's not about the players visiting kids in the local hospital every Christmas' he told me in a call in October 2020, 'but about having a culture in the club where things like this are just second nature –just part of the everyday function of the football club' (Murrant, 2020).

Woody's story is one of the most heart-warming examples of how non-football content can provoke greater engagement than pure football content. You can see a video on Brentford's official website here:

<https://www.brentfordfc.com/news/2019/march/woodys-story/>

The experience led to many posts where fans spoke about how proud they were of their club. As we have studied, clubs who are able to bring their values to life in their community experience stronger areas of emotional engagement among their fanbase. Social identity theory is clearly be seen in the way fans want to use social media to publicise their connection with and support of the club.

The story quickly became viral on Twitter, and soon FIFA was sharing it, as can be seen below:

Figure 3: FIFA twit about Woody's story



Source: FIFA official Twitter account. (n. d.). Retrieved October 2020 from <https://twitter.com/fifacom?lang=es>. Screenshot by author.

The *Mundial* magazine published the following:

Woody and his mum Nat are now regulars at Griffin Park, having developed a relationship with everyone at the club. And, according to Nat, that bond has helped Woody better than any speech therapy as he recognises what the fans are saying, the names of players, and the songs they sing from the stands. He copies what he hears, and the more he comes to Griffin Park the more he learns.

'We say 'Football Is Brilliant' a lot but, genuinely, when you see the game changing lives like that, who can argue? As Nat put it: "It was the best day of his life." (Romagnoli, n. d para. 2-3)

Consider social media as an opportunity to show how the values of your club are changing people's lives, how their direct intervention is lifting the story above the din of everyday interactions and finding ways to show the impact football can have.

Consider also how important these stories are in transforming external perceptions of football, because they transcend the usual football-obsessed group of users and enter the wider community.

Exercise:

From your own recent experience of football in your own country –and further afield–, share an example you have found of a league, association or club using non-football content to engage the wider community.

What would you say were the 3 or 4 common characteristics or themes in every successful viral story?

3.2.4 The role of players (and other football colleagues) in fan engagement

Although it feels uncomfortable to describe players as 'assets', they are remarkable powerfully people when it comes to building engagement at football clubs.

This theme looks at a case study of one football player and his time in the northeast of England to show how they can become the most enduring and positive symbols of a club's intent to engage, to value and to serve its supporter community.



First of all, let's consider some of the context and background here. Players are contracted to work for the club on the pitch, and, while contracts increasingly include sections relating to personal appearances and community support (including visits to hospitals, etc.), ultimately, just like it is the case with every other form of engagement we have explored in this certificate, it is about identity and values.

If you have a player who naturally reflects your club's values and/or whose personality, beliefs, background and interests already reflect those implicit in your club's identity, then this is far more important than any contractual requirement. Fans know when people are 'going through the motions', and that can cause more damage than good, but when a player becomes to be seen as epitomising the club's and fan's values, through his performances on and off the pitch, then the club has a huge asset.

Given that ideas of identity and values are often superficial in football (e.g., commercial partner press releases that talk about 'shared values' without actually describing them), the likelihood that the majority of clubs are briefing all new and existing squad players about what the club's values mean is possibly low.

Having the player's community presence responsibilities detailed in a contract is, of course, extremely important, but without knowledge and understanding of the club, its community and what they believe and stand for, any contractual obligation is unlikely to have the desired effect.

When players, either through natural fit or through a desire to make an impact and/or 'give back', subscribe to the importance of community engagement in their actions, clubs are in a fortunate position.

Often it is the 'single club' long-time loyal players who occupy this position. Because of their longevity at the club, they have come into contact with fans, on and off the pitch, they have to know long-term club community and commercial partners and, very importantly, they are also well known to the people who work at the club. One could pick out many who fulfil these characteristics and who, when they retire from the game, move on or end their career at the lower level of football, are badly missed.

Often, it is simply the case of a player who arrives at the club and who immediately 'buys in' to these ideas. They may only be at the club for a few seasons, but they make a tangible impact.

So, students of fan engagement and existing practitioners must factor into their strategies the need to identify and/or develop such players and to facilitate their achievement of

'club legend' status, since, in the case of Middlesbrough's George Friend, for example, he may not have been a star player, but has impacted on the club's community from his arrival in 2012 to his departure in the summer of 2020.

George began his career at Exeter City, currently a 4th tier club in English professional football. Via one move and several loan periods, he joined Doncaster Rovers (another club included in this certificate on account of their fan and community culture and reputation for innovation and best practice) and, after making 59 appearances for them in two seasons, made the move to the famous steel producing town by the River Tees.

In George's first season, he immediately became a fan's favourite not only as a result of his consistent performance but also as a result of his community work. He was voted 'players' player of the year' to demonstrate the affection held for him among the first team squad and was awarded the opportunity to captain the team against Rotherham United in 2015.

However, it is what George has done on a daily basis, in gaining a thorough understanding of the club's community work and placing himself at the heart of it, by making himself available to people, pro-actively making a difference and, importantly, ensuring he not only knew about but also actively helped to deliver any new club initiative either on or off the pitch, whether out at a local school or a local charity or pitch side, briefing the young mascots who lead the team out or making sure the day is really magical and memorable for a youngster.

He made 266 appearances for Middlesbrough, scoring 9 goals from his position as a defender, but made the biggest impact 'off the pitch'. At the age of 32, he is now bringing everything he learned to Birmingham City and he will, undoubtedly, already be making a difference working for one of the managers who he played for at Middlesbrough and who admires him greatly for what he brings to a club: Aitor Karanka.

Even people who do not play for a club can make an enduring impact on a community through an association with the club's values and identity over the years. One of the more remarkable examples of this is George Sephton.

George is the match announcer at Anfield Stadium, home of Liverpool FC: a club whose reputation for being different –for genuinely adhering to a strong sense of its identity and community responsibility– is recognised even by fans of other clubs.

Fans refer to George as 'The Voice of Anfield' and, according to Wikipedia, he is the second longest-serving stadium announcer in England (George Sephton, n. d.).



George wrote to the club's secretary to apply for the role in 1971.

Since August 1971, George has had an almost unbroken run of presiding over the matches at Anfield and seen much of the club's most glorious moments. The 21/22 season will be his fiftieth as a stadium announcer.

One of his duties is to DJ for almost two hours before kick-off, during which he's popular for championing local music that really matters to Liverpool supporters (including, for example, local musician Pete Wiley's hymn to the city 'Heart as Big as Liverpool'). Naturally, he also operates the scoreboard, announces goal scorers and substitutes, and makes some commercial announcements.

As every Liverpool fan knows, his most important job is to play 'You'll Never Walk Alone' (the version created by 60s Liverpool band Gerry and the Pacemakers), just before kick-off. It is rare that this is heard at any other time at Anfield in a match day, and its exact timing is a part of the culture at Anfield.

Liverpool club legend Kenny Dalglish said the following of him: 'George is part of the history and tradition of this club and it would be more relevant if he left than if I left' (George Sephton, n. d.).

George is also an after-dinner speaker, an organiser of charity events and, through his Twitter account, @VoiceofAnfield.

There are, of course, many stadium announcers with long records (Peter Gilham of Brentford is currently the only one serving his club longer than George), but the way George has become to epitomise his club's personality has led him to the status of legend at Anfield.

Exercise:

Identify a player in your league who epitomises the spirit and identity of his club. What does he or she do and what advantages do they bring?



References

[Screenshot of FIFA official Twitter account]. (n. d.). Retrieved October 2020 from <https://twitter.com/fifacom?lang=es>.

[Screenshot of Match of the Day Twitter account]. (n. d.) Retrieved October 2020 from <https://twitter.com/bbcmotd>.

Bradley, M. (2020, 15 May). Narva-Ending Story. *The Fan Experience Company*. <https://fanexperienceco.com/2020/05/narva-ending-story/>

Brentford FC help young fan to re-connect with the game. (2018, 10 October). *What's Looking*. https://whatslooking.com/community_news/brentford-fc-help-young-fan-reconnect-with-game/

Club Shop Manager Tony Sheldon Wins Volunteer of the Month Award. (2018, 9 April). *Salford City FC Official Club*. <https://salfordcityfc.co.uk/volunteer-of-the-month/>

George Sephton. (n. d.). *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Sephton#:~:text=George%20Sephton%20is%20a%20stadium,behind%20Peter%20Gilham%20of%20Brentford.

Huddersfield Town Partners 2019/20. *Huddersfield Town*. (n. d.). <https://htafccommercial.com/sponsor/yorkshire-air-ambulance/>

Jackson, E. (2020, 15 March). How Hull City, Bayer Leverkusen and Connect Four took social media by storm. *Hull Live*. <https://www.hulldailymail.co.uk/sport/football/hull-bayer-leverkusen-connect-four-3951841>

Millwall Football Club Family Club of the Year FC. (2017). *FC Business*. (n. d.) <https://fcbusiness.co.uk/news/millwall-named-efl-family-club-of-the-year/>

Murrant, R. (2020, October). Unpublished interview conducted by Mark Bradley. [Phone interview]

Pedal For Pounds 10 Starts Today! (2019, 29 April). *Huddersfield Town*. <https://www.htafc.com/news/2019/april/less-than-one-week-until-p4p10/>

People are absolutely gobsmacked that Millwall have been named EFL 'Family Club of the Year'. (2017, 10 April). *Metro*. <https://metro.co.uk/2017/04/10/millwall-family-club-award-6564796/>

Romagnoli, L. (n. d.). Brentford Fc Have Changed This Young Man's Life. *Mundial*. <https://mundialmag.com/blogs/articles/brentford-fc-woody-world-down-syndrome-day-2019>



The National League. (2020). *UCFB*. <https://www.ucfb.ac.uk/about-ucfb/industry-partners/employability-partners/the-national-league/>

What Is The Shippey Campaign? (n. d.). *The Shippey Campaign*. <https://theshippeycampaign.com/>

