

# Module 2. Understanding & Engaging with your Fan Base

## Unit 2.1

### 2.1.1 Rationale for fan consultation and dialogue

In this theme we are going to explore why fan consultation and dialogue are important.

It is believed that the concept of fan/club dialogue first emerged in English football in the 1950s, when fans first started travelling to away games (Hamil, 2020), simply because fans took charge of organising tickets and travel and would liaise with clubs to do this.

Fan involvement in club direction and decision-making reached another important milestone in 1992, when the visionary English football fan and pioneer Brian Lomax formed the very first Supporters Trust at Northampton Town, which paved the way for the creation of Supporters Director. Lomax (as cited in Conn, 2015) once said the following:

I believe there are certain very important values in life and that football support embodies them. There is a sense of pilgrimage, of going to a sacred place; there is loyalty, sticking with something through good and bad times.

It's about emotion, about sharing and comradeship, about the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. These are very deeply rooted human needs and I believe that is at the root of people's love for football and loyalty for their clubs. (para. 5-7)

He felt that football was not an entertainment business where wealthy investors could make money, that was not a sustainable or desirable model for football club ownership. This is exactly the beliefs that drive member-owned FC Barcelona too, as is set out here:

FC Barcelona is a truly different club. It is a member-owned organization controlled by its members (supporters) and not a private company. These members elect the club president every four years. The club's members, or socis, enjoy the right to vote for the club president and board; the right to vote at the delegates assembly (the club members' parliament which has the power to censure the president and the board in the event they do not comply with the club's statutes); and the right to vote for charitable works proposed by the FC Barcelona Foundation, the club's

charitable arm (FC Barcelona is committed to devoting 0.7% of its ordinary income to charitable and social projects). (Hamil, Walters & Watson, 2010)

This course does not set out to explore fan ownership at clubs, but its existence. The many who work for it and the clubs that espouse and champion it do so because of the fact that football, to its followers, is about the “emotion” described by Brian Lomax, and it is not suitable to be commercially or privately owned. However, this factor does imbue our approach to supporter consultation and dialogue, for without respecting this fundamental factor, no approach can be successful.

Let’s begin with one of the challenges we face in a world dominated by privately or commercially owned clubs.

In conversations with people who work at football clubs, I am often told that the club owner will not invest in Fan Engagement without evidence of the ROI (return on investment) that the club will earn.

That is, indeed, a very fair question, so my response is always the same: what are your fans telling you about their experiences; their reasons for attending and the things that they like and dislike because, of course, if you understand this and can address it, you will see a return in levels of retention and additional spend? (Mark Bradley experience)

As we have explained in other modules within this certificate, fan engagement, in its purest form, is emotional in form. However, if practised well by the club, league or national association, it will increase the fan’s emotional investment, and that will lead to many measurable benefits, from tangible ones (like attending more matches, renewing membership or season ticket, buying more season tickets, buying merchandise, and advocating that others also invest in the club) to intangible ones (speaking positively about the club with friends, co-workers and family and on social media, forgiving the club when it makes mistakes, presenting as a volunteer when needed, responding to survey questions, among others.)

It is therefore vital to the success of a fan engagement strategy that supporter consultation and dialogue forms part of it.

- **Who are your fans/supporters?**
- **What do they think?**
- **Into what groups can they be segmented?**
- **What are the themes that characterise each group?**
- **How would they describe their connection with the club?**

- **How much does it mean to them?**
- **What could the club do to value them more?**

In fact, what we are doing is simply implementing a strategy familiar to all progressive businesses **outside** of football. We are becoming customer-driven.

Let's begin by imagining a photo of a group of fans travelling to an away game – a game in an opposing club's stadium. These are, as we all recognise, among the most loyal fans out there, but who are they?

Any typical group of fans will be a reflection of society. It will be diverse. They will be of different ages, employment status and jobs, with different backgrounds and different social status. There are women, there are men, some are older, some younger. Some will enjoy rock music, some will like rap. Some might read, some might listen to classical music. In a typical "away" crowd, you might get barristers and baristas, captains in the army and captains of industry. And then there are the people who live in the club's vicinity, town or city. Some of them could one day come to games, some of them may dislike football. However, they are all stakeholders of one kind or another.

But one thing connects the ones who come to games and give their support: their love for this club.

Football is a microcosm of the communities it serves and, to do this well, it needs to understand this vibrant, complex community. Nevertheless, until recently, football did not listen to its fans, ask them for opinions, nor value their ideas and suggestions. And this situation, because it has developed for so long, has driven a wedge between people who love a club and the club: like a married couple who do not talk anymore. Who is going to be the first to break the ice?

Let's begin by exploring the wider business community, because, after all, businesses did not ask customers what they thought back in the days of "sales and marketing" (you can study this in course 1, module 1.) It was only after the impact of competition that businesses began to realise that talking to customers would not only make customers feel more engaged, but would also help the business to outgun its competitors.

The way business relates to its customers has evolved dramatically and comprehensively since the 1950s. Not only do most businesses now have a Customer Insights team, but many of them can calculate the impact on a customer's spending habits with the company and the way the customer's experiences with them influence this.

Net Promoter or Net Promoter Score (NPS) is a management tool that first emerged around two decades ago (Reichheld, 2003). It claimed to show customer research results that would correlate with the service provider's revenue growth.

Yes, that is right. According to Fredrick Reichheld, the tool existed to measure the loyalty of customers of a business. Rather than just giving an indication of customer satisfaction levels, it claimed to be able to show a correlation to revenue growth.

This has now been adopted by so many organisations, that it can be said that it has become the predominant method of measuring customer engagement. It is based on asking one simple question: based on your most recent experiences and on a scale of 0-10 where 10 is the highest, how strongly would you recommend us (i.e. the service provider) to friends, family and co-workers?

The percentage of responses scoring 0-6 is subtracted from those scoring 9 and 10 to produce a Net Promoter Score. Ratings of 7 and 8 are excluded, as the research underpinning the creator's work suggested that it was difficult to predict the future behaviour of those scoring thus.

By producing a Net Promoter Score (or NPS) the company can then build strategies to increase that score, and as Reichheld's work has shown, thereby increase customer retention through higher and higher advocacy scores, for it is know that the higher one recommends a service provider, the more likely one is to remain loyal to the same.

While this concept has been used in American Sports (Fisher, 2014) its use in football is so far rare. We will therefore explore how this concept could be used to help improve fan engagement in other themes within this unit.

So, is it possible that in a few short years students of fan engagement with the Barcelona Innovation Hub will be able to use supporter feedback to estimate future revenue levels of a football club? Perhaps the emotional and irrational nature of football loyalties and relationships may muddy the waters, but the concept remains very attractive.

So, for the club owner who wants you to show him or her how fan engagement can make the club money, we can advise them to focus on supporter consultation and dialogue.

But supporter consultation and dialogue can also help to address many of the issues associated with fandom, including the resolution of crowd management challenges (Stott, Khan, Madsen & Havelund, 2020) while also being a key factor in governance of football clubs.

In a conversation with Cardiff City's Julian Jenkins, he explained how approaching the club's Ultra fans, engaging in carefully planned dialogue and then experimenting with ideas emerging from those meetings, the club was able to make significant improvements to the match day experience that led to, among other things, a 46% increase in beer sales over 6 months (Jenkins, 2012).

It is clear that in the field of fan consultation three factors are important: dialogue, governance and transparency (Rye, 2020), and in the following two units and associated themes we will explore, in detail, the role that supporter consultation and dialogue plays in improving fan engagement in clubs, leagues and national associations.

We will aim to clarify the benefits of consultation and benefit so that students can recommend the appropriate processes in the work environment, with the result that the football industry starts to embrace fans, rather than to keep them at arm's length.

## Exercise

Imagine you are about to implement a fan satisfaction survey at an un-named club.

- Is it not likely that fans will simply ask for a winning team?
- How would you ensure that a survey was designed to deliver benefits to the club "off the pitch" too?

### 2.1.2 Structured consultation vs. *ad hoc*: opportunities and caveats

In this theme, we are going to study the importance of having authentic structured dialogue.

First of all, let's address *ad hoc* dialogue so we can better understand its strengths and weaknesses. The CEO who greets fans as they arrive at the stadium, asks them about their experiences, chats with them about ways the experience can be improved and then continues to monitor the situation by maintaining his or her presence is engaging in *ad hoc* consultation. There is no structure to this; no parties are signing any disclosure agreements; the interactions are not minuted, and there is no direct communication to other fans about the content of these chats.

However, they are important, because they give the CEO a flavour of what fans are thinking. They can hardly be described as necessarily statistically reliable data either, but they are still important, because the fans see that the club executive is interested in their views. As long as these comments influence the wider fan consultation process, they are a fantastic way of practising fan consultation and dialogue.

However, if this is **all** that the club does to get supporter feedback, then that is not satisfactory, because its lack of formality introduces risks. The CEO may not speak to representatives of all supporter groups. Unless he or she positions themselves at every corner of the ground, they are not going to get every viewpoint. As often as not, it is possible the same group of fans that the CEO sees at every game. Were this small group of data to influence wider all-encompassing policies, it would risk alienating large fan groups.

Social media is another way of collecting *ad hoc* feedback and encouraging dialogue (although it is mostly used as a one-way tool to “put out” information rather than to “receive” and to “interact”).

The problem with *ad hoc* consultation is that, by definition, it is not consistent, so, by definition, the quality of that feedback is not reliable. The truth is *ad hoc* consultation is something practised in place of formal structured dialogue, because football has always eschewed directly involving its greatest “partner” in what it regards as internal discussions.

So, let’s reflect on some of the barriers behind football’s historic lack of fan consultation and dialogue.

“Fear” is the key word. When we have spoken to practitioners privately over the years, they have often remarked upon the fact that clubs worry about engaging with fans through dialogue and consultation and surveys, etc., because they fear that fans will ask for something that they cannot deliver. They fear that, perhaps because of poor current team performance, they will only receive negative, maybe abusive feedback (as one sees on social media when a team is performing poorly.)

Familiarity is another barrier. Many of our private discussions with practitioners have revealed, especially in the past, a tendency to believe that “we know best” and yet, even as the clubs begin to see the value of taking a walk in the fan’s shoes, this attitude of complacency endures.

A further valid concern is that the psychological state of the fan is primarily determined by the team’s performance—especially over a period of time. So, if you were contemplating undertaking a major formal consultation process with supporters at a time when the team begins to lose—and to lose big—, then your temptation would be to hold back and to wait until things get better. But this presupposes that every club must have a period of good results before a survey (or similar) may be undertaken.

And this becomes a vicious circle, for a period of success on the pitch may cause fans to become less inclined to speak negatively, and opportunities to collect constructive criticism are lost.

In this context, the benefits of using the informal insights offered by *ad hoc* discussions with fans to inform and confirm the outcomes of structured dialogue and consultation become clear.

Let's re-examine the case of AZ Alkmaar<sup>1</sup> and their post-match fan experience survey, delivered to all ticket purchasers two hours after the completion of every home game. By using three simple (loosely translated) questions,

- how do you rate today's match day experience?;
- why do you say that?; and
- what could we do to improve it for you?

and performing this survey consistently season after season, the Netherlands club are able to better understand and navigate all of the doubts affecting most practitioners in football to the point that any argument being made "upwards" in a football club is much stronger for including this case study.

They only send surveys to people who have bought a ticket for the actual game, so that ensures that they are receiving "clean" data (i.e. purer data, unaffected by people offering an opinion who have not been to the game –a potential issue with post-match social media requests for feedback.)

Because the club knows the circumstances under which the game has taken place, they are able –over time– to begin to get an understanding of all of the different variables that affect fan sentiment over time.

So, what are these variables?

### **The kick-off time and date of the match**

If it is evening, then some families may have to leave early because of public transport schedule limitations or because their children have school the next day, but then again it may reveal that, because of working schedules, fans may prefer a later kick-off. We know that TV demands may lead to games taking place at, for instance, an inconvenient time, so this survey data will help the club to make their case in discussions with their League, for example.

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<sup>1</sup> Official website: [www.az.nl](http://www.az.nl)

## **The weather conditions**

We know that in extreme weather conditions, some fans may not attend to matches, but clubs, in our opinion, have been guilty of making unsubstantiated claims about the impact of meteorological factors. Alkmaar's survey ensures that, over time, the club can more clearly understand this impact.

## **Team performance**

This is a hugely important factor. If we can understand the interplay between team performance and fan experience better, then that will inform and streamline decision-making in the club. At present, we "assume" poor team performance will lead to fans complaining about their experiences, but the fact is that we do not know for sure, because very few clubs have actually explored it in any structured depth or detail. Alkmaar, over time, will be able to do this. From a conversation with an ex-employee, Bas Schnater, in 2018, I understood it is clear that fans have fan experience improvement needs in spite of the club's on-pitch performance. Alkmaar, in contrast with the majority of clubs, has a process in place to understand and, therefore, address it.

## **Status of visiting team**

In a league with three traditional "big" clubs (Ajax, Feyenoord & PSV), it is possible to make assumptions about the impact of visits from these clubs on the match day fan experience. Perhaps heightened security procedures or "on off" price increases could be refined if more was known about fan opinion.

So, one can see that even with a quick easily-implemented survey, clubs not only can benefit in terms of actionable data, but they also can begin to see the value of involving themselves in more structured formal dialogues with the supporters.

It is also true, in our opinion, that a supporter-owned club is generally more likely to honestly invest in fan consultation than a privately-owned one. There are plenty of contradictions to this statement, but when the club's executive decision-making process is in the hands of fans, they fundamentally and intrinsically see the value of open, transparent dialogue.

In summary, it would appear that a lack of fan consultation is another example of a predominant culture of "holding fan's at arm's length" and historical issues we address. By addressing these opportunities, seeing the benefits of combining *ad hoc* and formal consultation and starting to talk, we can extend the power of fan engagement and strengthen emotional bonds between fans and clubs everywhere.

## Exercise

Research the team that you support or are a fan of. How do they consult with fans? How do they involve them in the process of improving the fan experience and fan engagement more generally? Perhaps they do not. But if they do, please undertake the following actions:

- Identify (as far as it is possible) the ways in which your club practices *ad hoc* consultation and dialogue with fans? How would you improve these processes?
- Identify the ways in which your club practices formal structured consultation and dialogue with fans. How would you improve these processes?

### 2.1.3 Tools and techniques for effective Fan Consultation

Fan consultation and the creation and sustaining of fan dialogue are key parts of a fan engagement strategy. No association, club or league can take any decisive steps forward if it does not know who its fans are, what drives them (emotionally and behaviourally), to what extent the match day experience (for example) matters to them and what the improvement priorities they have for you are.

No association, club or league can draw conclusions about what matters to fans without a sound consultation and dialogue strategy. And yet, as we know, clubs are making decisions based on “assumptions”, on the questionable belief that the only thing of interest to fans is winning and, therefore, missing out on many much more achievable and controllable ways of strengthening the emotional connection between the association, club or league and its community of supporters.

The previous two themes have described this important area of fan engagement strategy and explained why it is important. This theme will show, with examples, how football is engaging with fans in dialogue and consultation, and it will share the tools and techniques being used.

Harlequins Rugby Union club<sup>2</sup> is based in west London, very close to the home of English Rugby: Twickenham Stadium. While it has a strong emotional bond with its supporters and local community, it takes their experiences seriously.

For several seasons, anyone visiting their website would see the panel “You said, We did.” This idea, prevalent in progressive retail businesses, is based on the notion that the person best placed to guide a club’s improvement is the customer or, in this case, the Harlequins fan.

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<sup>2</sup> Official website: [www.quins.co.uk](http://www.quins.co.uk)



So, there, in large letters on the website, are written the details of the most pressing fan concerns, an update on what the club is doing to address them and, most importantly of all, a big “thank you” to those providing their feedback.

In one example, a fan writes that it takes too long to get a non-alcoholic or hot drink at half time, so the club uses the query as a title, the title as a hyperlink to further information and the information panel as an opportunity to give an update.

“In addition to the coffee vendors in the North East and North West corners, for colder matches this season we added hot drink vendors behind the North and South Stands and served hot drinks from the King’s Bar” (Getting a hot drink at half time takes too long, 2018, para. 1)

This is only one strand, of course, of a club’s approach to dialogue. There are many ways in which it can be done, **but** the principle is that it uses *ad hoc*, informal and formal methods to ensure that as many fans as possible are reached and that as much feedback and dialogue as possible are obtained and generated, always with one eye on measurable improvements. This is so because we know that when “customers” are in the “experience improvement” driving seat, the club cannot go wrong.

There are many informal ways of collecting feedback. Please note that they all have their individual weaknesses, but they still do offer clubs an opportunity to pick up an issue that might be important or a clue that might lead the club to doing something that resonates powerfully, positively and emotionally with fans.

Social media, of course, is one such area. Tracking fans’ conversations and identifying key issues is one approach, and there are companies who will use algorithms to help clubs understand recurring themes and issues.

Keeping track of conversations within independent fan groups or, ideally, having some involvement as a club contact, can also be very helpful in discerning improvement ideas.

Some clubs have found it useful to have a hashtag so that, when fans are providing feedback, the latter can be more easily identified and reviewed by the club. For example, in a discussion with some women’s clubs several seasons ago, one club suggested that, as a result of limited resources, they could pick out a week, a season, where they would ask fans to think about ways the club could improve their experiences.

I remember, with amusement, some of the suggestions that were made as we discussed the opportunity. Someone mentioned ‘#moanday’ to correspond with a Monday, but that was felt to be slightly negative. Someone else suggested ‘#chooseday’ (to correspond with Tuesday) and that was received very well. The

point, of course, is that by having specific time-barred periods of consultation, the club maximises its resources and the fans are focused on this question. (Mark Bradley experience)

Surveys are very important tools in obtaining fans feedback so that clubs can set improvement targets. Now, while the professor does not intend to go into detail on how to run a survey well, there are some caveats and recommendations that our work suggests are necessary in the world of football.

When surveying large groups of fans, keep the questions to a minimum. As the AZ Alkmaar example in the previous theme showed, by having three simple questions, you can, with relatively little effort, gain a much clearer understanding of the factors influencing fans' perceptions of the match day experience.

However, when dealing with particular fan groups (e.g. parents bringing children, fans with special needs, fans using hospitality services, etc.), it is recommended that the survey approach is "touch point"-based, i.e. that it follows the whole "journey" that the fan in that group will follow. For example, from booking tickets via travel to the stadium to the refreshments and other services provided on the day, it is important for us to see everything he or she experiences so that we can pinpoint more easily where things may improve.

Having a score for each "touch point" is always recommended so that, over time, the club can monitor how well the experience is performing. As we have examined separately in this unit, it is also important to have an overall score. The principle is that, by taking a "touch point" approach and then allowing the fan to summarise his or her overall perceptions with a single score, the club is not only able to rate the overall level of fan engagement, but also understand what drives that level of engagement. For example, if the fan is displaying low levels of engagement through a "poor" score and the only "touch point" scoring low is "refreshments", then it can be inferred that improving the refreshments experience might impact positively on future ratings.

Your professor's belief, based on a 20 years' experience of observing (and often participating in) club and league consultation and dialogue programmes, is that the above approaches will be sufficient to produce good data for clubs.

This data, whether it be a common theme identified over social media, low post-match ratings with similar themes or more specific data, such as that gathered through surveys, is only that: data.

It only becomes "information" when it tells a clear story and, to do that, it is recommended that the club sets up a **structured dialogue** with supporters. This is common at many

progressive football clubs and can be done in several different ways, including the following:

Establish a supporter panel; invite members so that it becomes a representative of the club's fan base; have an evolving membership, where new members replace existing members after, say, two seasons; have the club's CEO present, as well as those who are able to implement any improvements; minute (i.e. record) all of the discussions and then meet regularly to monitor existing improvements and discuss new ones –all based on the informal and formal feed of data described above.

English Third Tier club Sunderland AFC<sup>3</sup> operate a similar process where a group representing all of the different fan groups meets regularly with senior club officials (including the ownership team) to discuss issues. See the following unit for more detail on this.

At larger clubs, this process may be formalized even further, where, for example, each season ticket holder may “vote” on key issues with their views perhaps discussed by a representative forum, with fan representatives on this forum elected by other fans and meeting club ownership on a frequent basis. This is something practised by MLS club Seattle Sounders<sup>4</sup>.

As we discussed, fan engagement is largely emotion-focused. In obtaining feedback and discussing improvements with fans and talking about how they are feeling about the club's current direction, you can directly impact on levels of trust and emotional loyalty: the two key factors emerging from Colby Cox's interviews with practitioners. (Cox, 2019)

## Exercise

Based on the above criteria, options and recommendations, identify the consultation and dialogue approach that your club could use to improve fan engagement.

How does your recommendation differ from the approach already being used by your club?

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<sup>3</sup> Official website: [www.safc.com](http://www.safc.com)

<sup>4</sup> Official website: [www.soundersfc.com](http://www.soundersfc.com)



## 2.1.4 Why do so few clubs consult effectively? Overcoming the cultural barriers

It is true that most clubs that you know will practise some form of supporter consultation. What is likely to be true for all of these clubs is that this has only begun recently, perhaps, in the last decade.

Very few clubs have a programme of consistent dialogue and consultation lasting more than a few decades, and, if there was an example, it is likely to have structure and formality, since we know that football, in the past, found it difficult to accept and acknowledge the need for fans to become “partners” in improving experiences and growing the club.

So, in this theme, we will explore why this has been the case (and continues to be so) so that students can understand all of the potential barriers to building successful fan consultation programmes and ensure that clubs can overcome these barriers and properly engage their supporters.

Some of the content (below) is from a blog written by Mark Bradley for *FC Business magazine* (Bradley, 2015) and an unpublished blog entitled “What really annoys season ticket holders about new fan pricing initiatives” (Bradley, 2013).

In other themes in this unit we have used the phrase “keeping fans at arm’s length” to describe the fact that, while the emotional connection between clubs and their fans is uniquely enduring, the consequent status of “partner” that should really apply in such a relationship, has too readily been eschewed by clubs in favour of a more remote one.

Why is there this remoteness? Why have not clubs been quick to see the value of having a closer relationship with their supporters?

There are more historic reasons, of course, in countries where large gatherings of working-class males were often viewed with suspicion, rather than joy. On the other hand, there are also more current, more practical reasons why it has been easier for clubs not to engage in dialogue rather than to commit.

Here are some of those reasons. By understanding them, we can ensure that the processes, systems and programmes we put in place in clubs thrive and do not break down.

First of all, club ownership is very fluid. In smaller developing football nations in Eastern Europe, for example, there is a tendency for clubs to be owned by those who intend to

achieve qualification for UEFA competitions and, with that, significant sums of money. Therefore, in a 10-club league where four or five might qualify, the owner considers that all that fans want is to qualify too, and there is, therefore, no point in talking to them about anything else.

There are clearly fans who believe that too, but, as we have seen in the case of Bohemian FC of Dublin, Ireland (Lambert, 2020), sometimes (after research and consultation) as few as 5% of those coming to games are purely seeking a win. The vast majority of fans are looking for more than that: sure, they want good football and lots of excitement on the pitch, but they have needs "off" it too, such as good catering, good facilities, space and shelter, entertainment and social opportunities.

In the case of the Estonian Premium Liiga (Bradley, 2020) the change from a culture of singular focus on football to a more community-based experience with a focus on all of the above match day elements has seen a remarkably and sustained growth in attendances, including a 62% rise in attendance since the UEFA Grow project began in 2018 there<sup>5</sup>.

This cannot happen with talking to the fans and recognising their different needs: from the family with children who yearn for a day out together in the fresh air watching athletes compete but yet with needs to keep their kids from becoming bored, to those who want to get behind their team with noise, colour and passion: nothing like this can be achieved without dialogue.

Although dialogue between clubs and fans was happening informally in some clubs, its lack was one of the factors leading the UK government to taking an interest in the governance of the game through the creation of the Football Task Force, shortly after the Labour Government led by Tony Blair came to power in 1997.

Since the creation of the Premier League first started to see an increase in clubs maximising their commercial opportunities, clubs were starting to take steps like increasing the number of replica kits produced (i.e. first, change and third kits) and, rather than changing kits every two years, moved to the production of a new kit every year. Ticket prices had also increased in spite of the club's increasing revenue streams such as new satellite television contracts, which, again, made it more expensive (sometimes prohibitively so) for fans.

Whilst this undoubtedly allowed clubs to leverage their commercial value, it led to increasing costs for fans who, unlike consumers in other industry and because of the emotional connections between clubs and fans (see course "Why Fan Engagement?

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<sup>5</sup> Measured at Monday 3 August after the latest round of delayed 2020 season fixtures.

Definition, Principles & Rationale”), cannot simply walk away. For example, if you have a child who supports Manchester United, “pester power” will always increase at the time of a new kit launch.

The Football Task Force aimed to promote supporter consultation and dialogue in England by suggesting that each club have a supporter on the board. The English game’s attitude to growing supporter influence and involvement was summed up in a newspaper report at the time. This was rejected out of hand by the Premier League’s spokesman at the time:

In the evidence they submitted to the Task Force, the three governing bodies<sup>6</sup> rejected ticket price controls as "inappropriate", saying that clubs needed flexibility to allow for circumstances such as promotion, relegation and ground developments. They said that they "do not believe that the overall well-being of the game will be helped by new layers of regulation or bureaucracy" [i.e. a regulator] and dismissed fans' calls for representation as 'unacceptable'. (Harris, 1999)

Having said that, the final report introduced the Football Charter, a series of promises, consistent across the Premier League and EFL (formerly the Football League), to ensure that supporters were treated fairly and consulted properly. The idea of a “fan on the board” was rejected, but the concept of talking to supporters in a formal setting was embraced.

This “promise” can now be seen in every club’s Charter. In it, fans can read about the club’s approach to consultation and dialogue, as in the following example from Bristol City<sup>7</sup> (Bristol City, 2020), a club in the EFL Championship:

We consult widely with supporters and welcome input on all aspects of our operations. Our Supporter Liaison has regular meetings with representatives of the Supporters Club and Trust and attends their meetings wherever possible.

The club is committed to meeting Regulation 111, the Government's recent Expert Working Group (EWG) Supporter Ownership and Engagement discussions, which mean that senior executives at clubs will be required to, 'hold at least two meetings/fans forums per Season to which its supporters (or representatives) are to be invited in order to discuss significant issues relating to the club. (Club Charter, n.d., para. 19-20)

It is therefore possible to overcome some of these cultural and historical barriers, but sometimes external intervention is necessary. Governments are always aware of football’s power and only intercede when success is likely and the Football Task Force,

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<sup>6</sup> The Premier League, The EFL & The (English) Football Association

<sup>7</sup> Official website: [www.bcfc.co.uk](http://www.bcfc.co.uk)

while not implementing key recommendations from fans groups, such as having a fan on a board, did make the formal process of supporter consultation obligatory.

Football supporter organisations can be a strong force for positive change, and in the UK it is the Football Supporters Association<sup>8</sup> who lead on the empowerment of fans, lobbying on government and improving levels of engagement in the game.

In their mission statement one can see their remit clearly:

We are an inclusive, independent, democratic organisation working with supporters, governing bodies, leagues and clubs to drive positive change in football through supporter engagement at every level of the game.

We nurture and develop supporter networks at local, national and international levels, working with supporters' trusts, clubs and individuals to initiate and support campaigns on issues of concern to football supporters, encouraging good governance, supporter representation on club boards, community-ownership and sustainable stewardship of football clubs.

A commitment to diversity underpins all of our activity and we oppose all forms of discrimination or violence in relation to football. (About us, n.d., para. 10-12)

In Europe, organisations like Supporters Direct (EU)<sup>9</sup> also promote good practice and lobby in areas affecting fan engagement. The success of the SLO programme is supported in each country by strategy support and training from its offices.

But all of this has arisen because of football's resistance to fan-led change, and this has had a tremendous cost: falling levels of trust among fans.

You can apply the most progressive techniques to obtaining feedback from fans. You can create the most representative group of supporters possible. You can ensure that the right people sit in on the meetings. You can share the outputs via multiple club communications channels. You can advertise the changes that have resulted from the dialogue you have invested in.

But if trust is lacking, all will come to nought and, when I look at the wreckage of several failed attempts at supporter engagement, mutual distrust was usually the iceberg that sank the ship.

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<sup>8</sup> Official website: [www.thefsa.org.uk](http://www.thefsa.org.uk)

<sup>9</sup> Official website: [www.sdeurope.eu](http://www.sdeurope.eu)

There are also internal barriers –lack of buy-in of key officers, such as the CEO, for example– and also other factors, such as disagreement between different fan groups.

But, for the student of fan engagement, there are still plenty of opportunities for clubs to recognise both the existing barriers to dialogue and engagement and the benefit to them and their supporter communities of addressing them.

### **Exercise**

Write 250 words on the key barriers that prevent the maximisation of supporter dialogue and consultation systems in your part of the world.

What are the key barriers?

How could they be overcome?

# Unit 2.2

## 2.2.1 Setting up an effective Fan Consultation exercise

In this theme, we intend to draw on Mark Bradley's experience of working in football for nearly 20 years by creating a new fan consultation exercise for a non-elite club in the fourth tier of its country's league system, where there was no previous formal or consistent approach to supporter consultation or dialogue.

In this way, we will be able to produce a realistic and achievable approach capable of being used as template by students and practitioners alike.

First of all, we need to agree on clear objectives. What are we trying to do? Well, in this case, we are going to understand what existing match attending fans think about the current experience and how we can improve it for them, because we believe that retaining our existing fan's goodwill will positively influence their retention and their tendency to recommend coming to games to their friends and families.

Attendances at FC Steel Town have been "on the wane" for several seasons. Ten years ago, when the club reached the last 32 of the Cup and played a club from the top tier, who regularly qualifies for UEFA competition, we actually had a "sell out" (that is, all 12,500 seats in our stadium were sold.)

But, since then, the average has fallen from 3,215 in 2011 to 2,450 in 2019. The owner, a self-made millionaire whose fortune was made serving the steel trade (and which has now almost completely disappeared), has been with the club for a long time, but feels that his previous approach of making all of the key decisions may mean that the club has missed out on a different perspective and, as such, may be missing opportunities to engage and retain lapsed fans and new audiences.

Not only that, but he has also become tired of being on the receiving end of much aggressive language and outright abuse on social media. "Perhaps" he told the club's CEO, "we need to talk to people and see how they would address some of my problems." The CEO felt that by changing the problems from "his" to "ours" an important first step would be made and one of the decisions made was to commit to implementing a structured, consistent and effective supporter consultation process.

In the discussions that followed, there were internal conversations about considering a fan-owned model: many were in favour of citing the success of clubs like Lewes, where membership fee income benefits from the club's reach and the power of its identity (Fuller, 2020) while many fans felt they were already "owners" of the club, albeit it "emotionally."



But for now, with the owner approaching retirement, the decision was taken to begin the process of consultation with some *ad hoc* discussions. Notices about the club's intentions were placed around the stadium, in the club's weekly e-newsletter, in match day programmes and via the local newspaper and radio, as well as via the club's various social media channels.

An initial discussion group was set up. It was made up of around fifteen individuals, including away travellers, season ticket holders, "occasionals", fans bringing kids, two women, a disabled fan, a fan of Asian ethnic origin, a local head teacher who supported the club and representatives of two of the club's commercial partners.

The new ticketing, marketing and communications officer suggested inviting along a couple of "lapsed" fans too, as he felt their experience would add value to the conversation. All of the club's full-time staff would be present, too, as well as two long-standing volunteers.

At the meeting, it was decided to create a programme of consultation and dialogue, whose aim would be to reset the club's growth strategy by basing it on the wishes of fans and the local community. There was much discussion about the scope of the project, and it was decided to base it on an "above the waterline" approach, where the ultimate function of the programme was to give supporters an opportunity to contribute to decision-making. Of course, the owner would reserve the right to veto anything he believed might threaten the club's immediate viability while it was also accepted that all footballing decisions would be left to the coaching team.

Now, of course, this club did not have lots of resources. Like many clubs, there were only seven people in full time positions at the club: the CEO (who also acted as the finance director); the ticketing, marketing and communications officer; the commercial manager; the team manager and his assistant; the stadium operations manager; and the head groundsman. Everyone else was either part-time or volunteered.

At the beginning of the first season of the programme, a simple survey was distributed via an email to all club season ticket holders, the club website and all of the club's social media channels. It was set out to explore what the community believed the club should stand for. It asked respondents to sum up what the club meant to them in as few words as possible.

When the team reviewed the results, they had had 800 responses. They felt this was good enough to base some further decisions on, so they worked through the data and identified several themes, most of which reflected in one way or another the town's steelmaking

heritage. Their most famous player's father had worked at the steel plant and he himself had begun an apprenticeship there before deciding to pursue a career as a football player.

When the programme team (now reduced to the CEO, comms officer, commercial partner and three fans) compared the results of the survey to the words on the club badge, they found similarities around concepts such as "family", "hard work" and "togetherness." With these emerging values in place, the owner agreed that every decision he made would be filtered through these values.

The results of the survey were published for all to read and everyone was thanked for their contribution. It was decided to hold a Steelmen day to recognise all former workers at the now defunct plant, to celebrate their contribution to the town's fame and to start to raise money to support ex-steel employees who had fallen on hard time.

In season two, the club began to explore the fan experience. It began with a short email survey asking four questions:

1. On a score of 0-10 (where 10 is the highest), how valued do you feel as a fan of FC Steel Town?
2. On a score of 0-10, how do you rate the quality of the fan experience here?
3. Why do you say that?
4. What could we do to improve?

The club felt that to do a longer survey might put a squeeze on their already limited resources, so fans promised that once the responses came in, they would spend a month reviewing them and would then publish the results.

While there were lots of individual improvement ideas and quite a few complaints (especially about match day refreshments), two clear themes emerged from the responses:

- The match day volunteers and staff are not particularly friendly and welcoming.
- The club needs to "modernize" (this conclusion was based on issues relating to facilities, little to-do for kids, poor toilet facilities and very limited food and drink choices.)

While the club decided to address the training of volunteers (it paid for their supper and invited them one evening and introduced a reward scheme, based on fan feedback), it decided to set up a Supporter Consultation group to discuss the remaining feedback and to manage the programme in partnership with the club.

The group would meet monthly, with the owner attending once every six months. The CEO would lead the discussions, and the group would set and minute (record) the agenda and the outcomes and decisions.

The discussions would remain internal and not published until all parties had agreed the minutes. A spokesperson was elected: Josie Taylor. A long-standing season ticket holder and mum to a disabled child, she would be the person communicating decisions.

The group decided that each fan on the panel would do a 2-year service and then be replaced by another based on a short informal election process.

18 months later, the meetings are going well, and there have been several improvements to the experience, including a new toilet block in the main stand, the creation of a family stand and the creation of a reward scheme where fans get a card stamped (like in a coffee shop) and exchange this for discounts or “magic moments” like travelling to an away game with the team.

On the downside, the fans feel the owner should attend the meetings more often, and, as a result of a poorly negotiated contract, there has been no improvement to the food. The team is still in the fourth tier, with slightly more points than before the new programme and attendances are up by 5%.

## Exercise

- How would you rate the success of the above programme?
- Are there any elements missing that would improve the effectiveness of the programme?
- Instead of using the “recommendation” question earlier discussed, this club asked the question “how valued do you feel?” What do you think about this?
- What do you believe is this club’s greatest strength (in its approach to supporter consultation and dialogue)?
- What do you believe is this club’s most important improvement opportunity?

## 2.2.2 The principles of structured dialogue

The previous theme has told the “imagined” story of a club facing the need to engage its supporters and creating, what it believed to be, a realistic and effective supporter consultation and dialogue programme.

Many of the principles of structured dialogue were woven into the narrative, including the following:

- Transparency
- Open to all
- Good regular communication
- Thanking fans for contributing to change
- Having a representative group
- Ensuring the group's membership is fluid, with no one remaining on the panel for more than two years
- Owner involvement (six monthly, in the case of FC Steel Town)
- CEO involvement at every meeting
- Evidence of supporter feedback leading to actual change
- Combining both informal and formal dialogue

What the above factors combine to produce is “trust” (Cox, 2019) among the supporter base, and that currency, as we have explored in our central definition of fan engagement –everything to do with the fan’s emotional investment in the club– is vital to maintaining emotional loyalty and strengthening the club against the risks of operating in a pyramid with relegation.

This is equally important in leagues too, as one of their roles is to foster good relations between clubs and fans. They can often intervene in ways that are not open to clubs, for example, in areas such as refereeing, which is always controversial, in a game whose success can be based on one refereeing decision.

We have already explored the EFL Supporters Survey (EFL, 2019). This gave fans of all 72 clubs in the League to express their opinions, rate aspects of their experiences and describe their behaviours and beliefs. This helps the League in many ways, including informing how it supports the clubs in different areas, improving commercial and community partnerships and considering specific regulations, like standing, for example.

A combination of healthy club/supporter dialogue and healthy League/club and League/supporter dialogue can help to share best practice and transform fan experiences, leading to increasing levels of engagement and one of the ways in which that has been used by the EFL is to hold “roadshows” where the senior EFL team, and a leading referee, will meet fans and answer questions.

So, where do we start? It may seem obvious, but any investment in dialogue requires clear objectives. What do the club and, more importantly, the fans see as the benefit of working together? Is it to deal with a specific opportunity or issue (creating a better atmosphere in the stadium, for example), or is it, more generally, to create better relations between the club and its supporters?

If, as sometimes is the case, the objective of the meeting is simply to give fans an opportunity to ask questions of the CEO or chairman, there is a risk that it only ever becomes a forum for “holding the club to account”. There is nothing inherently wrong with that if that is what you are after, but you cannot expect an atmosphere of challenge and argument in the room to foster a partnership approach to change.

Who should attend? Good question. From the club’s perspective the answer is often “those fans we find easy to deal with.” For a start, this is a game of passion, so football supporters might be guilty of some tasty language when raising issues with the club. They may even criticise the club on social media. They may even criticise individual club representatives on social media. But if they are the link to a constituency who feel undervalued or under-represented, then we have to look beyond that.

There may even be fan groups who do not get on with each other (sometimes because one perceives another to have undue influence over issues that affect them or to have privileged access to club officials.) Regardless of “positions”, we have to create a forum that embraces both of these perspectives.

Clubs often fail to put themselves in the shoes of fans who, among their peers, are often seen as leaders or opinion formers. If, for example, there has been a history of mistrust and a lack of engagement over several seasons, then they are likely to have been penning the letters to the local paper, emailing influential voices and challenging the club.

So, if they are seen to embrace dialogue with the club too hastily, this can create a decline in their profile and negatively affect their influence in the supporter community when clubs desperately need these individuals on their side. Engagement was never won through isolation.

Dialogue does not follow a clear structure. Although it will only prosper if it is supported by clear objectives, it is, by its nature, more “free jazz” than “12-bar blues.” So always be careful not to put too many constraints on the process and be equally prepared to run several meetings before a clear path forward emerges.

The number of meetings is also very important, as this can always undermine trust. If, say, you are gathering fans to look at how pricing initiatives could influence attendance at games, then plan sufficient meetings with supporters to be able to arrive at some conclusions before you go to press with season ticket pricing, for example. If you have earnestly gathered fans together to have a discussion about this and the next thing that they see is something that only vaguely reflects what was discussed, then you should expect levels of trust and confidence, both in the process and the club, to fall.



Survey fatigue may now be evident at a few clubs where, through email questionnaires, they had built up a good understanding of how fans think, what the current issues are and what could be done to address them.

For clubs new to this process, that first survey usually gets a good response (and, to be fair, even with 250 responses from a fan base of 20,000, it could be argued that you have statistically valid results), but for clubs with a record of dialogue, it is time to explore how else to keep one's finger on the pulse. Social media polls, independent message boards and other forums are all valid hunting grounds, but we need to start thinking differently about how we tap into the wider supporter perspective.

Transparency is key, too. Clubs must quickly convey the key points from supporter meetings and, when changes happen, clearly attribute them to supporter input. If the process of communicating results is held up by endless reviews of minutes, for example, then the lost momentum will start to infect supporter opinion, which is why a quick post-meeting communiqué of key action points is recommended and also why the development of a section on the official club website updating fans on what the dialogue is achieving should be present.

I think it is important that the CEO attends every meeting, not just because it shows commitment, but also because of the practical benefits. If there are going to be difficult issues to overcome, we need to know the context. Progress is much quicker when all the various supports and barriers are known and clearly set out.

The biggest barrier remains the past. The legacy of decades of looking down at football fans still sends ripples through the room that are capable of damaging trust. This can manifest itself in any number of ways ("You never did this in the past so why should we believe you now?"); so, if there were one thing, I would urge from both clubs and supporters, it would be constancy. No genuine dialogue ever sprang from a one-off meeting.

Success is all about trust. Our supporter engagement and consultation processes need to be designed around this principle. If they are, then they will lead to stronger levels of fan engagement.

## **Exercise**

How would a club with an international reach and reputation approach consultation with its supporters? The differences in beliefs, behaviours, expectation and needs between fans based in club's city or region are likely to differ significantly from those living several thousand kilometres away, so please set out some principles relating to how a club (such as Bayern Munich, Juventus or Liverpool) should approach that.

### 2.2.3 Establishing Fan Consultation groups

Now that we have covered the principles of supporter consultation, we will explore some case studies and examples of how they work in practice, and this will give students an overview of how different approaches work –and yet respect the same principles.

As we have discussed in other themes, in this unit and in other modules within this course, fan engagement is to do with the fan's emotional investment in the club. So, if harnessed, this emotional power is capable of great things, from supporting food poverty<sup>10</sup> in difficult times to creating record-breaking attendances, even when a team is at its lowest position in the club's history (Bird, 2018). Such was the case with Sunderland AFC, at the third tier of English Football and still capable of attracting nearly 50,000 fans to a Christmas game.

Therefore, establishing a good effective supporter consultation process will ensure the fans and their emotional investment are harnessed for the benefit of the club and fans alike.

One area of supporter consultation that is used by many clubs is that of establishing fan/supporter consultation groups, thereby allowing the club and a representative group of fans to meet regularly, talk about current issues and opportunities and find ways to reflect the fans' viewpoints in the decision-making that affects them and other supporters.

In order to illustrate how this can work well, we will explore the approach taken by MLS club Seattle Sounders<sup>11</sup>, an approach that has been in place for more than a decade and which has helped the club to grow its attendances and reach impressively in a country where football, until recently, was not among the most popular sports.

The "Democracy in Sports" idea was first launched by Drew Carey, when joining the Sounders FC ownership team back in 2008. His idea was to encourage fan involvement in the club, so he designed and became the first Honorary Chairperson of the Alliance.

The aspect of the Alliance and the Alliance Council (Democracy in sports, 2020) that most called the attention of sports analysts was the fact that there were mechanisms in place to ensure the process worked. For example, the process allows the members of the Alliance (i.e. fans) to fire the general manager if they do not believe he or she is doing a good enough job.

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<sup>10</sup> Fans Supporting Foodbanks official Facebook page:  
<https://www.facebook.com/FansSupportingFoodbanks/>

<sup>11</sup> Official website: [www.soundersfc.com](http://www.soundersfc.com)

The process works in the following way: supporters are able to influence the direction of their club, with the above example of potentially removing a general manager possible every four years.

As described on the website, the **Alliance Goals** provide Alliance members with a voice in the overall direction of the organization. This includes –though it is not limited to– the following:

- a vote on retention or lack of confidence in the club’s general manager approximately every four years;
- the right to advise on the club’s charitable contributions;
- the right to advise on matters regarding game-day experience;
- the right to advise on matters that primarily affect fan experience.

### **How to get involved**

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

### **Why to join the Council?**

- Your Voice. Your Club.
- You can represent all Alliance members in key decisions impacting matchday.
- You can get an inside scoop of your club.
- You can meet with ownership three times a year.
- You can connect with other Sounders FC supporters.

If a club wishes to pursue fan engagement, whose ultimate goal is to strengthen fans’ emotional investment in the club, then giving them this level of influence is a powerful way to do it. As opposed to actually owning the club (like FC Barcelona or Lewes FC, both studied in other parts of this course), this is more akin to socio-ownership, where the fans “emotionally” own the club and yet are able to influence its direction, rather than feeling helpless when an owner makes a decision that they believe threatens the club’s viability, infringes on its values or otherwise damages the “sacred” link between fans and club.



The trust that is required to foment fan engagement is more likely to be created and sustained in an environment where fans can so easily access the club's ownership team. This is so because a fan can talk directly with an Alliance Council representative and know that the representative is going to meet directly with not just the club's business office people but also directly with the club's ownership in one of the three annual meetings that the Council has.

That means it is a direct fan>Council member>owner communication process: very effective at addressing fan issues and creating trust.

It is also very open, since the Alliance allows **anyone** to become a member of the Council by simply collecting the minimum number of votes (25, it is understood), rather than having to win an election. This means that direct participation in the Council is open to any fan willing to do the work required to raise the appropriate number of votes.

But perhaps the best feature of the Alliance as a fan engagement mechanism is simply the fact that it exists. When launched, few other pro-sports teams took this approach—in America or anywhere else in the world—, creating a formal relationship between an independent fan-run organization and a commercially owned team/club.

Of course, there will be occasions when fan pressure, regardless of the channel through which it is expressed, will still lead to change, and it is clearly wise for clubs to listen and respond accordingly. However, when it was first launched more than a decade ago, the approach at Seattle Sounders was unique in the commercially-owned club environment.

So, while there are many different ways of achieving success in this area, it is important to work closely with supporters.

We therefore see several key steps/elements emerging.

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 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 encouraging engagement, respond to posts and ask for feedback? In most of the more than 2,500 fan experience assessments we have



undertaken as a business since 2005<sup>12</sup>, clubs 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 and disabled supporters (which would signal true intent and create much positive PR as well).

Clubs pursuing sound supporter consultation and dialogue begin to “tune in” to what matters to fans and to “best practices” that continue to sustain and deliver engagement.

Some of these may include the following:

- a 30-day survey to see how a new fan feels after his or her first few games;
- opportunities to attend panels or councils with club ownership present;
- opportunities to vote on issues of importance (regardless of the ownership model of the club;)
- a special day where season ticket holders are celebrated for their long-term support;
- loyalty points for doing the things that long term fans do (turning up in bad weather to see a low key game on a Tuesday night, patronising club facilities two or three hours before kick-off, loyally purchasing the club shirt as an annual ritual, travelling the length and breadth of the country regardless of the team’s performances on the pitch, among others.)

In summary, where clubs make the attempt to understand what the entity of the club means to fans and allow fans to have a voice in the decisions made, levels of trust in the club increase, leading to more strongly enduring emotional loyalty, which results in greater fan engagement.

## **Exercise**

Critically assess the Sounders FC Alliance Council model. Could it work for all clubs? Consider the strengths and weaknesses when compared with a fully supporter-owned club and make a recommendation for the consultation and dialogue model your own club should use.

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<sup>12</sup> If you want to read more, please visit <https://fanexperienceco.com/our-story/case-studies/>



## 2.2.4 Digital consultation

The final theme of this module explores digital consultation: what it is and how it can help associations, leagues and clubs to strengthen levels of fan engagement. We are going to specifically look at CRM and the way it can play a part in helping clubs to better understand and therefore serve their fanbase.

Fan engagement can be grown over digital channels. It helps to expand the narrative and the “story” from a once or twice-a-week frequency to 24/7. Just consider the impact on new kit launches where clubs use “countdowns” and other techniques to build up anticipation ahead of their annual release.

For large elite clubs with global fanbases, where fans are seldom likely to attend games, digital services can bring the relationship to life: taking it from a sales and marketing channel to a continuous source of information, emotional and interaction.

But just how much is digital used for consultation and dialogue, and, when it is, what should that look like? These are the questions we will address in this final theme.

In the northwest of England, Everton Football Club is making plans to move to a new stadium in its home city of Liverpool. To do this, the law requires that public consultation takes place so that everyone has the opportunity to give their views. Getting everyone together to do this is not practical in a city with a population of more than 900,000 people, so digital services were used as part of this consultation process.

The approach to consultation was praised by leading experts in civic engagement, sports business and marketing (Everton Football Club praised for exemplar public consultation, 2019), and described as “exemplar”.

The club gave an engaging name to the programme referencing its popular name as “The People’s Club”, a term originating from a comment made by David Moyes when he was manager at the club. The People’s Project began with the club holding public consultation in two stages (November/December 2018 and July/August 2019), and this produced a big response from the club’s supporters and residents of the city and, beyond all, they were keen to offer their opinions on the club’s ambitions.

Digital innovation played a significant part in this process with the second of two roadshows deploying virtual reality technology and an application that could be downloaded, as well as more “analogue” interventions like workshops, for example.

All of this input was vital to assessing the plans, which included transport, heritage and environment innovations as well as a “legacy” project to take place in the soon-to-be-vacated present home of Goodison Park, where the club has played since 1892.

The Head of the Chartered Institute of Marketing, Chris Daly, made special reference to the inclusion of digital approaches when praising the consultation process, and said the following:

Strong brands put their customer at the heart of everything they do, and Everton’s stadium consultation is a shining example of this. The club has not assumed, but asked fans what it is they want, inviting Evertonians and the wider public alike to play a meaningful part in the process.

Its choice of engagement channels has marked the club out as an innovator: incorporating the latest VR technology and recognising the popularity of apps, while not abandoning proven marketing techniques such as drop-in sessions and workshops. (Daly, as cited in Chapman, 2019, para. 6-7)

Everton’s approach to combining digital and physical consultation allowed them to secure support for their stadium move, and this theme will explore how associations, leagues and clubs can learn from this and complement their fan consultation and dialogue strategies.

At present, fan consultation and dialogue processes combine physical methods, such as supporter panels, fan parliaments and focus groups with research, and feedback processes, such as online surveys and polls. All of these approaches can be effective ways both to understand who fans are, what matters to them and what they think about their experiences, and to get their votes on issues of importance to them.

But Everton’s consultation process points the way of travel for the industry with its seamless blending of the most recent of technologies, including virtual reality.

How then can clubs maximise digital innovation to maximise engagement with fans when pursuing consultation and dialogue? The key to this is for clubs to maximise customer relationship management or, as it has been renamed for the football industry, football relationship management.

Most definitions centre around the use of technology to gain insights into a customer's interactions with a business so that the business can better target, serve and engage with said customer. Here is one such definition<sup>13</sup>:

CRM stands for Customer Relationship Management. It's a technology used to manage interactions with customers and potential customers. A CRM system helps organisations build customer relationships and streamline processes so they can increase sales, improve customer service, and increase profitability. (What is CRM?, 2020)

But, this is what Fiona Green states in the preface to her book:

This is not the first time you'll hear me say that it is not just about technology. Nor is it just about data. Having a strategy, systemic processes and the right culture are just as important to be successful. (Green, 2018)

We have already argued for a strong club culture built around shared values and the needs of the fans and the club's historic community by showing the strength of emotional engagement experienced by fans. The things that connect us to clubs are random, personal and often irrational, but this does not mean CRM, built on identifiable transactions, is not appropriate in the football environment. In fact, it makes it even more important. This is what Paul Greenberg observes in the foreword to Fiona Green's book:

The value of CRM, whatever your definition of it, is an enabler of capabilities that make your business operations and your interactions with fans not only work more effectively, but at the same time allow for timely communications with the fan base. Not only does that mean happier fans, because you are showing them so active love, but happy employees (and management) because you have a way of organising those interactions and transactions individually via storing them in an accessible customer record. (Green, 2020)

This is vitally important because fans interact with clubs using different channels and different methods: being in turning up to the club store to buy the new shirt, commenting on social media, sharing content on their Facebook page, buying online tickets or simply renewing via the club website. Currently, even many of the world's football elite, do not have a single view of their fans' relevant behaviours, interactions and purchases, never mind their intrinsic motivations. While it may be impossible to know that I am buying the club shirt for the first time in 20 years (because it reminds me of the one that the team wore at my very first game,) through understanding the themes and turns of my relationship, it will allow them to show that they understand me.

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<sup>13</sup> Official website: [www.salesforce.com](http://www.salesforce.com)



One way in which football can better apply the information provided by CRM (or FRM) is to create **personas**. Lars Helguson defines personas as

a representation of someone in your market of potential buyers. These personas are estimates, stereotypes of people who are or will be clients. As you learn about your market and gather information about your clients and their habits, your personas evolve as well. (Helguson, 2020, para. 1)

This can easily be applied to football, by identifying a similar estimate or stereotype of fans who currently follow or support the team. Let's create one now:

- 57 years old
- Male
- Lives more than 250 km from stadium
- Attends 3 home games per season
- Has not bought a home shirt (since records were begun)
- Has bought tickets for 15 away games (all closer to his home) in the last 10 years
- Took a credit card affiliated to the club
- Ran a half marathon for the club's charitable partner
- Once used a hospitality box at the stadium to bring guests to a home game

This, of course, is loosely based on your professor. All of these facts are true, but not all may be known by the club (or they may be stored in different areas.) How might the club strengthen that relationship? Perhaps by offering him an "away season ticket", since he lives far from the club. Perhaps he would be interested in using hospitality services too. Perhaps he has children and they have a relationship with the club. Would the launch of the club's new family stand be of interest?

As regards personas, Mic Conetta, the Arsenal FC's Head of CRM explains what follows:

Building personas that represent our fan base, bringing them to life, is one of the greatest areas for growth. You can easily lose people if you get too (far) into the details of data, clustered models, big data and data science, but actually it's the ability to bring data to life and have a consistent way of talking about it, be that for Christmas retail campaigns, season ticket renewals or ticket sales on a per game basis. If you can start bringing that to life a bit (...) it helps to deliver a stronger creative play into the message that we're trying to get across. It helps (...) the products and services we bring to market to meet those fans' wants and needs when (we) have different personas to work with. (Conetta in Green, 2018)

So, CRM (or FRM) is a way in which clubs can begin to understand who their followers are and what might matter to them, by inferring that from their transaction record.

Presently, clubs are using digital survey software, virtual reality and a growing understanding of CRM to strengthen their relationships with supporters. Just as we describe the move from blanket selling to “one on one” personal relationship building in the wider business world in course 1, module 1, we can now see that football is quickly bringing itself into a position where the general and generic messaging of the past is being replaced by a much more individually targeted future.

### **Exercise**

You are a CRM salesperson and you are making a pitch to a club who has never used a system like this before. They are in the 3<sup>rd</sup> tier of your national league, privately owned by a local businessperson, and currently stand in 6<sup>th</sup> position, with an opportunity to be promoted to tier 2.

- How would you pitch to this club owner?
- How would you persuade him or her to invest in CRM?
- What specific benefits, relevant to this particular club, would you bring into the presentation?

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