

Module 3. Delivering Value in the Fan Experience

Unit 3.1

3.1.1 The fan experience as a point of difference

The first theme in this unit will explore how the fan experience is a key factor in creating, creating and sustaining high levels of fan engagement.

As we have learned in other modules, fan engagement is a strategic and cultural concept focused on the fan's emotional investment in the club or national team. It is not a series of *ad hoc* interventions made by the club, league or national association, but the outcome of a properly planned strategy where the club has two purposes: to win and to engage.

Fan engagement leadership –the “engaging” part– has four key elements:

- Identity & meaning
- Consultation & dialogue
- The fan experience
- Employees & volunteers

As we have shown in course “Why Fan Engagement? Definition, Principles & Rationale”, the most sustainable and profitable organisations have led a customer-driven path. Designing their organisations around their customers' needs and basing their growth strategies on adding value, they have ridden out the fallow years, soared when others have slumped, consistently attracted and retained the best employees out there and grown customer advocacy and retention.

It is clear that relationship marketing is increasingly important in sports too, and, therefore, in football. Manuel Poch explains the following:

Sports supporters have never had so many entertainment options to choose from. This includes not only traditional (baseball, football, hockey, basketball, soccer) and emerging sports (lacrosse, paintball, NASCAR, extreme sports) but also digital television, online streaming, video games, fantasy sports, and many other entertainment options that have made it more difficult for marketers to establish relationships with the fans. (Poch, as cited in Rein, Kotler & Shields, 2006)

So, football needs to “stand out” in an increasingly crowded marketplace. Fan engagement is an effective way of doing this in football, where the huge emotional dimension means that if you design a club around the strategies that have driven every other successful business forward, you will have that most elusive of rewards in your hand: a sustainable football club whose growth depends not on what happens on the pitch, but on its loyalty to greater principles.

Dempsey and Reilly argue what follows regarding sports:

Supporters find something in sports that they cannot find anywhere else, e.g. the escape from the ordinary workaday world, the adrenaline rush and the thrill of a match or the feeling of being part of a community. (Dempsey and Reilly, 1998, as cited in Buhler and Nufer, 2010)

Research already shows that a good fan experience can heighten these feelings. High levels of customer service can increase fans’ “word of mouth” recommendations to others (Theodorakis & Alexandris, 2008).

In their study, Theodorakis and Alexandris used an established service quality methodology, ServQual, to study the link between service quality levels in the fan experience and future behaviours, including retention (i.e. attending again) and word-of-mouth communications.

What they found was evidence of the following: performance of key personnel (e.g. stewards, refreshments servers, etc.) and levels of service reliability significantly predicted the fan’s intention to buy future ticket while the tangibles (physical quality of the experience), responsiveness (appropriateness of service response, including speed) and reliability (delivering on the promised service or products) led to a 30% variance in “word of mouth”. This means these factors were talked about and shared amongst fans.

In our own experience, we have seen how important the fan experience is to match attending fans. In 2012 I worked on a project with a national association whose aim was to improve understanding of the motivations of “core” (i.e. long term, passionate) fans of the national team and use this understanding to improve the fan experience at the national stadium.

We began with qualitative interventions, including gathering internal views (i.e. those of employees and officials working for the national association), fan focus groups and “snapshot” match day feedback from representative core fans.

This informed the development of a survey, which identified the following key priorities for match-attending core fans:

- cheaper tickets,
- more pre-match and half-time entertainment,

- innovations to improve match atmosphere and noise,
- quality and pricing of refreshments, and
- stadium exiting.

We were then able to see how the fan experience influenced the core fans' overall intentions in three areas: return and recommend (as per existing studies) and also in terms of "how valued" the core fans felt.

In another unpublished study the same year, we conducted surveys where we used both "to recommend" and "how valued" as overall ratings, to see if this provided any further insight. What we found (and which was further confirmed by a series of focus groups) was that the existing emotional bond between the core fan and this particular club meant that the answers to "how strongly would you recommend?" appear to have been artificially high.

It was as if the respondents confused the nature of the question ("To what extent has the fan experience impacted on your likelihood to recommend the club's match day to other fans, who have never attended before, or who have previously lapsed from purchasing tickets?") with a question about their allegiance. A joke was made at the time by one fan, who said that he was certainly not going to recommend his club's rivals!

The responses to the "how valued" question attracted our attention because the same core fans were giving a much lower score here. Our assessment was that this question made it clearer that we were asking about the connection between their individual match day experiences as core fans and the impact of that on the strength of their emotional connection with the club (i.e. fan engagement).

That earlier unpublished internal club research informed the work with the national team, leading to the use of the "how valued" question while using the Net Promoter scale.

As figure 1 shows, using a ten-point Net Promoter¹ scale and surveying fans attending a specific friendly game later that year, the results showed the following:

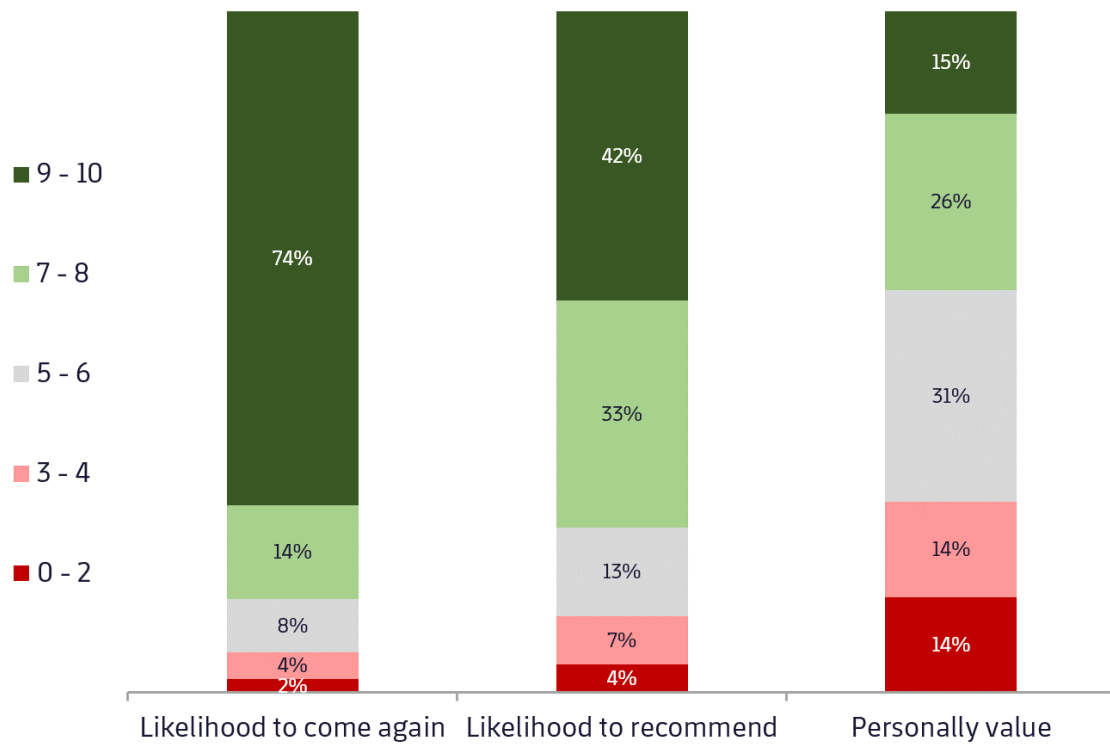
- strong levels of re-purchase intention,
- weaker levels of recommendation intention, and
- low levels of feelings of personal value.

We therefore believed that this indicated opportunities for clubs and national teams to strengthen the emotional bond with fans by improving their match day experiences.

¹ Official website: www.netpromoter.com



Figure 1: Results of the research undertaken



Source: Own creation.

This work and other work we have undertaken over the years have informed our focus on providing detailed feedback on the fan experience for clubs, leagues and national associations and then providing recommendations, based on what we have learned, to help our partners improve experiences and, thus, improve the emotional bond.

Therefore, fan experience stands as a great opportunity to improve levels of fans experience, especially if it can provide unique experiences that remind the fans of their intrinsic connection to the club.

Of course, clubs can emphasise what makes them different in marketing, communications, public relations and in the way season ticket renewals are promoted or tickets are advertised, but we believe that there is a clear opportunity to do this in the fan experience itself.

First of all, we must understand that the fan experience is not just the 90 minutes, nor even the period of time the fan spends in the stadium. As we have seen in the course "Why Fan Engagement? Definition, Principles & Rationale", the customer journey is determined by the customer's needs and expectations, so, for example, a new fan attending his or her first game will need to visit the website, perhaps call the club and, because they have no previous experience of the club, they will need assistance at different points. The core fan may already hold a season ticket, but "touch points" such as travel, arrival, retail, refreshments and levels of service from match day staff will be equally important.



By addressing improvement opportunities across the touch points, we can make the fan experience become the thing that makes the club special. Clearly, fans who attend hope for good football, a great atmosphere and a good result; but, as we are seeing from our work, from the research of others and organizations representing fans, the experience is increasingly becoming very important, too.

For elite clubs, where commercial income far outweighs ticket-purchasing income, the fan experience can strengthen the emotional bond between the fan and the club. On the other hand, for those clubs outside of the elite, who depend on match day revenue for their viability, the fan experience is vital in ensuring existing fans return and speak positively about the experience while new fans feel compelled to keep coming back.

Let's remind ourselves of the idea of match day touch points, the steps that make up the overall match day "journey" for the fan and those for whom these are important "moments of truth":

- First impressions
- Finding of information
- Ticket purchase
- Social media
- Journey (especially the last mile)
- Arrival & stadium vicinity
- Retail & merchandise
- Social & refreshments
- Inside the Stadium
- Match day staff

Let's also consider the different groups of fans, based on characteristics and needs. There are core fans, ultras, new fans, families, young people, children, older fans, etcetera. It is clear that while there will be some common needs across these groups; some particular groups have more specific needs than others.

Disabled fans, for example, will hope for more personal support and assistance whereas new families, with young children, may be interested in services during the game that keep their kids from becoming bored, which will allow parents to attend more matches, rather than having to give up and no longer attend.

So, by delivering a unique fan experience, you can address all of these needs: you have to remind the core fans of the reasons why they love the club so much while ensuring that those with a range of different needs see very clearly that their hopes have been addressed.

Let's complete this unit by looking at some examples of clubs who do this very well.

Lewes FC, a club we have mentioned in several different parts of this program, have a very strong identity, and this comes across in their match day experience, which emphasizes the social dimension of a football match. Not only do their varied and high-quality refreshments (including locally brewed ale) attract a wider audience, but their famous “beach huts” (Boyle, 2014) also both make the physical match day experience different and offer an experience unlike anything else in modern football.

Figure 2: Photograph of the four luxury beach huts set by Lewes FC



Source: The Boot Room at Lewes FC [Online image] (n.d.) Retrieved from <https://www.patternsofplay.co.uk/the-boot-room-at-lewes-fc>

The Estonia Premium Liiga club JK Narva Trans has used a variety of methods to attract new fans, including opening a hairdresser inside the stadium for games. Swedish women’s club Vittsjö GIK², for their part, are famous for their chairperson who likes to hug people when they attend games. According to a recent conversation with football branding expert Sissel Gynnild Hartley³, they even have a dedicated “hugging” game!

Often, a good fan experience is about getting things right (having enough refreshments to sell, stewards having good knowledge and seats allocated properly, among other), but the club who can deliver a unique experience carries more in its armoury than “wins” and is better able to grow sustainably.

Exercise

In your country, which club’s fan experience has the best reputation?
Why do people talk positively about it?
What does the club do?
What can other clubs learn from this?

3.1.2 Touch points and “moments of truth”

So, let’s revisit those touch points and explore, in much more detail, what they are and why they are so important.

² Official website: <https://www.svenskalag.se/vittsjogik>

³ If you want to learn more about her, visit <https://www.nala.no/about-us>

Touch points, as we have studied in different parts of this certificate, are the points in the fan experience that all fans of different types experience when attending games at their clubs' stadia.

Football has only recently become acquainted with the concept of "touch points." It sounds like a term encountered by someone pursuing their coaching badges, but is, in actual fact, one of the areas on which customer-facing businesses outside of sport focus a lot of attention and one which football clubs ignore at their peril.

Touch points are the steps encountered by the customer in the process of using a supplier's services or engaging in the experiences they provide. Some may be fairly innocuous, but some (often referred to as "moments of truth") can create perceptions that can be the difference between a lifelong relationship and an immediate separation.

Football's traditionally narrow view of its "customers" is changing, as we show in this certificate, but one of the best ways you can measure the true extent of this change is by examining the experience of fans at its various "match day" touch points.

Perhaps the most important is the "first point of contact". That is actually a collection of touch points including club marketing; viewing the club's website and also calling the club or dropping into its ticket office. The experiences of new fans, whose custom and loyalty are going to be a new source of revenue for the club, sometimes offer a telling insight into the culture at the club.

Let me illustrate this. I remember calling a club several years ago. I explained that I was coming to my first game and was bringing my elderly father and young son with me. I was immediately asked 'where do you want to sit?'

Given I'd not been there before and, without the gift of extrasensory perception, I couldn't answer that question. So, I explained again that we hadn't been there before. This time, more help was offered: 'do you want to sit at the side or behind the goal?' Getting there, fair enough, but still nothing that indicated that the needs of my Dad or, indeed, my young son were being considered. A better response would be: 'How old is your Dad? Will he need assistance? Can I arrange for parking closer to the stadium? (Mark Bradleys experience).

One of the other curious idiosyncrasies of the football experience is the fact that official websites –a key touch point– are probably far more important to new or infrequent fans than they are to diehards, as they are the ones needing the information. Bizarrely, however, outside of a few innovative leagues (including the EFL), most websites still stubbornly fail to take this factor into account.

Some people would venture that official websites are seldom used by anyone, since the core fraternity rejects what it interprets as the corporate “shtick” of the “official” message, preferring to use other independent media services. Those considering attending their first game find so little of use on cluttered and unhelpful home pages that they may end up deciding not to attend or to watch on TV (if that is possible.)

On the assumption that part of the desired growth at clubs must, in part, come for new sources, it is important that the website be inclusive of these needs, and yet, until Reading FC⁴ first broke the mould three years ago and featured a concourse food menu on their website, not one British football club had actually ever explained what it had to offer.

For the group of young families, where the food is the expected high point for the quickly bored youngster, having no information on the official site is a major fail, since parents want to be able to manage their kids’ expectations. Is there food? What food do you sell? How much does it cost? Answer those questions and the family can plan accordingly. Do nothing and they will be tempted to eat before they arrive or bring their own food.

Many clubs do provide extremely useful information services on their websites: match day guides, first time fan information, activities available to extend the 90 minutes and services such as social clubs, family rooms and children’s entertainment. But because these services are aimed at the passing and/or new customer, they must be clearly visible under a meaningful heading and intuitively reached, otherwise they run the risk of being missed.

By taking a closer look at these touch points, however, not only will we see where the gaps are, but we will also start to develop the “customer” mindset that growing clubs need. This is going to be particularly important during the post-pandemic period, when biosecurity measures –if not balanced with a good fan experience– may be enough to stop many fans (such as elderly fans, families or those who have other health or economic concerns.) A White Paper has been published on this challenge and the way clubs should respond (Bradley & Young, 2020).

In the following chart, we give examples of touch points together with a reason why they are important to a particular fan or fan group.

Chart 1: Examples of touch points and reasons why they are important

Touch Point	Example of Importance
First impressions	Is the font easy to read? Many websites are very “busy” using small font which makes it difficult for fans with visual impairment to understand what there is.
Information finding	Is there a FAQ section on the website? Are colleagues in the club’s Ticketing Department “up to speed” on all fan types and what they may need?
Ticket purchase	For those fans purchasing for the first time, does the ticket confirmation (if bought online) provide information relevant to those fans? For example, if the

⁴ Family section of the Reading FC official website: <https://www.readingfc.co.uk/fans/families/>



	purchaser is bringing children, is a schedule of activities provided, so the adults know how to ensure they and their kids get the best possible experience?
Social media	Does the social media team embrace all different fan segments with their content? Does the club's furry mascot have his or her own channel to communicate content for families or young fans?

Journey (last mile)	Does the club recommend alternative parking for when the stadium car park is full? Does it provide a link to live traffic information? Is there an accurate sat-nav for those driving? Is there a link to public transport services?
Stadium vicinity	How good is your signage? Is it written in a common font in welcoming language? Are key parts of the stadium easy to find? If you have a family area in the stadium, for example, is it well signposted?
Retail & merchandise	If you have a physical store (or several outlets) open on a match day, do new fans know where to find them? Is there a special offer or a player making a guest appearance and offering autographs?
Social & refreshments	Does the club promote its menus and prices via the website and social media ahead of the game? Does it make it clear that it meets all needs, including vegetarian, vegan and gluten-free? Does it offer family deals, child portions and fast-served beer? What is the fan's favourite? Will this be useful for first time fans?
The stadium inside	Are all of the services in each concourse or area of the stadium clearly signposted to ensure smooth access and minimum queuing? If you have an app to help fans find the shortest queues, is it promoted along with ticket purchase? Is toilet access for disabled fans prioritised (e.g. stewards hold radar keys) ⁵ Are disabled toilets only used by fans with special needs?
Match day staff	Are match day staff positive, proactive and engaging in their demeanour? Do they know (or have access to) all relevant information for fans? Have they been briefed on the particulars of this game? Do they look for opportunities to make fans smile?

Source: Own production.

These touch points and moments of truth inform our assessment work in the UK and Europe and allow for the participating clubs, leagues and national associations to pinpoint and improve their fans' experiences, leading to deeper levels of fan engagement, advocacy and retention.

Exercise

Undertake an assessment of a football match near where you live. Record the date, details of clubs that are playing, the name of the stadium and the weather conditions. Then choose three of the above touch points and, finally,

⁵ A Radar Key (NKS Key) is skeleton key that opens more than 10,000 disabled toilets in the UK.

- write a detailed assessment of your experience at each touch point;
- identify any strengths and weaknesses, from your own perspective; and
- make recommendations as to how your club could improve the experience for you, with your own particular needs and expectations.

3.1.3 Creating Monday morning stories: The value of magic moments

In an article published by *FC Business* magazine (Bradley, 2019), Mark Bradley explored the importance of “going the extra mile” and providing experiences for fans that can either be memorable, magical or both. These experience epitomize your game’s immense emotional power and, when considered as part of a fan engagement strategy, can help clubs to benefit through advocacy and retention.

I have seen a great many improvements to the match day experience on my travels. I’ve seen new branding; newly launched websites; new signage introduced; new retail lines; new refreshments offerings; new ways to pay and, of course, new forms of match day entertainment. The physical match day experience is evolving at a pace these days, but I believe that it is not being matched by the levels of engagement from our match day teams.

I believe we underestimate how important people are to the whole match day experience, but unless we recognise this and unless we start to address it, we risk undermining our investment and limiting our ability to grow our clubs.

I am reminded of a couple of Southampton⁶ games my family attended in the 2006/07 season. One was a 2-1 win at home versus Luton Town. Dean Kiely played in goal for the Hatters that day and the presence of the former Portsmouth (and main rival of Southampton) goalkeeper led to our kids hearing some unsavoury language. The other game featured a hat trick from Andrew Surman, two from Kenwyn Jones and another promising appearance by a young Gareth Bale in a 5-2 win against ten-man Barnsley.

Our recollection of the on-pitch action remains hazy. However, what we all remember to this day is a little cameo that played out in the queue as we waited to enter the stadium: a magic moment that we always recall when hearing about Southampton or watching them on TV.

Just before making our way to the turnstile, we visited the club shop. Our daughter (7 at the time) was collecting club-branded Beanie Bears (small furry toys for kids). We’d bought her the Southampton one and she was proudly carrying a plastic bag with her new friend safely wrapped up inside.

⁶ Official website: www.southamptonfc.com

In front of us were two stewards: one greeting people as they reached the turnstile and the other walking up and down the queue and performing bag searches. As he reached us, he weighed up the situation and asked my partner if he could check our daughter's bag. 'What have you bought today, then?' he asked her in a kind voice.

She opened up the bag and showed him the Beanie Bear. 'That's lovely' he responded (having completed the check in a way that was not only not intrusive but, in fact, very engaging). 'I bet you hope our boys play as well as they last time out' he continued.

'This is my first time here' our daughter responded. 'Your first time?' he asked.

He stepped back, cleared his throat and announced to the rest of the queue 'this little girl is at her first ever Saints'⁷ game today! Let's give her a lovely welcome!

An affectionate round of applause broke out. What could have been a perfunctory, necessary-but-unpleasant experience was turned into a 'magic memory' in seconds, because the steward cared and, more importantly, subconsciously (we believed) felt that it was duty to welcome a new soldier to the ranks. (Mark Bradley's experience)

The contribution of club colleagues is often overlooked in our rush to define fan engagement purely in digital terms. Off-line engagement is so important to those clubs who do not enjoy the status of the "elite" and who rely on ticket revenue for basic survival. However, from the experiences we have recorded over the last fourteen years, our assessment is that football still does not fully understand the impact that friendly, helpful and engaging people can make to the way their clubs are perceived by people, to levels of advocacy for their club and to the "bottom line."

The contribution of match day colleagues stretches beyond the match day and impacts on every "touch point" encountered (starting with that critical "first impression".) However, in our rush to digitalise everything, we risk missing an opportunity with new fans (or those with questions) who feel less inclined to log in and are keener on interacting with a "real" human.

So, when someone calls up with a question, do we just give them the answer, or do we pick up on clues to go that little bit further? Is our (conscious or sub-conscious) measure of phone "success" just a matter of getting it all over as quick as possible?

The experience people get who are phoning to ask questions of clubs is often a good indicator of that club's wider culture. For example, a friend called a club this week to buy tickets for him and his son. It was their first game and he mentioned this early into the conversation. The ticket office assistant sold them the tickets without further comment and the call ended. So

⁷ Nickname of Southampton and feature of their fans' traditional song of support, "When the Saints Go Marching In".



(consciously or sub-consciously) are we leaving it until the match day in the hope that something will happen to “convert” them into regular supporters?

Why not tell them what the club does for kids on a match day, why not mention when the players arrive, so they can get an autograph, why not offer pro-active advice on parking? Why even bother with human involvement if it is not going to add layers of value to the digital experience?

Think about every time your fans encounter human contact from your club along the “match day” journey: from parking attendants to stewards outside of the stadium, from club shop assistants and floor walkers to match day ticket office team members, and from concourse refreshments colleagues to stewards inside the stadium and your hospitality team too. It only takes one special “cameo” to forge a positive impression: one moment of magic eternally locked into the memory bank.

These “magic memories” are being created at clubs who understand this: whether it is a car parking attendant noticing a flat tyre and offering to fix it while the fan was at the match (Birmingham City⁸), a steward inside the stadium inviting fans to sit in the dug-out during the pre-match warm up (Portsmouth⁹), a groundsman inviting a fan to help put the corner flags in (Liverpool¹⁰), or simply making a youngster’s day like they did at Southampton.

But how many clubs are actively working to make these interactions happen? In our experience, clubs who are clear about their purpose tend to do these things well. They talk with their staff about what the club means to its fans; they explore the difference between “doing your job” and “making a difference”; they encourage them to take ownership; they work to find out what’s preventing people from trying something different; they remove “barriers”; they forgive those mistakes made in the pursuit of making “magic” and they recognise and celebrate those who, through their actions, are clearly embracing this approach.

Physical changes to the match day experience tend to be “one-off” interventions: adding a menu to a refreshments outlet, a stadium plan to a common entry point or a new car park. But one truth underpins all of these improvements: it does not matter how good the other things you offer are if the people delivering them are not stepping up too.

As we previously argued, fan engagement is primarily a cultural concept. It logically only becomes “part of the way we do things” if we do it every day. If our interventions can also add magic and create lifelong memories, then they are honouring the game and ensuring its future is safe.

⁸ Official website: www.bcf.com

⁹ Official website: www.portsmouthfc.co.uk

¹⁰ Official website: www.liverpoolfc.com

Exercise

One of the messages in this theme is the importance of individual interactions between club staff and fans and the way these can create magic moments and lifelong memories. These practices are comparatively rare, so please assess why you believe that is the case. When a game like football can mean so much to people, then why is this not practised more commonly?

3.1.4 The role of feedback in improving the experience and the engagement of fans

As you will find in several units within this certificate, football can learn lots from other customer-facing sectors. One area in which these sectors out-perform football considerably is in their attitude to feedback for theirs, which is based on a proven approach like Kaizen™, the “continuous improvement” business approach, which is made up of two Japanese words, “kai”, which means “change”, and “zen”, which means “for the better” (Imai, 2020).

It is characterised by the involvement of employees in the business: they become pro-actively involved in improving productivity. The employees are invested in the improvement process in two ways.

The employees –especially those closest to the customer– become involved in events and work in teams aimed at improving specific areas within the business’s operations and customer service. This helps to create building a culture where everyone is continuously focused on finding ways to improve.

The PDCA (plan-do-check-act) model is similar to Kaizen in that it also takes a circular approach, where a plan is made, action takes place, evaluation and new actions or improvements are made. Kaizen emphasises the involvement of customer-facing employees in these teams.

Supporter consultation and dialogue is, of course, an important part of any fan engagement strategy, since it is part of the process of learning what matters to fans as well as the way to improve their experiences.

However, these events, while often frequent and capable of bringing about improvements in other industries, are often not part of the working processes at a football club. While it is possible that such approaches are not understood (since they first appeared in the Manufacturing sector and have not been widely acknowledged as being in use in football), they offer real benefits to football, as they show an important activity that underpins fan experience improvement in football, leading to stronger levels of fan engagement.

While it is clear, from our experience, that clubs record and review data relating to many aspects of their operations (including attendance details, ticketing information, conference and

banqueting sales, retail sales performance, etc.), there is comparatively little evidence of the same approach to the match day experience: the fan experience.

This lack of focus may be yet another symptom of football's tendency to keep fans at an arm's length, seen most recently in the unfounded claims that crowds of fans would gather outside stadia where games were taking place during the Covid-19 pandemic (Steinberg & Ingle, 2020). Of course, this was not the case, but yet again, it was an example of football attributing criminal tendencies to football fans without any evidence.

Those students wishing to explore the evolution of attitudes to and treatment of football fans in the UK, please read Paul Brown's book *Savage Enthusiasm: a History of Football Fans* (2017). A review of the book began with the following line:

"For such an important group within a multi-billion-pound industry, they can be marginalised and maligned; herded and corralled; treated with suspicion and contempt. A necessary evil." (Sked, 2017).

But by focusing on collecting feedback from fans' match day experiences (among other aspects of the relationship), clubs can not only identify ways to improve their fans' experiences and drive sales (for example, having a more convenient and speedy refreshments service) but they can also begin to develop a culture of listening to fans: a key ingredient in the rise of relationship marketing and fan engagement.

It is recommended that clubs, leagues and associations take feedback on the quality of the fan/customer experience and use this data to optimize the experience (with the emphasis—just like Kaizen—on doing many small improvements over time and having this process managed by those in fan-facing positions).

This opportunity led to the creation of the Fan Experience Company in 2005 and, since then, it has been providing clubs with detailed feedback on their experiences of different fan types, ranging from first time and returning fans to those with disabilities, female fans of male football, young families (crucial to the recruitment of future fans) and visiting fans who (in England) contribute much-needed revenue to the host club.

The aim of these programmes was not only to provide feedback and improvement recommendations, but also to sow the seeds for a more fan-focused culture in clubs by measuring clubs' performance (including against each other) and also by recognizing and rewarding high-performing clubs.

In 2016, I wrote a blog about the Family Excellence scheme that the Fan Experience Company established in 2007/08 with the EFL (English Football League). The League calculated that, in the first ten seasons of operation, there had been an estimated increase in junior attendance of 37% - equating to nearly 6 million more young fans (and

also contributing to helping the League achieve overall aggregate attendances of more than 18 million fans in 2018: the highest number since 1959.

The EFL has been around for 132 years now. What this means to anyone with more than a passing interest in organizational culture is that attitudes are likely to be deep seated. However, club mindsets are changing and, thanks to the efforts of some committed, visionary and determined individuals across the League, the pace of change and engagement has never been stronger.

Back in 2006 we had some initial conversations with The EFL in which we explored the barriers to increasing junior attendance. Family engagement quickly emerged as an opportunity, if only to make it easier for people like me to be able to get to games. I'd grown up watching Sunderland, but moved abroad, then to London, then to Yorkshire, had kids, etc., to the extent that while my fervour for my team still burned brightly, it was as a non-attending supporter. If I could persuade my partner that taking our young kids to the Stadium of Light back in the early 2000s was not only safe but an engaging family experience, then I would feel positive about starting to attend matches again.

So, The EFL asked me to take my family to 30 consecutive games in the 2006 / 07 season. Half of the trips were as an 'away family' but the findings were consistent: no strategic evidence in our experiences of (1) families being seen as a potential growth area and (2) 'barriers' almost at every stage of the experience, from website to the day of the match itself, that made it difficult for families to engage. (Mark Bradley's experience)

Having shared these findings with the clubs, over a series of regional meetings, an opportunity began to emerge, and The Family Excellence Awards¹¹ were born.

Although the detail has changed (driven by the needs and priorities of clubs over the 13 years of the awards), the overall concept has not. Clubs are visited twice a season by experienced, qualified assessors who detail their "journey", which consists of all of their experiences: from planning attendance and booking tickets to travelling to the stadium to arrival; everything that happens before the game and everything that happens in the stadium itself, including refreshments and retail experiences. This qualitative "snapshot" is then returned to each club, unedited, with scores for advocacy, friendliness, value and intention to return, as well as benchmarking data and detailed recommendations on "quick wins" and more substantial improvement requirements.

This is not a mystery shopper programme. They are characterized by assessors checking that everything a service provider needs to have in place is there. This is more appropriate when the service provider has the mechanisms and standards in place and wishes to check them. Our purpose, conversely, was a long-term consultation programme aimed at changing minds and

¹¹ Official website: <https://fanexperienceco.com/our-story/case-studies/efl-family-excellence-programme/>



driving change. It is not only offering improvement opportunities to clubs on a season-by-season basis, but also marking societal and behavioural changes over time.

The EFL supports the strategic value of the programme with “best practice” publications; benchmarking data, so that clubs can identify where they lie in respect of the best clubs at key touch points, such as their websites and refreshments services, for example; recognition, not just the award itself, but a celebratory “end of season” event attended by more than 100 club representatives where clubs share their stories and common challenges are addressed in the open: and seminars. The learning has led to sharper, more “supporter-driven” initiatives in other areas, too, like disabled supporter engagement, away fan experience and an understanding of the perspective of women who follow the game.

But it all keeps coming back to the fact that it is the clubs who are responsible for this exponential rise in junior attendance. It is the clubs themselves who deserve the credit not only for being prepared to embrace different ways of thinking, but also for introducing innovations which have sent ripples across global football.

There are no longer clubs indifferent to the opportunities that family engagement brings. Across the country the correlation between a winning team and increasing performance is being broken: we may win, we may lose, but our family attendance is increasing and, because it has become a strategic priority, it will continue to do so.

All of this is built on the value of feedback and, over the next few themes, we will delve deeper into the practices that this process has encouraged. Fan feedback processes remain one of the most effective ways that clubs, leagues and associations can improve fan experiences while developing a fan-focused culture: moving from “marginalised and maligned” to active partners in the growth and flourishing of the game.

Exercise

Research your nearest club, league or national association and identify if there are any fan feedback processes in place. What exactly is done?

Write a two-long paragraph summary of the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches you find.

Unit 3.2

3.2.1 Touch point excellence: Information & Ticket Purchase

In the themes that follow, we look at the match day fan experience and share best practice examples of how each touch point can be optimised for different fan groups.

As source material, we will use the documentation issued to Fan Experience Company's experienced assessors and which is updated each season to account for the evolving needs of the target group. For example, when we started this programme in 2007/08, social media was not an expected part of the experience. However, now it is seen as a vital tool for interaction, communication and for strengthening the emotional connection between clubs, players and fans. Smartphones too were less common in 2007/08, and most fans, if purchasing their first ticket, would do this either by telephone/post or in person. Now, it is likely that many fans will purchase by smartphone and access the stadium via simply scanning their phone.

But, at non-league and grass roots levels of football, people will (in the majority of cases) simply pay on the day, since these clubs cannot be run without the assistance of volunteers, and technical advancements are less likely to be adopted.

So, we will look at different touch points, set out what a good quality experience should look like and support this with examples.

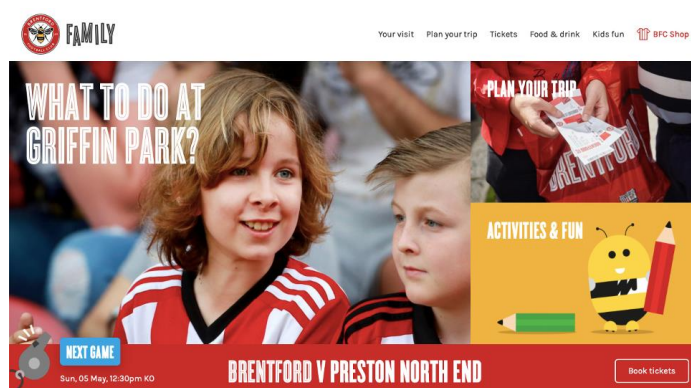
The Information & Ticket Purchase touch point is especially important for new fans and for those who are not holding season ticket membership, as the latter will, by nature of their status, bypass that step.

By taking the "new fan" perspective, considering their needs and then articulating standards, processes and behaviours, clubs can develop and adapt this to meet their own needs.

Here is a list of some of the questions we would be asking as regards these important touch points:

- How easy is it for fans with different needs to access the information they need? Whether by smartphone, tablet or desktop, it is important that new, returning or infrequent attendees can easily access the information they need.
- How is this information presented? Is there evidence of innovation in the way the club meets the needs of particular fans?

Figure 3: The dedicated Family page accessible via Brentford FC's official website¹²



Source: Brentford FC's official website [Families section] (n.d.) Retrieved from <https://family.brentfordfc.com/?ga=2.145083895.27445222.1588936827-1178451753.1588936827>author. Screenshot by author.

- Does the information describe in detail any services for particular fan groups? For example, is there a First-Time fan section, a Families section or information for particular groups, such as fans with disabilities?
- Is ticket pricing transparently displayed and are appropriate offers, discounts, etcetera shown?
- Do clubs describe any appropriate member schemes, season ticket benefits or fan loyalty schemes?

We have also mentioned the importance of “magic moments” and “lifetime memories,” so we look carefully to see if any clubs are offering these moments. EFL League Two (fourth tier) club Leyton Orient¹³ offer a First-Time certificate for any young fan attending his or her first game.

Another English fourth tier club is Colchester United¹⁴, which introduced the idea of a match day timetable so that a new family's more intrinsic expectations can be managed:

- What is the total cost of the day?
- Where and when can my kids get autographs from the first team? What entertainment is going on and when?
- How do we get to access Eddie's Nest, the home of their beloved mascot? When does the coffee bar with its healthy food range open?

The wider family experience programme was launched at Colchester United in 2014/15 just as the club was sinking towards the fourth tier, but one year later, overall attendances had increased, demonstrating the value of adapting the experience for different groups.

Other clubs provide information on refreshments for groups who would benefit from information in advance, because of budgetary, diet or other needs, including prices and menus.

¹² Official website: www.brentfordfc.com

¹³ Official website: www.leytonorient.com

¹⁴ Official website: www.cu-fc.com

At English Championship club Reading¹⁵, it is possible to pre-order food for young supporters ahead of match day and get it brought straight to your seat.

A Kingsley Kids Bag gives the young Royals in your life get the opportunity to select what they want from a wide variety of options, whether it be healthy eats or naughty treats. And what's more, you also get a free gift of a player picture and a set of crayons. All this for just £5 – offering matchday convenience at fantastic value.

You can get a Kingsley Kids Bag from the kiosks at Madejski Stadium, but if you pre-order ahead of the game, yours will be delivered to wherever you are sat in the stadium up to 15 minutes before kick-off. (Kingsley Kids Bags, n.d.)

First impressions count, so, if you can convey both the basic information and that which will be useful and also engaging for specific groups, then retention can be maximised.

Fan expectations of ticket purchase have increased in line with the ease with which other leisure ticket purchases can be made. If you are watching a game on TV and enjoying it, and you decide you would like to attend the next home game, then that moment is exactly the time when you are most motivated to do so. It is therefore essential that no barriers are put in your way. Purchase must be easy, with as few clicks as possible, and confirmation and ticket should immediately follow.

Most importantly, if the fan encounters a problem or has a question, club or national association employees must not only have the appropriate knowledge (or access to it), but must also be looking for ways to create a lasting first impression.

For example, if someone is booking for a friend who has a disability, they must be able to make accurate and reliable recommendations to those fans. Another example would occur when a parent books tickets for a group including a child. If the club has a kids' membership, a family stand or any activities or entertainment for children, then the assistant should pick up on this.

First impressions are traditionally understood to be “lasting”, but that anecdotal belief is now supported by research which shows that they are so powerful that they are more important than “fact”, i.e. factual evidence (Wood, 2018). So, if first impressions of a football club are negative, the rest of the experience, even if good at times, will be lost in the overall perception of negativity.

As has been stated in other units in this certificate, the importance of club channels of information is clear: new fans need extra information, reassurance and support whereas existing fans may use other networks and sources for information. While online services prevail these days, it is also important that club employees not only have the information at hand but can also use the enquiries to identify other opportunities to engage, attract and retain the fan.

¹⁵ Official website: www.readingfc.co.uk



Exercise

Compare the websites of two clubs in the second tier of football in your country.

- What best practices did you find?
- How could each club improve?
- Are there common opportunities?
- Are there common weaknesses?

3.2.2 Touch point excellence: Travel, stadium vicinity and social media

In this theme we will identify and share best practices in relation to the above touch points: each important in ensuring that the fan's experience is as good as possible, leading to strong levels of engagement which will drive future re-purchase, retention and advocacy.

For existing fans, travelling to the game is part of the essential match day rituals that connect different groups, characterise their match days and celebrate their habits. Meeting up at the same bar, wearing the same clothes, eating the same food and, of course, travelling to the game is all part of the experience. So, for existing fans, it is important to recognise this and to be proactive in ensuring any potential disruption is both mitigated and possible.

For example, this may involve using the club's communication channels to advise of traffic delays, roadworks or other potential hazards. Being able to estimate revised travel times adds extra value to the fan.

For new fans, travel information is essential. The driving and parking advice offered by Danish Superliga club AGF¹⁶ is very detailed¹⁷, even down to using a colour-coordinated map to help fans find the right car park. When your professor [Mark Bradley] attended in 2018, this was his mode of travel and this ensured that any hassle was immediately removed on his trip to this attractive east Jutland city.

English Premier League club Aston Villa¹⁸ makes travelling to their West Midlands home, Villa Park, extremely easy too. The detail in their website guidance is impressive, with parking exclusion zones included to ensure a smooth day for every travelling fan¹⁹.

For a national association, when hosting an international match, it is likely that many people will come to the game without previous experience of visiting the national stadium (or any other venue used), so travel information, in as much detail as possible, is essential. The FAI (Football

¹⁶ Official website: www.agf.dk

¹⁷ <https://www.parkarena.dk/info/parkering/>

¹⁸ You can find different ways to get to the club in <https://www.avfc.co.uk/club/villa-park/visiting-the-stadium/travel-and-parking>

¹⁹ Official website: www.avfc.co.uk

Association of Ireland) link visitors to their website²⁰ to the national stadium's own travel & directions page, which makes things easy for the first-time traveller²¹.

As we have discussed, for non-elite clubs, the attraction, engagement and retention of new, lapsed or infrequent fans is absolutely vital, so having parking information designed with their needs in mind is very important. Every website, app or other channel of information should provide detailed travel information, ideally including the following:

- Public transport options & prices
- Taxi options & prices
- Routes from (any) airport/rail station & prices
- Walking maps, including walking times
- Information for groups, such as families bringing children
- Maps for those driving, including official and unofficial/contingency parking options, including prices and walking times
- Cycle maps

English championship (second tier) club Wycombe Wanderers²² have access challenges at their Adams Park Stadium, where there is only one access road and very limited parking. They have operated a scheme whereby any full car could use the club's official car park.

Not only did this scheme ensure that fewer cars were used, but it could also be shown to be a more environmentally-based response to a traditional stadium issue.

The actual parking provision needs to be well managed, too, with factors such as access, supervision, cost, security and ease of departure.

Overall, clubs should be looking to exercise control over the parts of the journey where possible. In some locations, civic arrangements allow for clubs to hang bunting or flags to indicate a game is on.

One of the best ways in which clubs can help to make the journey as hassle-free as possible is to include all of this travel information in their club app. This, with agreement of the fan, allows the club to geolocate them and provide the easiest and/or most direct route to the stadium while making other suggestions according to the fan's specific interests.

The use of social media platforms in an effective way is a resource that can help engage fans in long-term relationships and convert them into loyal customers. The St. Louis Rams and the LA Galaxy are using social media as a tool to engage fans in long-term relationships as well as to

²⁰ Official website: www.fai.ie

²¹ You can find different ways to get to the stadium in <https://www.avivastadium.ie/getting-here>

²² Official website: www.wycombewanderers.co.uk

enhance supporters' experiences and to understand supporter's needs, values, and behaviour to deliver a more effective message (Poch, 2015).

While this course does not intend to explore the separate subject of digital marketing, it is important that students understand how digital can enhance the match day experience for the paying fan.

In undertaking our assessments, we are looking for evidence in the fan experience of the club (or national association) of reliable up-to-date information and advice that ensures fans and other visitors have the best possible experience. This experience can be hassle-free or with added value, where other nearby attractions or commercial partner offers can be enjoyed, and, as we have mentioned above, apps can be one of the most effective ways to do that, along with websites that are designed for smartphone.

In order to grow engagement, both with new and existing fans (and the different types themselves), it is important that on match days (and leading up to them) club social media content is not just simple "broadcasting", i.e. putting out information. In order to connect with fans, social media content needs to have the following characteristics:

- Authentic (i.e. in a recognisable tone of voice that fans immediately associate with their club).
- Two-way, in that it generates dialogue, interest, opinion and feedback.
- Capable of reaching different segments, either by ensuring different groups, such as families, new fans or away supporters, are engaged or informed by the content, or by using innovation, such as a mascot account, to reach children.
- Responsive, so that if anyone should ask a question or make an enquiry, there is a response.

When travelling to attend a game at Eredivisie club PEC Zwolle²³, I sent a tweet advising them that I was at my first game. 'Is there anything to do before kick off?' I asked.

Soon afterwards came the response, suggesting I spend the time in the hotel adjacent to the stadium, promising a warm welcome and a good range of food and drink. Just as we have mentioned earlier, the importance of a good first impression cannot be emphasised enough and, while face to face impressions are the strongest, those created by digital means cannot be ignored. I felt welcome when I arrived. (Mark Bradley's experience).

The stadium vicinity is a part of the fan experience, whether the club has control over the space or not (and even where there is very little space at all). This is the part of the fan experience that comes, in most cases, before the fan passes through the turnstiles into the stadium.

²³ Official website: www.peczwolle.nl

Of course, there are exceptions, depending on the country or specific location. At OB Odense²⁴ in Denmark, you access the stadium vicinity through an external turnstile to enjoy the fan zone and other social and entertainment opportunities, before you enter the stadium itself and take your seat. This is also the case at Willem II²⁵ and English Premier League club Brighton & Hove Albion²⁶, too. But the principle is the same: how can we ensure that fans have the best possible day or evening out, regardless of the team's performance?

Over recent decades the emergence of concepts such as fan zones, entertainment zones, live music, DJs and skill tests have become to characterise the match day experience. These elements are so important because of these reasons:

- they create added value for existing fans, providing much more than just a football match;
- they satisfy the entertainment needs of those outside of the traditional football fan base and help clubs to diversify their fan bases;
- they have become the expectation of people these days who are looking for more of an “experience” from their sports trip;
- they offer the club a chance to add new revenue streams or create new commercial partners;
- they can help commercial partners to showcase their products; and
- they can have a special appeal for specific fan groups, such as families.

American and Canadian sport is known for its tailgate parties: social events taking place before the main event (originally using the tailgate or boot of a vehicle). This often involves consuming alcohol and barbecuing food. They are intended to be non-commercial events, so while selling items to the fans is frowned upon, it is something which more football clubs should consider, especially at warmer and drier times of the year and where, for whatever reason, they are unable to set up their own fan zones.

Key to the success of such initiatives are good signage, helpful and knowledgeable stewarding, good execution of the various activities on offer (for example, ensuring all kids get to take a mini penalty) and, if possible, activities which underline the club's values and identity.

Exercise

Imagine you are the CEO of a club with space (owned by the club) around the stadium but with very little budget. How would you use the space to maximise fan engagement before the game?

3.2.3 Touch points excellence: Retail, social and refreshments

In this Theme we continue our analysis of “best practice” in key match day touch points to understand their role in driving up levels of fan engagement.

²⁴ Official website: www.ob.dk

²⁵ Official website: www.willem-ii.nl

²⁶ Official website: www.brightonandhovealbion.com

These touch points are all traditional parts of the fan experience. Of course, not all club stores are within the stadium complex, and some clubs only have independent refreshment sellers outside of the stadium and do not provide their own.

However, if the club wishes to grow its fan base, access new groups, bring new revenue channels on stream and add more value to the match day experience, these touch points represent great opportunities, since, according to our research, the bar is currently set very low.

When we consider match day refreshments, we know that there are clear obstacles for the majority of clubs. Games only take place every few days, as a maximum, so the benefits of having a permanent presence or lost staff may not usually be employed directly by the club. Because of these and other factors, items may be more expensive than they might ordinarily be in the High Street. This may lead fans to bring their own refreshments, which will also threatens an important revenue stream for the club.

There may also be other factors, including available space. When speaking to one leading European club recently, they said that to set up a quality burger “pop-up” service, they would need 30 square metres, a luxury to most clubs.

One other factor to consider is the ubiquity of independent food sellers on match days. Anecdotally, fans appear to enjoy these services more, and what is clear is that more and more fans are voicing their dissatisfaction with the existing sports stadium refreshments experience.

The *Australia Leisure Management* magazine has published an article (Research shows sports fans fed up with stadium food, 2016) about a research carried out by Western Sydney University. Such research has confirmed that it is not only price and service quality that are the issues, but that fans are looking for refreshments items that are more diverse, of a better quality, healthier, more affordable and easier to eat

In 2018, the Golden State Warriors²⁷ introduced a “concourse-only” ticket, giving access to the concourse and TV screens showing the game, but not to a seat in the arena. Such was their confidence in the quality of the experience there and the demand for tickets. At \$100 for a monthly pass, this was a significant development (Savvas, 2018).

Separately, in 2020, the Fan Experience Company worked with a leading club whose higher category ticket purchases in the main stand wanted a much better offering than the customary sausage and condiments of much of northern Europe.

Finally, from our experience over the years of conducting fan surveys and fan focus groups, it is clear that the refreshments experience can be a significant driver of dissatisfaction, often becoming a catalyst for wider dissatisfaction.

²⁷ Official website: www.nba.com/warriors

So, how do clubs respond to this and what are the basics? How can clubs embrace the new opportunities presented by digital technology and our diversifying food likes?

In general terms, we have learned a few pointers about the importance of creating an experience (in terms of service quality and customer service) that drives emotional loyalty and “word of mouth” advocacy. Clubs and national associations need to have an awareness of the following fundamentals:

- Leaders must walk the fan experience (club leaders and suppliers executives must have “fan’s eye” experience of the refreshments service itself, by attending on a match day and purchasing products themselves).
- Expansion sports have an influence on UK fan behaviours (see previous mention of tailgate parties).
- There is no point in marketing new products if the experience is rubbish. A new product is only valuable if it can be easily obtained (good queue management) and easily consumed.
- It is important to connect the experience to the club (or stadium) by having products or refreshments experiences that reflect the club’s personality, identity or values. Such is the case, for instance, of the much-enjoyed Middlesbrough FC 2parmo burger”.
- Team leaders need to be leaders, not just managers of speed and supply. They need to be actively “reading” the situation, quickly moving supply, talking with fans and seeking feedback.
- Craft ale and existing large beer supplier are both essential in our experience.

Now, there are many innovations, highlighting a more positive direction of travel for clubs, but as long as the above criteria are the governing factors, clubs of any size and resource should be capable of improving their fans’ refreshments experience and strengthening the emotional ties to the club.

Here are some of the more recent innovations capable of propelling the match day refreshment experience into the 21st century in the fan-focused environment:

- Lead on “One Great Product” (perhaps linked to club identity)
- Pre-order kids’ box (as we have seen with clubs like Reading in England)
- Smartphone Q beater. It allows fans to find out where the shortest queues are, or which kiosk still has the product you desire.
- Order to seat. While this has been an established service for disabled fans in many European and North American stadia for some time, its expansion can ensure fans do not need to miss any of the action.
- Self-service beer. This can speed up service and supply significantly.

- Healthy products. As the make-up of fan bases diversifies, it is vital that modern eating needs are reflected in what is offered, be in sustainable food, vegan or vegetarian products.
- Accessible service (Can there be queues dedicated to families with children or lowered counters for wheelchair users?)
- Food villages to enhance fan zones.
- Street food to mirror current eating tastes.
- Pre-paid beer to speed up service at half time and to allow core fans back into their seats for the beginning of the second half.
- Free fruit for kids to encourage healthier eating.
- Cashless service; surely, now a must for all football clubs.
- Menus on website so that fans, including those with special nutritional needs and budgetary challenges –families, for example–, can plan ahead.

Of all of the refreshments innovations we have seen, the most striking use in terms of fan engagement was that achieved by the partnership between the Cleveland Browns (NFL's famously least successful team recently) and Budweiser (the American beer company). In 2016, Budweiser arranged for a number of beer fridges to open in the Browns' Stadium and nearby bars when (and if) the club won a game (Morris, 2018).

In a recent magazine article, Mark Bradley summarises the refreshments challenges for clubs:

But I suspect there's a deep-seated and enduring cultural resistance going on here. For example, some clubs try a new product and withdraw it after one season when we know that it takes time for new offerings to get established in the minds of fans. This has definitely been the case with kids' snack packs and lunch boxes, for example, with one club reporting that it took until season two for them to start selling in significant numbers.

You also wonder if clubs ever ask supporters for feedback on the refreshments experience. If they did, perhaps they'd also find 40% of respondents wanting something different and that, for any business, would surely be an audience worth embracing.

I also believe that many clubs' lack of research or experimentation in regard to refreshments betrays a subconscious belief that most fans disable their taste glands before entering the stadium (e.g. 'I would love a nice vegetable balti in this cold weather, but I am actually going to opt for the pre-cooked mixed-origin beef burger on the processed bun'). They don't like change, these football supporters!

The irony is that the former is probably easier to get right than the latter, with Birmingham City serving up their own 'Cookhouse' Balti option in recent times. And the Blues are not the only ones on the path to food heaven. Stevenage provided muffins with the club badge iced on the top (fantastic for kids); Middlesbrough offer the hugely

popular 'Parmo' and, current Eredivisie 'Family Club of the Year' Vitesse Arnhem (playing in the covered Gelredome stadium, which is also used for concerts and large public events) provide mixed salad bowls; cheese soufflé; goulash; pastries; cookies; fruit bowls and beer. Finally, Exeter City recently welcomed us with vegetable pasties, vegan snack bars and soya milk. There is therefore plenty of evidence out there of clubs expanding the F & B offer and meeting developing customer demand.

At the outstanding Java Joe's here in Bradford, I recently ordered a coffee with oat milk. 'Is that preference or medical condition?' the barista asked. 'Preference' I responded. And, in the final analysis, if football wishes to grow its match-attending audience, then it must accept that supporters' refreshments preferences are changing. (Bradley, 2020)

For Retail, many of the above factors apply, but a key question to ask is the following: with the majority of people purchasing online at their own convenience from their homes, what should the purchase of an in-stadia retail and merchandise be?

Of course, it will continue to serve match-attending fans and those visiting during the week; it will continue to be a place where items are bought upon "emotional impulse", let's say, after a big home win or when Grandma brings her granddaughter to her first game. But how else can it ensure it contributes to strengthening fan relationships? Two things ought to be considered. The fact is that retail merchandising is the traditional focus of customer engagement means that there is a lot of easily transferable best practices around. Multiply this by the emotional added value created by football, and fan engagement is the quotient.

Let's first explore some best practices in retail merchandising according to Nicasio (2019) and consider how well our local clubs' outlets compare:

1. Talk to customers

The best retailers do not talk to customers to sell them things. They talk to them to understand what they need. Sure, on a busy match day, it is difficult to do this, but at quieter times, it should be a key focus. Did you get what you were looking for? Is there anything else you need? Where else do you buy your leisurewear or sports equipment? (among other questions).

Many football fans visit club stores for something to do before kick-off, especially those arriving early. Therefore, clubs should make sure that, when there is time to do so, their retail co-workers take every opportunity to strike up a conversation.

2. Add value

This is where football can elevate the retail experience. Invite a player who is not involved in the game to sign autographs and pose for pictures with fans in the club store a couple of hours

before kick-off. Make sure this is promoted via all channels, especially those likely to reach key target audiences, such as children.

Add an extra moment of excitement by promising that one of those queuing for an autograph will get to sit in the dugout during the pre-match period, for example, with his or her friends or family, or offer a free item, such as a beanie hat, scarf or tee shirt to the first 25 fans who purchase at the store on a match day with a ticket for the match.

3. Maximise display

This is an area where a theme-related approach can really catch the eye. Usually, when you visit a club store, you will see this season's kit, or, depending on the time of year, perhaps there will be a sale. But how often do clubs go further and create themes that are designed to focus on areas such as famous eras, famous players, famous kits or famous victories? These can be catalysts for conversation and engagement, regardless of whether a purchase is made. Remember that fan engagement is both an emotional state as well as a transaction. Sure, the latter benefits from the former, but the former is the approach football has eschewed when, as has been pointed out in this certificate, it has much more power.

4. Signage and lay out

Some clubs, by nature of their stadium's design, have little space and end up "cramming" everything in, with the result that browsing is impossible and items with no relation to each other are placed adjacently. In such cases, promoting the online outlet may be the best option, but, even when there is little space, consider using it to display your understanding of your fan base, by having clear signage (directional or display).

If you can create a natural pathway through your store, you can maximise dwell time, intrigue and entertain visitors, and create sections with individual appeal, such as kids' collectibles, heritage, inc. books and adult leisurewear.

When designing your queue management system, ensure that it does not create easy access to products that are likely to hold up the queue (for example, kids' items).

5. Keep things current

It is standard to see tools such as merchandising calendars in operation at successful retail outlets. Changing the display to focus on different themes (see above) ensures a "freshness" that inspires and encourages visits and dwell time.

6. Other best Practices

Football seems to eschew ideas such as “try before you buy”. Whether this is yet another example of the psychological distance between clubs and fans that this course aims to shorten or not, the failure to promote this service in a highly visible way may stifle sales. On the other hand, in-store technology, such as fixed tablets that provide background info or which allow fans to order items not held in stock for future pick up or delivery, is also going to add value.

7. Your people

As we have explored, when club co-workers practise great customer service behaviours such as smiling, good eye contact and friendly conversation, levels of engagement are likely to rise. Where these colleagues are enacting a set of widely understood values in a culture of fan engagement, within an overall strategy, then this can be significant, and yet it is extremely rare in football. Take away the colours and (this professor believes) the “same song, different lyrics” assessment of the in-stadia experience for the new or non-football fan will still apply.

Many of the best in-store experiences have been the result of fantastic first impressions: often created by someone at the door of the store and often by someone unrelated to the store, such as a friendly steward.

Elite and established large clubs are able to offer immersive store experiences (AZ Alkmaar and FC Copenhagen come to mind), where you may be able to add a museum visit to your browsing or purchase.

Smaller clubs, e.g. women’s, non-league or grass roots, who may rely on volunteers, will not be expected by fans to have substantial retail outlets.

For some clubs, the lack of space may mean that smaller satellite outlets, mobile vendors or even self-service machines may be able to provide an adequate solution.

Finally, why not use your retail activities as part of your community engagement strategy and, for example, ask fans to donate used replica kit to be sent to communities in need? Ged Naughton, a former CAFOD worker and currently working for Marys’ Meals in Liberia, dribbles a ball 15 miles every Christmas to raise money to pay for the delivery costs of sending many donated football shirts to Africa (Kierney, 2017).

With many clubs showing support for local communities’ food poverty (covered in other units in this course), why not use the retail arm of the club to be a flagship to address clothing poverty with a difference?

Remember, the difference football clubs have is that there is emotion buried deep in all of the transactions that define retail in other industries. Everything shines with the added meaning the

purchase brings. By combining best practices with the added emotional value football brings, it is possible for clubs not only to maximise revenue generation but also to strengthen bonds.

Exercise

At the next match you attend, undertake an assessment of the way the club or national association handles these touch points.

- Identify three strengths and three weaknesses in the refreshments and retail experiences you record.
- Make recommendations for how these experiences could be improved (at little or no cost).

3.2.4 Touch point excellence: inside the stadium and post-match

Those new to the concept of the “fan journey” “touch points” and “moments of truth” often think that the fan experience is what happens between the 1st and the 90th minute of a game; and, as we will discuss below, in fact, it is important. However, emphasis must be spread across the entire match day experience to maximise levels of engagement.

There are several key “best practices” that we will briefly cover now, before we investigate one hugely underused and appreciated part of your fan engagement strategy: the furry mascot.

You can divide the “best practices” that relate to inside the stadium and post-match into different themes: (1) things that make the experience hassle-free, warm and sheltered, and safe; (2) things that make it easier for you to encourage retention of fans; and (3) things that add “magic” to the experience: moments that fans will remember all their lives, because they somehow epitomise the magic of football and what it means to them, their families and friends.

Many are obvious and we do not plan to get into stadium operations here (nor health and safety), so let’s focus on those that will encourage the retention of fans and those that will add magic.

We can all agree that match-attending fans follow a path through their supporting lives. They may begin by coming along with their mum or dad (and sitting or standing in quieter areas of the stadium); then, they maybe want to get into the noisy areas of the ground with their friends. Perhaps they then prefer the view from the main stand/tribune, where, at some point, they may add hospitality. They may even earn enough money to own or hire a box in the stadium in the end. Clearly, a stadium lay-out plan which does not take these factors into account is likely to endanger retention, whether it be children who are in an area of boisterous behaviour and adult language or disabled supporters who may be seated in front of the visiting/away supporters.

Many clubs still insist on taking this approach while wondering why attendances have fallen over the years. Segmentation is a must and does not mean re-designing stadia, but simply identifying the “right place” for the “right fans”.

Having said that, the creation of family zones, areas and stands in English football has brought about a revolution in provision and associated entertainment and activities. We will focus on the mascot later: for now, consider the benefits of a part of the stadium with access to a “warm room” where kids are issued with puzzles, their own magazine and even a bingo card, so that the youngest can start to learn about the game. Taking such approaches has added as estimated 6 million more new fans to the second, third and fourth tiers of English football and is also quickly influencing the approaches of progressive clubs like OHL Leuven of Belgium, as we have illustrated in other parts of the course.

Stockholm club Djurgårdens²⁸ have created a Kids’ Stand where children between the ages of 9 and 14 can attend. Safeguarding employees are present, as are supervisors, but no parents are allowed, thus offering an environment for older children to become independent and express this.

The clubs’ ultras also provide banner and flag painting training and, once a season, members of the Kids’ Stand are able to travel to an away game, where they get a free hot dog and the opportunity to show their support with colour and noise. When most of football is scratching its head about the subject of retaining high school age kids, this famous club in the Swedish capital is showing how it can be done, while Denmark’s FC Copenhagen²⁹ deploys a DJ and Rapper in the family stand before kick-off to ramp up the vibe for younger fans.

Middlesbrough FC’s³⁰ Generation Red Family Zone (GRFZ) has everything, from “hygiene superheroes”, a “walking bus” upstairs to a reading zone for when it gets too cold for the youngest fans, to a full team of mascots leading a “dancercise” session pre-match, and, for families attending their first game, their own dedicated experience, including a chance to play FIFA with a first team squad member. The GRFZ is always sold out and the club’s biggest challenge is figuring out how to deal with the increasing demand (which pre-dates their recent promotion by several seasons, incidentally).

Cardiff City³¹ adapted their turnstile system to recognise when a junior swipes their ticket on their birthday. Three red lights flash, the family is greeted and offered a “money can’t buy” moment that the happy kid will never forget. Over a four-year period (without winning anything or being promoted, but because of a raft of similar initiatives backed up by strong consultation), the Bluebirds saw family season ticket membership rocket from 459 to over 7,000.

²⁸ Official website: www.dif.se

²⁹ Official website: www.fck.dk

³⁰ Official website: www.mfc.co.uk

³¹ Official website: www.cardiffcityfc.co.uk

Stewards and match announcers have the opportunity to individually or publicly convey information, such as the date of the next match to fans leaving the ground or specific information on services, such as “order at seat” for those who need it. On the other hand, periods such as the pre-match period or half time are ripe for the addition of entertainment aimed at those who wish to remain in their seats or sectors.

Stewards who remain passive, wordless, expressionless or do not move from the wall contribute nothing but a reminder of the distance at which football fans are often held. It is a symbol of football’s unwillingness to forego an attitude that suggests that fans are no more than “stadium fodder”, one step below “customers”, worryingly near to “criminals”.

Clubs that excel at personal engagement, as we shall see in module 4 of this course, can begin to transform that feeling, while underlining their values and differences. Clubs that excel at personal engagement grow without winning –though few truly embrace engagement this way.

There is one person who, more than anyone else, is able to add to the match day experience, regardless of the team’s performance, and that is the mascot.

What follows is your professor’s personal take on the value of this under-appreciated asset, re-printed from a recent article:

One of my favourite moments of this season happened at Pride Park, home of Derby County³². When you register your child for the ‘my first match’ scheme, among other things, you collect a certificate from a little gazebo outside the stadium. Except this time, alongside Rammie (the club’s much-loved mascot) there was a real live ram from (I believe) a local army regiment. A real animal as a mascot? It got me thinking. Are we missing a trick with our furry mascots?

The unveiling of a club’s new furry mascot isn’t usually a newsworthy story, but when Partick Thistle³³ unleashed Kingsley on to an unsuspecting world back in 2015, we all sat up and took notice. In fact, many of us, stood up and ran away screaming too.

Designed by a Turner Prize-nominated artist and long-term Jags³⁴ fan, David Shrigley, Kingsley is bright yellow and shaped like a ‘splat’. He has a monobrow, empty dead eyes and a jagged skull. As the Daily Record newspaper reported at the time ‘the mascot will most definitely get young fans off their seats - and running for their mums and dads at Firhill (Stadium) next season’.

³² Official website: www.dcfco.co.uk

³³ Official website: www.ptfc.co.uk

³⁴ Nickname of Patrick Thistle

But that was the point: maybe he wasn't designed to make kids laugh; maybe he was designed to reflect the deep existential despair of the fan of the under-achieving team. After all, David's club are known to many of their older fans as 'Partick Thistle Nil'.

So, what exactly is the purpose of the mascot? Just because 99% of them are slightly passive, large furry creatures aimed at keeping kids entertained, does that mean you can't experiment from time to time?

Where does the idea of a mascot come from? Well, according to www.todayifoundout.com (which I can heartily recommend for all sorts of underwhelming facts) the idea came from the 1880s French opera *La Mascotte*. This is the story of an Italian farmer whose crops won't grow until ('surprise') he's visited by a mysterious woman named Bettina who (as long as she remains a virgin), functions as his good luck charm. (Blitz³⁵, 2016)

In the same decade the 'mascot' was mentioned for the first time by the New York Times. They introduced a boy named Charle Gallagher who was allegedly born with a complete set of teeth and 'the magic charms of a genuine mascot' and, as we entered the 20th century, sports began to pick up on the potential of engaging fair fortune through the same medium.

As you've probably gathered, the furry mascot was still some decades away, since at this point you were more likely to see a dog, child, monkey or goat leading your team out. And, to be sure of generating as much good luck as possible, teams would have as many mascots as possible, often lining up for team pictures with a menagerie of several small children and animals.

English football was beaten to the concept by American Football, with Handsome Dan (a bulldog) being appointed as mascot to the Yale class of 1892. 127 years later, Handsome Dan continues to lead out the team, although according to my source, the present incumbent is the 17th. Not only that, but he is still a real bulldog. No made-up furry creatures in the Ivy League. No sir!

So how does the current roster of mascots in English football honour these origins? My experience (based on over 300 fan experience assessments undertaken by our Europe-wide team of assessors this season) is that our furry friends have maybe eschewed their ancestral responsibility for magical powers and good luck in favour of ... what exactly? I think it is time for some furry focus.

So, what should the modern-day mascot be getting up to? To start with, he, she or it needs to be known to the fan base. One thing that connects the Eredivisie's sc

³⁵ If you want to read more about this, visit <http://www.todayifoundout.com/index.php/2016/09/first-sports-mascot/>



Heerenveen³⁶ and Major League Baseball's San Francisco Giants³⁷ is that both Heero and Lou Seal have 'back stories'. Check them out.

Kids (and other fans) can actually get to know something about their pastimes, lives, likes and dislikes. To be fair, the average adult Giants fan might not be surprised to learn that Lou Seal likes to eat a lot of fish, but that's beside the point. How many of our clubs here in the UK actually bother to tell the story of their mascot and explain the connection to the team?

H'Angus the Monkey is the first one to come to mind who transcends the role (and if you don't know the origins of his name, he is Hartlepool's mascot, based on a story about a monkey who was washed ashore from a ship. The locals hadn't seen a monkey before, so assumed he was a French man and sent him to the gallows!) but seem to have been based on the need to appeal to kids (and little else) with no meaningful connection to the club's history, heritage or values.

That's not to say we don't have some fabulously hard-working individuals around the Leagues. Like me, as I embrace decrepitude, they have a very limited sphere of vision, an inability to climb stairs safely and a girth wider than the average vomitory. But they are expected to have the energy of Thomas Dolby in the original Hyperactive video.

A few weeks ago, I watched as Pandamonium (Ayr United's³⁸ wonderful mascot) accidentally trample a young child as he hurried to exit the pitch just prior to kick off. To be fair, the only thing that raised a bigger smile that day was an opposing player's attempt to win a penalty five minutes later.

There are also clearly occasions when a giant-headed creature with a dopey grin and outsize limbs doesn't quite fit in to proceedings (see @mascotsilence for pictures of mascots observing moments of silence: the funniest thing I've seen since the PA announcer at one club responded to the solemn completion of a pre-match Remembrance ceremony by playing Two Tribes by Frankie Goes to Hollywood).

It is not easy being a mascot, but I sometimes feel we've missed the point.

Liverpool fans would never countenance the appearance of a mascot in the stadium at Anfield because it just doesn't feel right. Perhaps it is because it is seen to be at odds with the special - almost sacred - nature of the experience there.

³⁶ Official website: www.sc-heerenveen.nl

³⁷ Official website: <https://www.mlb.com/giants>

³⁸ Official website: <https://ayrunitedfc.co.uk/>



But Mighty Red does exist as a force for good in the community via the LFC Foundation³⁹. Kids can also buy a book telling his story, from his first visit to Anfield to the importance of getting behind the players.

Mascots like Sammy the Shrimp at Southend⁴⁰; Spytty the Dog at Newport County⁴¹ and Donny the Dog at Doncaster Rovers⁴² all have an on-line presence too. Willem II⁴³ (from Tilburg in the Netherlands) have a lovely, friendly mascot called Kingo who not only greets kids as they take their seats in the Family Stand, but also has his own Instagram account, where, before the club's recent Cup Final appearance, junior fans could be seen giving their support to the club).

Clubs are discovering that if they want to secure the next generation of fans, the mascot can be a prime channel for communicating with them and engaging them. If you haven't already seen it, tune in to Doggle Box via Donny's website⁴⁴ (Doncaster Rovers, 2019). There were lots of reasons why the club became this season's EFL Family Club of the Year and this was one of them.

A mascot can't be everywhere either (especially with the afore-mentioned access problems) so there's a great benefit in having more than one: twins, siblings or even clones. This could also give you an opportunity to promote diversity, as Millwall does with Zampa and Bolina (since they were first snapped together on a secret date at one of the club's open training sessions).

It is clear that the history of the mascot offers some clues as to their role in the future: both as a lucky charm, an emblem of the club's identity, a source of entertainment on a match day and a positive presence in the community. (Bradley, 2020)

We have aimed to explore many of the most important touch points of the match day experience in order to illustrate the value of the match day experience. This, after the impact of Covid-19 on football, will be a major part of club's future plans. This is a time of unprecedented economic and health concerns, and many fans, including long term loyal fans (those over the age of 70, for example) may be concerned about attending matches. But if clubs can create and promote experiences that engage fans and communities safely, then fan engagement will have played a big part in helping those clubs to survive and thrive (Bradley & Young, 2020).

³⁹ Official website: <https://foundation.liverpoolfc.com/>

⁴⁰ Official website: www.southendunited.co.uk

⁴¹ Official website: www.newport-county.co.uk

⁴² Official website: www.doncasterroversfc.co.uk

⁴³ Official website: www.willem-ii.nl

⁴⁴ <https://www.doncasterroversfc.co.uk/news/2019/may/ddtv--dogglebox-episode-4/>

Exercise

Research the match day rituals of your national team. Is there a mascot? How is he, she or it used? Are there more than one?

Make an analysis of the way the mascot is currently deployed, setting out the strengths and weakness of the current strategy and making recommendations for how it could be better used, particularly in terms of connecting with the next generation of fans.

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