

Module 4. Growing Engagement (Data and Measures)

Unit 4.1

4.1.1 Segmenting your fan base

After working with one league for a few years, my team enquired as to the impact our interventions had brought. We had been helping the clubs to improve the experience for one type of fan: junior fans (under 12) so we wanted to know, after the first two years, what difference our work had made.

Quickly many clubs were able to tell us that their junior fans' engagement had improved in every sense. Not only had they sold more season tickets (Most of them included in Family offers) and increased junior fan memberships but they also made these numbers grow while they developed their services and experiences.

However, some clubs could not tell us the same. They could only make an estimate of the numbers involved based on unsound data. In fact several clubs recorded 'concessions'¹ as 'junior ticket sales', when other people groups can be included in the first category, as elderly fans, etc.

These clubs could not give us a figure because they only had two segments: season ticket purchasers and concessions. The best they could do was to look at how busy their family stand was and make a guess. Now, there is nothing wrong with that, especially in leagues where people pay in cash at the turnstiles. For example in Estonia, where concepts such as 'online ticket purchase' are just starting to take hold in a sport that is finally beginning to flourish there, when the league asks clubs to submit their attendance figures (so that the league can see how well they are growing) it is often necessary to calculate them by using a formula based on physically counting fans at a specific time when the maximum quantity is likely to be inside the stadium (Towards the end of the first half).

¹ Discounts applied to people categories generally accepted not to have the economic freedom of others, often in line with government pension age, etc.



Over the past two decades the project we mentioned at the start of this unit has seen the positive impact of clubs embracing standard business practices such as segmentation. **It is allowing clubs to measure the impact of their engagement work and to understand and address the different types of fans and their individual motivations, needs and expectations.**

Current segmentation practices have allowed clubs, leagues and national association to make enormous strides in increasing participation in football (playing, coaching, volunteering and refereeing), **in expanding clubs' reach and growing and diversifying attendance figures.**

So, before we look at some theory and practice, let's further consider the potential of segmentation. Businesses, from which football is now learning more than ever before, values segmentation as a tool to understand not only who their customers are but also each customer's patterns of behaviour and, implicit in them, their needs.

Businesses look at segmentation in two ways: **Market Segmentation** by which they break down all of the potential new customers out in the marketplace into specific groups, **and Customer Segmentation** which is the application of the preceding theory to people who businesses already supply goods or services to.

Segmentation offers **two considerable benefits**. First of all, it allows your business to be better informed about the people you are expecting to do business with. Secondly, it informs the way you market, communicate to and engage these groups, regardless of whether they are potential or existing customers.

In the context of football, segmentation allows you to better understand who your fans are, how they behave (interactions, purchases, and preferences) and what this evidence tells us about their intrinsic beliefs, motivations and expectations.

As one would imagine, there exist a large number of different ways of segmenting a customer base, **but three of the main ones are as follows:**

Geographic segmentation allows businesses to break down audiences by location, whether that be country subsets or as narrowly targeted as street-by-street subsets. This can apply to suppliers looking to break down business subsets as well as firms targeting consumers.

Demographic segmentation allows targeting of people of a particular age, gender, ethnic background, income level or a combination of multiple factors. Lifestyle segmentation involves consumer subsets that are more about what people do than who they are; e.g. grouping those who are physically active or enjoy particular social events.



Cultural segmentation is more about grouping those with similar ideas/customs/beliefs; e.g. a drinks manufacturer might specifically target people who are more likely to be teetotal for cultural reasons to try his non-alcoholic offerings. (Newgrove, n.d)

Let's explore the value of applying these three segmentation approaches to a club's fanbase.

Geographical segmentation can aid clubs whose fans are nationally scattered, rather than just in the region. It is important to note that the region is not an area dominated by the elite clubs, since the national economies development and employment opportunities often make people move away from the immediate region of the club because of economic needs.

Geographical segmentation is quite important in spite of the fact that many clubs do not appreciate it. A recent losing play-off manager noted that he was sorry for all the fans back in the town where the club plays. Even though it was not intended, the manager ignored those fans scattered over the country and even abroad. For example, Bradford City² has a fan club based in Argentina.

One fan of a Midlands-based club in England shared an observation with me:

My club's attendances always drop by 1,500 fans for midweek games and there is no evidence that the club appreciates why this is the case. It's my belief that this is due to the fact that many thousands of supporters live too far away from the city to attend midweek games. It's a pity the club do not seem to acknowledge that its fan base is national and international and not just regional (Supporter of Midlands-based Club)

Then, geographical segmentation could be used by clubs to recognise the distances its fans cover to support their club. Regarding larger elite clubs, geographical segmentation is vital to identify the territories where they have strong fan bases and those where there exist opportunities to make new ones grow.

Demographic segmentation is useful for clubs to address the needs of specific age groups, for example. 'The Fans of the Future' is a phrase one hears a lot in football to refer to youngest fans. Because of the existence of many leisure and sport activities,

² Bradford City is a fourth-tier club in northern England with a storied history. The town was part of the Industrial Revolution: the centre of the Victorian 'boom' in manufacturing in England. Now, however, it is one of the country's poorest cities, hence many people have moved away over the years.



together with the advancement in gaming and other digital activities, clubs have to work hard in order to attract the youngsters' support.

An article written 5 years ago summarised what seven clubs were doing in this regard. It showed that those clubs were aware of youngsters' demands and needed to be proactive in engaging them.

The article explains it is possible to turn kids into lifelong fans by marketing specifically to their age and by engaging them. These studies develops concepts such as 'family zones', 'magic moments', 'mascots and kids' entertainment at games, but how Real Madrid addressed this group is as follows:

In 2015 Real launched Real Madrid Kids Planet 'an online virtual world' targeting 4 to 14-year-olds. Free of charge children register, create their own avatar and play games (train players, complete missions and more). Football is the main focus, but the Real Madrid basketball team is also represented. Premium memberships are available for €4,95 per month.

(The) positive is that Real Madrid Kids Planet is both in Spanish and English, therefore targeting far more young fans around the world.

The kids' zone on the website is also in Spanish and English. It offers more games to children and adults, like a trivia game and fantasy manager. *Hala Madrid Junior*, a club magazine for young club cardholders, is marketed here as well. (Score & Change, 2020)

Figure 1: Real Madrid Kids Planet



Source: Real Madrid official website, Retrieved September 2020 from <https://www.realmadrid.com/en/news/2015/04/real-madrid-kids-planet-a-game-for-the-youngest-madrid-fans> Screenshot by author.

Finally, the cultural approach to segmentation consists in grouping together fans with similar beliefs or behaviours. This is clearly a powerful option for clubs, whose fans are often bound up together by their beliefs, values and shared activities.

Let us take a club's ultra group, for example. We have studied this in the previous module in terms of how to consult and establish dialogue, but we must also consider the power they represent in terms of noise, colour and atmosphere. Therefore, a club must consider how to engage ultra group and having it set aside as a clear fan segment will be really useful to do that.

So, segmentation offers clubs a way of recognising, acting upon and meeting the needs of different fan groups. Even more important, segmentation ensures that each different fan group feels valued and engaged. By ensuring each fan is valued and respected, levels of emotional loyalty rise and clubs reap the benefits.

Exercise:

Considering the above, how else could you use Cultural Segmentation to engage with a particular group? In answering this question, please identify a specific fan group with



shared values, beliefs or behaviours and briefly summarise how the club could engage them and what benefits this would provide.

4.1.2 Understanding different behaviour patterns

In the past, it was impossible to predict what your fans would do in the future. In fact, no one actually engaged in this, as they all believed that winning would keep fans happy and losing would ruin their weekends! This is certainly true but it ignores the strong emotional connections between clubs and fans and the fact that however bad it may get they are always your team and you won't change.

This has always fascinated your professor. By now, you will know that I am a Sunderland fan. If you have watched, the two Netflix series entitled 'Sunderland 'Til I Die', you will know of my club's disastrous recent history. As recently as 2017, my team played in the Premier League. It had remained in this league for more than a decade and, towards the end of this period, we had beaten our rivals Newcastle United, home and away six times in a row.

We are now separated by two divisions. Sunderland play in the third tier of English football while Newcastle play in the Premier League. Their fans, of course, like to revel in our difficulties and some even turn up to support third tier teams who are playing us. The intent, of course, is to anger us, but if you analyse that, it's really easy to shrug off, because my team means more to me than Newcastle. I'm proud of my north east England background and many of my friends are Newcastle fans BUT there is nothing they could do to make me convert from a Sunderland fan to a Magpie³, however bad my team becomes. (Mark Bradley's experience).

Having said that, within the fan base of any club, there are going to be fans exhibiting widely varying behaviours: from attendance patterns over a season to over a lifetime and behaviours influenced by different life stages or team performance. Remember: fans range from obsessives (who know every result of every game since they were born) to casuals (who would tell you they are a Sunderland fan but because of a variety of reasons do not attend matches or interact with the club).

The digital technology advancements have helped businesses to better understand customers' behaviours. For example, Amazon not only has a record of your purchases, but it also has much data able to predict what you are going to do next (and make helpful suggestions along the way!). Certainly, **data by itself is not sufficient to make the most accurate judgements** – how often have you received an email telling you that

³ The nickname of Newcastle United fans – a black and white bird and member of the Crow family.



because you have bought a lawnmower, you might be interested in these other lawnmowers? - **But data considered in the frame of the customer's wide behaviour patterns makes possible to come to sound judgements able to increase the customer's level of engagement.**

Let's look at a specific example. A fan first bought a season ticket in 2012 and until three seasons ago, on average, he would attend at least 80% of home games every season. And because the club sells tickets for away games on behalf of the host club, it also knows that he travels to five away games every season on average.

However, since 2018 his attendance levels have dropped. He still renews his season ticket, but the stadium technology shows that this ticket has only been scanned at the entry of half of the games he was entitled to attend.

This information would not have been available to clubs more than two decades ago and certainly it is not available to clubs who do not practise more sophisticated approaches to ticketing. For the increasing number of clubs do apply this technology benefits are enormous.

The information is clear: something is reducing the number of games that this fan is attending. So, what can you do? Resources permitting, you can contact the fan to ask him if there is anything you can do to help him get full value out of his season ticket. Of course, this can be done by electronic means, be it an email or survey, but in the emotionally driven world of football a phone call can make the biggest difference.

The results will be informative. Perhaps he has changed his working patterns or perhaps he has moved a little further away from the town where the team plays. In one authentic case, a club told me that there exist cases where they have been able to pinpoint this changing trend may signal the arrival of parenthood.

Certainly, parenthood is a key step in the lifetime story of a football fan. It might mean the fan finds it more difficult to attend matches, but it also may help clubs to prepare for and address this situation for other fans.

How might a club respond? **Some authentic approaches taken by clubs to address situations where a fan's attendance has lapsed because of parenthood are as follows:**

- Contacting the fan to congratulate them and offer them an opportunity of having a commemorative plaque or brick in the stadium with the child's name on it
- Offering family membership
- Offering a gift such as official club branded babywear



- Offering a revised package that may cost less but which will better adapt his needs (say a 6 or 12 game season card)
- Providing him with details of how the club supports young families (on or outside of match days)

Therefore, **having a mechanism to flag significant changes in fans' behaviours will allow clubs to take more specific measures to understand their circumstances, engage them and retain them.**

Elsewhere in this Certificate, we have used the example of Premier League Brighton & Hove Albion Club who have calculated how far each fan has travelled to support the club (home and away) over the course of one season. It is now becoming noticeable how many clubs are using the last game of the season, or the close season, to thank fans for their support over the previous season.

By sharing with fans how many kilometres they have actually travelled, not only does the club show it takes care of them, but it also provides fans with data they can use to display their loyalty to others.

Consider a young fan who has migrated from a kids' season ticket to a student one, where the club acknowledges his or her economic constraints by offering a discounted / affordable season ticket. By reviewing attendance patterns, we notice that she has begun to attend only midweek matches and no longer attends at the weekend. There is no note on her data file of any message or intelligence on the subject, so the club contacts her to discover that, like many youngsters nowadays, she has had to take a job at the weekend to fund her studies.

What can we do in these circumstances? As before, we can revise the packages we offer kids of student age or find other ways to support her. MK Dons, the fourth tier English, was one of the first to pro-actively offer a ticket package for students.

Their 'Super Six' or 'Terrific Ten' packages offer solutions for those going off to University, as described by the club:

Heading to University next term doesn't mean you have to stop watching your MK Dons - sign up for a Super Six or a Terrific Ten Season Ticket!

Both Super Six and Terrific Ten Season Tickets allow you to stay committed to your Club wherever you are studying in the country for the next few years.

A Super Six, priced from just £5 a month, allows you to choose any SIX Sky Bet League Two matches. You can reserve the same seat or select a different seat for each game.

A Terrific Ten, priced from just £8 a month, allows you to choose any TEN Sky Bet League Two matches. Like the Super Six, you can reserve the same seat or select a different seat for each game.

To sign up for a Super Six or a Terrific Ten visit the Box Office at Stadium MK or call 0333 200 5343.

Super Six and Terrific Tens are available to supporters born on or after 1st September 1993 and before 31st August 2000. (Milton Keynes Dons Football Club, 2018)

All of these examples show the value of investing resources and time in studying fan behaviour patterns. This process can help you to pro-actively retain fans whose circumstances may lead them to lapse or to engage another ones at a key stage of their lives. It is yet another proven business technique football is taking advantage of.

Exercise:

How might a club without ticketing technology (such as the ability to scan tickets upon entry and know who is in the stadium) address the need to identify fan behaviour patterns?

Imagine you are representing a technology company and preparing a short presentation at a football club. How would you describe the benefits of your technology in terms of understanding and acting upon fan behaviour patterns?

4.1.3 What is fan loyalty & how do you build it?

One of the things that segmentation and behaviour profiling allows us is **to learn more about how fans manifest their love for the club**. Specifically, we will return to a theme we have explored from different perspectives in this certificate: fan loyalty.

So far, in these studies we have contrasted the perspectives of fans – what they feel represents loyalty – and clubs. **We have considered that loyalty reflects Fan Engagement and can be expressed in both transactional and non-transactional way.**

Consequently we mean that loyalty could be defined by the extent to which a fan purchases or otherwise interacts with a club. The purchase of a season card and / or the new replica shirt may indicate strong levels of loyalty, but **equally the way that fans emotionally experience their bond may be just as strong**. This may be expressed in non-transactional ways such as the extent to which they trust in the club and believe in its fan-owned team, for example.

And there is one thing that most fan-owned teams fear when it comes to loyalty: that a losing team may impact on both dimensions of loyalty and subsequently on the revenue streams of the club.

Recently psychologists have contended that in contrast to what many people believe a crushing defeat or a period of poor performance may bind fans together just as much as the euphoria of a spectacular win or achievement might do. So, regarding this topic we are going to examine this idea and explore how it might affect the way clubs relate to and interact with fans and how they might use this to increase levels of fan engagement.

The article reports that:

Despair and joy can be so intensely felt that both emotions cause fans to identify strongly with the club they support. The phenomenon, termed **“identity fusion”**, **helps explain why fan loyalty is often so deeply entrenched – even when a club does nothing to deserve it.** (The Newsroom, 2016)

Identity fusion is very easily seen in football, with one of the researchers citing Leicester City fans as a good example of the concept:

Together the fans have been on a journey where for many years the team didn't get the results, then the club's fortunes soared, culminating in them celebrating the Premiership title (in 2016).

Our research suggests it is the intensity of emotion that counts, so their history of shared painful losses is as important as the joy of winning the league in creating 'self-shaping' experiences. These experiences lead fans to fuse their own identity with that of their club and fellow supporters. (The Newsroom, 2016)

The research which involved talking to 150 fans of different performing teams across England, gives us an insight into a new approach to loyalty. A new approach that has positive implications for clubs outside of the elite where periods of poor performance, relegations or desperate defeats, may be experienced much more frequently than those experienced by followers of the big teams.

This identity fusion can be observed in transactional and non-transactional behaviours, as to renew membership when nothing good is boded for the following season or to keep speaking out for the team on social media when everything is against you.

In the specific context of Covid19, the pandemic has endangered the existence of the majority of clubs. For those whose new seasons began in the summer of 2020 the issue of season ticket renewals came out from the uncertainty about whether or not fans



would be allowed to attend games. No one knew if it would be three months before fans returned, six months or even much more.

Many clubs instinctively acted perhaps subconsciously driven by the sense of identity fusion. These clubs asked fans if they would consider not asking for their season ticket renewal money back in order to help their club to survive. The results were noteworthy – heart-warming actually – at many clubs.

At Doncaster Rovers, one of the clubs with the best record of engaging with fans and giving fans a voice in the way the club is shaped, took a consultative approach to deal with the difficulties presented by the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020. They had to deal with a curtailed season (It ended around six weeks before it was supposed to), with the problems of season ticket refunds, and with the lack of certainty over the season ahead (20/21) and fans attendance.

At the core of this complex issue was the fact that without fans in the stadium and contributing to the club its viability would be put into jeopardy. Consistent with the club's long-standing investment in engagement, two weeks before 19/20 season curtailment, the issue was placed in fans' hands via supporter board of the club. The CEO and commercial and marketing manager clearly laid the situation out, listened to concerned fans and collected their ideas.

This led to an official communication direct to fans from the CEO, Gavin Baldwin, alongside an interview with the club's commercial and marketing manager, Shaun Lockwood. (Faninsights, 2020).

In the case study, Kevin Rye explains some of key learning points relating to the way fans' loyalty can help shape policy at difficult times and how it is often in these most difficult times that what we have seen to be referred to as identity fusion asserts itself:

1. Don't be afraid of asking your fans parliament or representatives for their views on difficult subjects. You don't have to agree on everything, but giving them a role can help you get to the right decision
2. Building and maintaining good relationships with your fans – Fan Engagement – has positive *financial* benefits, as well as making it easier to deal with difficult situations such as Covid19 or a series of match postponements
3. Remember, when it comes to the financial impact of good Fan Engagement, some of the benefits come over time, not immediately. (Faninsights, 2020).

Covid19 has created unprecedented challenges can be addressed by applying fan engagement tools and techniques, such as consultation, transparency and being led by the fans' shared instincts, as the case study shows.



Loyalty may even be enhanced by the way some clubs will partner with fans. Trust will become stronger and the existential threat of this awful pandemic may be diffused not necessarily by the shared victories of fans but the impact of their many shared defeats.

Exercise:

Review the approaches to similar challenges faced by clubs in your country at this time of unprecedented challenge to the football industry.

What is the best example of a club navigating these challenges in partnership with fans and how has that specific club benefitted?

4.1.4 Using data to create 'lifelong memories'

This theme continues to explore the use of data and other marketing techniques to strengthen levels of engagement with fans.

We must stress data is not of value by itself in its natural pure state. **It is when we convert it into information through the use of analytical tools that its value becomes evident. But without a customer-focused culture any business will still fail to maximise this potent combination since they are intrinsically guided by the customer's needs.**

In her seminal book about the application of CRM (Customer Relationship Management) and analytics in sport, Fiona Green emphasises this point and uses an interview with a professor to underline it.

Other progressive growing businesses in other sectors do this because customer engagement is so important in a world where 80%+ businesses are now in the service sector. They can only prosper if the customer feels valued.

When the customer feels valued – usually when adherence to core values ensures that their experiences continually convince them that their service provider has their best interests at heart – then the resulting emotional loyalty is so strong it transcends financial incentives, like loyalty points and 'money off'.

They trust. They forgive. They defend you. They may not say it, but they quietly love you. OK, so in these days of social media sniping and faceless message board terrorists, it might not be possible to get everyone on board, but wouldn't we all appreciate the opportunities a positively engaged (majority) fan community would offer?



In customer-driven organisations leaders talk about it all the time. Decisions are filtered through their brand values. There are customer value KPIs. Employees matter too and there is continuous open transparent dialogue between the service provider and its customers. Employees are recruited based on their values fit and rewarded when they live those values.

The irony (or possibly even the explanation) is that by nature of our love for our teams, we already have the strongest levels of emotional loyalty and so maybe deep inside we genuinely feel there's no need to build it any further.

Isn't it ironic then that the thing non-sports businesses envy us for the most, we simply take for granted? But the rewards for the sports business that genuinely embraces the values-driven approach will be immeasurable. (Green, 2018)

So, when the information created by CRM, business intelligence and data analytics is processed in a customer-oriented organisation it is possible to transcend simple delivery of service and create experiences that genuinely drive emotional loyalty and engagement.

In the same two pages of her book, Green quotes Jeff Bezos from Amazon, whose application of customer data is legendary. It is all down to create a customer culture:

Customers are always beautifully, wonderfully dissatisfied, even when they report being happy and business is great. Even when they don't yet know it, customers want something better, and your desire to delight customers will drive you to invent on their behalf. (The Amazon, 2017)

Let's examine an example of how this can be used to create 'magic moments' for fans. If a club, like Eredivisie side AZ Alkmaar⁴, routinely collects the birth dates of fans then this isolated action may not mean too much additional effort to a season ticket purchaser.

If our data shows us that this same fan purchased a replica shirt online and asked for the name of a specific player to be printed on the reverse, this is an action the supporter will not further think about later.

However, when it is the fan's birthday and on that day he or she receives a personalised physical birthday card signed by his or her favourite player, then it is likely to create an emotional response from the fan.

What AZ is doing and what distinguishes it from the majority of other clubs is to connect the dots. AZ is looking at all aspects of the fan's relationship with the club through data analysis and finding opportunities to really delight them.

⁴ Official website: www.az.nl



Returning to Fiona Green's book, in the epilogue she imagines where things might go next from a data geek's perspective. Connected stadia is one area she muses about by considering a scenario where it will be possible to connect the data from people in the stadium whose data ordinarily we would not have:

But perhaps one of the most valuable opportunities, now that we know the value of data, **is the ability to get contact details from those who haven't purchased online.** Friends of the 'pack' leader; recipients of gifts or corporate guests, they all tend to end up in a stadium without filling out any sort of form, so if they want to tweet the goal or Facebook their photo, they have to log into Wi-Fi first. It may be costly, but it's a simple win that supports everything I've discussed so far. (Green, 2018)

To complete this theme, let's look at the limitations of football in data terms. We really only sell a limited number of items based on a pre-set group of interactions: ticket sales and merchandise. Ben Wells, a UK sports marketing and fan engagement expert, predicts a future where the sports club, and by definition the football club, evolves as a lifestyle brand – and here we return to Nike and their approach. Wells continues:

To build a greater diversification in their revenue streams they need to behave less like sports organisations and more like lifestyle brands, creating natural brand extensions that appeal to wider demography. That larger audience will be potentially interesting to a broader range of commercial partners. This is where data comes in. Investing in **building a more dynamic model, which sees match day as a means to an end (rather than the be all and end all) and which enables the organisation to engage with a varied customer set year round, regardless of location, should be their nirvana.**

Sport has an unparalleled ability to connect with people but for too long has relied on 'passion' as a business driver. At the same time the shift of brand spend to digital platforms is effectively a 'who's got the most efficient algorithm' competition and forgets that ultimately, we are all trying to connect with human beings. Harnessing that human emotion and allying with a smart approach to data should allow the industry to fight back. (Green, 2018)

Therefore, data is going to become even more important in engaging our fans and achieving the greater diversity we need to make our clubs grow. This is something that clubs with serious intentions towards their communities should wholeheartedly embrace in the years to come and not just in order to preserve the elite.



Exercise:

Consider the different transaction points that a fan may have with his or her favourite team. Based on the knowledge you have gained in this Theme, what other connections can you spot? How else might a club surprise and delight its fans? Write no more than 200 words on what it might do.



Unit 4.2

4.2.1 The irrationality of fandom: instinct over science

This unit looks at several aspects of data and its use in football. As an introduction to fan engagement, the study material aims to give students a good grounding in the area, the basic knowledge and a review of relevant learning material and the enthusiasm to do more.

Fandom objectively considered is often irrational, especially to those who are not excited by sports and the emotion and belonging associated with being a fan of a team. But there exist 'levels'.

As we have studied in this module, **ultras are acknowledged to be the most extreme manifestation of passionate fandom**. Their behaviours can challenge administrators, external perceptions of the sport, security approaches (Especially in a time when many, including UK policing expert Owen West, are arguing for a more tolerant engagement-based approach) and the perceptions of other fans. Those supporting a particular club may refer to – and feel like they belong to – a family. But, as we know, most murders are committed by someone the victim knows! It's a complex business.

Max Wendkos⁵ is a product design expert and also an enthusiast researcher and teacher in the field of sports psychology. In an article written in 2014 he summarises what he sees as the psychological explanation of much of the irrational behaviour associated with the attitudes and behaviours of sports fans.

It is easy to put yourself in a position to follow his line of argument. Let's consider the following scenario. A fan of an opposing team criticises your team on social media. This sticks in your craw, as they say. But what this fan is actually saying has a basis in objectivity and can be viewed as fair criticism by someone disassociated from football. Let's say, your overlapping left back keeps finding himself too far up the field and, as a direct result of this, the opposition is finding opportunities to attack: one of which leads to a goal.

So, what's the problem? Anyone can see this rival fan has a point. But that overlooks the powerful psychological processes underpinning fandom and the different ways in which our sense of self-esteem is tied to following our favourite team / club.

⁵ @MaxWendkos



In the context of the team he loves (NFL club Seattle Seahawks) Wendkos summarises this concept in his introduction:

If you've ever criticized a sports team in front of one of the team's most passionate fans, you've likely been accused being a "hater" and had your argument quickly dismissed. It doesn't matter if you presented objective evidence to demonstrate how you drew your conclusion — e.g., suggesting that an NFL quarterback is bad because his statistics are worse than any other quarterback — because, **to these passionate fans, there's no such thing as a valid argument against the teams they support.** (Wendkos, 2014)

'There is no such thing as a valid argument' against the team you support: that is an apparently harsh statement. But if we review it in the context of social belonging (and we have studied this concept and the work of Tajfel in other modules of this Certificate) we can begin to see a pattern behind this apparent irrationality.

Wendkos explains this concept by introducing two psychological concepts: **Self-Categorisation and Social Comparison.** He explains each one:

Self-categorization is the process in which we (meaning humans in general) form part of our self-concept (or identity) by placing ourselves into social categories with others who share common attributes. (For example, I classify myself into the following social categories: Sixers fans, avid fantasy football players, Penn State alumni, etc.). (Wendkos, 2014)

If your professor were to submit to this categorisation, then he would be a Sunderland-supporting, Labour Party-voting, Pro-Remain music fan and a Sheffield University alumnus.

Social comparison is the process in which we then apply favourable attributes to the social categories we identify with in order to enhance our self-esteem. And because our self-esteem is directly tied to our perception of these social categories, we resist any and all attacks that might diminish our perception of them. The more highly we identify with a category, the truer this is. (Wendkos, 2014)

Followers of the UK's Brexit vote and subsequent arguments will know that it has divided the country. For the purposes of this theme, your professor can explain how Social Comparison manifested in how he originally responded to the vote to leave the EU taken in June 2016.



So, during the acrimony that followed the vote, Wendkos' argument can plainly be seen at work. I tended to characterise pro-Brexit supporters as less compassionate, intelligent, more pro-Far Right politics, financially comfortable, etc. Later on, I self-defused. I realised that there was nothing to gain by going out on social media.

Because most of the people I followed were pro-Remain, social media, in effect, became an echo chamber for me. There was no open debate, constructive criticism or argument there. I can see this so clearly in the way football fans operate too (Mark Bradley's opinion).

So, let's take Max Wendkos' argument and take it away from Seattle and apply it to the fan of a football club - let's say FC Barcelona – and work through this:

1. A hardcore Barcelona fan identifies with the 'Culés' social category and this forms part of his identity. (Yes, his social category is actually "FC Barcelona fan," but really hardcore fans often don't see it this way; they see themselves as part of the teams they root for).
2. He applies favourable attributes to FC Barcelona in order to enhance his own self-esteem. Because his identification with the 'Blaugrana' team is a key part of his self-concept, positively evaluating the team allows him to evaluate himself more positively.
3. If someone says something negative about FC Barcelona (and, at the time of writing this Certificate, this is a happening a lot) — true or not — he perceives it as a personal attack and a threat to his own sense of self-worth.
4. In order to preserve his sense of self-worth, the fan defends FC Barcelona when he believes that others are attacking the team by a) fighting back and/or b) discrediting the attacker. Even if he knows that the other person is right in his criticism of the club, he will defend the team anyway because to accept the other person is right would require him to accept that FC Barcelona is not as great as he believes it is (and consequently neither is he since his club is a key part of his identity).

So, here we see Social Identity Theory and its various subsets once again explaining some of the core elements of football fandom. It's important that students see Psychology as a core study area, as it explains so much of the way humans behave and, as football is an area in which their base emotions are so clearly exposed, studying it can really help to understand and rationalise what we see as so much irrationality.



Exercise:

Using Wendkos' short self-description, provide a quick overview of your Social Category statement (for example: the team you support; the things that you engage with passionately; your political, religious or other convictions and education background).

Also, provide examples of when you have been caught into a moment of defending the irrational because you see it as (1) attacking your team and (2), by definition, attacking you.

4.2.2 How data can help you thrive in times of poor 'on pitch' performance

This theme explores the use of data to engage fans when the team is not!

All of us, at some time or other or, all of the time, experience those painful times when our teams just seem to let us down time and time again. And, as we have explained in these studies, the emotional bond we feel for the club means that we suffer even more.

As the previous theme confirms, this is often because we feel our team's pain as our own pain. They – and their hopes for victories and glories – can be seen as a projection of our own self-esteem. Their defeats - their inglorious moments – are our own.

In fact, you could say that the one thing that all football fans do have in common is the shared pain of defeat and I, for one, have followed my team from the Premier League to the third tier of English football in just two seasons. It doesn't matter that I pretend to have nothing to do with them, especially during key games that they need to win to have a chance of survival, because I'm still – physically and mentally – tuned in.

I know exactly where I was when many of our most painful defeats happened. I was visiting my son at Cambridge University when our relegation to the third tier was confirmed. In typical fashion, we had been losing 1-2 with moments left; scored what looked like a perfectly good goal and then the referee had disallowed it, condemning us to the drop. Look! There I go again, associating our relegation with the referee. The objective fan of another club would say 'Ah, but that referee wasn't responsible for all of the defeats this season' and I would react with anger, because he's pointing out a truth, which I begin to see as an attack on me. (Mark Bradley's experience).

So how can data assist with this? **The answer is to step back from seeing data as a means to advance transactions and to focus it on non-transactional behaviour.**



The student will recall from other courses, modules and units in this Certificate that Yoshida was a researcher who first, along with his colleagues, **defined fan engagement as the sum of non-transactional and transactional behaviours exhibited in the support of a sports team** (Yoshida et al., 2014).

In order to maximise levels of fan engagement through the use of data, let's first remind ourselves what we mean by both terms.

Transactional behaviours are those involving a 'transaction': for example, renewing a season ticket, renewing membership, purchasing a ticket for a specific game, purchasing the replica shirt, buying refreshments at the stadium, etc. These always involve a financial exchange and, by definition, are much easier to identify and measure.

As we have seen in other units, having this data – and making the connections between the different transactions – can offer clubs ways to strengthen the relationship, for example, by offering game packages, discounts on purchases, etc.

Non-transactional behaviours include:

'On- and offline engagement. Online fan engagement behaviours involve actions such as consuming, contributing to, and creating brand-related social media content. Offline engagement activities can be singing, clapping, and cheering for your team/athlete/club (i.e. the brand), or engaging in positive word-of-mouth behaviours.(Huiszoon, 2017)

We can clearly see how non-transactional behaviours really do emphasise the social identity characteristic of 'belonging' to a sports team, so if we can harness data to show the fan we understand and appreciate their support, then we can strengthen that relationship. To do this, the action must, by definition, transcend the day-to-day.

It is self-evident that passionate football fans do not want their club to use their data to say 'Thanks for coming. Sorry we lost.' So, is there an opportunity to use data to get in touch with fans' deep emotions? We believe there is and that this is a largely untapped area.

Looking at various predictions about how the football world will look in five or ten years, there is much focus on how technology will adapt to create a more immersive stadium experience and how 'second screen' technology will be able to enhance the experience - almost to the point of being there- for those who are not. **However, there is little about how the emotional connection can be understood and honoured.**



One of the ways data can be used to honour fans' emotional loyalty is to ensure that their stadium experiences are excellent. Anecdotally, we all know a fan who comments on the poor stadium infrastructure, dreadful toilets or poor food selection, when his or her team loses. So how about addressing that?

We could do it by adding surprise and delight to the experience. For example, if it is a very cold evening and parts of the stadium are open, why would not we offer fans a free coffee?

Or why would not we want to understand the issues within the fan experience so that they can be addressed?

Or, outside of the stadium, why not create a large image of the club's former stadium – perhaps used for more than 100 years – and place seating beneath it so fans can take pictures there.

It is true that some well-connected stadium are providing spaces for people to take selfies but it is completely different to provide something with the match result and date superimposed on the photo and the emotional pull of being able to tell your daughter about the many games you attended at the club's old stadium with your own father. One situation appears superficial and more akin to the American stadium experience while the second one really does help the fan to reflect their own story with the club and allow him to tell it to others.

Data about fan's age and ticket purchasing behaviour can allow you to celebrate a fan's significant birthday. Let's say your grandmother is attending a game on her 75th birthday. The club can anticipate this, contact others who routinely purchase with her, arrange for an area to be prepared and then make a short announcement before the game with her safely in her seat.

If family members are able to tell 'her story' as a fan, then the club will be able to make a detailed and emotional announcement. It always surprises me that so few clubs do this. One might imagine that post-Covid19 many clubs will have to work so much harder to retain their most loyal fans because of the economic and personal health concerns.

Delighting some, as in the example above, may not only be a way of creating a strong emotional connection with one fan and her family, but a sign of intent that shows your club is ready to embrace the post-Covid era by showing the purpose of data is not always to look for another sale but to honour the emotional commitment that characterises the fan.



Exercise:

Consider your own club and make a recommendation as to how they could use data to make an emotional connection with a fan and / or group of fans.

If they do not collect data (for example, they do not sell tickets), how else could they do that?

4.2.3 Measuring levels of engagement

How do you measure levels of engagement? This theme takes some different perspectives from the subject that we study in the course 'Why fan engagement? Definition, principles & rationale'.

It would be dangerous just to look at attendance numbers and say our fans must be engaged because they're coming. Well, if the team is winning and they are coming, does that really show that fans are engaged with the club? Because when teams are winning fans will not tell you the problems or the issues they have. It takes for the team to start losing for that to happen.

In fact, it could be said that a team winning and playing well might actually 'mask' deficiencies which could be addressed. For example, problems within the match day experience, the refreshments service, the behaviour of stewards, etc.

One of the most interesting and frequent contributors to the area of fan engagement is Bas Schnater: a 'big data' expert whose work at AZ Alkmaar enabled them to turn around a falling season ticket membership picture over just one summary.

Bas's observations are always astute and contextualised because of his dual fame as both practitioner and researcher. It is therefore interesting to study his views of measuring engagement (Schnater, 2016).

While Bas has acknowledged the validity of using Net Promoter as a reliable measure of engagement and its difficulties. In other parts of this study we have confirmed that it is a useful tool for new fans and for customers of other services, such as hospitality, because to ask them to 'recommend' is not encumbered by an existing long-term emotional hold on the fan. In cases where long-term fans are asked this question they may provide an exaggerated response by conflating their perceptions of the match day experiences they're being asked about with their lifetime view of the club. So, some care is needed.



So, Bas offers other potential measures and we review some of them here.

Many clubs and national associations have used, and continue to use, surveys to collect data from fans. The Danish Superliga issues an annual survey to fans of the different clubs that make up the league, while the Eredivisie in the Netherlands also takes this approach.

In both surveys, fans (usually season card holders and / or those purchase tickets – i.e. on the database) are asked to respond questions about their experiences, their opinions and behaviours. As the Yoshida's study shows, this may have some weaknesses, including limiting the scope to those attending matches, but it is an easy and comparatively inexpensive route to measuring levels of engagement. (2014)

Beyond that, there are many possible approaches, ranging from SERVQUAL, the customer service tool (Parasuraman, 1985) to the Censydiam model developed by the research company Ipsos which focuses on the 'atmosphere' around the product or service rather than on aspects of the product or service themselves.

If you study the contributions of both practitioners and researchers, you will see that there is no one accepted approach to measuring fan engagement, but that the accumulation of data from several sources, using several established and informal frameworks, can give a better indication of the level of emotional loyalty manifest in the individual fan and groups of fans.

Transactions will give us a very clear indication of levels of engagement as the purchase history of a fan, for example. We may learn that they purchase a season ticket every season and they have done it for 12 years, for example.

However, what the pure transactional data will not uncover is the emotional intention of the fan. There may be factors indicating that this fan is a lapse risk. The factors themselves can be extremely diverse. As we have studied elsewhere, his work patterns and location of his home may hinder attendance, so he may decide not to renew when he feels that the amount of games he can attend represents good value for the price he has paid.

He may also be becoming more emotionally detached from the club. They may be playing well but he may have issues with the ownership and the distance between his actions and attitudes and the club's long-standing historic values.

Or, for example, he may be about to purchase season tickets for his children who are now old enough to attend. Without further data it is not possible – and definitely wrong – to draw conclusions about his levels of engagement from transactional data alone.



Then we may find out more by connecting the responses from him to his most recent fan survey to his transactional behaviour. He may be using stadium facilities more or less frequently and / or may have specific issues with the match day experience, perhaps with the club's services for parents with young children who are coming to games.

His social media activity, comments about the club and general tone may also reveal insights about his levels of engagement, while his response to club offers (including requests to complete surveys) may also give an indication.

What is clear is that any club embarking on a programme of fan engagement must acknowledge that there may not be one best approach to measuring levels of engagement and an approach using different frameworks and measurement tools may be better.

A key indicator of levels of engagement, though not empirical, would be the assessment of the club's official supporters club and / or formal consultation and dialogue processes. What do the leading official and unofficial fan groups say about levels of engagement? What are the trends and themes in the discussions they are seeing on message boards and social media?

Once again, we are seeing fan engagement as a state of mind: an art just as much as a science and an instinct just as much as the result of detailed planning. A club with a strong fan-led culture is more likely to maximise measurement of engagement than one where a focus on engagement is either intermittent or seasonal.

The measurement of fan engagement is evolving right now while the concept it is meant to track becomes more established in sports. In the near future we are likely to see fan engagement dashboards become more common just as they are used in other sectors: a single view of the customer that allow us to act with certainty when the data is analysed and becomes intelligent.

4.2.4 What has data helped football to learn about the modern fan?

In this final theme we are going to explore a specific case study to gain a different perspective on this important question (Schnater, 2018).

For the majority of non-elite clubs, season ticket renewals represent the most important number. The direction – the trends – therein will have a big impact on the strategic leadership of the club. Therefore, it is important to understand this data.

Bas Schnater as one of the leading 'big data' experts in Europe and also a researcher, student and practitioner in European football is the perfect person to feature here. With his permission we are going to re-print in full an article he wrote about his then



employer AZ Alkmaar, the Eredivisie team. The article highlights the importance of data and how it lead to insights able to lead clubs to act differently where they would have made assumptions.

Dutch Eredivisie club AZ Alkmaar is living up to its promise on being an innovative club. On-field performance is fully based on data-driven insights and as of last year the club has now started to implement this approach on its business operations as well. In a recent interview, AZ explained how they use data to increase fan engagement. Now, they've applied the same methodology on their season ticket membership campaign and after years of decline the first results look good with already a growth of 10%.

Having seen the success of a data-driven approach during their half season ticket membership campaign last winter (+300% sales compared to traditional marketing approach), the club also applied a data-driven approach to the season ticket membership campaign 2018-2019. Together with their partner, data-driven marketing agency Two Circles, AZ set out a strategy to maximize results. In this article, Bas Schnater will expand on the club's approach.

Planning

Like most clubs, AZ Alkmaar had been suffering from an annual decline in season ticket memberships. "We saw a drop in memberships every year, and assumed this was due to societal changes", Schnater explains. As part of the new campaign strategy, the club started with an in-depth analysis of its data. It appeared the club had suffered from an average retention rate of 78% over the last 5 years. "We wanted to turn this around, as this means a decline in revenues".

In-depth analysis showed the club suffered from a retention problem over an acquisition problem. So, AZ decided to disconnect retention and acquisition and decided to focus more on retaining current fans.

"Normally, we always looked at the total sales numbers, but it appeared more was happening under the surface".

This meant that the last home games of the season were going to be important moments for the campaign.

Secondly, AZ conducted a survey amongst its current season members. This survey generated valuable qualitative insights on the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation of its season members. These insights translated to a communication strategy specific to the differences between the stands.

"We portrayed very different values to the stands. An example is the family stand, where we focused family photos and our mascots, where for our fanatics we focused on fireworks and interaction with the players".



Another important element was the adoption of a predictive model for retention as developed by the sports data company Two Circles⁶. From the data-analysis, four variables appeared to be significantly predictive for renewal of memberships. After that, the club formulated feasible KPI's, being 2017-2018 members +1, via an increase of the retention score to 85% plus acquiring new members.

Using data for offline activation

On the 5th of April, AZ's season membership campaign launched. At the beginning the club focused on segmented e-mail campaigns tailored to the four stands.

"For example, we've made 5 variations of our campaign video, tailored to the specific requirements of the four stands, as exposed by the survey".

One of most effective campaigns happened around the last home game. Before the match, AZ used its insights to activate non-renewed members offline. By working together with their supporter groups, AZ distributed 'hand-written' flyers by the most popular player at that time (again, based on survey-insights) and planted these flyers only on the seats that hadn't been renewed yet.

In the note, the player thanked the fans for a great season and asked for their support the next one. "The beauty is that all our supporter groups got behind it. Our fanatics distributed the flyers on their stand and the Supporter Federation helped us with distributing flyers on the main stand. The fans want the stadium to be sold out just as much as we do, so when I discussed my plan with them, they were happy to help.

To me, this is a perfect example of optimal fan engagement". It appeared to be effective.

The campaign resulted in a major peak in sales after that match, with the flyered stands showing a significant increase in sales compared to the non-flyered stands.

"What we noticed is that we now weren't only able to reach our members who aren't normally easy to reach via e-mail, but also that the effect of the campaign lasted longer. Where an e-mail campaign mostly has an effect-span of 24 hours, the impact of this flyer lasted four days".

The club won the last game with 6-0 on a very sunny day, with Iran international Alireza Jahanbakhsh winning the league top scorer title that match.

"Obviously sportive results have a substantial impact on these things. Though I do believe as a marketing team, you have to be there to yield maximum results. It's about leveraging the important moments".

The retention phase of the entire membership campaign lasted until the 31st of May. Instead of having again a retention rate of 78%, the club managed to

⁶ <https://twocircles.com/us-en/>



increase the retention rate to 93%. “We will still try to question what send out a survey to the non-renewals, which we can use as input for next year’s campaign”.

Acquisition of new fans

With a retention rate of 93%, AZ managed to slow down the loss of memberships and actually turned it into growth.

“According to our own analytical model, we will now end up with a predicted increase of around 10% in memberships”.

New fans are harder to find, although the club does have the advantage to leverage sportive results. Though, the club follows a different strategy.

“The season members’ survey told us clearly that fans come to AZ for many other reasons than (just) sportive performance. I think those other motivators are crucial to understand because as a marketing team, we can’t influence sportive results”.

Learnings

Now that AZ’s retention campaign has been a success and the overall campaign projection is positive, the club has learned some valuable lessons.

Schnater: “Our biggest learning is that a season ticket membership campaign requires a lot of strategic planning. Where we normally had a good set plan but varied still according to the flow-of-the-day, we now fully respected the campaign planning and maximized online and offline campaign opportunities. I believe that made the difference”.

But the element of surprise seemed to have an unexpected effect.

“I hoped that we would get some result from a simple flyer campaign, but I didn’t expect such growth. I guess it was partly because since so much nowadays happens online that offline impact is still undervalued”.

In the end, the results of the flyer campaign accounted for 11% of the total renewals.

Another learning is the use of predictive modelling.

“This was the first time we used such a model. It appeared to be accurate up to 89% in predicting the propensity. We will continue to develop this model created by our partner Two Circles to maximize predictability of retention”. (Schnater, 2018)

This case study is one of the most informative available to students of fan engagement. The article shows the interplay between many different factors, including data science, culture, ‘offline’ intervention, social media, team performance and fan segments. It highlights significant opportunities for clubs not just in the way they act upon season ticket data, but in presenting the value of thinking differently.



Overall, it suggests that clubs practising fan engagement with strong levels of commitment are likely to consider retention as important as, or more so, than acquisition. As the business tenet goes it is much more expensive to attract a new customer than to keep an existing one.

Exercise:

Why do you think so few clubs use data science techniques to resolve season ticket renewal issues? How could a league or national association encourage more clubs to go down this path?

Please consider cultural as well as resource / finance barriers when formulating your response.



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