

Engaging Football Fans



A philosophical note by

KVM Research

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Introduction

Football clubs as well as other sports clubs have changing fortunes and get promoted to higher leagues as well as relegated to lower leagues and they are in constant competition with clubs in neighbouring areas for support.

KVM Research noted that a smaller club in Cheshire was relegated after the 2010/11 season and the question arose whether the club had the support it needed and deserved from the local area. KVM Research drew up a proposal with a view to investigate whether the club had such support and if not why not.

Meanwhile another local club had arranged a promotional event in May 2013, which was attended by Knud Moller (KM) of KVM Research. He had a conversation with a senior officer (SO) of the club and handed him a copy of the said proposal and it was agreed to meet at a later date. This subsequent meeting took place in July 2013 at the club office.

During this meeting the SO said that he was not so much interested in the kind of investigation proposed for the Cheshire club and showed to him as the Club was already doing its own investigation based on season ticket sales and he wanted to avoid duplication.

After further discussion the SO said he would like to know: "Where his club was sitting in the local community?" Anecdotal evidence suggests that the majority of fans come from neighbouring towns and a figure of 30,000 was mentioned. However, this is far from clear. While it is possible that a majority of football fans in that area supports the club there is no documented evidence to suggest that they make up the majority of fans supporting the club. It is more likely that they come from a much wider area.

The SO further mentioned that he felt that among the supporters there was an under-representation of women and children, but would like to know whether this was true given the demographic profile of the local area. He suggested this could be done with the use of data from the 2011 Census. Knud Moller agreed to investigate. The SO said there was no urgency on the matter.

Other anecdotal evidence suggest that most of the 30,000 supporters never set foot at the local stadium, but do buy a significant amount of merchandize from the club shop. It is said that the club makes more money out of selling shirts than do some larger clubs.

A third meeting took place on an afternoon in November. The SO reiterated that the biggest proportion of the adult supporters do not turn up on match days possibly for financial reasons, but there may be other unknown reasons.

He mentioned that there is evidence that the average attendance crowd at league matches included an average of about 25% women. He asked how his club measure up in this context?

The somewhat controversial issue of possibly attracting support from the ethnic minorities who are known to live in the local towns was discussed. It was agreed that in many cases they have their own sporting interest eg cricket and hockey. However, the SO said that the club had tried to promote their hospitality facilities as a venue for Asian weddings.

General

There are several reasons why football clubs should try more vigorously to keep their fans happy and loyal than perhaps they have been doing until now. Fans **don't** feel like their opinions are being heard. In fact, only 45% of fans agreed that their teams are interested in hearing their opinions. Even worse: only 33% of fans agreed that their team actually listens to their opinion, but if football fans are already passionate about their teams, why should the clubs bother listening? Fergusson (2013) suggests there are 7 key reasons:

1. Fans cheer for more than a team's performance.

A team's win/loss record obviously plays a huge role in a fan's satisfaction, but this is the variable that the CMO has least control over. For sports teams to keep their fans, it's not just about winning games or getting to the playoffs: 71% of fans have affinity that goes beyond their team's performance.

2. Fans want to be engaged throughout the year.

Although football is seasonal, many follow their team throughout the entire annual cycle - from preseason through the trade deadline, and even during the offseason. There are still times in the season that fans can be targeted to get them involved with the club, even though the team may not be playing. By hearing what fans are looking for at certain times of year, teams can enhance their offer accordingly.

3. Fans are willing to switch favorite teams and there are still 'floaters' to attract.

22% of sports fans are willing to switch teams and 30% already have in the past year. If teams don't listen to fan feedback and include them in their decision-making process, fans may not stick around for long.

The trend of people switching teams will rise as technology enables interaction with teams outside of their geographic area. Fans can watch and follow teams anywhere across the leagues by streaming online and by interacting with them through social media.

Some fans still don't have loyalty to a single team. These floaters represent a valuable segment that clubs can target. They have an opportunity to steal fans - and their spending money - if they know how to drive team loyalty effectively.

4. Teams can optimize marketing investments

Did that new outdoor ad campaign really increase ticket sales? Is it worth for your organization to have a mobile team application? Does your arena need Wi-Fi? Questions like these can only be answered by understanding your fans deeply. Organizations that listen to fans can

do longitudinal studies to see how their marketing decisions affect fan behaviours over time, and make adjustments accordingly.

Your fans' input can also help you optimise your marketing programs: from merchandise, to in-game experience, to the social media platforms you should be keeping an eye on. For example, through their fan council some clubs engage their members at least twice a month on specific topics that influence business and marketing decisions. These types of engagements have helped them increase viewership, TV ratings and even make changes to the game itself.

5. There is an opportunity to provide value and deepen relationships with sponsors and advertisers

Your advertisers and sponsors would like to see a good return from partnering with you. You can help them see this ROI by giving them direct access to your fans. For example, with a fan council, you can offer pre and post validation studies to advertisers as an added value feature. This minimizes the risk for advertisers by enabling them to test concepts and effectively place ads in multiple channels.

6. Listening to fans enables teams to measure and increase brand value.

Branding is important for most organizations, but even more so for football teams. If you're a major league team, your brand needs to cater to two distinct fans: local and national. To develop a brand image that resonates with both groups, you have to understand them deeply. With insight into your community of fans, you can hone in on the drivers of your brand and develop an image across all touch points that better resonate with all your fans.

7. Fan engagement drives the season ticket sales funnel.

Ultimately by engaging fans, you can better create targeted engagement tactics to move fans up your season ticket sales funnel. By understanding what motivates fans from casual to hardcore, you are more likely to convert your single game attendees into valuable season ticket holders.

Crawford (2003) quoting other researchers suggests that in recent years there has been some resistance to the increasing involvement of corporate business in the running of professional football in Britain and the contemporary pattern of commercialization within the sport. It is suggested that the commercial interests of the new corporate powers in professional football have led to a targeting of a new audience of middle-class consumers who can afford the increased ticket prices at the expense of the game's 'traditional' working-class supporters leaving the latter outside "the pearly gates".

With Stoke-on-Trent, including Burslem, Tunstall and surrounding areas, in many ways being a traditional working class city these developments may have had an effect on the support of the local football clubs that is still to be fully understood.

Crawford (2003), again quoting other researchers suggests, that contemporary 'communities' are in constant flux and change, and individuals will move in and out of several of these fluid entities throughout the course of everyday life. The nature and composition of a supporter 'community' may change over time, and, significantly, how the composition and redefinition of patterns of support within this may be in constant flux, particularly in a media saturated society (such as contemporary Britain) where fashions and the boundaries of group membership are constantly changing and being renegotiated.

These developments make it even more important to keep in touch with the fans and listen to their concerns.

Within Stoke-on-Trent City Councillors, professionals engaged in education and other public figures often complain about the low achievements by local children and low levels of aspiration for their future. So perhaps there is one more reason to engage with football and other sports fans. If more people could get as excited and passionate about their achievements at work as they do for those of their favourite sports team, we would probably hear about many more success stories that would be of benefit to us all.

Support by women

The Commercial Director (the introduction above) raised the question of women's representation among fans. In that regard Crawford (2003) notes: "Women's under-representation in many other supporter 'communities', and in particular professional football in Britain often sees their support deemed somehow 'inauthentic' by other (often male) supporters. Hence, certain individuals may see their progression (or even induction) into a supporter 'community' limited or even prohibited altogether."

Further study by Cox et al (2006) into the participation of young women aged 15-19 found that encouragement from school, encouragement from their family, to have fun and relieve stress, and the role of friends and social groups were the main reasons for participating. Another group of the same age, who never participated in sport suggested that practical issues (lack of time and money), feelings of self-consciousness and intimidation, lack of self-motivation, and the role of friends were the main factors in explaining why they did not participate.

However, the Supporters' Surveys carried out by the Football League (2006,2008, 2010) suggest that a steady increasing proportion of fans are women, up from 20% in 2006 to 23% in 2010 (Appendix, p 70). It is of course a paramount question whether these percentages apply to our local club. The 2010 survey reports that nationally 3,142 (12% of the total) took part in the survey.

The survey further reflects the importance of some of the issues referred to above eg self-consciousness and self-motivation. “Although local club (63%) and parental influence (48%) remain just as key factors behind their decision to start going to games as they are for men, there is also a stronger influence from family (23% vs 19%). This is evidence on a matchday with women more likely to attend with families than friends, and nearly three times as many (31% vs 12%) attend with their partner or spouse as male fans.” (2010, p 22)

“Attitudes towards bad language (*intimidation!*) differ slightly from males with 35% saying it doesn’t deter them but they would prefer it to be eradicated (29% among male fans).” (2010, p 22) Other issues “are safety, good match atmosphere, clear sightlines and adequate toilet facilities – the latter far more than for male supporters. A clean, well maintained stadium and good stewarding (*intimidation!*) are also more important for females than males.”

Many league clubs have delivered in these areas. Female supporters in the survey are marking safety as either very good or good, stewarding and toilet facilities as adequate reflecting the efforts being made by clubs to improve an area for which they have frequently been criticized in the past.

Understanding participation and support

Goretzki et al (2008) shed further light on the challenges that face a football club in trying to attract supporters. He notes that peoples’ lives are busy and diaries are well packed; attending football matches will rarely be a priority. Supporting a winning team may be an attraction, but supporting ‘football’ per se may not be.

Free time is in short supply and often closely guarded. People tend to ‘commoditise’ their free time and are often surprisingly reluctant to give it away. A football club needs to compete for this free time – there is no automatic ‘white space’ in diaries, but is doing so in a crowded market. Football faces the challenge of being just another leisure activity and needs to make its case as lifestyle choice to challenge other activities. However, in this context, upfront ‘commitment’ is becoming less fashionable.

With time shortages and mounting choices, consumers are wary of committing themselves to anything too soon. A balance needs to be struck between a commitment that is embedded enough to motivate attendance, but not so demanding or lengthy that it feels like a burden.

A football club needs to convince its prospective audience how it can give them the buzz of exertion and the opportunity to let off steam and at the same time the feeling of being part of a unit, of togetherness with opportunity to create friendships.

While the above may be focussing on the reasons why people are not participating or supporting a particular club The Football Leagues’ survey of supporters gives some details of why people start supporting their team. The most important reasons are:

- 1. It's the local club**
- 2. Parental influence**
- 3. Matchday experience**
- 4. Friends influence**
- 5. Family influence**

It is likely that all of these apply to our local club and it may be worth pointing out that the area in which the club finds itself is generally recognized as being quite conservative (with a small c).

Further reading

- 1) Ipsos MORI, *Satisfaction with the quality of the sporting experience survey (SQSE3), Results for: Football*, Sport England July 2011.
- 2) Fergusson, Dan, *Engaging fans, 7 reasons why sports teams should listen to their fans*, published on 'LinkedIn', June/July 2013.
- 3) Crawford, Gary, *The Career of the Sport Supporter: The Case of the Manchester Storm*, 'Sociology', Vol 3(2), pp 219-237, Sage Publications, London, 2003.
- 4) Goretzki, J, Esser, A, and Claydon, R, *Increasing Participation in Sport, Research Debrief*, Henley Centre Headlight Vision for Sport England, 2008.
- 5) Cox, L, Coleman, L, and Roker, D, *Understanding participation in sport: What determines sports participation among 15-19 year old women?* Trust for the Study of Adolescence for Sport England, 2006.