GROWING YOUR CLUB

PRACTICAL & PROVEN IDEAS FROM CLUBS LIKE YOURS

FOREWORD

"Those who love the Non League game describe it as 'the purest form of football'. Speak to any fan of the 'grassroots' game and they'll tell you how unique the experience is. At most grounds you can change ends at half time, hear every tackle and every exchange on the pitch and even listen to the manager's instructions to the players. You can enjoy top quality fresh food prepared by the very people who are serving it and have a drink within view of the pitch. You probably know many of the players and can meet them after the game in the social club.

This is no different in women's football in both the FA Women's Super League and FA Women's Premier League, it's the same unique level of intimacy, freedom and access that makes the experience so special.

However, growing clubs at this level is not easy. You have your loyal supporters who turn up week in and week out, but attracting and retaining new supporters is a different challenge all together.

We know that competing sports, leisure and entertainment destinations represent a challenge, but the clubs whose achievements are contained in this booklet have shown that if you're prepared to think differently about common challenges and to maximise the assets that make your club special, you can overcome them.

So how do you start that dialogue with fans? Where do you find the best volunteers and how do you keep them? How do you maintain a high profile in your local community? What are the best ways of promoting match days? How do you compete with larger better resourced clubs in your area? What opportunities do social media and new technology offer? How do you attract new people to your club? And, most importantly, how do you ensure they feel compelled to come back time and time again in the future?

There are clubs at every level of the National League System with imaginative and effective solutions to these challenges and this guide shares many of their ideas.

I remain in awe of the amazing work these clubs do and hope that the ideas in this booklet inspire you to continue your crucial work and create a sustainable and successful future."

Martin Glenn
CEO The Football Association

This booklet contains many ideas and case studies that will help you grow your club. However there are a number of proven, simple actions that all clubs can do.

Rather than ask the same volunteers who do so much at your club, try and engage someone new to explore the ideas in this booklet. Ask trusted fans or family members not usually associated with the club.

1. Identify a local family that has not been to a game before and ask them to provide you with honest feedback of their experience – pages 10,11
2. Introduce a new fans section on your website detailing the essential information first time fans will need to know; directions, parking, cost, catering available – pages 66-69
3. 'Get Big, Get Niche or Get Out.' Focus on developing and promoting the characteristics that make your club different and unique – pages 44,45
4. Increase your skilled volunteers by contacting your local university or college who have students with a range of disciplines from media, business and marketing and who are desperate to gain hands on experience – pages 18-21
5. The online world is free so increase your community presence through online programmes, posting match day footage and effective use of Twitter – pages 36,37,46,47

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CAPTAIN

01

INTRODUCTION

This guide brings together proven best practice as well as existing good ideas from all levels of the National League System.

The aim is to help clubs to overcome the common barriers to sustainable growth by sharing approaches from around the country that are working for the clubs concerned.

Although this guide does contain some focus on the experience beyond the turnstiles, the main emphasis is on encouraging new people to come to a game in the first place, as that is where clubs have indicated they would appreciate more guidance and support.

Each section covers a specific area, describes its importance in the context of growing your club and includes examples, from around the country, of clubs who are approaching things differently and getting good results.

- **What opportunity did the club identify?**
- **What did they do differently?**
- **What results did they achieve?**
- **What resource will clubs need to do this?**

Naturally the guide is not exhaustive but the case studies and the other ideas in it are capable of helping clubs of every size to grow in a more proactive and sustainable way.

02

DEVELOPING A DISTINCT IDENTITY

INTRODUCTION

It is important for clubs to think about their identity, as the basic offering of 90 minutes of football every week is unlikely, by itself, to form the basis of a growth strategy.

Given the competition for our leisure time, clubs need to develop and trade on their differences. What makes your club unique? What is it about the match day experience at your ground that makes it so special? Why would a new fan forego the opportunity to watch football at a higher level in favour of a visit to your club?

Identity creates belonging and that sense of belonging is what we need to drive sustainable growth.

More and more clubs around the country are realising that different is better. Below, you'll find some examples of what they are doing.

CASE STUDY: LARKHALL ATHLETIC FC

The Evostik League, Southern League, Division One (South & West)

Dr Tracey Hill
Football Secretary, Larkhall Athletic FC

WHAT WAS THE OPPORTUNITY?

We believe that we have a friendly, accessible and inclusive club with no airs and graces, so we wanted to explore how social media could help us promote this more effectively in our community and beyond.

Having looked at the various options and considered the various pros and cons, we decided to set up a club Twitter account to strengthen relationships with both our existing and potential fan base. This account would be operated in line with our friendly, accessible and inclusive values and would aim to communicate in a way that reinforced positive perceptions of our club.

WHAT DID THE CLUB DO DIFFERENTLY?

Larkhall Athletic FC launched its Twitter account (@larkhallafc) at the start of the 2013-14 season. Two years later the account now has just short of 2,500 followers, with proactive activity, entertainment, news updates and general engagement happening on a continuous basis.

A lot of hard work goes on behind the scenes to make the account vibrant, relevant and interesting to its followers. This is a very active account: we tweet daily, use the club's website to drive traffic to the account and vice versa. We follow back, which many clubs don't do and we always respond to messages.

WHAT RESULTS DID THE CLUB ACHIEVE?

Almost immediately the account struck a chord. They include almost all of the first-team players, the club management, large numbers of supporters, numerous other clubs, local businesses, non-league football organisations and media outlets such as the Non-League Paper, the Non-League Show and the local press, with whom it's very important to have strong reciprocal relationships. Our followers come from across the UK, the rest of Europe, and even north America.

Having such a visible presence on Twitter has resulted in more visits from ground hoppers and roving photographers to our highly scenic ground Plain Ham than we can count and also many media appearances on BBC 5Live, TalkSport and BBC Radio Bristol have come about through online contact.

Most important, though, is the engagement with the local community and with club members and supporters that Twitter facilitates. People who can't attend games now rely on @larkhallafc for updates and we have a close reciprocal relationship with the accounts run by other sections of the club such as the Reserves, the Ladies' team, and the Youth section.

WHAT RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS ARE THERE?

Naturally, you need to find a resource to operate the account and for many clubs, this may be an opportunity to recruit a young marketing-aware student who is au fait with social media and best able to maximise its impact for the club.

But we don't consider this to be a significant resource implication, because the benefit of social media is that it is easy to do. As long as you have clear guidelines for those accessing and using the account, then it's possible to maintain a permanent presence, to be immediate, responsive and to communicate totally in character with the personality of the club.

CASE STUDY: YEOVIL TOWN LADIES FC

The FA Women's Super League (FAWSL) WSL 2

Trevor Jenkins

Marketing Manager, Yeovil Town Ladies FC

WHAT WAS THE OPPORTUNITY?

The success of the national women's team in the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup has propelled the game forward and ignited interest up and down the land.

However, the challenge remains for individual clubs to ensure they are communicating a distinct offering, which reinforces the differences delivered by women's football and ensures that new fans are attracted, entertained and retained.

At Yeovil Town Ladies we wanted to really strengthen our identity, so that the community we wished to engage saw us as much more than just a football club, but something inclusive, different and engaging.

WHAT DID THE CLUB DO DIFFERENTLY?

Several seasons ago we introduced a Bill of Rights.

The fan's bill of rights is our club's promise to our supporters. Not only does it set out what they should expect from us under several headings (contacting the club, the welcome on the day, the price fans pay, the environment in which games are played, refreshments, the players and when things go wrong, etc), but also enshrines the club's values of accessibility, inclusivity and warmth.

When we first launched the Bill of Rights (the first of its type in UK football, we believe), we used medieval language for impact and humour. However, since then, the promises contained in the document have been reviewed and updated annually.

WHAT RESULTS DID THE CLUB ACHIEVE?

The response from fans of both our club and visiting teams has been extremely positive and it has helped to convey our personality as a club and reinforces what we believe makes us different.

It is a fundamental part of what we are as a club, but because it's been published, it stands out and draws attention. It also acts as a filter for internal club decision-making, like the brand filters used by progressive organisations outside of sport. So, for example, if we are considering a change, we can run it past our Bill of Rights first to ensure it reflects our values and does not contradict or compromise them.

WHAT RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS ARE THERE?

One of the major benefits of an initiative like this is that it requires extremely little resource, just the spark of an idea and the creative ability of someone who is able to bring it to life.

Every club has its own distinct identity but very few appear to market themselves on this. We think this is a missed opportunity so would urge clubs to attempt to enshrine their own values in a document. It's so easy to do and has such an impact on those who see it.

Given that the Bill of Rights was established some seasons ago, all that is required is a review each season, so there is minimal resource implication.

BEST PRACTICES

Become a Community Benefit Society or a Community Interest Company
Some clubs we have spoken to have re-constituted or are in the process of reconstituting in order to support their wider community objectives.

One option is to become a Community Benefit Society (like FC United of Manchester, for example). A community benefit society is run primarily for the benefit of the community at large, rather than just for members of the society. So if clubs have an overarching community purpose that reaches beyond its membership, this path might be right for them.

Another is to become a Community Interest Company. The primary features of any company holding CIC status are, firstly, that assets owned by the company are used for the benefit of the community and secondly, that limitations are applied to ensure that while a profit can be made, the primary focus remains on achieving benefits for the community.

The FA commission Muckle LLP to provide free legal advice for FA Charter Standard clubs and leagues and those clubs within the National League System or Women's Football Pyramid. For further information please call 0191 211 7799 or email CSLegalHelp@TheFA.com

Launch a Community Newsletter
Once you begin to broaden your local community contact database, consider launching an email club community newsletter, so that you can cost-effectively keep your community in touch with all of your work and activities.

This way you can inform people in the local community and beyond of the work that your club is doing. It is also a useful way of providing updates for schools and building community links.

Seek Co-operation Partnerships
As Marine FC have shown, it is possible to offer half-price entry to season ticket holders at local Football League or Premier League clubs, but how about expanding the relationship so that fans of your club are able to attend matches on a more favourable basis at your larger neighbour? Building closer relationships with larger local clubs may avoid duplication of effort in some areas and allow mutually beneficial approaches to emerge.

THIS WAY YOU CAN INFORM PEOPLE IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY AND BEYOND OF THE WORK THAT YOUR CLUB IS DOING.

#VIVA GNE
#VIVA GNE

03

BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE TEAM OF VOLUNTEERS

INTRODUCTION

The majority of clubs are run on a day-to-day basis by volunteers and any significant extra commitment immediately has an impact on resources. Volunteers are not easy to find and often more difficult to retain, so developing the right strategy is a key factor in supporting sustainable growth.

However, there is a clear correlation between clubs with proactive, well-thought-out volunteer recruitment strategies and sustainable growth.

Clubs also have a distinct opportunity in that they offer an environment in which people interested in a career in sports can gain useful education and experience. This is particularly the case in the growing academic area of sports marketing and administration, where students at all stages of their education are looking for opportunities to give up their time in exchange for valuable learning opportunities.

The following case studies show the mutual benefits of a considered partnership with a local further or higher education institution, as well as further specific guidance on volunteer recruitment and retention.

CASE STUDY: ASHTON UNITED FC

The Evostik League, Northern Premier, Premier Division

Steve Hobson

Vice Chairman, Ashton United FC

WHAT WAS THE OPPORTUNITY?

Clubs always rely on volunteers to keep things going: to ensure we can put games on and to ensure supporters get a friendly, safe and enjoyable experience.

However we wanted to focus on growing the club. Therefore we explored the potential for finding young volunteers who, with their social media experience, could help us expand the reach of the club with better communications, marketing and club promotion.

WHAT DID THE CLUB DO DIFFERENTLY?

We have developed a close working relationship with the University College of Football Business (UCFB) (based at Burnley FC's Turf Moor stadium) and they have provided us with interns who, in turn, provide copy for our media channels.

Currently, and in addition to the current crop of interns, we also have two volunteers who have now graduated but who enjoyed their time so much with us that they opted to stay on. One, Michael, is our Match-day and Assistant-Secretary, the other, Luke, runs our club shop. Michael also runs some of our social media and supports our Reserve Team Management.

In addition to these two, we have a journalism student from Staffordshire University writing articles (almost daily) for our website and match programme, a sports photographer gaining experience, and two students addressing income generation as Commercial Associates doing the hard slog behind the scenes.

If one of our volunteers makes a mistake (and it's natural that they would, from time to time) then we all rally around, support the individual, help them to learn and move on. We regularly thank them for their efforts and in May 2015 we organised a Casino Night for all of our volunteers as a way of saying thanks.

WHAT RESULTS DID THE CLUB ACHIEVE?

This approach to finding and retaining young volunteers has allowed us to increase our media presence through our website and social media significantly over the past three years.

More widely the opportunities we can provide for students has really excited local colleges and universities as the experiences can positively support their learning. This has allowed us to negotiate new opportunities and new programmes.

As a consequence of this we will be able to make improvements throughout our infrastructure as well as bringing a new workforce in that we are confident will want to remain part of the club further down the line.

WHAT RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS ARE THERE?

Naturally time needs to be taken to develop a plan to engage and attract volunteers, but beyond that, we believe that there are few significant resource implications, especially due to the benefits of working in partnership with local community organisations.

However, a clear commitment to embracing change and equitably sharing resources (wherever there is a need to do so) is needed to build trust and capacity.

CASE STUDY: JARROW ROOFING FC

Ebac Northern League Division One

Andy Hudson

Vice-Chairman / Communications & Media Manager, Jarrow Roofing BCA FC

WHAT WAS THE OPPORTUNITY?

At Jarrow Roofing FC we redesigned our website and introduced social media to improve the engagement with supporters and the local community and to promote the positive match-day experience at games. We enhanced the website and social media channels with a more professional feel (video and audio content, for example) in order to make more of the local population aware of our existence. To support and retain this we needed to recruit volunteers with the correct skill sets.

WHAT DID THE CLUB DO DIFFERENTLY?

We introduced our own YouTube channel as well as sporadically introducing podcasts and Audioboo recordings. If we could present a professional feel to the club through the media and communications strategy then we could help to influence new supporters and enhance the experience of existing fans.

Things like a revamped match programme featuring original content and representing good value for money (presented as a mini magazine rather than a photocopied effort) would improve exposure and would help to also bring new sponsors in.

Instead only introducing Twitter and Facebook updates we developed visual content such as goal photos. We brought in a club photographer and media students from Sunderland University joined us to add to our content output.

WHAT RESULTS DID THE CLUB ACHIEVE?

Crowds have jumped up. From an average of about 50 per league game the season before we changed our media approach we reached 70 last season and have now improved to 106 for the current season. This has also included a larger number of younger fans and families coming along. Youngsters have been so accustomed to consuming their football on television that they've bought into our online content and it has really changed their opinion of the club. While we'll not challenge Newcastle or Sunderland, local youngsters have seen our highlights and identified that they can be part of a club instead of being priced out of the game. They see us as a real club now, rather than something like a pub team.

We offer free entry to under-12s with an adult (not pegged to numbers either, so one adult could bring a number of juniors). We've also offered blanket free entry at times to test whether spend increases at the tea hut, etc. It actually does.

WHAT RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS ARE THERE?

Sunderland University is nearby and runs a sports journalism course. Our local newspaper (The Shields Gazette) has also been supportive of us.

We have students who have volunteered to learn and work with us. A lot of their time is spent editing highlights, etc, but the payback for those who do it is that their CV and portfolio expand with the experience.

BEST PRACTICES

Say Thank You
It's well known in successful businesses that people work better when they feel good about themselves and being genuinely thanked for their contribution will naturally have a motivating effect on volunteers.

While end-of-season celebrations (see Ashton United case study above) are always successful, it is equally important to thank club volunteers informally on a regular basis.

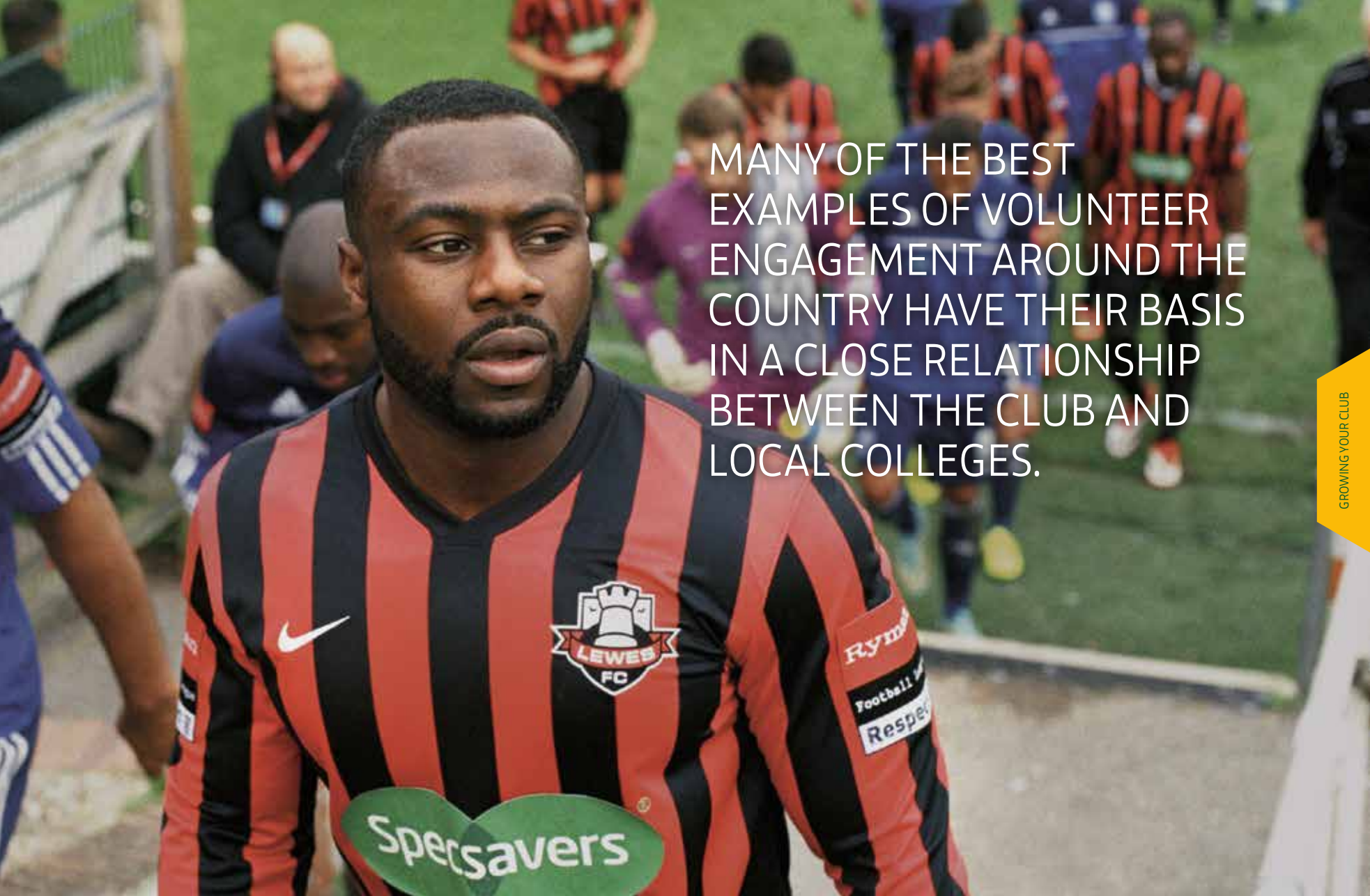
If you can make your volunteers feel valued, wanted and important and, if possible, can include them as part of the decision-making process, they will feel part of the club.

Develop relationships with local colleges & centres of education
Sports Marketing is an evermore popular subject for higher education studies and more and more students are looking for placements during their degrees to be able to experience sports administration and contribute their talent and enthusiasm.

Many of the best examples of volunteer engagement around the country have their basis in a close relationship between the club and local colleges. And, as the Ashton United example illustrates, many of these youngsters may even stay on and continue to volunteer beyond completion of their studies.

Join in
www.joininuk.org is the nation's charity for local sports volunteering.

The organisation helps sports clubs find volunteers nationally. They support the clubs and groups who need volunteers most and promote opportunities for people to get involved. Grassroots sports club can register and create their own page on JoinIn's official website and this will help them attract the right people.



MANY OF THE BEST EXAMPLES OF VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT AROUND THE COUNTRY HAVE THEIR BASIS IN A CLOSE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CLUB AND LOCAL COLLEGES.

LEWES
FC
owner
ecsavers

04

TALKING TO FANS

INTRODUCTION
Today's fastest-growing organisations talk to their customers.

They understand what matters to them and involve them in decisions that affect them. They are transparent, they invite scrutiny and they increasingly reflect the communities in which they operate. Finally, they make decisions based on shared values: the beliefs that unite them and their customers.

We believe that if clubs are to grow sustainably, they need to apply the same principles and we believe that developing a supporter mindset is the first step on the road to sustainable growth.

So what can clubs do to become more 'supporter focused'?

Our research has identified the following key criteria:

- The club leadership team increasingly reflects the community around the club and the experience required to engage with it. Where supporters have a significant stake in the decision-making process (either as a result of supporter ownership or through more informal involvement) efforts to grow the club are generally more effective
- They have processes in place to promote dialogue with supporters and local stakeholders
- They encourage feedback and act on the findings, often in partnership with supporters
- They communicate the improvements they have made to supporters and the wider community

What follows are case studies and best practices designed to help your club develop that supporter mindset and reap the benefits of a modern business approach.

CASE STUDY: LEWES FC

The Evostik League, Isthmian League, Premier Division

Stuart Fuller
Chairman, Lewes FC

WHAT WAS THE OPPORTUNITY?

As a supporter-owned club, Lewes FC's directors wanted to ensure that we weren't missing out on any opportunities to improve the match-day experience by failing to see things from the supporter perspective.

In particular, we wanted to ensure we were doing everything to not only make it easier for different parts of the community to attend, but to also make them all feel valued.

One group that emerged as a priority was families.

Families value the opportunity to spend leisure time together, but there are often barriers, which make it difficult for them to engage with their local club. By engaging with them, seeing things from their perspective and better understanding their perceptions and expectations, it is possible to attract and retain their attendance.

WHAT DID THE CLUB DO DIFFERENTLY?

Each of the club's directors was asked to recruit a local family, interested in football but who had never attended a game at The Dripping Pan (Lewes' ground). They were asked to record their perceptions of the experience from the website, to travelling to the game and leaving afterwards, and to share this with the club afterwards.

In fact, there are many 'touch points' which have particular importance for families, especially those attending their first game. They include the ease with which they can find out information about the game (kick-off time, pricing, directions and parking) but also those factors that make the whole experience more relaxed (is there a sheltered stand? What is there to eat that the kids would enjoy? Is there anything for kids to do before the match?)

WHAT RESULTS DID THE CLUB ACHIEVE?

The feedback collected helped re-focus the club on what matters to families, since we now have increased awareness of the factors that determine whether or not a family will feel engaged by their first experience at the Dripping Pan. For example, while toilet facilities are often not the best at non-league football, they are vitally important to family recruitment. As a direct result of this exercise the club was able to target improvements at areas that would really make a difference.

What's more, we're seeing the value of looking at things from the perspective of a range of different supporter groups now. We're learning that the fan base is made up of groups of like-minded people and by engaging with each of these groups, we can ensure they feel more and more engaged by their experiences at the club.

Back in 2011 we became a community club with the aim of being everyone's favourite non-league side. As we stand we now have over 1,000 owners, in over 15 countries including a fan club in Scandinavia and the USA. Three years ago we introduced 'Support and Share' which gives all owners discounts in a significant number of local shops.

WHAT RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS ARE THERE?

There is really very little by way of resource implication here.

We needed to take the time to identify and recruit the families who would be providing feedback on their experiences. We also needed to consider the scope of the experience we wanted feedback on (from website to leaving the game afterwards). Finally, we needed to set aside time to read the feedback, reflect on it and decide how best to use it.

CASE STUDY: THE EVOSTIK

(NORTHERN PREMIER) LEAGUE

Angie Firth

League Secretary, Evostik League

WHAT WAS THE OPPORTUNITY?

The best businesses understand what matters most to their customers and we believe that this is no different in football. Sure, we know fans want a winning team, but they also want to feel valued, to enjoy their match-day experiences and to feel that they have a say. But if we could help the clubs to take the supporter perspective and see things through the eyes of fans, we believed that every club could benefit from this.

Our first focus was the first time fan. We wanted to help our clubs grow by putting them in the shoes of the new supporter so that they could better understand the factors influencing that supporter's likelihood to come back.

By getting a new supporter, with a genuine interest in non-league football, to report on his or her perceptions of each stage of the match-day experience, from first impressions and the website to arriving at the ground and enjoying the game, and then sharing that with our clubs, we hoped to create a catalyst for action.

WHAT DID THE CLUB DO DIFFERENTLY?

We arranged for each of our 68 clubs to be visited by a genuine new fan (often accompanied by their children). Beginning with the website, the visitor recorded all of his or her experiences and perceptions at every key touch point.

Over the course of three seasons, from 2013/14 to 2015/16 we will ensure every club receives a visit, a full report and a list of recommendations for action in key areas.

At the time of producing this guide, we have provided comprehensive 'first time fan' feedback reports to more than 50 of our clubs, giving them a completely objective perspective on the match-day experiences they provide. As a consequence of this, many of our clubs are now making improvements, aimed at ensuring every new fan feels compelled to return.

WHAT RESULTS DID THE CLUB ACHIEVE?

We have now undertaken visits to 51 clubs (accounting for newly promoted clubs too) and have been able to identify where the clubs' comparative strengths and weaknesses lie.

In general terms, our clubs are strongest once inside their grounds. The warmth of welcome, the social club/club house, the quality of the refreshments experience and the close access to the action all score highly. However, the programme has also helped to identify several opportunities related to making it easier for the new fan to engage.

As a consequence of this, many of our clubs have made changes. From 'first time fan' sections on websites to a focus on creating a warm welcome at the first point of contact, we are seeing some significant changes, all of which we are able to put down to an increasing 'supporter perspective' across the League (and some of which are featured in this booklet).

WHAT RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS ARE THERE?

To fund the initiative we used part of our FA Development Funding budget to engage an experienced partner to develop the scheme, recruit visitors and report on the visit programme.

The partner recruits the visitors and provides us with a comprehensive report covering all of the key 'touch points' (first impressions, website, travel, parking, the welcome & assistance received from volunteers and stewards, refreshments & souvenir services – if available – and the match itself).

BEST PRACTICES

Walk in the Supporter's Footsteps
Carry out an assessment of the route to your club on a match day.

Try approaching your club from several different directions in a car and/or more closely on foot and record your impressions. At what point should the signage start? Is it clear to existing fans as well as first timers? Is there additional information that needs to go on the website? Are there opportunities to place programme sellers (for example) at key strategic points where they can direct people as well as promote the match-day magazine?

Informal Dialogue
We all encounter supporters in the course of our work, so every opportunity should be taken to canvass them on their opinions. The level of formality may depend on the particular circumstances, but this could range from simply asking people during the pre-match period, for their feedback informally, to having someone deployed with a 'clipboard' to collect post-match feedback.

Having a series of informal conversations with supporters, ideally in their own environment, will also help promote engagement and identify improvement ideas.

Share the Results
Ensure the results of your consultation are communicated in some form back to those who took part. If you want to build authentic engagement, you need to be transparent, so consider introducing a 'you said, we did' section to your website to make it clear that you're acting on fan feedback. Simply identify the feedback you have received over a given period, summarise it and explain what the club is doing to address the issues and opportunities arising.

Online Feedback Communities
Advances in technology have made it much easier for clubs to develop and grow online communities. The benefit of larger online communities is that their feedback is likely to be more statistically reliable than that obtained through face-to-face meetings. So by creating and engaging with online groups, you can be sure that the changes you make are likely to matter to the widest group of people.

Furthermore, given the important role message boards play in non-league culture, we have a ready-made mechanism for beginning threads on how our club could attract and retain new supporters, for example.

Supporter Panels
Invite a representative group of fans to participate in a regular discussion forum (with meetings held every two/three months usually proving effective). Use feedback from your message boards (above) to identify agenda items (or pre-agree them) and then use the time to share experiences and talk about how things could be improved.

Choose two or three key priorities from your initial research and break these down so they form the 'agenda' for several consequent meetings.

Producing a 'family strategy', for example, will take more than one meeting, so develop ideas over a period of time, while perhaps addressing one or two other issues.

Family Panels
Growing clubs often claim that engaging with families, in particular, acted as a catalyst for their success. They're easy to have conversations with, present some different perspectives and are supportive of anything that will encourage 'family time'.

Focus on Value
Our emphasis should be on finding ways to make supporters feel valued so it follows that we should ask this question (for example: based on your recent match day experiences, how valued do you feel?) as much as we can.

Why not routinely ask fans this question, and what's influencing their response, in all club communications, especially electronic ones? A feature with the manager's post-match comments could easily include a link to a brief survey, while a regular e-newsletter could always end with the 'value' question.

Roadshows
Roadshows are a very effective way to establish dialogue with fans. As a more informal approach than surveying they allow the club to get out into the community (summer fairs, schools, community events, etc.), tell its story and obtain direct feedback from those present.

Open Days

Open Days offer the opportunity for clubs to invite fans into their stadia, learn about what the club is striving for and offer fans an opportunity to ask direct questions of the management team, manager, etc.

Such informal gatherings can allow for much debate, relationship building and myth breaking. They are rapidly gathering renown in many sporting organisations as a great way of opening up the lines of communication and encouraging engagement and involvement.

Social Media

Where once the British were slow to criticise poor service, the establishment of social media has not only made feedback more immediate but has also led to a massive increase in the volume of comments about customer experiences.

As well as monitoring posts, tweets and conversations to identify improvement opportunities, clubs should also be ready to deploy hash tags, such as #matchdayexperience (specific to their own club) to encourage feedback.

Surveys & Questionnaires

A strong starting point for any period of consultation is a survey or questionnaire. With careful planning and design, surveys can provide a high volume of data, which in turn can give your club the confidence to act on any emerging issues or opportunities. The emergence of inexpensive / free online survey packages has also made it much easier to design, deploy and monitor surveys.

The shorter the survey, the more likely it is to be completed. Paper-based surveys should contain no more than 10 questions and email surveys should, ideally, not exceed 30 questions.

05

STRENGTHENING YOUR COMMUNITY PRESENCE

INTRODUCTION

For supporters, the power of the National League System match-day experience quickly reveals itself once you pass through the turnstiles and, while there are always areas within the match-day experience that can be improved, the biggest challenge facing us is encouraging new people to the turnstiles in the first place.

There may be larger Premier League or Football League clubs in our vicinity. There may even be large clubs from other sports who dominate the local media. Your club may be 'exiled' from its natural home.

Without an effective approach to strengthening your presence in the local community, clubs won't get the opportunity to engage new people with the quality of the experience they offer.

This section contains a range of examples and case studies from clubs, of all sizes and circumstances, highlighting different approaches to strengthening their presence in the local community. From the physical to the virtual, from the traditional to the innovative, there are examples capable of being adopted by any club.

Clubs who best reflect their local community in terms of the make up of management team, their outlook and focus, are those who are having the most success at increasing and retaining their supporters.

CASE STUDY: FC UNITED OF MANCHESTER

Vanarama National League North

Andy Walker
Press & Communications Officer,
FC United of Manchester

WHAT WAS THE OPPORTUNITY?

FC United of Manchester is a community football club owned and democratically run by its members. Its corporate structure is as a Community Benefit Society and membership is open to all, with everyone an equal co-owner, holding one voting share in the club.

In order to continue to grow the club, to cement the club's financial stability and to ensure good attendances in our new Broadhurst Park stadium, it is vital to maintain accessibility to the club, to ensure price is no barrier to participation and to maintain a good balance between supporters who pay admission on the gate and those who purchase season tickets.

It is especially important in an area of the country like ours where many people have little by way of disposable income that we remove as many barriers as possible from attending, so this is a key part of our strategy.

WHAT DID THE CLUB DO DIFFERENTLY?

At the club's 2014 General Meeting, members decided that the pay what you can afford scheme of the last five years for season tickets would continue. Our members also set the minimum price of an adult season ticket at a very affordable £100.

However, we do continue to rely upon those supporters (that can afford to) to add a donation to the minimum price of £100. In asking for an additional average donation of £60 (equivalent to an entry price of less than £7 per match) we can maintain our financial stability while making the club accessible to all.

WHAT RESULTS DID THE CLUB ACHIEVE?

There are now more than 1,500 season ticket holders (including more than 200 junior season ticket holders), many of whom would not be able to afford to come, without this offer.

WHAT RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS ARE THERE?

The club is growing and has developed a strong infrastructure over the years so a project like this is capable of being supported without any additional resource implication.

Furthermore, the opening of our own stadium has also helped by attracting the attention of the local and national media to our different way of doing things.

More specifically, we believe that the principle of **pay what you can afford** has been proven beyond a doubt and we believe it is transferable to clubs of any size and circumstance.

CASE STUDY: STAVELEY MINERS WELFARE FC

Northern Counties East League Premier Division

Terry Damms

Chairman, Staveley Miners Welfare FC

WHAT WAS THE OPPORTUNITY?

Staveley is an economically deprived area suffering high unemployment. It is therefore a challenge to attract and retain new supporters without clearly providing an experience that delivers genuine value for money.

In order to be able to meet this demanding objective, we felt that we needed to think differently about the role that a local club plays in its community.

WHAT DID THE CLUB DO DIFFERENTLY?

Over the past four years the club has developed and implemented a strategy based on a complete re-think about its purpose and potential. This had led to a number of changes, some incremental and some representing a completely different approach to traditional aspects of the way non-league clubs are run.

For example, we have decorated the clubhouse in the blue and white stripes of the club, engaged with local schools and run soccer schools with staff wearing high visibility vests displaying the club logo.

We target families and young kids wanting to enjoy football in the community. Rather than competing with our local professional club (Chesterfield FC), we look to respect their initiatives and seek opportunities in areas where they may not be present.

An opportunity to build a junior club was achieved and through organic growth over four years we now have our own junior section with our own playing and training fields.

WHAT RESULTS DID THE CLUB ACHIEVE?

The commitment to thinking differently about the club's purpose has produced some startling results. Our league positions have worsened in the last two years, but crowds are up 30%, the numbers we are engaging with are increasing and revenue is improving to the point that we are now producing a level of income that requires VAT.

We have learned that the 'holy grail' of growing without winning genuinely is achievable when the club's leadership team commits to thinking differently about the purpose of a club. We have a long way to go, but believe we have made some solid steps forward.

WHAT RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS ARE THERE?

Naturally, this requires time commitment from everyone at the club and we are lucky to enjoy the support of a number of volunteers and club supporters, without whom our initial success could not have been achieved.

But overall, we believe this is more a question of attitude rather than numbers. We have a clear strategy supported by good community values, which our manager, our players and all our visiting fans and families share.

By ensuring our focus is off the field rather than just on it, we have been able to achieve a level of progress that only a few short years ago would have been unimaginable.

CASE STUDY: FAIRFORD TOWN FC

Uhlsport Hellenic League, Division One West

Chris Tanner
Committee Member / Volunteer,
Fairford Town FC

WHAT WAS THE OPPORTUNITY?

The club was established back in 1891 and has been providing an opportunity for local players to play at a competitive level ever since. Coming close to closure in the mid-2000s, the club is now in a positive position. The club pays no one from players, staff or management and is committed to improving its facilities for community use and providing a friendly place to visit for functions and of course football!

One opportunity prioritised was 'first impressions' since it was felt that this was an area we could control more effectively.

Our profile in the local community is growing and we believe we represent a compelling offer for anyone wishing to come to his or her first game. However, if we don't get things right at the first point of contact, any new fans are unlikely to return.

WHAT DID THE CLUB DO DIFFERENTLY?

In the summer of 2013, I led the committee effort to help change the appearance of the club's ground Cinder Lane.

Over the past year the club with a small but committed band of volunteers, the club has turned the tables in terms of advertising sales. Only three or four advertising boards had been fully paid for during the 2012/13 season so we held a brainstorm at the club where committee members spent several hours talking about all aspects of the football and non-football operation – and what could be done to revitalise the offering.

Ground board sales were seen as a potential source of much needed revenue as well as a great way of building local contacts, so we began an informal campaign of face-to-face meetings with local businesses to share our vision for the club, explain what we were doing to grow the club and to promote our ideas about the ground boards.

WHAT RESULTS DID THE CLUB ACHIEVE?

Thanks to being able to offer an attractive price point of £99 per season (including the £40 production charge) the club has now sold out of advertising boards around the perimeter of the pitch and created a new source of revenue to drive the club forward.

Upon reviewing the success we have achieved, it's become clear that the face-to-face approach we have used has been important, since it emphasises the values, personality and accessibility of the club. This has taught us a lot about the value of continuing to engage with our local business community.

WHAT RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS ARE THERE?

Whilst many clubs struggle for advertising in the current climate, we have found that taking the time and energy to develop relationships with the network of local businesses, we can use the natural friendship engendered by our club to improve match day perceptions and grow resources.

BEST PRACTICES

Be Where People Go
While social media is a very effective way of keeping awareness up, a physical presence is also important.

Clubs like Bath City (with a presence in the City centre), Curzon Ashton (a stall in the local market) and Slough Town (taking a stall in the local shopping centre) have found that personal engagement and promotion of their local club, in places where there is a lot of local footfall, can be very effective.

Junior Takeover Days
One of the ways you can both strengthen relationships with local schools and junior sports clubs and drive up junior attendance is to arrange Junior Takeover Days.

Choose a match and the allow children to shadow the key roles on a match day. These could include the referee, the groundsman, the team coach, the turnstile operator and the programme seller.

By videoing the event, you then have collateral to promote the club more widely to younger fans, while ensuring those who participate have the most memorable day possible.

Get your Mascot Out and About
If you have a club mascot, locate them in busy places in your community (supermarkets, high streets, etc) and let them promote your club with leaflets, hand outs and free tickets for youngsters. Not only does that build interest but (if the mascot is accompanied by a volunteer!) you're also able to answer questions, tell people where the club is, what's going on in the coming weeks, etc.

A couple of seasons ago Bristol Rovers placed Irene the Gorilla in various parts of the town to intrigue and to promote their club.

Roadshows
As well as creating opportunities to engage with the public and seek feedback from supporters, Roadshows allow clubs to promote their matches. Oxford United Ladies took players and Olivia the Ox (their mascot) with them on the Thames WSL road show, offering photo opportunities, autographs and information on becoming a fan of the club.

Company Social Clubs
Many of us have large commercial organisations, factories and/or warehouses in our vicinity, so why not contact their sports & social clubs and invite four-five different ones to visit a home game?

Plan for them to get a good match-day experience and involve them in an inter-company penalty shootout competition, for example, where two or three from each social club take part.

Open Days
Have an open day where fans and sponsors get to meet management and players. Perhaps supporters could enjoy a number of activities including a bouncy castle, face painters, hit the cross bar competition, etc. The supporters may also get the chance to watch a first team training session.

Not only is this attractive to existing supporters, but also represents great value for families, local junior/

adult sports clubs, community groups, local business and, of course, the local media.

Celebrate the Start of the New Season
Why not hold an event to promote the start of the new season? The positive publicity surrounding the event and the interaction between players and supporters on the night would create a news story for the local media and an opportunity to communicate/celebrate what the club is planning to do to strengthen its profile in the local community.

Signage & Sponsorship
Signage not only directs new fans to your ground/stadium, but it also gives your club visibility. So try to identify places in the local community where there are lots of people and/or traffic (particularly at busy times of day) and investigate whether or not you can establish a presence. For example, it is now possible to sponsor roundabouts, etc.

This raises awareness of the club to visitors who may not have known that there is a local football team. It also adds to the match-day experience when travelling supporters arrive.

Make your Club a Recycling Hub
The emergence of reuse and recycling as important local services offers clubs an opportunity to become directly involved.

By establishing a relationship with a local environmental organisation it may be possible to present the club's facilities, on a regular basis, as a hub for recycling and reuse.

For example, for everyone who comes and donates a used PC, laptop, mobile phone, bike or smart phone, you could offer free match tickets to a future game.

Not only does this attract people to your ground, but it also begins to add a new dimension to way local people perceive your club.

Host Celebrations of Educational Success
Developing relationships with local schools/colleges is one of the best ways to open up opportunities to attract the next generation along to your club.

Many schools operate widely publicised and well-attended prize days, holding them in the school assembly hall or a local municipal location.

Why not offer the school your stadium for prize day (if you have the facility) or, separately, offer the pupils a 'lap of appreciation' at a key fixture, thereby strengthening messages around achievement and education?

NOTICES
FIXTURES.
THANKYOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT.
MARCH.
15 STAFFORD RANGERS H 3.00pm
18 STAMFORD AFC A 7.45pm
22 BARWELL A 3.00pm
25 RUSHALL OLYMPIC H 7.45pm
29 FC UNITED of MANCHESTER A 3.00pm
APRIL
BLYTH SPARTANS H 7.45pm
WITTON ALBION H 3.00pm
EVO-STIK IN A LEAGUE OF OUR OWN
WWW.MATLOCKTOWNFC.CO.UK
EVO-STIK
PREMIER DIVISION

06

PROMOTING YOUR FIXTURES

INTRODUCTION

Event promotion is a sophisticated competitive field and it is sometimes difficult for a small non-league club to be heard above the din these days.

Add to that the fact that some grounds are often not immediately visible to passers by, that road signage may be poor or non-existent and that some clubs may be temporarily exiled from their natural home town and the nature of the challenge reveals itself.

Therefore, in order to maintain the flow of new fans and to attract the attention of lapsed supporters, clubs need to develop imaginative approaches to match promotion.

CASE STUDY: LEWES FC

The Ryman Premier League (Isthmian League)

Stuart Fuller
Chairman, Lewes FC

WHAT WAS THE OPPORTUNITY?

Many of those who are sharing their ideas and experiences in this document will share my belief that, even at the non-league level, we know we are in the entertainment industry.

We don't have to just compete with people going to Brighton, Crawley Town, Chelsea or Arsenal each Saturday but also with families who go to the cinema, the beach or other leisure activities in the area. We knew we couldn't influence what happened **on** the pitch but we knew we could massively influence the experience at every part of the fan's experience.

By finding ways to apply this mindset to our match days, we believed we could start to positively influence attendance at our games.

WHAT DID THE CLUB DO DIFFERENTLY?

A few of us have backgrounds in marketing and commercial operations and there is a saying that goes "Get big, get niche or get out". We couldn't get big (we didn't have the cash for that) but we could get niche.

We did look at how we could find a theme, a link or a subject for every game we played. We started on the posters, creating them in many instances with cryptic messages (every one has a link to the date or opposition in some way) and then the programme and finally the theming of the actual game itself whether that may be with activities or the food we serve.

Last year we introduced a new food partner who took our theming to a different level, serving quality food from our catering outlet at the top of our grass bank so people don't mind waiting for it to be cooked as they can watch the game and enjoy a decent pint of beer. Yes we do burgers and hot dogs, but they are made with locally-sourced organic ingredients but we also introduced Thai Green Curry, Garlic Roasted Pork Loin, Chilli Chicken Wings and double cooked chips with beef stock and local cheddar cheese.

WHAT RESULTS DID THE CLUB ACHIEVE?

One of the greatest achievements was getting global coverage for our unique and eye-catching posters. Most people who hear Lewes FC will associate us with our posters. We've appeared in newspapers, magazines, on TV and on the Radio.

Significantly, our posters' fame has spread far and wide and way beyond our own fan base. People up and down the country are ordering our posters online, discussing them on social media and/or drawing positive conclusions about our club from them.

All of this activity took place as we slid down the league so we didn't initially see a rise in crowds, although we did see an increase in the yield per fan. Programme sales went up (even when we introduced a free e-copy) as we threw the traditional content approach out of the window and replaced it with one full of abstract stories and content our fans wanted to read.

WHAT RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS ARE THERE?

Passion to get involved, enthusiasm to want to be different and patience when things don't go right. You have to remember that people fundamentally come to football to watch their team win. If you can get over that fact and work on what you can influence then slowly you start to change the mentality of the fans. Sure, when you win it is up there with your wedding day, but if you lose and you have had some decent food, a pint of local beer and read a decent article or two in the programme then life isn't so bad.

CASE STUDY: ST HELEN'S TOWN FC

The North West Counties Football League Premier Division

John McKiernan
Chairman, St Helen's Town FC

WHAT WAS THE OPPORTUNITY?

Some clubs, for a variety of reasons, currently find themselves exiled from their natural home. This, for a large professional club, would be an immense challenge, but for a small local club, it could signal their demise.

St Helens Town's current exile at neighbours Ashton Athletic means that the club has to work a lot harder to maintain a presence in their home town. As a result of this, keeping followers up to date with information while they await a return to a new facility in the borough is a major priority.

WHAT DID THE CLUB DO DIFFERENTLY?

We decided to make our match-day programme a big focus of our growth work because, when you look around, very few clubs depart from the standard paper version that's sold at or beyond the turnstiles. We believed that by taking our programme online, promoting it effectively and providing quality content, we could strengthen our profile at a time when people could be forgiven for forgetting that the town had a football team.

The club now offers an online version of their award-winning match-day programme which can be viewed via the club's official website. The free online e-Programme is an exact replica of the printed programme and allows readers to flip pages, zoom in on photos or features as well as follow web links to additional club information and sponsors.

WHAT RESULTS DID THE CLUB ACHIEVE?

With match-day programme sales averaging 50, the e-Programme has given an additional readership of over 1000 on a number of editions during 2014-15. All 25 league and cup programmes from the 2014-15 campaign are available online and, to date, have had close to 15000 views which has proved to be a huge advantage in relation to the club's commercial and sponsorship activity.

Not only that, but by making the online programme free to access, we are adding value to the experience of being a St Helen's Town supporter, developing a reputation for being different and ensuring that everyone is within a click or two from the latest news on the club.

WHAT RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS ARE THERE?

The e-Programme has given the club a much wider audience at a time when we are temporarily distanced from our traditional supporter base. It has also offered greater exposure for club sponsors and it has played a significant part in increased sponsorship revenue.

There is a small amount of extra work to create the e-Programme, of course, but if clubs are producing their own artwork, it's a straightforward and cost-free process to create a professional online version.

BEST PRACTICES

Here are more ideas for promoting your matches:

Friday Night's All Right for Football
While Saturday pm kick-offs are almost sacrosanct in non-league Football, some clubs are finding success by moving to Friday evenings, especially when they are supporting the move with additional promotional activities and a long communications lead in.

Winchester City recently moved a game to Friday evening, communicated their intentions well in advance, promoted the new date and kick-off time comprehensively in the local area, offered a discount and achieved a 300% increase on their usual attendance.

On the Buses
Some clubs have formed strong local partnerships with transport companies and are able to run affordable services to their games on a match day.

AFC Fylde, for example, runs a free shuttle bus service to home games at Kellamergh Park. The double decker bus (decorated in club colours and proudly displaying the club crest) makes several stops en route and doesn't return until 5.30pm, to allow fans to enjoy a post-match drink before setting off home.

SOME CLUBS HAVE FORMED STRONG LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS WITH TRANSPORT COMPANIES AND ARE ABLE TO RUN AFFORDABLE SERVICES TO THEIR GAMES ON A MATCH DAY.

Gentlemen
No Swearing
Please
We can accept no
responsibility for injuries
arising from encroachment
of visitors onto the
playing area at anytime

07

ATTRACTING & RETAINING SUPPORTERS

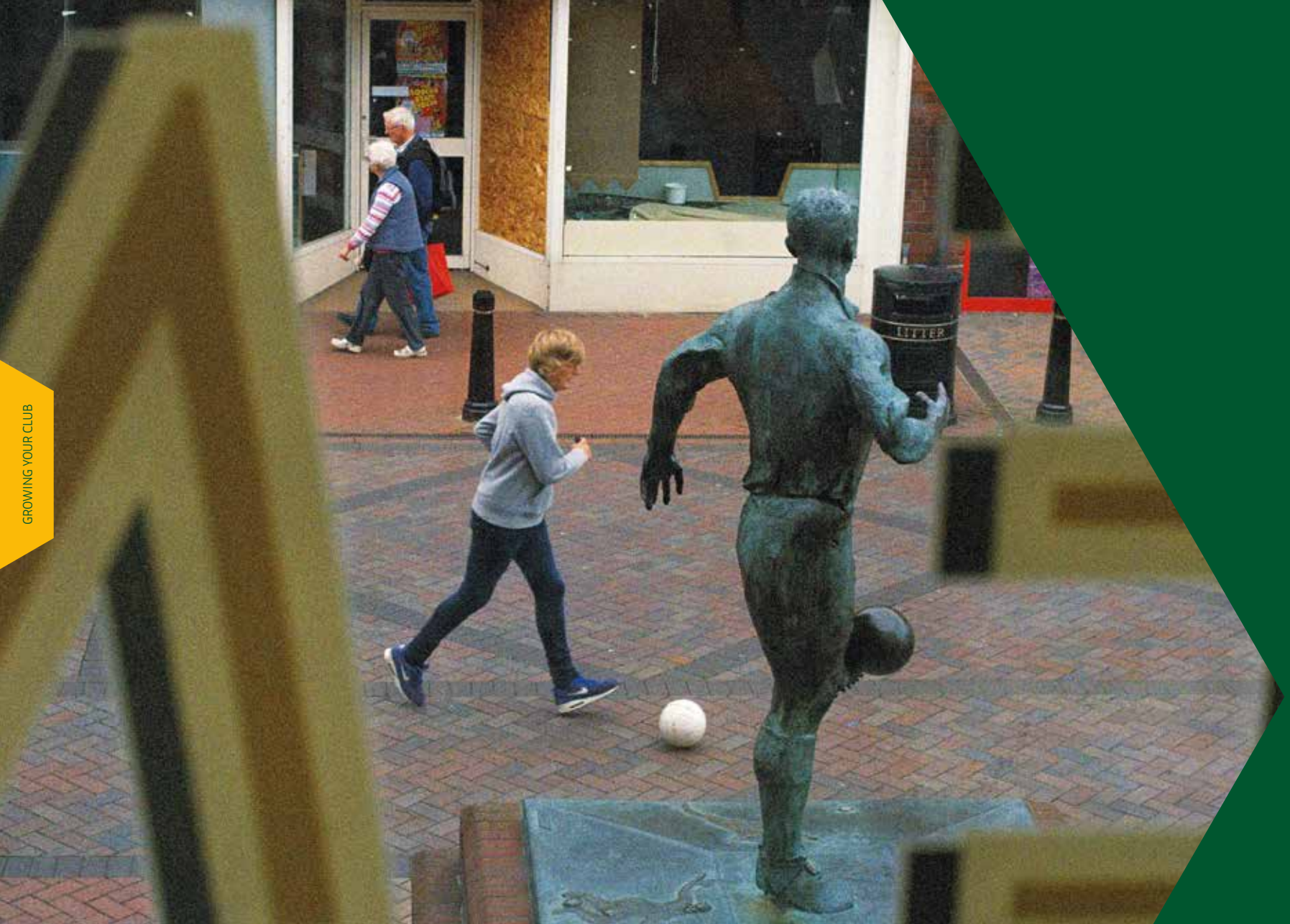
INTRODUCTION

How do you get new supporters to their first game? More importantly, how do you ensure they return regularly?

For new fans who are interested in football but new to your club, research shows that the admission price is a factor in getting them along to their first game, but after that it is the quality of the overall experience that determines whether or not they return. Team performance is only one factor in that experience.

But the engaging, intimate and relaxed nature of the experience clubs can offer makes it an attractive proposition for many different groups of people. So what are clubs doing to engage local businesses, education centres, community groups and other sports clubs? And more generally, which clubs are good at attracting youngsters, women and groups not normally associated with following their local non-league club.

The easiest way to approach increasing attendance is to think of your fans as two distinct groups: New Supporters & Existing Supporters.


LITTER

NEW SUPPORTERS

New Fans and their Families
It's often at the very first point of contact that we miss a great opportunity to engage with new supporters. Our existing fans already know what to do. They know what they want and which is the most convenient way to get it.

New fans and their families, however, will not have this knowledge, so it's important to acknowledge that in the offer you make them, otherwise we simply create a closed shop and limit our growth opportunities.

- Make it easy for them to obtain information about your club.
- Do not assume that they already know.
- Ensure your website and your match day volunteers/staff understand the needs of families who haven't been to your stadium before.

Our research shows that families have different needs. There are the more obvious ones; how to get there, where to park, how to purchase tickets, how much it will cost and what there might be for the kids to do.

However, there are also some more unspoken needs, which, if met, will ensure they get the best from the day.

- How do they manage their kids' expectations of food?
- What should they wear?
- How do they avoid 'standing out' or looking conspicuous?
- What are the local traditions?

Therefore clubs who take a wider view of the match-day experience and endeavour to help new fans/families answer these questions are more likely to get them to commit to coming to games.

Given our fantastic value prices, the cost of attending a match day shouldn't be a barrier to attendance. However, our research shows that families, in particular, want to be able to test before purchase while research from other sports tells us that after a family attends their first game, offering them a two or three game package may increase the likelihood of them picking up the habit permanently.

Clubs should also talk to their own friends, families and children and put themselves in their shoes. If you're playing pre-match music, you'll have your favourite tunes, but if you want to attract a particular age group of young girls, you may need to play a One Direction song!

After all, the huge growth in family attendance in the professional game is purely down to giving the clubs the opportunity to see things from the family's perspective, so put yourselves in their shoes.

EXISTING SUPPORTERS

While on-pitch success is important to core fans, it is also important that their support is valued, that they feel part of the club and that their experiences reflect what their club means to them.

Longer-term fans of non-league football tell us they believe their customer experience is something the clubs could control more effectively. When this doesn't happen it emphasises the gap between what fans believe their club truly stands for and a more mundane reality. This risks alienating the group we rely on the most, so we encourage clubs to establish and maintain dialogue with core fans.

Factors influencing these fans' perceptions stretch well beyond the match itself to include elements such as the level of engagement they have with the club (consultation, communication and input), the quality of the facilities and refreshments and the atmosphere inside the stadium.

Long term fans of the game want to be engaged by their clubs, asked for input, given behind the scenes access and to get to know the players well.

The solution to fan engagement is to step away from the football and take a view of the wider experience. We want people to have a fantastic time, we want to create enduring memories and we want to build a level of loyalty that will transcend results on the pitch.

So focus on what makes people happy, find out where the gaps are, use this guide and work with your community of supporters to come up with imaginative solutions.

CASE STUDY: NOTTS COUNTY LADIES FC

The FA Women's Super League (FAWSL) WSL 1

Matt Rowland

Marketing Manager, Notts County Ladies FC

WHAT WAS THE OPPORTUNITY?

The women's game is still relatively new to the UK sports fan, so we have to work extra hard to ensure we add value for our supporters.

Furthermore, the engaging, modern and accessible identity that the women's game has in this country means that there is an expectation that we will do things differently.

This thinking led us to develop the idea of offering a VIP season ticket. All of the benefits of a traditional football season ticket, but with a little extra!

WHAT DID THE CLUB DO DIFFERENTLY?

Unique to the women's game is the access and interaction with the fans, as well as affordable access to the facilities.

Although not a new idea to football, our VIP season ticket was a unique idea to the FA WSL. It gave the supporters access to a hospitality suite pre-match (the same facility used by the men's club that may have been out of the financial reach of a supporter before). It also gives access to the suite pre-match and to an exclusive area where the players come to eat and wind down after a match. We also included a tour of the ground, showing supporters behind the scenes areas that they may have never had access to before, including the dressing room and the manager's office.

On top of this we offered an open training session to watch the players train, something again they have never had access to before.

WHAT RESULTS DID THE CLUB ACHIEVE?

Fans coming to FA WSL games know that they can access the players after every match. **Every** player will make themselves available to supporters after the game and we know that this is a fundamental part of what makes our sport different.

However, just as this access to players is a huge USP in women's football, it's something that is likely to be lost over time, because as the supporter base continues to grow it can't be offered to everyone.

However our VIP season ticket approach enables a privileged group of fans to maintain this access. The proof is in the pudding and we have already sold 45 of these tickets (many more than anticipated).

WHAT RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS ARE THERE?

The resource is time and organisation. With the help of a very supportive men's club we're able to offer the kind of access mentioned above. It also helps to have a manager who is very co-operative and trusting of what you are doing and who is willing to let his players interact so much with the fans.

This all relates to the culture of the club, so rather than it being a question of resources, we believe that it is the mindset of the club that determines the success of initiatives like this.

CASE STUDY: BURGESS HILL TOWN FC

Ryman Premier League (Isthmian League)

John Rattle

Coach, Burgess Hill Town FC

WHAT WAS THE OPPORTUNITY?

If clubs are to grow they need to undertake a comprehensive review of their opportunities. While engaging with the local community is at the heart of this, there will be different areas of focus for different clubs.

For Burgess Hill Town FC, we felt that if were to be successful we needed to adopt a more sustainable business model with a focus on youth development and that we needed to reduce the age range of our supporter base. We also recognised that the social demographic of our area meant that football was an unaffordable luxury for many people.

WHAT DID THE CLUB DO DIFFERENTLY?

The first policy adopted was free entry for under-18s. This is the third season that this incentive has been offered and whilst team results have undoubtedly helped this season, we now have more young people and families attending than ever before.

We were concerned that we would lose a great deal of money, but actually we've made up in catering profits what we've lost at the gate. It is unlikely that this policy will be reversed even with promotion. Next year we are looking to offer an adult membership scheme with discounts to try and build more loyalty and make it even more affordable for parents to bring their children along.

We also invested in the youth team and forged links with local youth football clubs, particularly Southdown FC offering coaching sessions to the under-16s of all local clubs and these children learn about the club and its values and then spread the word amongst their friends and families. This has allowed for identification of outstanding young talent leading to unprecedented success for the youth team over four years. A number of these players have progressed to the first team, and as well as one player leaving for a Premier League club.

WHAT RESULTS DID THE CLUB ACHIEVE?

Our focus on youth-driven growth appears to be bearing fruit. Since embarking on a strategy to lower the age of the supporter base, attendances are up. We are also benefitting from a a thriving youth football setup at the club.

Take up of our membership scheme is on the up too and, most pleasing of all, the average age of the supporter attending Burgess Hill FC games is down, in line with our original objectives.

From a financial perspective, everything is going well. The club is solvent and thriving, and also finding it easier to gain sponsorship due to a heightened presence in the local community.

WHAT RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS ARE THERE?

Naturally, finding the time and resource to support our endeavours is not easy and our volunteers continue to go the extra mile, in spite of their day jobs limiting their availability.

We are therefore focused on two objectives: increasing the number of volunteers at the club (and offering them the support and development to help them succeed in their roles); and reviewing our approach to governance to see what we can do differently there too.

CASE STUDY: MARINE FC

The Evostik League Northern Premier – Premier Division

Richard Cross
Club Secretary, Marine FC

WHAT WAS THE OPPORTUNITY?

Every non-league club has to work hard to maintain attendances: to attract new generations of fans, and retain them. But in areas like ours where there are two major Premier League clubs, the task is considerably more difficult.

We therefore decided to focus our efforts on attracting and retaining more young fans, by finding ways in which we could convey our values of accessibility and friendliness in the match-day experience.

WHAT DID THE CLUB DO DIFFERENTLY?

We explored the different touch points experienced by youngsters attending their first game and also did our best to understand what mattered most to new young fans.

As a consequence of this we introduced an inter-schools penalty shoot-out competition that happens on the main pitch at every home game. Having worked hard to develop positive relationships with a number of local schools, we know the primary school children love to play with their classmates on a top quality football pitch against their local school rivals.

To ensure price is no barrier to participation, we have made it free for the children who take part. We find that the parents and carers who accompany them usually make a donation to our ground appeal bucket collection too.

WHAT RESULTS DID THE CLUB ACHIEVE?

We have seen an immediate impact from this approach with a lot of positive feedback received both from the kids participating and others attending matches. The initiative has become an expected part of the match-day experience at Marine and part of what makes us different.

As a consequence of this the club has developed much stronger relationships with junior schools in its area and is seeing the number of youngsters attending games increase, with an overall downward trend in the average age of the match attendee at Marine.

WHAT RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS ARE THERE?

The main task is to gain the buy in of the local schools and that means making it easy for them, as they have so many other priorities, so you need to obtain time with the schools and then promote the initiative in a way that takes any extra work away from the school and makes it easy for them to participate. The easier it is and the more value it adds, the more likely you are to receive the support of your local schools.

Getting the buy-in of the kids is no problem at all, as they are so excited by the prospect of playing on our pitch.

CASE STUDY: YEOVIL TOWN LADIES FC

The FA Women's Super League (FAWSL) WSL 2

Trevor Jenkins

Marketing Manager, Yeovil Town Ladies FC

WHAT WAS THE OPPORTUNITY?

Naturally, a key part of our strategy as a FA WSL club is not only to encourage girls to attend matches, but also to increase their participation in the sport more widely. As a consequence of this we are always looking at imaginative ways of making this possible.

We knew that participation on the pitch on a match day is of huge value to girls so wanted to find a way to do that in a new way: both maximising the youngsters' enjoyment of the experience while contributing to increased attendances.

WHAT DID THE CLUB DO DIFFERENTLY?

We came up with the idea of reaching out to all of the junior girls teams in the area who had won their league this year. We would invite them to attend a match, offer the teams training pre-match, allow them to parade with their trophies, receive the crowd's applause, have their photos taken and participate in flag bearing.

We gave the initiative the name 'In The Company Of Champions', promoted it heavily through our various communications channels and wrote to all of the clubs who qualified.

We then followed up, spoke to the clubs, explained the initiative in detail and, most importantly, worked hard to make sure it was easy for them to get involved.

WHAT RESULTS DID THE CLUB ACHIEVE?

The results have been fantastic. One single initiative has helped us not only to increase attendance at a specific game, but to extend the reach of the club to many local girls' football clubs.

Within two days of communicating the offer we'd already added 20% to our expected attendance and, on the day itself, a game that ordinarily would have attracted an attendance of 200-250 saw more than 400 people attend. This more than exceeded our expectations: bringing into contact with the club, an audience that could be encouraged to attend more games in future.

WHAT RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS ARE THERE?

There was no additional resource required to undertake this initiative, beyond our usual team of volunteers on the match day.

However it is of vital importance to ensure all of those volunteering on the day are fully aware of the initiative and of the need to ensure the girls and clubs participating receive the best possible experience.

BEST PRACTICES

Loyalty Schemes with a Difference
There are very few customer-facing businesses who do not offer loyalty schemes these days. They want to reward their most loyal customers while ensuring they are motivated to keep coming back.

Football at non-league levels is no different. We have supporters who display incredible levels of loyalty to our clubs and by recognising this and rewarding it we will make them feel more valued and they, in turn, will be more inclined to recruit more friends to the cause.

You do not need technology to maintain such a scheme, since a simple 'coffee club' approach will usually suffice for most clubs.

Stamps can then be given to reward the following behaviours:

- Purchasing official replica kits
- Booking official bus travel to away games
- Buying products with certain partners
- Being in the club house/social club more than an hour before kick-off
- Responding to surveys and questionnaires that the club issues
- Making a suggestion to improve the supporter experience
- Turning up to 'low category' games

Stamps can then be exchanged for discounts or even 'money can't buy' moments (travelling to away games with the team, etc).

Family Days
Creating family days, where there is an added focus on family-friendly activities and a discount for family groups, offers clubs an opportunity to attract new supporters. This has been proven in the Football League where a renewed focus on families had led to an increase of 31% in junior attendance over the past six seasons.

However, families do have busy schedules, so ensure that you promote these fixtures well in advance and in ways that will reach busy families, for example, through schools, community groups and at family destinations (such as leisure and shopping centres).

Freebies for Early Arrivals
As more and more clubs develop strong relationships with local businesses, why not take the next step and offer something which is now commonplace in American sports, but rarely seen in the UK: the offer of free (possibly limited edition) items to the first 25 or 50 supporters to enter the stadium.

The items could range from t-shirts, hats or posters to smaller collectibles, like key rings or pin badges.

Making Away Fans Welcome
One of the defining characteristics of non-league football is the passion and commitment of fans who will often travel great distances in support of their team.

Naturally, this can be expensive, so by creating a warm and welcoming environment for visiting fans, you can ensure your club is on the 'must-visit' list for future seasons.

As well as providing a warm welcome on arrival, as many of the clubs featured in this guide do, why not produce a poster thanking the visiting fans for making the journey? For example: "Welcome Spartans Fans. Thank you for travelling 300 miles in support of your team!"

Appeal to Fans of local Premier League / Football League clubs
Why not follow the example of Merseyside-based Marine FC and offer half price entry for season ticket holders at Everton/Liverpool & Tranmere Rovers (when their teams are playing away from home).

This is an easy way to introduce a new audience to your club.

WHILE SOCIAL MEDIA IS A VERY EFFECTIVE WAY OF KEEPING AWARENESS UP, A PHYSICAL PRESENCE IS ALSO IMPORTANT.

08

IMPROVING THE MATCH-DAY EXPERIENCE

INTRODUCTION

In its most general sense, the ideal match-day experience combines convenience and value. Clubs have got to ensure there are no barriers to preventing the new fan from attending games and they should also strive to provide value above and beyond the 90 minutes.

Our research shows that most clubs do very well in conveying the friendliness and accessibility that characterises our game, but the critical success factors in ensuring the best possible outcomes are rarely set out.

This section draws on the activities of clubs from around the country, highlighting just what the 'basics' are in respect of the aspirational non-league match-day experience.

CASE STUDY: BELPER TOWN FC

The Evostik League, Northern Premier, First Division North

Ian Wright

Club Secretary, Belper Town FC

WHAT WAS THE OPPORTUNITY?

The club has a warm and friendly reputation, being located in a very pleasant part of Derbyshire. We know how much our existing supporters enjoy following the club. They know everything about it, they know how things happen on a match day and their loyalty has helped the club thrive over the years. However, how do we attract new people to the club? How do we get them to feel part of the club?

Our opportunity quickly presented itself: we wanted to make it easier for new fans to attend matches.

WHAT DID THE CLUB DO DIFFERENTLY?

To do this, the club created a First Time Visitor section on their website. The section contains guidance on a range of issues including:

- Detailed guidance on travelling to the ground and a range of convenient parking options
- Admission prices, including confirmation that children under 14 are admitted free when accompanying a paying adult
- Confirmation that it's all 'pay at the gate' and tickets do not need to purchased in advance
- Confirmation of 500 seats under cover and another 300 covered standing places, including useful 'soft' information like the lack of segregation and the fact that you can sit or stand just where you like

The section also confirms that Belper Town is a family club which takes its responsibilities seriously including ensuring an abuse free environment and proactively addressing offenders. It also describes and promotes the main function room (where all supporters are welcome and it's free to enter), the club's award winning catering service and the club shop where club souvenirs and old programmes are on sale.

WHAT RESULTS DID THE CLUB ACHIEVE?

It's difficult to measure the impact of one small step like this in isolation, but more widely, it's helped us to start seeing things from the (new) supporter's perspective. We are less inclined as a club to assume we know the answer, without first engaging with supporters.

The implementation of a First Time Fan page is also symbolic, as it demonstrates that we **are** interested in new supporters and are prepared to do what we can to remove any barriers to attendance.

It's also encouraged us to think of other ways in which we can make it easier for new fans to engage with our club.

WHAT RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS ARE THERE?

One of the benefits of making this change is that it is so easy to do. There is no resource requirement at all, just a heightened awareness of the concerns and questions, which, if answered effectively by the club, will make it easier for a new fan to engage.

It also helps that our league provides us with a 'new fan' feedback report, so that we can see objective feedback on the experience we provide.

CASE STUDY: DONCASTER ROVERS BELLES LFC

The FA Women's Super League (FAWSL) WSL 2

Faye Lygo

Marketing Officer, Doncaster Rovers Belles LFC

WHAT WAS THE OPPORTUNITY?

In four years time the club will be 50 years old, even if most sports fans see women's football as comparatively new. And yet, in spite of this heritage, the club is focused on ensuring no barriers are put in front of any new fans wishing to attend their first game.

As a consequence of this wish to remove any barriers from attending, we have explored ways in which we can make it easier for new fans to not only easily attend games, but to get the best from the experience.

WHAT DID THE CLUB DO DIFFERENTLY?

The club decided to create a PDF (downloadable from the club's official website) that provides comprehensive information for people considering making their first visit to see the Belles play at the Keepmoat Stadium.

Not only does this include all of the basics (dates and times of fixtures, price of admission, directions and parking, etc.) but it also covers those areas important to different types of fans. For example, the questions answered include:

- What is there to do near the stadium?
- Can I eat and drink at a game?
- Where in the stadium will I be seated?
- Do you produce a match-day programme?
- Where can I get help and assistance?

When you are appealing to families, you need to understand that for many parents, their main concern is being able to proactively manage their kids' expectations on things like food and drink, so if your club can provide that information in an easily accessible part of the website, then they are making it easier for that new family to commit to attending.

WHAT RESULTS DID THE CLUB ACHIEVE?

The Fan's Guide has only recently been introduced but has already been identified by the FAWSL's own 'mystery fan' programme as contributing significantly to the ease with which new fans can engage with the club.

It is also a symbol that the club genuinely wants to engage with new supporters. We are not a 'closed shop'. We know the recent success of the national Women's team is likely to lead to an increase in interest in our club so we want to make sure we make the experience of engaging with us as easy and rewarding as possible.

WHAT RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS ARE THERE?

We consider that a development like this requires very little in the way of resource: simply a commitment to addressing those touch points that mean most to potential supporters.

Having said that, it is important to research the needs of new fans. Put yourselves in the shoes of someone attending a sports event for the first time. What are the natural concerns? What might put someone off from attending? What extra information might head off any concerns and/or promote some of the really special things that you do? These, we believe, are much more important considerations.

CASE STUDY: ASHTON UNITED FC

The Evostik League, Northern Premier, Premier Division

Steve Hobson

Vice Chairman, Ashton United FC

WHAT WAS THE OPPORTUNITY?

Naturally it's the team that is the main draw, but clubs have other assets too and often miss opportunities to maximise them. We have endeavoured to develop an attitude characterised by a belief that we cannot control what happens on the field of play, but we can extend our influence much more effectively off it.

With that in mind, we set about understanding how we could improve footfall, patronage and revenue from the social club.

WHAT DID THE CLUB DO DIFFERENTLY?

In order to sustain and improve good sales levels we had to maintain the warm and friendly welcome in the club and provide activities the customers wanted.

We also allow the customers to come up with suggestions for events and play a part in putting those events on too. As a consequence of this, we now have darts teams, pool, local community meetings, functions, etc, all of which bring in high footfall and drive sales.

The next natural step was to start a pub team, separate to Ashton United, playing in a local league but using our club as a base.

When you begin to think differently about your assets, you recognise that it doesn't always have to be a football team sharing your club facilities. Moving forward we are looking to target other clubs and societies, eg. running clubs, cycling clubs, the local organ society, chess clubs, folk groups and charities: all with the intention of increasing footfall.

We have also written to local funeral directors promoting our availability for wakes, etc., and we offer them a £50 credit towards club sponsorship for every event booked into the club.

WHAT RESULTS DID THE CLUB ACHIEVE?

The effort focussed on the bar has brought in more income across a week than anything we are doing on match promotion.

Also, an additional revenue stream is TVs with rolling adverts for local businesses and forthcoming events in the club.

Our creation of a pub team now brings in extra drinkers, food sales and, on occasion, the team have sponsored first team matches. They are also a useful source of steward volunteers for big matches too, a point which shouldn't be lost on anyone wondering how to increase resource while growing the club at the same time.

The above has reinforced our belief that clubs' own assets are often not fully maximised and, with a little thought and creativity, they can become a significant contributor to club revenue.

WHAT RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS ARE THERE?

We allocated responsibility for the project to a club director (who took charge of the bar) and invested time in dialogue with staff and customers, as their input and buy-in was absolutely vital to the success of the project.

So, to summarise, we would say that an investment in thinking differently about your own assets is much more important than considering this particular initiative purely in terms of resource.

BEST PRACTICES

Here are more ideas for improving the match day experience:

Promote a Destination Point for New Fans/Families
Ensuring new fans return is one of the biggest ways that clubs can drive sustainable growth. To do this we need to anticipate the needs of these new supporters are do what we can, with the available resource, to meet those needs.

One of the easiest ways to do that is to promote, via the club website and social media, a meeting point for first time fans. All this needs to be is somewhere where a volunteer can share useful information and answer any questions. They should also be armed with membership forms, season ticket information and good local/club knowledge. Most importantly, they should be friendly and engaging.

Provide a Match Day/Night Update
Particularly on match days, it's important to promote the fixture to people who may be considering coming along and need that extra little push.

So, on a match-by-match basis use your website and social media communications to announce any special activities or arrangements, the timings of any entertainment or activity and the availability of any special promotions, such as on refreshments, etc.

By getting your audience used to the announcement of a Match-day Timetable you will add extra reasons for attending and also proactively meet the needs of different groups, such as families, for example, for whom refreshments will be an important consideration.

If you have free parking, tell people about it
Many non-league club websites are strong on the information that existing fans are already aware of, but weak on those areas that matter to new fans. One area is parking. This is likely to be the biggest potential cause of stress to the first time supporter, so if you have free parking on site or nearby, this is a tremendously valuable asset and you should promote it clearly on your website.

Take an Environmental Approach
Consider offering prime parking places for free to groups of fans who travel together in the same car. Not only does this demonstrate your environmental awareness and generate some good PR, but it also makes it easier for people to find a space and may also encourage more people to come (if they are going to fill a space in the car, for example).

This may also open the door to a mutually beneficial relationship with local environmental organisations.

Mascots
The mascot role has become embedded in the British football experience and this is because of its popularity among the young children. So, regardless of your size, why not introduce a mascot?

Rather than taking all of the related decisions in house, why not invite local school children to design your mascot, name him or her, create the back story and decide how he/she should behave on a match day?

This not only strengthens the relationship with local schools but also ensures that your mascot makes a difference.

Do not restrict their activities to the game itself but ensure your mascot appears before the match, mingles with supporters, poses for pictures and offers handshakes. Subject to your volunteer's availability, are there also opportunities for him/her to be active at community centres throughout the week too?

Programmes
Programme sellers meet many fans and often represent the first point of contact on a match day, so do encourage your programme sellers to engage with the fans they meet.

The design of programmes is important too. Recent research highlights falling sales in the men's professional game and this is partly explained by the immediacy of internet information.

However, by involving more content designed by the fans themselves, programmes can begin to complement official media feeds and create their own individual value. Why not feature a My First Match section where a child writes up his or her experience of attending their first game?

Fan Ambassadors
Introducing the role of Fan Ambassador on a match day can create opportunities for pro-active assistance.

Naturally, this requires the availability of an enthusiastic club volunteer who will be welcoming new faces, helping 'lost' fans and engaging with kids, either through issuing goodie bags'and/or handing out information/selecting youngsters to take part in on-pitch activities, such as a half time penalty shoot out.

Clubs do need to make things accessible and easy for fans especially, but by engaging directly with them, smiling, shaking hands and generally making people feel welcome, they are making a major contribution to the growth of your club.

Full House!
One of the challenges faced by clubs wishing to attract the next generation to games is how to keep the younger kids from becoming bored.

This, for many clubs, is a challenge we can easily meet, through our clubhouses/social clubs, table football, freedom to move around the pitch and other activities. However, the very youngest also need to develop an appreciation of the game so why not introduce a 'Bingo' card for them?

Produce a sheet, encourage sponsored from a partner and include a number of game events for the kids to tick off (corner kick, offside, booking, goal, own goal, penalty, etc).

You could also include one or two less expected events (Mascot running on to pitch and dancing with the corner flag, etc) to add a little intrigue.

SUMMARY: DIFFERENT IS BETTER

The Non-League Day (founded by James Doe in 2010) is an opportunity to showcase local clubs and a chance to provide something different and engage new fans who ordinarily would be occupied at a Premier League or Football League who have never been to a game at your ground before.

Your aim though should not be restricted to simply lifting attendances on that day, but providing an environment and an experience that leads those first time visitors to want to come back.

The key to success, therefore, will be to showcase what makes us different and this guide has provided a range of examples of what National League System clubs are doing to emphasise that difference.

We'll leave the last word to Stuart Fuller of Lewes FC. An Isthmian League club who have had their fair share of challenges in the past, they are now a leading example of what's possible.

Stuart describes ten things Lewes FC does to grow their club:

- Kids Go Free was introduced five years ago and continues to this day
- We've celebrated the return of the match-day poster (visit the club in the run up to a match and you will see virtually every local shop with one in their windows)
- We were one of the first non-league clubs to produce an e-programme (and distribute it free of charge)
- We have our own TV highlights package that viewers can subscribe to for just £5 a month
- We take a barrel of locally brewed Harveys beer to every away game as a gift to our opponents' bar/ club house
- We upgraded our food offering – focusing in on quality local ingredients
- Community ownership of the club now stretches internationally (and we hold annual elections to the board)
- We aren't afraid to standing up for a cause – whether this be on promotion through merit for the FAWSL or in supporting other non-league clubs who we believe have been wronged
- We transparently publish our annual financial statement (including our budgets) on our website and anyone can access this at any time
- We have created a mental well-being programme within the club and recently hosted the national well-being tournament for the second year in the row
- We have a number of other ideas in the pipeline too – using social media developments for instance to create even more of an integrated experience for our fans.

The growth that Lewes have achieved has contributed to their new 3G training facility (opening in Spring 2015). This will enable Lewes FC to secure the financial future of the club and to facilitate planning for the next stage of growth.

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For the excellent imagery ©stuartroyclarke www.homesoffootball.co.uk

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PRACTICAL & PROVEN IDEAS FROM CLUBS LIKE YOURS

The FA