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Case Study

The formation, organisation and management of MyFootballClub: Implications for marketing practice

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Abstract

In January 2008, an internet-based company, MyFootballClub (MyFC), completed the purchase of Ebbsfleet United, a small English football team playing in the nonprofessional Blue Square Premier League. The company's plan was to attempt a revolutionary management structure where fans, paying an affordable annual membership fee, could take over ownership of the club and, through democratic online voting, make every major decision concerning the club, from team selection to choosing sponsorship deals. This paper will present a case study of MyFC and examine how the organisation was formed, how it is organised and how it is managed. It starts by outlining the project background. The following section relates the objectives, which are split between tactical and general. A description of the strategy adopted by the team running the project and the tactics will follow. In the next section, the results achieved by MyFC will be presented, followed by a conclusion. We acknowledge that the project presents an evolution and a new alternative in terms of football clubs ownership. On the other hand, although the project can be deemed fairly successful in the short term, attention needs to be given in the long term to some manifestations of the members of the community.

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Background

The ownership of football clubs has become a topic of intense interest and discussion over the last few years,¹ mostly led by the takeover of Manchester United by the Glazer family, when club fans tried to avoid it and created an alternative club, the Football Club United of

Ownership and governance concerns

Manchester, after the takeover finally happened (see, eg, FC United of Manchester websites).²

Kicked off by Roman Abramovich's takeover of Chelsea FC in 2003, foreign investors have since flooded into British football, buying up some of the clubs. In the case of a number of these investors, such as the Glazer family, the aim has been to capitalise on the commercial potential of the Premier League's worldwide popularity for financial gain from foreign markets. In others, chiefly Abramovich and Thaksin Shinawatra, the Thai owner of Manchester City, the investors have looked at the clubs as holding less obvious tangible benefits and so have spent enormous sums to catapult their team to the peak of the football mountain.

The subject has also generated academic discussion, most of the publications focusing on mutualism and Supporters' Trusts, alternative forms of club ownership and supporters' involvement in club matters.^{3,4}

Even before the wave of takeovers started, Adams and Armitage³ acknowledged most British football clubs as being companies and recognised that several of them had already been floated on the Stock Exchange. The results of those clubs, it must be said, have been mixed. In fact, according to Renneboog and Vanbrabant,⁵ by that time only Manchester United and Glasgow Rangers had consistently been a good investment for their shareholders.

Positioning themselves against the over-commercialism of football, Adams and Armitage³ argue that the pursuit of profit maximisation is not coincident with the interests of football clubs' customers/supporters and that it could lead to the diminishment of the emotional bond between them. In fact, Auty¹ actually proclaimed that '[t]he unholy alliance of football and the television money has seen games kick-off at times to suit television schedules, clubs wantonly changing their strip with little regard for fans' finances and rocketing ticket prices' (p. 273). Michie⁴ seems to agree with this when he places the 'gentrification and *yuppification* of the fan base' (p. 6) as a secondary problem of the increasing commercialisation of football, exemplified by the increase in the number of games played by teams in European competitions. According to him, this gentrification of the fan base can jeopardise the football product itself. Fans contribute to the core product in football by creating the atmosphere at games; excluding fans from the sport therefore undermines the game.

Growing commercialisation

This transition comes as a result of and contributes to the growth of football, and sports in general, as a profit-driven industry. As clubs are now regarded as businesses to these investors who usually have no prior affiliation to the teams they buy, many fans feel that their views are becoming increasingly ignored and they now represent little more than customers. The old link between the club and the community is seen as being in danger of breaking down. Taking this into consideration, Adams and Armitage³ argue that commentators were aiming for greater democratisation of club ownership. According to Michie⁴ and Martin,² in response to worries of over-commercialism of

the 'people's game', the Labour Government set up the Football Task Force, a group of specialists formed to analyse the situation of football in the UK, one of whose several goals was to encourage greater involvement of supporters in the running of their clubs.^{3,4} Auty¹ cited the then Culture Secretary Chris Smith's speech, during the launch of one of the Football Task Force reports, about the increasing danger of high finance in football. Michie⁴ claimed that there was an urgent need for alternative forms of ownership and governance in football. In fact, the Football Task Force established a way to help fans create Supporters' Trusts and then acquire shares in their clubs¹⁻³ through Supporters Direct, a model heavily criticised by Martin² due to its applicability only to small teams facing financial problems.

Democracy and involvement

Although he considered Supporters' Trusts a step forward from today's model in supporters' involvement in club decisions, Michie⁴ understood it as an alternative model. Although acknowledging the radicalism of his idea due to the high prices of football clubs, Michie⁴ placed mutualism initiatives as the ideal form of supporters' participation in club matters, with supporters turning into club owners. Adams and Armitage³ also agreed that mutualism would be an ideal form of supporters' involvement.

Michie⁴ and Adams and Armitage³ justified their idea by stating that mutual constitutions would address the problem of conflict of interest of owners and supporters, since both would be the same. Michie⁴ cites FC Barcelona as a successful case of such a model. The Club Statutes determine the institution's goal as being the pursuit of sporting excellence and the club is run by a body directly elected by the members every five years. Even in this successful example however, there are points of conflict, such as the establishment of organisations to sustain the democratic roots of the club by fans fearing changes in the club structure by the management in the late 1990s.

Benefitting from loyalty

Michie⁴ and Adams and Armitage³ defend mutual forms of ownership against some of the criticism it has faced in the past, such as poor performance (which, according to Adams and Armitage,³ does not occur, since mutuals are subject to and operate in a competitive market). Both papers claim that mutuality in football is particularly suited due to customer loyalty and the uniqueness of the product that football presents (product uniqueness in the sense that a team supporter is not going to change his team because of performance or financial issues, for example). Adams and Armitage³ place mutualism as a possible differential to football clubs in attracting supporters since it will enhance the experience of being a supporter of that particular club, by creating a real feeling of ownership by fans.^{3,4}

Examples of clubs that have reached such a situation are, however, meagre. In fact, both papers have only two examples of small clubs (Lincoln City FC and Chesterfield FC), both in response to financial problems faced by them and formed by groups of supporters trying to save their beloved teams, which emphasises Martin's² criticism of the format.

A digital Barcelona FC

As can be seen, the format of MyFootballClub (MyFC) is not entirely new and could be seen as a kind of digitised Barcelona, the difference being that whereas Barcelona operates in the 'real' world and is therefore constrained in the extent to which it can engage members, Ebbsfleet has been able to take advantage of new media to create a truly democratic, virtual football club, taking advantage of, according to Strauss and Frost,⁶ cited in Beech *et al.*,⁷ the internet's low cost for businesses and customers and the convenience for users. This project also presents a confirmation of Green's⁸ claim that the internet provides fans with cheap, instant and global communication and the opportunity to exchange ideas and information. According to Green, the media provides supporters with a constant source of information on their team even when they are living abroad or outside the local area. Beech *et al.*⁹ hypothesised that clubs, by meeting supporters' needs using the internet effectively, would provide them with a stake on their club. Barber, cited in Auty,¹ positioned the internet as one of the two most important developments in regard to fan power in the future. According to Barber and Auty, also citing the Manchester United takeover by the Glazer family, the internet is already 'serving as a means by which football fans can exchange ideas and information, and as more and more people become familiar with it, this is likely to expand' (p. 273) and it 'can be used to keep fans informed, canvass opinions and muster and mobilise support' (p. 274). Beech *et al.*⁷ seem to agree with this, since they state that football fans use unofficial websites to communicate and be rebellious. Green⁸ goes further, claiming that the internet has already been used extensively to organise protest campaigns.

According to Auty,¹ around 47 clubs had Supporters' Trusts at that time and all of them were present on the internet (Martin² claimed that 63 clubs had Supporters' Trusts by 2004, but did not relate them to the web).

In this regard, it can be said that MyFC presents a different perspective on the football club ownership discussion and the influence of the internet in football because it uses the power of the latter to boost one form of the former.

Objectives

The initial objective of MyFC was to get 50,000 people together, each contributing 35 pounds to buy a football club, with 7.50 of this total going towards website maintenance and 27.50 being channelled directly into the running of the club. In this regard, in February 2008, approximately 21,000 members had already subscribed and Ebbsfleet United was purchased. By July of 2008, more than 30,000 members had already joined the project.

The creation of MyFC

The intention behind the creation of MyFC was to experiment with the polar opposite of the current trend towards private ownership: total accountability to fans. The process of redressing the democratic deficit, which has seen fans' input to their club marginalised by growing commercial interests, began, as stated earlier, with the government-led

Innovation for improvement

initiative Supporters Direct. This initiative has helped set up Supporters' Trusts in clubs all over Britain, with fans pooling their money together to buy enough shares collectively to gain a seat on their club board of directors. MyFC represents a new type of experiment in which fans own the majority of the club.

Furthermore, by basing the enterprise on the internet, MyFC has been able to take advantage of new communications innovations to attract a different kind of member. First, the project has wide-reaching international appeal with members coming from as far as Scandinavia, the US, Panama and China to name but a few. None of these members would have even heard of Ebbsfleet United had the club not been selected for the takeover, yet many have since travelled from all over the world to attend games and have taken time to register their votes on the various decisions surrounding the management of the club.

MyFC is in this sense innovating not just sports, but also the entire concept of the application of Web 2.0 technologies. The website allows an entirely web-based community of members to go online and influence the management of their company with the intention, on an individual level, of testing their own untried theories against competitors (other clubs) who have more experience and expertise. In this respect, the enterprise delves far deeper into the possibilities presented by Web 2.0 than most of the existing market leaders such as Facebook, MySpace, search engines and user-generated content sites. This online community has a direct impact on the fortunes of the company both by their presence, and therefore the financial contribution of their membership fee, and by the decisions they choose to make regarding the business plan. Combining these unique aspects with the popularity and competitiveness of football raises the stakes of the project, as the club may prosper or fail entirely as a result of the members' choices.

This leads on to a second point — the voting itself. While the idea of direct democracy in its purest form as a means of representative decision making has long been abandoned in politics, the internet has made it a legitimate and manageable method for smaller scale projects. Many of the votes on the website will obviously be straightforward choices between 'yes' and 'no', such as ratifying the takeover or agreeing to sanction deals with potential sponsors. The most complex issue to date has been over team selection. This has been carried out by means of a two-stage process: first, members vote on the most popular formation and then an aggregate is taken of votes in favour of playing particular players. The most popular line-up that fits with the formation then plays the next match. The team manager handles all the more time-sensitive decisions such as in-game substitutions.

Strategy

It should be noted that the word democracy does not actually feature on the MyFC website or in its advertising, yet the project definitely took advantage of all the discussions surrounding football clubs' ownership that have grown in recent years (ie the takeover of

Manchester United by the Glazer family and the proposal of moving Wimbledon FC to another city)¹ and the discussion about the *yuppification* of the football fan base (ie the season ticket prices and the number and price of kits launched every season).⁴ In this regard, the price position of the membership was crucial, so as not to lose the focus on mass involvement and participation and the essence of the concept.

Responsiveness and engagement

Another aspect of this project is the breakthrough it represents in consumer control and the tailoring of a product to its consumers' specific needs. It involves the transferral of ideas, chiefly democracy. This concept is currently being experienced and represents one of the main focuses of discussions surrounding brands and their brand communities.¹⁰⁻¹² In these environments, the consumers act as co-owners of and help build the community and the brand itself. If MyFC ideas do prove to be successful in sports, and football more specifically, there is a considerable chance that they may be employed in other clubs and even other industries in the future.

Taking fan participation to the extreme, with the 'Own the Club, Pick the Team' slogan, the project also attracted a heavy contingent of fans of Sports Interactive game Football Manager, a series of football management simulation games. The same can also be said about fantasy sports fans (especially football, for sure). This popularity of both management simulation video games and fantasy football competitions illustrates the potential audience for a product like MyFC. MyFC takes that fantasy and hands fans the opportunity to test out how they might fare in the real, unpredictable world of sports, although in a less autonomic version, due to the number of owners. Even the price of annual membership is virtually identical to that of a video game.

Capitalising on this scenario, the project presented the opportunity to work with a consistent PR campaign that has triggered massive viral spreading of the news, also leading to a huge quantity of word of mouth and e-word of mouth around the idea. This, together with the absence of boundaries on the internet,^{6,7} as stated earlier, can help explain the amount of owners outside England who joined MyFC (around 20 per cent of the total number).

Tactics

Viral marketing and public relations

The sole medium used to support the project and its PR/viral campaign was, and still is, the internet. The project website was the anchor of the campaign and the source of information for potential users. News about the project always presented the website address and led potential users to go online and register their interest in becoming one of the 50,000 future owners of a yet to be decided football club. These web news texts were spread all over the world by people amazed by the idea through e-mail. In order to enhance interest, registered members could also suggest teams to be taken over. After the payment of the fee, members were able to go online and discuss about it. They were also able to send messages to registered members who had not yet paid for membership, urging them to do so.

By July 2008, a reformulated website was launched. Although the visual identity was changed to fit more with Ebbsfleet United's, the features were almost the same, presenting the opportunity to purchase membership, to access information about the project in the case of curious and/or wannabe members and to access previews of the members' discussions taking place on the members' website accessed after logging in.



MyFootballClub website — www.myfootballclub.co.uk

Subscribers as owners, managers and customers

Once you have finally become a member, the members' website, however, is considerably different, providing a much greater range of more detailed content. It is the centre of all the interactions that occur in the community. For example, in its forums, the team line-up, the club financial results and the budget are discussed in parallel with games being played, under the following topics.

- Football — in which Ebbsfleet United Football Club and general football matters are discussed.
- Society — for all issues related to the MyFC Trust, including the members, Board and all live votes.
- Soapbox — where vote proposals, concerns and possible solutions are discussed.
- Off-topic — in which anything unrelated to football or to MyFC can be discussed.

Apart from a couple of official e-mails sent to the owners, all official and unofficial information is passed through the forums. The forums are moderated by a volunteer group of members that makes sure the subjects are appropriately on-topic and no anti-social behaviour is taking place. Besides that, any kind of discussion is allowed and members have the freedom to suggest, discuss and say whatever they want.

In addition to the forum area, the website has other features and functionalities for members:

- a shop where it is possible to buy memorabilia and merchandise from both Ebbsfleet United and MyFC — this is an important tool to increase the team revenue and take advantage of the great involvement of members/owners/supporters with the club
- a web television service on which owners can watch the games and therefore know more about the players to support their team selection — this allows members to closely follow the team in order to be able to make the best decisions with their votes
- an area where the results of every vote are displayed, which can be said to transmit transparency to the members (examples of issues voted on are allowing the current manager to negotiate with the current team players a new contract for the 2008/2009 season, the supply of replica shirts to people working for radio and television channels covering the FA Trophy Final, etc).

Every member also has a personal page, where they can post more information about themselves and their thoughts about the team and football in general and in which they can exchange messages with other members and put together their own micro-network of members. This certainly enhances the link that members have with each other and with the community itself.

History

Already in its short history, the project has had a number of important milestones. Here we have highlighted the website launch in April 2007, the Ebbsfleet United purchase agreement in February 2008 and the club on-field lifetime highlight, and the victory in the FA Trophy Final in Wembley.

The MyFC website was launched on 26 April 2007 with the initial task of attracting as much public interest as possible. By the end of July that year, 53,000 prospective members had registered their names and e-mail addresses on the site and the search began for a suitable club to purchase. Ebbsfleet United was thought to be the best option for the reasons stated previously and a prior agreement for the purchase was made by mid-November.

The takeover was formally announced on 17 January 2008. Now that the club and website administrators had come to their agreement, the project faced its first practical test. The purchase had to be ratified by the website members, marking the first public vote conducted on the site. By this time, over 21,000 of the prospective members had paid their annual subscription fee, making them eligible to cast their votes. The voting period lasted a week, with the motion to buy Ebbsfleet supported by an overwhelming majority (95.89 per cent). A similar majority voted in support of a motion to approve manager Liam Daish's plans for the January transfer window.

Democracy and engagement — the foundations for success?

A decision had already been made to leave Daish in control of team selection during an acclimatisation period until the end of February, allowing the new owners to grow accustomed to the voting procedure and the squad. So as not to completely derail the club's fortunes by introducing sweeping changes in personnel, all directors kept their jobs and their roles remain crucial to the smooth running of the club. For example, all transfer negotiations for buying new players or selling others are conducted in the same way as before, with the exception that before they finally go through, they must be sanctioned by a member vote.

Unfortunately, the most radical aspect of the new ownership, the picking of each game's starting line-up by the members, did not work as well as was hoped and was subsequently suspended. This issue is the most polemic matter being discussed in the community because it has always been central to the project's premise and ideology. During the 2008/2009 off-season, a new attempt is being made to see how Pick the Team works.

Results

The project effectively implemented a PR campaign, which led to massive coverage by the media. This in turn triggered the registration of more than 53,000 prospective members. Of those prospective members, around 21,000 joined before the takeover was agreed on and around 9,000 others joined after the agreement. This buzz around MyFC also led to a new kit-provider agreement with Nike and a couple of other sponsorship and promotional activities.

On the field, although the team failed to secure promotion to English professional football's FA League 2, it did play at Wembley for the first time, winning the FA Trophy. This success enabled the budget for players to be increased by 30 per cent. The playing budget for the next season has already been approved to be kept at the same levels, which can create a big advantage for the team and boost them to promotion. As the division in which the club plays is at such a level that paying transfer fees for new players is rare, the increase in budget is therefore almost entirely dedicated to wages. As a result, the club has been able to offer increased amounts to players, which in a league where most are only on part-time contracts can make an enormous difference to the amount of time players can spend training during the week. According to manager Liam Daish, this had a significant impact on the club's season, particularly for their FA Trophy campaign, and there was a noticeable upturn in results following an initial acclimatisation period when the team selected by the members suffered a decline in performance.

The reaction of the club's existing fan base to the takeover has been mostly welcoming. For such a small club to suddenly be the focus of so much media attention has been a source of pride and the Ebbsfleet United Supporters' Trust expressed its support for the takeover before its ratification. A number of fans have since become members of MyFC.

The web's number 1 club?

The club has also capitalised on the media interest in the club (a search for Ebbsfleet United on Google generates more than 400,000 results) by signing an agreement with Nike to be the 2008/2009 kit provider.

The 1–0 win over Torquay United in the showpiece final held at Wembley Stadium was attended by over 26,000 fans, an enormous number considering the calibre of the teams playing and a powerful indication of the club's growing public status and fan base increase.

Conclusion

The dawn of a new organisation form?

What makes sport such an ideal breeding ground for such experiments is the degree of loyalty that fans/consumers feel towards their teams/products. Fans will not simply abandon their team if it fails to perform and therefore their role is far more suited to critical input than consumers in most other areas. In addition, the obsessive nature of fandom, especially in football, leads to greater discussion on the hot topics concerning their club by the average fan. All this means that, up until now, football has been a product-led industry, with the clubs that perform best on the pitch by having the best players and coaches gaining the most fans and commercial benefits.

MyFC has, in stark contrast, set out to be a consumer-led organisation, with the team gaining fans and funds through a project that has little to do with the team's performance. In the short term, with the initial boost in funding and the victory by the team in the FA Trophy, the experiment would appear to be on the road to success. It, however, remains to be seen to what extent this success can be sustained when built upon a theory completely counterintuitive to all previous operations within the sport.

As stated earlier, greater democratisation of club ownership is being called for. MyFC seems to present a development of Supporters' Trusts, which are being helped by the Football Task Force to increase fans' participation in football.^{1–3} The idea can also be said to be the digital evolution of the mutual forms proposed by Michie⁴ and Adams and Armitage³ and present in clubs like Barcelona and almost every sports club in Brazil, for example.

Although the project can be deemed successful up until now, the short-term situation, however, does not guarantee the long run. Analysing MyFC as a brand community,¹³ Guimaraes¹⁴ has found dissatisfaction focuses regarding 'the balance between free speech and the sense of community',¹⁵ the formation of 'exclusive clubs' or the exclusion of the majority in the discussions,¹⁶ trust in the management team¹¹ and the relationship with the community.¹⁷

All these issues need careful attention because they can jeopardise MyFC's future, a future that depends not only on the current members, but on new members as well. And there is no doubt that members work as ambassadors of the project both in positive and in negative ways.

From a purely commercial perspective, MyFC represents a groundbreaking enterprise. A company that is owned and administrated, at least on a macro-level, on the internet, by members of the public in

this way is unprecedented. If the project proves successful in the field of sports, an obvious starting point for its massive popularity across the socio-economic spectrum, it could lead the way for similar companies to try this approach in other fields. Similar ideas of consumer-led enterprise are becoming increasingly widespread in society's most competitive industries in some form or another, whether it be Facebook or Youtube. In Michel Gondry's latest film, 'Be Kind Rewind', members of the public help create their own movies with the help and guidance of a video store worker. For now, such things remain fantasy, but the reality might not be that far away.

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