THE GROWING ATTENDANCE MODEL

BY GEOFF WILSON & BAS SCHNATER

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this model is to provide football federations, leagues and clubs with a framework on how they can grow attendance on game days. There is a general acceptance that achieving success on the pitch will have a positive impact in terms of attendance. Relying solely on results is a poor and unsustainable strategy to growing attendance, therefore we created this model. Admittedly, attendance can also depend on the opponent the team plays. In sports economics, this is called the drawing potential of the away team (Kesenne, 2014). This does have an impact on attendance but again, it is not a sustainable strategy as a team will only play against a top team a limited number of times at home per season (this also is the case for local derby games).

Read: The Economics of Fan Engagement by Bas Schnater

Why should a league, club or federation want to increase attendance? Apart from the obvious financial benefit (ticketing, food and beverage sales on game days), more attendees mean a more valuable proposition for sponsors/broadcasters as well helping to create the right atmosphere during home games.

This model is intended for use by football federations (national teams), leagues and clubs. The model can also be applied to other sports (like rugby, cricket etc.) who have regular league appearances over a sustained period though this is not included in the scope of this blog.

Clubs and federations should focus on the elements that are within their control (e.g. pricing, customer service, stadium cleanliness, etc) and mitigate against the elements they can't control (e.g. other competitors, competitive imbalance of the league, weather, team performance, away team etc).





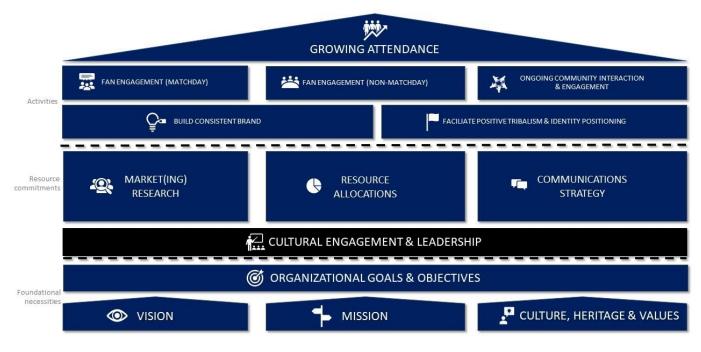


The model has been created by Geoff Wilson and Bas Schnater based on their own club and National federation experiences within the football industry. The model has been reviewed and supported by Mark Bradley (www.fanexperienceco.com), David Fowler and Dr Paul Blakey (University of Worcester) and has been tested with leagues and teams in terms of application and usability before publication.

THE MODEL IS BROKEN INTO THREE BROAD ELEMENTS:



THE OVERALL MODEL



September 2019 | © Bas Schnater & Geoff Wilson







CHAPTER 1. FOUNDATION NECESSITIES

The first broad element that must be in place in order to realise sustainable attendance growth is to have a clearly defined vision, mission and culture & heritage. A clear vision and mission provide clarity of purpose and direction for the entire organisation across all departments. The vision statement clearly defines where you want your federation or club to be in the future. In essence, it states your ambition as an organisation, providing direction on where you are heading. The mission simply describes the current purpose and activities - what you do, for whom, and what are the benefits. A mission statement helps to clarify the role of the federation and activities with its stakeholders. It asks the question, why do we exist? The goals and objectives derived from this vision and mission will then guide the organisation through this process. It is therefore important that growing attendance is an important part of the long-term agenda of the organisation. This ensures all departments are aligned and justifies the allocation of necessary resources. Everyone should buy into what your trying to achieve in terms of sustaining or growing attendance at home games - it's not just the job of the marketing department!

A club or national team must have a clear understanding of its cultural surroundings which are deeply rooted in the team's history and heritage. Closely linked to this are the club's or national federation's values: this provides a framework on how staff and fans should behave. Having core values allows fans to identify themselves with the team and brings the fans together in terms of their support. These core values express who they are as a group, what they believe in and what they stand for., Being part of the 'tribe or clan' is one of the basic human needs (Funk, Filo, Beaton, & Pritchard, 2009) with the behaviour of staying part of the group through the highs and lows of the team's performance on the field, (a concept called performance tolerance) (de Ruyter & Wetzels, 2000). A great example is the fans of the Northern Ireland International team. They have created a core identity (the Green and white army; GAWA) which combines a set of values & culture which are portrayed in the stands during games - fun, passion, togetherness, inclusiveness. A club or national teams culture determines whether, for example, the focus is on fun or whether it promotes the club's history/heritage. The culture creates the atmosphere that permeates every aspect of the club or national team. Is the atmosphere relaxed or intense? Supportive or competitive? This should all be considered during this stage of the model when growing attendance. The club or national federation should identify

with the values, culture, history and heritage alongside the fans so that a strong foundation is established of who they are, what they believe in and how it is portrayed on match day and non-match days (Wilson & Fowler, 2016). The fan culture ensures a sense of ownership and togetherness with the team.

Read: Fan Engagement, from match day to every day by Geoff Wilson & David Fowler

"History, heritage and then the values are what fans really link to."

- Geoff Wilson



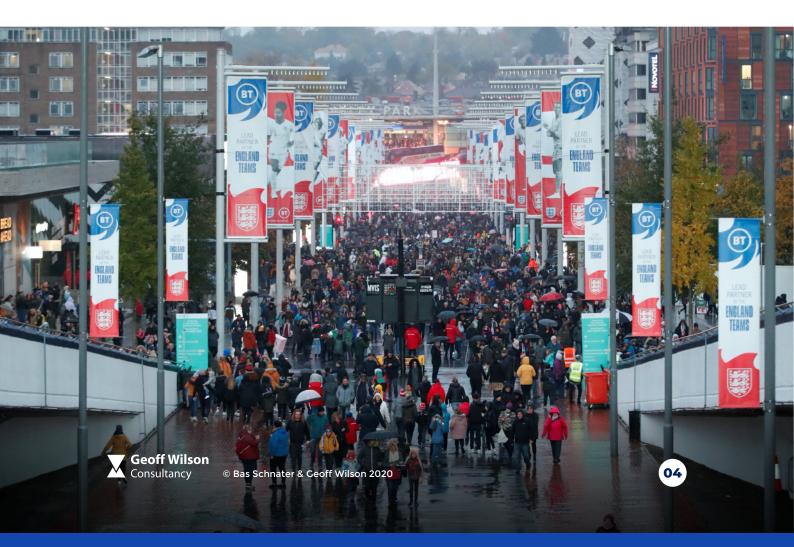




If the organisation is not 100% clear on why it exists, where it is heading and does not have a deep understanding of its cultures/values/history and heritage, then whatever activity is planned is not grounded in a firm foundation (Draebye, 2017). Also, it will undoubtedly lead to internal communication inconsistencies which can result in external branding inconsistencies. It will make it more difficult for fans to connect themselves to the team as different interpretations about the brand will exist (Boyle, 2017).

Then what we thought was really interesting was how many people in our research mentioned 'leadership'. What that means is, if I'm the boss and someone comes up to me and says "I want to improve attendance", but I'm all about sponsorship, then growing attendance wouldn't be top of my priority. If it's not top of my priorities, I'm not going to drive it. So you need a driver."

- Geoff Wilson





CHAPTER 2. RESOURCE COMMITMENTS

To grow attendance sustainably, resources must be allocated strategically. This includes:

- Cultural engagement and leadership. The support of the Chair, CEO and/or Marketing Director are fundamental when seeking to grow attendance. It is strong leadership that not only will provide direction, but it will also ensure that implementation is operationalized and the necessary appropriate resources will be reserved (Elberse, 2013). Senior leaders must be fully engaged in the programme from the very start and commit appropriate resources to make it happen (Bradley, 2019). This includes growing attendance being part of strategic meetings. The culture within the organisation must allow staff to safely share new ideas and programmes. Leadership should therefore develop a healthy working culture. It is this senior leader who then connects this to key elements such as heritage, history and organisation values (ECA, 2018).
- 2) Marketing research. It is vital to conduct qualitative and quantitative research with your fans. It is important to get an overall evaluation on the quality of the fan experience. This will help to understand what improvements are needed. Analysis of transactional data (ticketing,

The impact of local competition from other sports and entertainment offerings must be taken into consideration. Who are they, what is their experience like? Are you both going after the same audience? Research must be conducted to understand the competition better as well as developing an appropriate action plan.

Finally, it is also important to conduct desk research. It is important to gain a deep understanding of your potential fan base. What are the different segments who you don't reach yet, what is the customer lifetime value assigned to each segment, how can these segments be reached? It is vital to conduct desk research regularly and then to create plans on how to gain access to these potential fans.

- 1) Resource allocation includes areas such as; training hours provided to ensure well-trained stewards, parking staff, friendly hospitality staff, bar staff etc (Ferrand, 2017). These front-line fan contact moments all need to be staffed by people who have been given the right training i.e. customer service, dealing with families, security. Nothing is more negative to a fan experience than bad customer service from club employees. An experienced marketing team must also be in place with the right marketing budget assigned to be able to connect to the desired audience. In addition, ongoing training in staff must be maintained alongside the recruitment of staff with the right skills and personality across the organisation to employees who are in direct contact with fans. Also, budgets should be reserved to improve the fan experience. As Formula 1 has shown, investments in fan engagement and the fan experience can result in increased revenues and therefore seem to be a commercially logical choice.
- 2) Communications strategy. A communications strategy focuses on areas such as: communications objectives, implementation plan, annual content plan, relevant platforms/channels to market for your various fan segments. A clear, simple and consistent message must be created which can unite fans and engage them beyond the matchday experience. In addition,







compelling content which is delivered across a range of digital and non-digital platforms should be actioned. As Fiona Green, managing director of Winners puts it, key is to "get the right message, to the right person, at the right time, on the right platform" (Green, 2018). This is where CRM can also be used. The club and or national federation should distribute this content in the right way via direct channels (social media, web, email, app, messaging,) and also via the channels of communication partners (influencers, digital media, traditional media etc). Engaging and interactive content with a consistent tone of voice must be established. This content must be amplified through a wide range of partnerships such as external digital blogs/websites, the players channels or broadcasters. The content created should not only focus on the club/national teams' history and heritage but also on the current team / players / legends / heroes. Especially in the age of social media, bringing the fans closer to the players will give them a stronger affinity to the club/national team.

"We went to some sporting organisations and they had no marketing departments but they wanted to grow attendance. But there's no growing attendance within their goals and objectives. Whereas those that did have fans considered in their goals meant they could assign resources to improving in that area."

- Geoff Wilson

It is vital to ensure the same creative message is communicated through all these channels regularly. To feed the appetite of the modern football fan living in an information society, strong storytelling techniques should be applied around game days to extend the game day experience to more than 90 minutes (Rein, Kotler, & Shields, 2006). It will help fans to warm-up and to follow the team overall rather than just following the games.

Refer to the KNVB video which show how they are applying storytelling around the game: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=holqp3rUx5Q

Growing attendance does not mean you only focus on acquiring 'new' fans. Communication & Marketing strategies must be developed for the various sectors of your fan base such as the 'hard core' and casual fan. Retention strategies must be implemented alongside acquisition plans as the cost to acquire a new fan can be significantly higher than retaining an existing fan.







JAMES BAYLISS, EDITOR OF DIGITAL SPORT:

"If you take both ends of the spectrum, I've been to the Emirates, I like to consider myself a good fan and will support the team no matter what, but there's almost a sense of expectation at the ground. This sense of 'I paid a lot of money', 'I want to be entertained', and that's from the fans alone, but from the club alone there's also this idea that clubs are thinking 'you're just the fans'. 'you don't know what you're talking about' and there seems to be no unity. On the other end of the spectrum, I've been to Hampton and Richmond a few times who play in National League South, and over there the fans help the club. They clean the stadium, they support it and run it. And therefore the club makes a bigger attempt to keep the fans really involved in the community. So, what would you say to the really big clubs about how they can maintain that right balance and create a community without having someone like Jurgen Klopp who pulls it all together?"

GEOFF WILSON:

"Go and learn from a community club. And then what you do is you cater it into your vision, culture, heritage and values."





CHAPTER 3. ACTIVITIES

This element of the model deals with putting the activities in place to realise the strategic elements of the model. As mentioned earlier, it is vital to have a consistent message across all platforms telling the same story. This will help in unified team identification and will stimulate positive tribalism and identity. This can be done through leveraging key moments in the team's history. Clubs and federations should facilitate this accordingly. The brand should therefore be consistent, not only in its messaging but in the overall delivery of the brand promise (Willems, 2017)

Another element how sports organisations can grow attendance sustainably is by allowing and facilitating positive tribalism to happen. A good example of positive tribalism is that of the Tartan Army in Scotland. The use of 'the tartan' provides a strong symbol that unites the fans for the national team – tapping into their history and heritage as a country.

The final strategic elements required to growing attendance include:

1) Improve the fan experience (Match day)

This pillar covers fan engagement on match days both at the stadium and away from the stadium. This focuses on the following areas:

- Customer journey to and from the stadium. Walking in the shoes of the fans is a great way to identify the customer journey on game days. (Schnater, 2016)
- Quality assessment of the physical matchday product
 - Cleanliness of the stadium, price of tickets relative to the overall experience, fans activity at the stadium (quality of entertainment in the fan zones etc), quality of food and beverages, helpful/friendly and knowledgeable staff/stewards, access into the stadium (car parking, turnstiles access), experience of shop (range of products, quality of products), atmosphere inside and outside the stadium (this also includes fan songs and singing sections). In many cases the location of the stadium can be a hindrance, but this is where frequent transportation to and from the stadium comes into play. The stadium or venue plays an important part in growing attendances. For example, families might not come to the stadium unless there are clean toilets or "family areas", disabled spectators need specific facilities as do fans of an older generation.

Various ticketing options should be created by the club and federation to meet the needs of their various fan segments. It is important to find the right ticketing options that optimises attendance (ticket packages, pricing, various places to purchase a ticket).

Data can be used to identify key pain points in the fans experience. This insight should be used to improve or change the experience on game day. Also, regular market research will expose new trends which will become part of the fans' expectation. For example, esports is a great market trend but the concourses do need to have space to fit in esports pods. If the concourses are usually congested and you add more elements to it, it will have a contrasting effect.







1) Improve the fan engagement (non-match day)

This pillar covers fan engagement outside match days both at the stadium and away from the stadium. This will include areas such as:

- Attracting new events to the venue (esports etc)
- Ensuring a high-quality experience for fans on museum/stadium tours
- Use of the venue and stadiums for business
- Retail and other uses during the day
- Create unique experiences for fans (for example, train with the team, travel with the team, eat with the team or a player)

In addition to organising activities at the venue, it is important to also include projects, programmes and activities away from the venue on a regular basis. This will strengthen the bond with the sports brand and will lead to increased interest in visiting a game.

1) Ongoing Community interaction and engagement

This pillar focuses on the constant engagement with the community. It is vital that community activities are not one-off programmes but foster deep engagement with the community performed regularly throughout the year (ECA, 2019). These programmes must seek to embed the club or national team into the community and therefore become a logical part of life. The club or federation must try to connect this with partnership activities which link into the overall strategic plan. Once the club or federation has become an integrated part of the community, attendance will grow.

"For this model to work you've got to go through all these building blocks. You can't do one or two. All the building blocks must go together so everyone at the club is working together in one direction, and that for me is so important."

- Geoff Wilson





WHITE PAPER CONCLUSION

The aim of this model is to provide football leagues, clubs and national federations with key building blocks to help grow attendance at their matches. We understand that sporting performance also plays a part in growing attendance but as an industry we can't solely rely or focus on this. This model provides tools to help grow attendance sustainably.

This blog provides an overview on growing attendance at clubs and federations. Behind the model is a range of toolkits and templates for each stage that would bring about implementation of the model.

Why not get in touch with us to gain a greater understanding of our model:

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ABOUT US



Geoff runs his own Sports Consultancy, working with clients such as FIFA, UEFA, AFC and FIBA across the world. He is also on the board of Tourism Northern Ireland. You can follow Geoff on twitter **@geoffwnjwilson** connect on LinkedIn at **linkedin.com/in/geoffwnjwilson**



Bas has worked on the club side for many years where he successfully implemented data-driven strategies and has grown attendance. Now, he works in media and is an independent sports consultant who works for federations and clubs around Europe to increase attendance. You can follow Bas on twitter **@BasSchnater** or connect on LinkedIn.

HOW THE MODEL CAME TO BE WHAT IT IS TODAY, BY GEOFF WILSON

BACKGROUND TO STARTING THE MODEL AND DEVELOPING THE FOUNDATION SECTION

I co-authored this with Bas, who was more on the club side, whereas I was more on the association side. As we started to go into more than just football clubs and football associations, we started to look at other sports and found that many people have the issue of wanting to grow attendance. We were were finding out was that this was a recurring issue that sports organisations had. We first wondered whether their thinking was too short-term, like they would tell everyone they had a match on, then turn the tap off until the next match comes along and they'd turn the tap back on.

Therefore, people's marketing approach was very short-term. And as this realisation started to come into both our minds, we started to think that there's got to be something more long-term to think about. There were a number of projects that Bas and I worked on together, and when we







started to work on those projects, the same common issues came across, both within football at club and association level, and other specifically team sports such as Netball and Rugby.

So to try to understand this we started to jot down areas that we thought were common and/or had a common challenge. We then broke this down into three models. The first one was foundation. The next was the resources, and the third was the activities. What we found in essence was that people didn't have a very clear vision of where they're looking to get to as an organisation. They were looking like they were going to struggle with, not only attendance, but with getting their brand right and getting deep engagement within their fanbase. They didn't have a very clear 'why we exist'. So they were maybe doing hundreds of things and so they were getting away from their core reason for existing. So if you announce that you're going to put a man and a woman in space, you're not there for something else, they're not there to organise a football match. So you need a really clear focus on what you're there to do. But everybody must know this in the organisation.

And then we started to go to federations and clubs, and what we really found which was really unique with the whole culture, heritage and more importantly the values, was that people love to be associated with positive values. If you take Everton Football Club for example, they would claim to be 'the people's club'. If you said Sheffield, you'd say "they're made from steel". So history, heritage and then the values are what fans really link to.

Clubs and federations in sport have started to have a clear vision and reason as to why they existed, and a really deep culture with heritage and values. These people had a real starting base. But with the people who didn't have that, that's where we had to start our work. Then we thought, ok, those who have a clear vision will also have clear goals to focus their attention on. Goals are much smarter, measurable objectives. Bringing it back to growing attendance, if you're not thinking about the fan engagement, well then you're never going to assign the right resources, financial or human, to improving the issue, and that's what we found was so important.

We went to some sporting organisations and they had no marketing departments but they wanted to grow attendance. But there's no growing attendance within their goals and objectives. Whereas those that did have fans considered in their goals meant they could assign resources to improving in that area.

Then what we thought was really interesting after talking to some academia people and speaking to a wider pool of experts, was how many mentioned 'leadership'. What that means is, if someone comes up to me and says "I want to improve attendance", but I'm all about sponsorship, growing attendance wouldn't be top of my priority. If it's not top of my priorities, I'm not going to drive it. So you need a driver.

That driver must be at the senior, leadership level. If they are not sold on that type of activity, then you're going to struggle to improve attendance. So leadership was really, really, really important.





USE OF RESOURCES AT CLUBS

So that was the baseline, then we worked on the resource part of the model. At first we broke it down into three areas: the marketing resource, the research and then the resource and communications. So under the research, like anything, you've got to go and know what's wanted. So for example, when I went to Orlando City Football Club, I received an email the next day saying "how was your experience?". The Americans focus on the fan, on the customer, and they become a guest. The fan is a guest of the organisation, and that's everything from how they get into the stadium, like car-parking which they get, to even the friendliness of the stewards. I think a lot of this is down to the fact the employees are highly paid but also highly trained.

One thing that's important to know is that this model deals with the amateur side of team sports, not just the professional. I'm involved in a club called Crumlin United in Northern Ireland and we've tested the model. What we have at Crumlin is a very clear vision and mission. We have a history and a heritage and it's all about being a community club.

Make your club a community hub, and that doesn't have to be in the stadium. Be a community club in the community.

It's not just down to the marketing person, it must be everyone not the front line to make the fan experience the best possible. The person at the stadium serving you the burgers. How is he serving the burger? Is he serving it with a grump or with a smile? Everyone delivers the personality of the organisation. That helps that overall experience.

Everton's message is 'the people's club'. It always needs to be around that idea that it's the people that make the club. So that must always come out, that communication includes not only engaging people who go to the game, but people who don't as well. If someone has bought from you but they don't go to the game, the club should know that and know they have a link with us, so how do we get them to come to a game? And when you approach people and promote the club it must be the same creative delivering the same message. There must be a brand and a consistency.

USE OF RESOURCES AT CLUBS

This is all about, how do you improve the match day experience? Is the venue clean? Are the toilets clean? Is there easy parking? Is there quality food? That all has an impact. But then you've got fan engagement on non-match-day. What are you doing outside of game-days to engage your fans? And the last part, though I think it's incredibly important, is having a deep community programme. I don't mean footballers giving gifts out at Christmas, which of course is good. I mean a 40-week programme that happens every year which keeps the club involved in the community, for kids and families to get involved in and to learn from the club. What's important to me is that this model is not just about football, it's for a whole range of team sports which compete in a league format across all levels of the sport.

For it to work you've got to go through all these building blocks. You can't do one or two. All the building blocks must go together so everyone at the club is working together in one direction, and that for me is so important.







WHY DID WE BUILD THIS?

Not everyone is going to win their league, so how are they going to keep attendance high? How do you engage your community and bring everyone together? Well, because not everybody's going to win, and because sport has a way of bringing everyone together, we believe that there was a gap in the market for a piece of academia, a model, that people can adapt and implement for their own club.

JAMES BAYLISS, EDITOR OF DIGITAL SPORT:

"Geoff and Bas' model clearly outlines the way sports clubs at all levels can work to establish their values, ethos and a culture that ensures fans feel valued by their team, but also included and cared for. Fan engagement and the relationship between match-goer and club has never been as important as it is today, as so many platforms are available for entities to reach out to their followers around the globe. The importance of maintaining this relationship cannot be underestimated. While it is crucial, and perhaps most clubs understand that now, not all of them get the process right whatsoever, but this model is here to help clubs follow a set of steps and become one with their fanbase."

