



Marketing brands to fans

Peter Draper explains how he communicates the Manchester United brand to its disparate base of 50 million fans

Thousands of people have gravitated to Manchester United and become fans over the years. Some come via their dad, some because they're born close by and a vast number of people come because of the power of the media.

Total dedication

The good thing, unlike pop groups, is that football fans tend not to change their allegiance as to whom they're going to support. So once they 'are one', it's up to Manchester United to look after that fan's interest and work with it, knowing that these people have a special relationship with the club. The fans don't up and away like you would leave a bad pint of lager. That's how customers treat normal brands; they don't treat football brands like that, and we're very lucky in that respect.

I think Manchester United stands for excitement and flamboyance, a certain sense of style in the way we play, and of course success. The will and desire to be successful drives everything and I think that, in that respect we are a different kind of organisation.

The business of escapology

We're in the sports business clearly, but we're in the entertainment business as well. What I talk about is being in the 'escapology' business. Billionaires or dustbin men can come here or engage with Manchester United and escape from whatever it is they do day to day.

Success drives us – the standards are set on the pitch. On the football side, our success rate is very high so we need to be as successful in the way we manage the business, which helps support the team. All our resources go back into regenerating the product to the highest calibre.

A lot of people don't like talking about football clubs as business – but we do. Our job is to take the best elements of Manchester United and market them to millions of fans and millions of people.

The team is the demonstrable part of the brand. The football team is at the centre of the club and surrounding that is the rest of the business. So it's not two separate circles, it's a target and a bull's-eye. What I see is the team at the centre of the business and the customers at the centre of our thinking around that.

Players are clearly a visual identifier for the brand. You don't get a better visual identifier for this brand than David Beckham or Sir Alex Ferguson. Those are the visible signposts and represent, in the most vibrant form, the core of the business called Manchester United.

I think that generally speaking, sport has treated customers pretty poorly because they've had this 'kidnap mentality.' Somebody has given you their heart and soul and it's been easy to say 'thank you very much, we'll just take that and not give much back.' I think we've changed dramatically in the last few years and now understand the need to answer our customers and respond to their wants and needs.

Rewarding fans' allegiance

The responsibility is to market to fans without being over-exploitative. They have given us their hearts and their minds at some point in time and said 'I want to be a Manchester United fan', and then along comes some sort of mammoth marketing machine that says 'we're going to market to you'. So there's a real sense of responsibility and doing the right thing for our fans is what occupies most of our time.

We've made vast strides in the last four or five years about understanding what kind of relationships people want. Some just want a match-going relationship. Unfortunately we've got 50 million fans; they can't do that every week; it's physically impossible because we can only seat 67,000 people here and we actually have to try to be loyal to the core fans who come here on a regular basis. So the whole brand mix in terms of nurturing the continued relationship between the club and its fans is complicated.

Our vision is to be the most pioneering football club in the world. We've got over 500 full-time staff and around £130m in turnover. It's a small business but a huge brand. In terms of market capitalisation value, we've been as high as \$1bn (£640m). We're not that level today but that's the way the market is.

Teamwork is everything

We have a good dialogue with the managers and the players about responsibility to fans and customers and they do a great deal of work to try and engender that relationship. We know what the players are here for, primarily they're here to play and train and rest, that's what enables us to get the product out on the field, but there are other things that we want them to do. We know that they become a visual manifestation of the brand.

The important thing is to work with your customers. I don't care whether you're in the airline business or the sports goods business, you really have to think about the customer in the first instance and then develop products and services that are meaningful to them, because otherwise you're dead in the water. I think football has got so much to learn from other industries. But I think in the final analysis you've got to look to the football field and say teamwork is everything.

Management have got to embrace change and bring people to the party who are willing to work in a team environment – more and more so today, otherwise some other team somewhere else will kick you off the park – metaphorically speaking.

