

HULL



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HULL F.C.



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1865

Manchester United and Manchester City, Liverpool and Everton, even Rangers and Celtic, no local rivalry is as fierce as Hull FC and Hull KR. That's because in these parts Rugby League is in the blood. Until a couple of years ago, Hull was the only major city in Europe never to have had a top division football team but in rugby the city's hardly ever been out of the top flight and has usually boasted two teams up there. You can even see that in the name of the club – Hull FC. Unlike virtually every other UK football club, Hull City has to be content with Hull AFC (Association Football Club).

Broken time

HULL FC is in fact one of the oldest clubs in the League and was formed by a group of ex-public schoolboys from York in 1865. In 1895, the club was one of the first to desert Rugby Union following one of the greatest rows in British sporting history. The dispute was officially about "broken-time", which was fundamentally a row between representatives of the northern working classes and the southern leisured classes and their diverging opinions on the emphasis that should be placed on the competitive and recreational elements in the sport.

In the 1890s, the average wage for a northern mill worker or miner was 26 shillings for a five and a half day working week based on 12 hour shifts. Travelling to a game often meant losing a shift and

consequent financial hardship for the predominately working class members of the northern teams. The southern players were drawn mainly from university and public school backgrounds, so they could comfortably withstand the costs of playing. For some years it had been alleged that certain northern clubs had been making "broken-time" payments and when the RFU consistently refused to legitimise this loss of earnings compensation, a group of northern clubs decided to hold a special general meeting on 29th August 1895 at the George Hotel, Huddersfield. Twenty of the twenty-one clubs in attendance voted to break away from the RFU and form a new organisation called the Northern Rugby Football Union. As well as Hull, founder members included Wigan, St. Helens, Leeds, Bradford, Huddersfield and other stalwarts of the future sport of rugby league.

Professionalism

The Northern Union game rapidly professionalised and Hull prospered. In 1913 they paid a world record £600 transfer fee, plus an astounding £14 per match, for three-quarter Billy Batten. In the '20s and '30s Hull experienced mixed fortunes, but a very special event took place on September 26th, 1936. It was a game at the Boulevard against Wigan, which Hull dramatically won 13-12 – very much against the run of form. So thrilled were the Hull fans by the result that they began to sing a cowboy song, "Old Faithful", which had topped the charts. The song stuck, the fans loved it and it soon became the club anthem. In these days of copy-cat chants in professional sport, Old Faithful stands out as one of the few unique songs on the terraces.

Hull FC played at the Boulevard for 107 years and moved to their new home at the £44m state-of-the-art Kingston Communications Stadium in January 2003. By then much water had flowed under the Humber Bridge. The Super League had formed, Sky was heavily



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Case Study

involved and antipodean players had permeated the clubs. The first sport that paid its players really was becoming professional now. Yet its image, especially outside the north of England remained one of flat caps, brawny blokes, Eddie Wareing and 'oop and unders'. As a northerner but a lifelong devotee of the round ball game, I was inclined to agree. How wrong I was! Having seen inside Hull FC, having seen how the club, how the business is run and how they treat their fans, I think most big name sports clubs and many blue chip companies could learn a lot about customer-focus and implementing Service-Profit Chain principles if they spent a few days with a Hull FC Director.

Fan feedback

In 2009 the club asked The Leadership Factor to conduct its first formal fan survey. It wanted to understand how the fans perceived the club and, above all, how it could involve them more, address their concerns and deliver what they wanted. Two way communication was the main priority for improvement that came out of the survey. Although fans felt that the club was better at communicating information outwards than it was at proactively listening to the things fans wanted to say, both could be much better. This prompted the club to introduce a raft of innovative measures to address the fans' concerns on this subject.

Call a Director

26 times a year, every alternate Wednesday between 5pm and 6pm, Hull FC fans can pick up the phone and speak directly to a Director on any subject of their choosing. Calls will be answered by one of the Executive Directors, James Rule, CEO, Tony Sutton, FD or the Community Director Jon Flatman. The subjects that fans have called about have varied widely from the obvious ones of team performance and team selection, to why Sky has moved a high profile local derby fixture from Friday to Thursday evening, to reporting a stadium issue such as safety, right the way down to simple questions like what time does the coach leave for the next away game!

Airlie Night

This is a popular phone-in programme on KCFM Radio that goes out every Wednesday at 7pm. Every alternate Wednesday from 7pm to 8pm, CEO, James Rule is in the studio to respond live on air to fans' points.

"Tell us"

For some people, picking up the phone and talking to a Director may be intimidating. If so they can use the "Tell us" email channel. It's certainly a popular one with over 1,000 emails in the first year. As well as the subjects above, some of the emails can be quite emotional (perhaps it's easier to let off steam in an email than a phone call to a Director), others may just be a simple thank you for a great family day out at the last home game. Either way, fans get an immediate acknowledgement followed by a personal response from a Director within 48 hours. For people without email there's a 24/7 "Fans Line" which they can call and leave a message at any time to make their point.

Fans' Forum

The club had already introduced an annual Fans' Forum but following the survey the



fans' appetite for involvement with the club was so apparent that it was decided to increase the meeting to three times a year – one pre-season, one mid-season and one at the end of the season. At many professional sports clubs, the Fans' Forum has the reputation of being orchestrated by the club, both in terms of agenda setting and membership. Not at Hull FC. Instead of a small committee of a dozen or so, anyone can attend the Hull FC Fans' Forum. And they do, with average attendance running at over 400. Also, to give fans the maximum opportunity to participate, two of the forums are held at the stadium but the third moves into the city centre at the Hull Truck theatre. And if you still can't attend, no problem. The event is broadcast live on KCFM radio and on the Hull FC website (where a podcast can also be downloaded later). There's a roving mic at the event enabling anyone to ask any question or make any point they wish.

FC Voices

The Fans' Forum is not organised by the club but by FC Voices, the independent supporters' club. FC Voices and Hull FC are both committed to working closely together to ensure that the fans' views feed into the club's decision making. A good example is the official matchday magazine, "The 18th Man", which was extensively re-shaped with input from FC Voices. The 68 page mag is good value at £3 and includes far more articles and features likely to be of genuine interest to fans than most matchday programmes I have seen. As a thank you to fans for their input, 10,000 copies were given away at the first match of the season and circulation is cur-



Call
a Director



rently running at around 8,000, a far bigger programme to attendance ratio than most clubs achieve. It is also used by the club to express its views, e.g. the regular two page "From the Chair", featuring the views of chairperson Kath Hetherington.

New strap line

In 2009 Hull FC was very keen to learn more about how the fans perceived the club and one of the survey techniques used to achieve this was to ask respondents to encapsulate their image of Hull FC in no more than three words. Some of the suggestions were no surprise, e.g. 'Old Faithful', the song of choice on the terrace, 'black and white', 'Airlie Bird', 'established 1865' and 'loyal fans'. However, one of the themes that came through strongly was the fact that the fans were very proud of Hull – the city as well as the club. This led to the development of "Hull&Proud" which now features alongside the crest on all official communications and publications and has been adopted in a big way by the fans too.

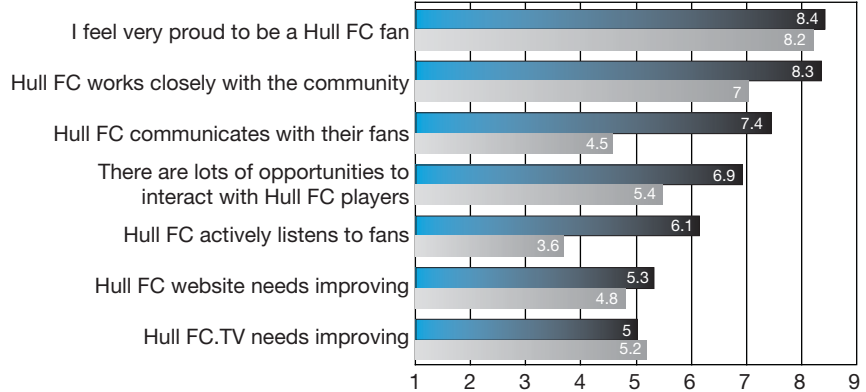
2010 survey

Following the success of the first survey, the 2010 survey was considerably expanded into a full fan satisfaction survey as well as updating the communications-focused questions that predominated on the first survey. The good news, as shown in the chart, is that the fans are much more satisfied with both aspects of two-way communications – hardly surprising in view of the monumental efforts made by the club.

There is also a very high level of fan awareness of the new initiatives such as Call a Director, Tell Us and the expanded Fans' Forum.



Chart 1: 2009-2010 comparisons



Fan satisfaction

The 2010 satisfaction survey has shown that Hull FC fans are very satisfied with most aspects of the matchday experience including safety and stewarding at the stadium, the interaction with other fans, the ticketing and the matchday programme. Compared with other professional sports clubs, Hull FC fans are much more satisfied with the value for money of the season ticket, the matchday atmosphere and the toilet facilities. However, there are some areas where they are less satisfied. As is often the case at football and rugby stadiums, satisfaction is lower with the food and service from the catering kiosks and with pre-match entertainment, which gives the club and the Stadium Management Company some areas to work on over the next twelve months.

Family occasion

Compared with many football clubs, one of the things that stands out about the 2010 Hull FC fan survey is the extent to which the match is a family experience. Around half the respondents said they attend matches as a family, either with their spouse/partner or with their partner and/or children. This obviously helps to explain why there is a higher than normal level of fan satisfaction with factors such as safety and atmosphere. A high level of family attendance is also a great commercial benefit for clubs. Compared with single males, families tend to spend more on revenue generating products such as the catering, the programme, the lottery

and they tend to be more loyal to the club rather than just the team. Hull FC is already getting a lot right for maximising family attendance and loyalty, including the atmosphere, the safety, the clean toilets and the popularity amongst families of the programme, the mascot and the club lottery. However, the survey has shown where improvements could be made for families such as the catering, the pre-match entertainment and more zoning in the stadium so that families can sit together, as can the more noisy fans who want to spend the match chanting and voicing their views on Hull KR!

Customer-focused culture

One of the main achievements of Hull FC's Board is the extent to which they have successfully developed a genuinely customer-focused culture at the club. This is still very unusual at professional sports clubs, which is very strange from a business perspective. Peter Kenyon was probably the first visionary to understand the extent to which fans' loyalty and propensity to spend money with a club will be influenced by their overall satisfaction with the club and the customer experience it delivers, not just the performance of the team. Winning is obviously very important to football and rugby fans, but it's when team performance is not up to fans' expectations that it really pays off to treat fans as important customers, to involve them and communicate with them and to give them the kind of experience they want at matches and in their other dealings with the club. **S**