



Game of the People Insights:

Harnessing the Media

Today's non-league club has many options when communicating with its supporters, its sponsors and the greater community. Things have changed substantially since the days when the local newspaper and the match programme were the only outlets. But the new paradigm delivers many more opportunities for the small non-league club. This paper outlines what clubs can do and how they can do it.

Plenty of atmospheric noise

Non-League football clubs are competing on many fronts for attention: rival football clubs; other sporting entities; social news; the political correctness agenda; and marketing-driven content. Given the current structure of local newspapers, much depends on how a club "spoon-feeds" the local media. The days of the local reporter attending football matches are largely gone. Devoting resources to an entity that may only attract 200-300 people is impractical for many newspaper groups. So, a non-league club has to be forward thinking about the way it conducts its media efforts.

For a start, a club should examine what is NEEDED and what is NICE TO HAVE. It must also ensure scarce financial resources are directed in the best possible way. For example, is it worth spending cash on something where there is not a need? While everyone wants to think of their club as Real Madrid, if West Ham & Egg Sandwich Albion attracts only 50 people, the need for a sophisticated website and social media campaign is unwarranted when all you really need is to slap some posters around town to drum up support every fortnight.

Getting the right mix

The rise of the internet has affected every form of print media. We live in an age where convenience is the underlying mantra – food, finance, utilities, shopping, information are all far more accessible than they have ever been before. When the internet exploded, people were quick to predict the demise of print media and newspapers. People want information more than ever before, but few are willing to pay for it in the way we used to hand over a £1 coin and get a newspaper in exchange. Travel into London on a commuter train and look at how many people are reading a newspaper. Hardly any. But many are reading newspapers online via a tablet or smartphone. Convenience.

There's a generational aspect to consider. Younger people treat electronic media as the norm, therefore your media mix must be contemporary and flexible. And tools like social media should be used carefully.

Ideally, the media mix should comprise:

- Website – your primary channel
- Social media – Facebook, Twitter, SMS
- Email distribution
- Print – the programme, posters

Consistency of message, consistency of appearance

Before looking at installing various forms of media, it is equally important to ensure there is consistency across the media platform of any club. As the old adage goes, "everyone should be singing from the same songsheet". In other words, rogue

spokesmen should be discouraged, personal agendas discarded. The club should have a set of values that its messaging is built around. In other words, what the club stands for and what it does not represent.

This need not be a complex task, just a few well-chosen statements that should provide guiding principles. Also appoint spokespeople.

Likewise, and this may not be easy to achieve for smaller, less-resourced clubs, the club should represent a brand. A uniform appearance, be it colouring, style or packaging, should also be implemented. Not only is this "professional" but also breeds familiarity – if everyone sees, for example, a Red and White Robin in town, they begin to associate it with the club. Corporate Visual Identity and Branding may seem like grandiose labels for a small-town club, but they are both part of the zeitgeist. Word of mouth is no longer a strong enough tool to build crowds and publicity.

Some clubs have already made in-roads in this direction. A good example is Sheffield FC, who have used the club's heritage (the oldest club in the world) as a clever marketing ploy.

Branding should include the following elements: colours of the club; crest of the club; motto or slogan; consistent use of imagery; agreed nomenclature; consistent stable of products; consistent use of typography.

The website – your shop window

Start-up costs for websites can be significant and run into £000s. But you can "buy" off-the-shelf sites for next to no initial outlay if your audience does not warrant the expenditure. The downside of some of these sites is they are uniform and limited in their scope, but for many clubs, they are functional enough.

The website should be a mix between news, information (static and variable) and interaction. The programme is no longer the main channel of choice for communicating with your supporters, so as much resource should be devoted to the website as possible.

Websites need to be fed, however, so the club should appoint a webmaster for technical issues and an individual or editorial team to provide regular content. To many clubs only update their sites spasmodically, and often aligned to results. In other words, when they lose, the update is lack lustre or completely missing. Websites should be updated promptly whatever the result.

The reasons why the website is now the primary channel are as follows:

- Costs – once set-up, annual fees may be your only costs
- Immediacy
- Breadth of audience – print media cannot compete

Social Media – today's gossip

Twitter and Facebook are rapidly usurping websites as the most popular information channel. Especially popular with younger supporters, the use of both is now an important element of any club's media offering. The power of Twitter is now undeniable – as a matchday tool, to get newsflashes out, to gather information and to publicise your website or facebook.

The latter can be very effective: Twitter allows you to push people towards more substantial content on the website. Importantly, it places the club at the heart of a virtual community – it is the new advertising but more cost effective and more ubiquitous.

Facebook, however, is less effective and likely to attract more unwanted noise. A presence on Facebook should be part of the mix, but requires more maintenance than Twitter or indeed a website.

It makes sense to appoint a separate social media expert within your ranks, preferably choosing someone from more recent generations to administer it.

Email distribution

Email has come a long way since its early days and there are incredibly effective methods of reaching your audience.

Email bulletins, pushing people to your website, should be considered as a staple of the media mix. HTML emails, as provided by companies like mailchimp, not only look good but impress your audience.

Email bulletins can be news – as a wrapper for all your weekly news – or event driven, inviting fans to games or other functions at your club.

Print – the final throes?

For so long the only option, print media is no longer as relevant or as compelling. Consider posters, for example. The traditional homes for these one-time vital tools are dying. Town centre shops are closing by the week – avenues of boarded-up windows. Pubs are also closing daily. Community advertising sites now comes with a tariff. People drive everywhere, even on the shortest journeys. There is, to quote the poem, “no time to stand and stare” [at posters].

However, posters, placed strategically and web-enabled can still be effective, but you are competing with church fetes, keep-fit classes and other community events for space at the library!

One of the rituals of going to a game – especially when you were young – was buying your programme and absorbing every line. Today, especially in non-league football, the day of the programme is on the decline – probably terminally. Clubs all over the pyramid are bemoaning declining sales as supporters gain all they need to know from the internet.

It’s time to face facts. Non-league clubs are up against it when it comes to funding a programme and actually getting someone to produce it for them. There’s little motivation in working 10-12 hours a week on a product that only 20% of your crowd is bothering to buy.

The problem is, the leagues demand that you produce a programme of a certain size, so clubs have to deliver a product they know will not make money, and at best, will break even. It’s a loss leader, so rationalise the offering. Produce the minimum and divert attention to the internet.

The time has come to make life easier for non-league clubs that are, essentially, part-time on the field and increasingly full-time off the pitch. Add up the time spent by the dozen or so people that most clubs rely on and it will probably equate to two to three people working full-time.

So what’s the answer? Get innovative or get retro. Scrap the programme, introduce the team-sheet concept and leverage off the power of the internet when it comes to advertising revenue. Football clubs have been slow in utilising the internet for advertising purposes – the website will always come out on top if you analyse the stats. If a 300 crowd yields 60 programme sales, the total exposure for the season, at best, is 1,800 people. An advert on the web can be seen by 20,000 people a week, and that’s conservative. No contest – you just have to persuade local businesses that the internet is the way ahead.

One way of exploiting the internet is to introduce apps that supporters can plug into on their smart phones. The really tech-savvy clubs could time the launch of information so fans can access the line-ups, scores and team news before the kick-off.

The local media

As mentioned, the days of the local hack attending every game are over, unless you happen to be playing at a very high level. Forging good relationships with the local press are important, however, and the value of this should not be underestimated.

Importantly, the club has to feed the press, it can rarely rely on a proactive approach from the newspaper. The club and its follows should be realistic about what the local media can provide for them. The local paper is not an organ for the club and it does not provide free advertising.

Include the local journalists on your regular bulletins. Ensure they are informed of fixtures and fixture changes. Give them total access to take content from the website. Invite them to the club, but don't expect too much from them: 1- they don't have time, 2- they work in a shrinking industry, therefore don't expect them to work out of hours too often, 3- they have limited space and a lot of asks.

Try and provide copy that they don't have to edit too much. In other words, look at how they fill their page and the wordcount. Don't provide a 1,000-word match report if their match reports are normally 300-400 words. Tailor the report and you avoid mistakes and drastic editing.

The future

It is difficult to be optimistic about local media, but we live in a world where accessibility to so much delivers exciting opportunities for football clubs. With the right approach, a local football club can grab its share of media attention. You just have to find people to do the jobs – no mean feat.

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