

# Care in the Community

David Steven works for a company that helps organizations understand why they're unpopular and what to do about it. Football clubs presented a much bigger challenge than he'd anticipated...

IT DIDN'T LOOK LIKE A BAD JOB — a day researching the role Premier League clubs play in the wider community. Had to be more fun than finding out about petrochemicals, the water industry or frozen peas.

I started at the top and phoned Old Trafford. The guy talked happily about football in primary schools for a few minutes. Then he became suspicious. "Why do you want to know all this. What are you after?" When he heard that I was a researcher his line hardened. "I can't help you, I'm afraid. I'm not authorized to give out information. You could talk to my boss, but he's not here. I am sorry." He wasn't.

I worked down the division. Most responses were negative. One club was "too busy to talk". Another did community work but didn't have any

information about it. A third could only release information with the permission of the Chief Executive (we're talking training sessions for kids here — not usually classified 'top secret'). Three clubs promised to call back and didn't; two offered to send information which never arrived.

Football is fashionable and rich. Many clubs have scooped millions by 'going public', selling shares on the back of a century of money coming through the turnstiles. Yet only Arsenal talked confidently about the value it places on the *people* who support it. Liverpool seemed to be proud to be unhelpful. "Can you tell me about the work you do in the community?" "No." "Why not?" "We don't do any." "What, none at all?" "No." He had to be lying. After all, this is a club famed for close links to its city. Spurs could only recommend a local rival. "Try Crystal Palace. They're supposed to have a very good scheme. They've even got the local council involved." That's cutting edge, I thought.

A Villa supporting friend wasn't surprised by how badly I was doing. Villa is just another company now, listed on the stock market with the other money grabbing corporates. He bought shares, but didn't really want to. As he sees it, nothing can stop the final commercialisation of the game. Villa Park will become an 'entertainment centre', run along the lines of the local UCI.

The cinema analogy is interesting. Cinemas used to be almost as grim as football grounds, but times have changed. I complained to the UCI last winter about having to queue in the cold for a ticket. I got a free pass by return of post. When a film was ever so slightly out of focus, the manager wrote to apologize.

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This is the *minimum* level of behaviour acceptable for most companies these days. Their shareholders judge them on the quality of the services they provide. Those who are complacent about customer loyalty — think of Gerald Ratner — can see millions wiped off their market value almost overnight. The far-sighted, meanwhile, go further. They see compelling *business* reasons to assess what they do in the widest possible context. GrandMet argues that "success cannot be defined solely in terms of earnings, growth and the bal-

ance sheet" and produces a 90 page *Report on Corporate Citizenship*, showing how "a truly successful company is sensitive to the concerns of all those on whom it depends; investors, employees, customers, trading partners and the countries and communities in which it does business."

Perhaps the problem is not that football is now big business, but that it is still being run in an old-fashioned, amateur way. You just have to read the annual reports to see how clubs take their success for granted. Man Utd can only find the space for the most grudging of nods to its fans: "We are also grateful to our support-

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ers and customers who have supported the full range of Manchester United's operational activities throughout the season." Tottenham just hopes "shareholders and fans" will be patient while the club keeps losing.

This could be an expensive mistake. At the moment, the football sector is performing well and share prices for most clubs are on the up. The game gets favourable media coverage of the kind other companies pay millions for. Even the *FT* goes all soft when it writes about the game. But

this honeymoon won't last. Analysts will phone up with much tougher questions than mine when fans/shareholders bring critical motions to AGMs, or the Labour government is less than enthusiastic about supporting a game so cynically run. They'll expect to hear about coherent, well-thought through policies — not to be put through to someone who's too busy to talk.

Clubs (and their supporters) might look at Shell, once famously certain that it was the best-managed company in the world. It got a barrage of bad publicity when taken on at its AGM by shareholders. Its chairman is now apologizing for past "arrogance" and worrying about the kind of "subtle, but in the end far-reaching mistakes" that bring a company down.

The rules are changing. Sugar, Edwards, Ellis *et al* should take note. ○

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