

CHAPTER 1 - Case Study: UEFA

The fundamentals of CRM in the digital age can sound relatively simple: getting the right message to the right person at the right time. But for sports organisations in particular, the media revolution that has enabled a vast and rapid extension of their visibility, popularity and reach, has also made that task an increasingly challenging one to accomplish.

With membership spanning 55 countries, a database of 17 million fans and an ambition to continue accelerating its current trajectory of commercial growth, European football's governing body UEFA is a prime example, not just of the complexities that sports organisations face in building one-to-one relationships with their supporters, but also of the processes they need to adopt in order to succeed.

This case study demonstrates some of the thought processes that UEFA had to go through when adopting their own approach to CRM.

Stakeholder Relationships: CRM is Not Just About the Fans

UEFA has had a clear vision for its CRM goals since it started developing its capabilities in the field in 2014. It faces on-going challenges in having to align its objectives with the interests of three important stakeholder groups: members, sponsors and media partners. I interviewed Peter Willems, Head of Marketing Activities and Sponsorship in UEFA's Marketing Division on October 12, 2017 at UEFA's Nyon headquarters.

"Our digital vision is quite straightforward – we want to engage with football fans everywhere. This means building lasting and valuable relationships built on authentic two-way communication with both our current fans around the world and with those we don't yet have – fans of other sports, or other interests."

“We need to know where they are, what they’re interested in and how we can connect with them in a way that makes it easy for them to connect with us.....when you look at our relationship with our members – the 55 national associations – we also have a role there to support them in everything they do for the sport, whether it’s the way they engage with their fans or the responsibility they have to grow the sport. We deliver this through a programme called UEFA GROW and CRM sits at the very heart of that.

“Secondly, our sponsors are absolutely crucial to our work here and while they still value our events for the traditional opportunities we provide – brand exposure, access to tickets, exclusive experiences – they want access to our fans on a one-to-one basis. This will be achieved through our digital channels and the unique relationship we have with our fans driven by what we know about them and that two-way communication we talked about.”

The pace of change in digital technology however, means Willems is also happy to admit that UEFA does not yet have all the answers as far as media objectives for CRM are concerned. An open mind is essential to being able to react and adapt as new opportunities emerge due to the sport industries recent adoption of data-driven practices:

“We haven’t yet figured out how we use CRM with our media partners – the broadcasters that have helped us grow the European Championships, Champions League and Europa League into the biggest football properties in the world – but we’re talking to them and trialling various approaches. What is clear is that OTT (“over-the-top” media broadcasting) is not just a buzzword – whether it’s direct-to-consumer from UEFA, or via our trusted network of broadcasters – fans will be taking more control of what footage they see and when, and we have to be able to support their decisions and therefore help our broadcast partners with theirs.”

Know Your Fans, and be Able to Reach Them

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To achieve the necessary level of customer knowledge, Willems talks about how UEFA has placed a strong emphasis on the quality of its database and the number of data points it can track.

“We certainly know more about our fans than we did before we adopted CRM. We’ve still got a long way to go but, of the 13 million fans we have in our database, we know the age and gender of nearly half of them, the location and language of over two thirds, and we even know the favourite teams of over a quarter of them. “So, a clean and centralised database is definitely an achievement we can be proud of – making sure our individual data sources have standards that are aligned took some work but now we have that in place, the work needed to maintain the central source is minimised. Our next step will be to build out our Single Customer View, increase the level of automation, and potentially include unknown data with our known records.”

Customer knowledge is of little value without the means to act on it, meaning an effective communication platform is essential to ensure the right message is actually delivered to the right person at the right time. For UEFA, this has meant prioritising email marketing.

“The engagement level we achieve through our email marketing programme is well above industry average, thanks to not just an increase in our activity, but a different approach – we don’t blast emails out, we use segments that enable a targeted and personalised communication.

“Now we need to build on the success we’ve had with our email marketing programme – we even won a database marketing award for innovation in insight-driven emails – and roll-out the approach through our other digital channels. Our website is already optimised with a user log-in that holds valuable information to improve our fans’ experience, so we’re going to focus on more dynamic content and, as with any CRM approach, we’ll look to maintain the customer journey across our other platforms, specifically our mobile apps. “

Expect the Unexpected

The American author and entrepreneur, Seth Godin, famously said that it takes six years of hard work to become an overnight success (Godin, 2008). UEFA is now moving into year four of its CRM journey and beginning to see the sort of results that can look like a sudden breakthrough. Here, Willems sheds light on the quantity of work that went on below the public radar to get the programme to this point.

“When I think back to our first sessions discussing this subject, I’m sure none of us expected to be where we are now. Some of us might have expected a slower pace. We can’t move the same way our corporate sponsors or partners do, as we’re a governing body, run by its members and fully accountable to them. Others may have preferred quicker results but, on balance, I think the approach has been absolutely right for UEFA, our members, our partners and of course our staff. When I think about the challenges we’ve had, I’d say that organisational change is definitely one of them. It’s no secret that people are naturally averse to change, they fear the implications for themselves, so getting the buy-in of our colleagues has been tough.”

“The majority of activity has focused on my department, marketing, so of course we’ve experienced the biggest shift, and for us the biggest process change has been in the way we’ve operated with our legal team to implement the former EU Data Protection Directive and now the GDPR (General Data Protection Regulations). Before we started this CRM approach, we were collecting data – asking our fans if they wanted to hear from us, looking at our Google Analytics, tracking behaviour across our digital channels – but it’s safe to say that while I’m sure we were compliant with regulations, they didn’t come first. Now, we place as much emphasis on the way we do things as the result we’re looking for. We work with our legal team at the start to understand the framework of our approach before we talk to ICT about the way we do it. As a governing body, UEFA operates under strict corporate governance, so ensuring that approach is rolled out to the way we use, collect and store data, particularly that of our fans, is absolutely paramount.”

The other major challenge UEFA has consistently faced is that of the unknown, derived from the way that fans’ behaviours and preferences will change to the unpredictability of football itself.

“Of course, like all sports businesses, whatever plans we might make, whatever key dates we put in our diaries, when our major events hit us, we focus 100 per cent on those and other business issues have to take a back seat. The 2016 European Championships were a huge success for us and while we managed to maintain our CRM focus throughout, our pro-active development had to take a back seat for a while. Anyone involved in the event side of sports will understand what I mean here. They take over your focus, time and every spare amount of resource you have.”

The other unknown that Willems has become accustomed to is pinpointing exactly where his organisation sits on the CRM roadmap.

“It’s impossible to say because we don’t know what the end looks like. Does anybody? Just as we think we have a plan, some new technology is developed that we didn’t imagine, or a new social channel has taken over East Asia and we have to reconfigure our approach to accommodate it. But we’re a lot further along than we were one year ago, and when I think back to 2014 when we started, we can see some great achievements.

“As for what the future holds? It’s difficult to say with any certainty. We’ve no idea what changes will be thrust upon us from external forces: changes in technology, the demands of our fans and our partners, the economic environment, etc. But we know some of the key outcomes we’re looking for.”

While new communication and engagement channels may emerge and consumer behaviours will inevitably evolve, the building blocks of UEFA’s CRM strategy will remain the same with a focus on, data, content and channels. For Willems, these three elements create a circle in which channel access to compelling content yields data insights that can improve and be repeated (almost) ad infinitum.

“To achieve our vision, we have to ensure we’re where our fans want us to be and we have to demonstrate we’re listening to them. We want to be able to pick up our conversation with them regardless of what channel they’re using and when they last talked to us. We have to know their intent and predict their actions so we can make the journey as easy for them as possible: we want them to come to UEFA because we can give them exactly what they want when it comes to European football. We want to ensure they think of us before anyone else, including their own team”

“A centralised database that powers this is absolutely crucial. It needs to house the information we need to deliver this experience for our fans, but that’s the engine that powers the rest of it. We need the right digital platforms: a highly personalised website experience, a mobile app that integrates with our website, social channels that don’t operate in silos, and as many forms of push messaging as are necessary to ensure we meet the needs of the European football family.”

“But, of course, most crucial to all of this is the content. We have to have the right content for our fans to want to engage with us, but as you can imagine, as owners of two of the biggest football properties in the world, we don’t struggle a lot in that area. It’s knowing what within our gigabytes, terabytes and petabytes of content we need for which fan, and that’s where our centralised database comes in.”

Lessons for the Long Term

UEFA’s experience in developing CRM for the digital age highlights four important lessons for other organisations taking the same path:

- (1) Be clear on objectives.
- (2) Obtain senior buy-in.
- (3) Draw on the experience of others.
- (4) Be in for the long term.

“Be absolutely clear about why you’re doing this – get your objectives written down and ensure you can demonstrate the progress you’re making within each of these objectives. And you also need senior level approval for this – unless your top management know and support what you’re doing, you’ll never get the right amount of resource to take it forward.”

Just as there is a difference between quality and quantity in the data side of CRM, the experience of UEFA leads Willems to advise drawing a similar distinction when it comes to building strategy. Learn the right thing, not everything.

“Make sure you have the right people working with you. There’s so much information about what you should or shouldn’t be doing, you need to work with people who understand your business. And don’t be afraid to ask for help – don’t think you know all the answers because you probably don’t. Even the most advanced CRM practitioners in the world are still learning every day.”

As Seth Godin observed, achieving success will also take longer than most people think, and Willems couldn't agree more.

"You should also double or triple whatever timeframe you have identified for whatever data-related task you have coming up next. It rarely goes so smoothly that you get it right first time, and you usually underestimate what dependencies you have before that task completes."

Source: Willems (2017, October 12).