

Football & First Party Data

The data gap in football

Football has a first-party data problem. Clubs of all sizes now boast increasingly global fanbases, but many are failing to keep pace with the digitalization that has accelerated rapidly over the past few years. As a result, the disparity between followers and the fans they hold actionable data on is growing. The pandemic kept fans from going to matches and this highlighted the game's reliance on ticketing and stadia activity as a source of data. Yes, clubs were able to reach out via social media and other third-party channels, but this left many without the first-party data they needed to communicate directly with their fanbases and offer value to their sponsors.

A microcosm of first-party data's importance to football can be seen in **Spotify's sponsorship of FC Barcelona**. The partnership between the streaming giant and one of the game's biggest global brands came into effect in the summer of 2022, and was, in part, driven by Spotify's own quest for first-party data. Enticed by a global fanbase of over 350 million across social and digital, they enquired about the number of "registered fans" Barca had – i.e., fans they held first-party data on like full names, contact details and other personal information. However, only 1% – just over 3 million – qualified as registered and it is reported that Spotify's valuation of the deal was affected as a result² (the deal does have a positive first-party story to tell but more on that later...).

In the modern age of digital engagement and global reach, **clubs need to adopt a data-driven approach** to their fanbases centred around capturing and processing first-party data to deliver the more personalised experience that their fans, and sponsors, crave. In this article, we will draw on our experience working with a mix of rights holders to look at the technology involved and highlight best practice examples of how they can be used to drive a successful first-party data strategy.

[1] <https://www.thedrums.com/news/2022/03/18/the-catalan-data-plan-spotify-s-fc-barcelona-sponsorship-explained>

[2] <https://barcauniversal.com/barcelonas-small-database-of-fans-could-cost-the-club-millions-in-sponsorship-deal/>

Three, Two, One...Zero?

Before going any further, it is important to establish exactly what we mean when we say first-party data. In the context of this article, first party data means **data directly and willingly collected from fan sources**, as opposed to data provided by (second party) or purchased from (third party) other parties. This means data such as name, age, address, and preferences collected predominantly via digital channels such as the club website, fan app and online transactions or contactless payments.

There is another term – zero party data – that is increasingly being used, which refers to attitudinal data explicitly shared via fan surveys and polls. This is essentially a sub-set of first party data differentiated from the personal, behavioral, and transactional data clubs can collect from fans via engagement with their own channels. However, as both zero and first party zero- and first-party data are provided willingly by fans, representing real marketing value to the club and their partners, for the purpose of our analysis we will bracket both under the term first party data.





That's the way the cookie crumbles

So why is first party data so important now? Part of the importance comes from the demise of third-party cookies. Once the driver behind a digital advertising industry which is today worth over \$600bn³, cookies are being phased out with Google recently joining the likes of Apple and Mozilla in committing to move away from the technology due to user privacy concerns.

With this source of data no longer available, football clubs will know less about the activity of fans and are less able to target potential fans across third party platforms.

In turn, brands, seeing the impact on the ability to target fans via digital advertising, will look for new ways to secure fan data as Spotify did with their FC Barcelona sponsorship. To avoid the potholes in an ever-changing digital landscape and maximise the commercial potential of their fanbases, clubs need to prioritise the collection of first party data.

[3] <https://www.forbes.com/sites/theyec/2022/09/12/the-slow-death-of-third-party-cookies/>

Know the value

Fan data has a value and must be earned. While there is still a legacy of reticence driven by privacy concerns, people are much savvier today as to the data / value trade off and each individual fan has their own price they place on providing personal data to an organisation, knowing they will be marketed to as a result. In the bulk of cases, their data is the direct price they pay for receiving content and this price is steadily increasing as audiences become more discerning.

As they seek to grow the first-party data they hold on their fans, football clubs need to be mindful of this price and not as ask for too much in one go. For example, asking multiple attitudinal questions when a fan is signing up for a free content service may put some fans off completing the sign in process.

The provision of data it is also bound up in completing the purchase of goods or services (e.g., where it is needed for delivery of merchandise or for ticket notifications). In both cases, the collection of data is subject to regulations such as GDPR and clubs need to be mindful to clearly state how the data they collect will be stored and processed.



In venue

A first party data strategy starts with how that data is going to be captured. Football clubs, leagues and federations have two opportunities to collect personal information from fans – in venue, at a game or event, or remotely via web or mobile platforms – with technology playing a key role in both.

In venue, the advent of cashless transactions has allowed stadia owners to build up a picture of fan behavior around the ground. By tapping their card or phone to pay, fans let the club know who has bought what, where and when and this information can be used to understand popular products, purchase areas and service times, enabling the club to drive revenues via personalised promotions.

Working with organisers of leading events in the sports and music industries, TEC have built or implemented a few robust cashless payment systems. These have been used to collect first party data across hundreds of thousands of customer purchases giving our clients a vital picture of their customers' event experience, that they have used to refine future events. One such example is **leading dance music festival UNTOLD**, who TEC built a tailor-made ticketing solution for and then integrated new digital access and cashless payment systems to deliver a seamless experience – and source of data – across their digital ecosystem.

Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) technology like that used in UNTOLD's access wristbands can also be used glean first party data from fans through gamification, with details exchanged for experience opportunities as be seen with the examples of UEFA's Champions Festival and NFL's The Fan Style Tour.

In venue data capture has been greatly aided by the improvements in Wi-Fi / network coverage at football grounds. For those that have – or are thinking of installing – in stadia Wi-Fi, requesting that customers log-in to get free access is a simple way to capture first party fan data. However, in stadia Wi-Fi can be hugely expensive / difficult to install and the continued roll out of 5G may negate the need for it. Clubs will need to weigh up the costs against the benefits in terms of fan experience and assess other means of data collection, as necessary.

[4] <https://youtu.be/xLGJZhCkg6M>

[5] <https://streetsense.com/the-nfls-brand-activation-scores-a-touchdown/>



The ticketing opportunity

Ticketing is an integral part of the in stadia experience and the digital evolution of ticketing has made the process of purchasing and redeeming match day tickets a vital source of first party data for football clubs. Whether they are acquired directly through the club or an official ticketing partner, the purchase lets clubs understand personal identifiers like name, age and residence and, over time, purchase patterns like when they buy and how often.

Tickets are increasingly being provided digitally, whether that is added to a season ticket or membership card or sent to mobile device. This means that the redemption of that ticket on site provides a quick source of data around fan attendance. Where the ticket is part of a hospitality package or membership scheme, further benefits can be included digitally of a membership card, such as club shop promotions, that can be used to drive revenues and capture further fan data.

The remote majority

Whether due to cost, location, or availability, many football fans are not able to attend matches. For clubs to engage and capture first party data from this remote majority, they are reliant on a mixture of web and mobile app platforms, offering a range of services and content. By tiering the availability of content, most clubs encourage fans to log-in and give their data in exchange for joining the fan community and benefiting from exclusive content and features.

To do this, clubs can build in features like streaming, ecommerce, and gamification to attract fans to their digital platforms and offer the value needed for the fans to willingly provide their personal data. This is often a multi-stage process, with a minimum amount of data requested at the start to encourage sign up, and additional content and services offered at different stages of the relationship to expand the data held on each fan.

One of the challenges clubs face is building and monetizing their relationship with passive fans – those who follow a team but without attending games or engaging with club channels. A first party data driven approach can be key to tackling this, as can be seen in the example of Greek side, PAOK FC who used the data they held and a Greek tradition to successfully engage and reactive their passive fans.⁶

[6] <https://www.sportspromedia.com/opinions/personalisation-sports-data-talks-nba-app-paok-fc>





One sign-on to rule them all

The digital transformation of football and the fan experience means there are now multiple digital tools and platforms for fans to engage with their football clubs, both at home and in stadia, often operated by different club departments with differing operational set-ups and objectives. As a result, there are often different log-ins required to access each tool. This complicates the process for the fan, requiring users to keep track of their passwords across the suite of platforms they are using but also importantly, from a data perspective, it makes it more difficult for the club to collate and maintain profiles of each fan that could be used to personalise their experience and drive new or increased revenues, by up-selling across different platforms.

The best solution for a club to build a unified profile of their fans, based on their behaviour across these multiple touchpoints, is to establish a single sign-on platform. This does not mean simply having a log-in to your website. Rather, it means having one central log-in process that gives you access to every digital platform you are supposed to. A good example of this can be seen with the NBA membership service. Their NBA ID scheme connects the fan experience across the league's different digital offerings, including their app and their streaming service, NBA League pass, enabling them to deliver personalised content, experiences, and ticket opportunities to each fan, including behind the scenes footage of their favourite teams and players.

Single sign-on case study: The R&A

TEC recently implemented a single sign-on system for **The R&A** as part of our work developing their digital ecosystem. The golf governing body had identified that their customer data was siloed across their ticketing, streaming and membership platforms. They wanted to connect the data collected across all their digital engagements and improve their understanding of their fans.

To achieve this, TEC built a single sign-on platform, using Amazon Cognito as the authentication layer and an API to connect this sign-on with the customer accounts held by their ticketing provider. The sign-on process was kept light to encourage sign up completion, requesting the minimum level of data. This still gave The R&A enough data to communicate with and market to fans, leading them to more detailed data capture opportunities at a ticketing or membership level, which could then be used to drive a more personalised content experience through their streaming service or The One Club Hub, their 365-loyalty programme.



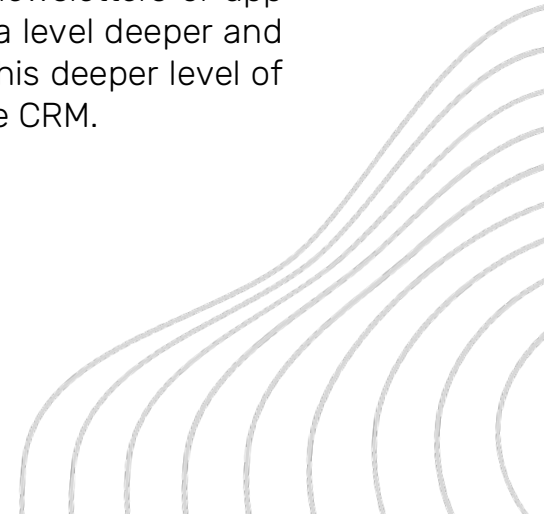
Centralised Data View

Data capture is important, but it is only part of the equation – its needs to be accompanied by **a clear direction on how that data is processed, stored, and analysed** to ensure the club is building up insightful and actionable pictures of each fan that can shape marketing efforts and fan experience.

A Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system allows clubs to do just this by aggregating fan data from the different platforms it is captured. Whether it is ticketing, ecommerce or a membership scheme, each function where data is captured will have its own requirements and will necessarily be operated via individual platforms, often by different departments. They may choose to access the data at the platform level, but this does not provide a unified picture.

By having one centralised CRM system, where data from the different sources is combined, clubs can use data rules to create a single view of their fans based on unique identifiers and build a better understanding of their behaviour and preferences. This can then be used to personalise their experience through the content they are served in communications, or via content platforms by connecting the CRM with the Content Management System (CMS).

As the name suggests, CRMs are customer focused tools designed to help organisations process, analyse, and act upon customer data to improve experience and drive business growth. They allow for analysis aimed at direct action such as personalised newsletters or app content, but the extent of the queries you can run can be limited. Businesses and clubs are increasingly looking to go a level deeper and establish data warehouses or unified data platforms that are more centred on understanding and analysing the data. This deeper level of analysis can be used to identify trends and shape broader business strategies that impact how the data is used from the CRM.



Benefits for all

The act of collecting and aggregating first party data to create single fan profiles that can be used to deliver personalised experiences is cornerstone on which any club Direct to Consumer (D2C) strategy is built. As the media landscape becomes more and more fragmented, clubs are seeking to better monetise their fan relationships, either directly or through the value they can offer for sponsors (and the revenue opportunities bound up in first party data are such that D2C streaming platforms will start to offer a viable alternative to traditional rights models).

To achieve their marketing goals, sponsors are prioritising depth of fan relationship over scale, but this type of partner can in turn help a club drive up the first party data it is capturing. This brings us neatly back to the **FC Barcelona & Spotify** deal referenced at the start, where first party data was initially an issue but now is being created as a result. Commenting on the agreement, Lee Gibbons, Managing Director of leading sports marketing agency Sport Unlimited highlighted that:

*"The Spotify platform and offering and the ability to activate player-first initiatives – i.e. playlists – will help the club accelerate the club's first-party global data capture, which in turn will grow its addressable database to monetize directly and offer enhanced value in future sponsorship negotiations."*⁷

It is clear then that a strategy centred on first party data can add value to all parties. From capture and authentication to analysis and customization, the variety of technologies we have looked at here enable this value to be realised. As the scale of personalisation required increases, **further technologies driven by AI** and machine learning will undoubtedly play a part in delivering this and should be part of a club's long term digital thinking, but immediate focus should be on collecting and processing the data needed to build a unified view of their fanbases.

[7] <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2022/03/18/the-catalan-data-plan-spotify-s-fc-barcelona-sponsorship-explained>

A stylized, glowing green 'win!' logo on a dark background. The text 'win!' is written in a bold, rounded, sans-serif font with a thick outline and a slight shadow, giving it a 3D effect. The exclamation point is also stylized with a circular dot. The entire logo is set against a dark, textured background that looks like a metallic surface.



If you're looking for help with the technology behind your first party data strategy, why not speak to TEC.

For almost a decade, TEC has worked with leading sports organisations and event organisers to build, refine and integrate data capture and single sign-on platforms, working with CRM systems to help our clients better understand their fans and improve the experience they offer to them.

Whatever your digital challenge, TEC is happy to help.

Contact us

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