

The future of the football programme by Stuart Fuller

Over the past year there has been some heated debate within many Non-League clubs as well at league meetings and forums about the future of the match day programme. Unfortunately, there has been an inverse correlation between the costs of producing a programme and the number that are sold. We can thank the Internet for that, with its fancy news feeds and up to date scores from every league around the world.

In most instances a programme for a Saturday game goes to print after a thorough edit on a Thursday at the very latest, which means that two whole days of footballing news, views and scandal can break before the programme is printed. We all want to consume our news now – this is the prime reason why newspaper circulation has fallen so dramatically and a match programme often contains nothing new to the reader.

The programme is a conundrum for clubs at the Non-League level. On one hand, it is a valuable tool to get information over to the fans, whilst on the other it is a commercial vehicle for the club to sell advertising space. Unfortunately, whilst the commercial manager may be happy at selling 20 pages of ads, the reader wants to see editorial and content not ads. So, they won't buy it and because they don't buy it, the appeal to the advertiser falls over time. An inverse catch 22.

At Lewes, we had traditionally sold 1 programme for every 4 fans. On an average match-day we would print 200 copies, 50 of which would be used for players, management, guests and officials. The other 150 would in most instances sell out at £2 a copy. Multiply that by 23 games and the £7,000 is a very useful revenue stream. We are in an unusual position of having over 700 owners who live outside of our match day "catchment" area so we now provide an e-programme 24-hours post-match for all owners to read or download. Does that work? Based on viewing statistics for most games we see the same number of views as actual sales. Potentially we are cannibalising programme sales by offering it online but likewise we are extending the reach for our advertisers. A positive catch 22.

There are some games where we can get e-programme views in the hundreds, especially if physical programme sells out – our most viewed programme was our friendly two seasons ago against Brighton & Hove Albion where the online version hit over 1,000 views.

This season the Isthmian League have announced two initiatives with regard to match programmes. Firstly, clubs are now able to produce a "double edition" for midweek and Saturday games, reducing print costs whilst Carshalton Athletic have been selected to trial the publication of just an e-programme.

To many fans, buying a programme is seen as an essential part of going to a game. But like every other element of the game, it needs to get with the times. Back down here at Lewes we've tried to break the traditional mould, focusing on articles and editorial about the game (such as this article!) rather than the traditional club history, match reports and tired, repetitive articles that are dated as soon as they are published.

The e-programme opens up a whole new world of opportunities, not only for the club but also for the reader. The ability to be able to add dynamic content is a huge opportunity – putting video into the programme, having a live scores feed, making adverts interact with the user (and thus making space more valuable to the advertiser) and being able to access it from the palm of your hand.

I'm not a traditionalist but likewise I understand the place for the humble football programme. Technology can deliver reduce costs, increased revenues and a wider readership for every club. But are we brave enough to embrace it?