

## A community asset by Stuart Fuller (@theballisround)

*“The club is at the heart of the community and has community in its heart”*

Boca Juniors, FC Porto, Bayern Munich, Barcelona, Real Madrid and Lewes FC. That’s quite a group of famous football clubs, who have graced some of the biggest tournaments in the world. OK, so the mighty Rooks may not quite get the same billing as Barca or Porto but all of the clubs are owned by their fans.

Lewes Football Club aren’t the highest ranked side in the English game to be majority community-owned – based on the final positions in the 2017/18 season that honour fell to AFC Wimbledon but both are exceptions to the rule when it comes to ownership models. Out of the ninety-two professional clubs in the Premier or Football League, only four are fully owned by the fans, with four others having minority fan-owned ownership. In Spain, six La Liga sides are owned by their fans, whilst in Germany a majority control by a single entity (person, or company) is not permitted by the Deutsche Fußball Liga and is the German law for clubs.

The vast majority of community-owned clubs in England can be found in the Non-Leagues, where many are keen to avoid history repeating itself of the boom and bust approach of having a single owner who is happy to bankroll the club, often to the extreme, when the sun is shining, but then completely withdraws their funding when times are tough, or they can’t handle criticism from the fans.

Community ownership is a long and hard road, both in terms of finding it to start but to navigate. It may not be the best ownership model for every club but for those, like Lewes back in 2011, who face the choice of trying it or going bust, it has been a savour.

The key is in the description – community ownership. To be successful the club has to position itself at the heart of the community and have community at its heart. Those are big words but ones that every fan-owned club should have as one of their core aims and objectives. For some that means a radical change in approach, having to engage with new audiences or those who may have been burnt under the previous regime. Many clubs will wonder where exactly they start in putting the notion of community-ownership into practice but often it is easier than it seems. To many, including me, this is Modern Football. Being part of a much wider group of interest, using the football club to enhance the value within the community, whether that is through making their facilities available, collecting for local interest groups such as Food Banks or charities on a match-day or using their social media to promote local causes.

Our experience down at Lewes FC in growing our worth has been a continuous process over the last eight years. The key to delivering value to the wider community is first to understand the dynamics of the local area and then how a club can easily, quickly and cost-effectively add value, becoming more than just a football club. One approach that any club could follow is summarised in these five steps: -

1. **Define what the “community” is** – It is important that any community-owned club knows the demographics of their local community. Where do the competing factors on a match day come from? Local professional club, cinema, beach, shopping centre? What are the local pressures on the community? Is it a wealthy community or one where social pressures dominate the local area?

By understanding these factors, a club can quickly build community outreach programmes that will increase their standing and ultimately, reputation in the local area. For instance, many clubs are now working in partnership with local food banks to collect donations for the local community. Many clubs have facilities that could be used during the working week for local groups and good causes, such as blood donation centres or maternity classes.

2. **Define the “quid pro quo”** – Football fans have tribal instincts and are often more loyal consumers than retail shoppers. Often when times are tough, their loyalty to the “brand” increases – they are more likely to spend more if they know that they are going to help the club. So why not build on that concept of trust by engaging the local business community to work with the club on developing a loyalty programme?

For instance, approaching local businesses and asking if they will give owners of the club discounts on products and services in exchange for promoting them within the ground? Would a fan decide to choose one local take-away over another if they knew that they would get a discount or even better, that the club would get an element of commission? By building the trust with the local business community there's also more chance that these organisations will want to get involved more with the club as a sponsor or a commercial partner.

3. **Create a value proposition** – Clubs need to be able to sell themselves to the local community as an asset. This means understanding what the club stands for and living those values. If the club can demonstrate its importance to the community not just through words, but through actions then it will increase its standing in that community. Look for local good causes, offer your club's time and resources and be present.

One great example of this is focusing on local schools and working with them to provide access to the club for pupils by giving every pupil a free season ticket. Whilst some clubs offer free admission to Under16s, the majority of football clubs charge for their entry. Why? In most cases there is no marginal cost in admitting one additional fan – in fact it is highly likely that everyone who enters the ground will spend money somewhere, whether that be on food, drink, programme, club shop or raffle. Young children will use peer-power to bring their parent(s) who will in turn pay to get in. Creating memorable experiences for these young fans will encourage them to come back time and time again, laying the foundations for the future.

4. **Communication is key** – It is important for any fan-owned club to have an ownership database, knowing exactly who the club's stakeholders are. Likewise, it is equally important to ensure there is a regular dialogue with these owners. It's wise not to restrict this communication to one method. Many clubs will use regular email campaigns, which is a good basis, but also think about how to use Social Media as an engagement tool for the local community.

Owners need to feel valued and communication engagement allows that. For instance, think about how you can include them in some decision-making such as the choice of an away strip, the music the teams should walk out to or even the name of a mascot. Likewise, think about how you could increase turn-out at election time by introducing online voting or livestreaming of the AGM. There are numerous online tools that can be used for the basis of a communication strategy free of charge although it is advisable to have one person within the club in charge of the communication strategy.

5. **Repeat to fade** – It is important that once you have started to engage with the community, you do not give up. Constantly think about how you can improve on all of the above steps. Set measurable goals on elements such as ownership sign-ups and renewals, number of local businesses engaged and engagement in the communication (most tools will include the ability to do this for free). Review progress at the end of the season and listen to the feedback of all stakeholders.

The longest journey starts with the smallest step and often costs nothing. That's the philosophy of community engagement and in today's society where individuals, let alone football clubs are insular and can appear to only care about the money, it is amazing how a little bit of focus in the surrounds of a club can deliver a huge benefit.

Community ownership to be is the cornerstone of modern football. Many will be against it but for the wrong, selfish reasons. But here's the great thing – you don't have to be community-owned to have a community mindset.