

Stakeholder Management in English Non-league Football: The Case of Dulwich Hamlet FC

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Aim

Based on a case study of an English non-league football club, this paper seeks to understand how Dulwich Hamlet FC has increased its average attendances by 587% over a seven-year period. An increasingly high profile has been achieved by Dulwich Hamlet FC with numerous articles appearing in the local national and international media. Most of these articles have sought to describe the unique atmosphere at the ground with little attempt made to take a firm-centric position and analyse what the club have done to underpin this success. This research uses stakeholder theory to analyse how the football club, which had a declining average attendance of 180 in season 2009/10, has managed to grow its attendances year on year so successfully. The longitudinal research considers the football club's approach to a wide range of stakeholders that includes the local community, fans, employees, refugees, emergency services, councillors, suppliers, and others. This case study therefore represents an appropriate research site with which to better understand the practical impacts of a progressive approach to "*those who can affect or are affected by the achievement of an organisation's objectives*" (Freeman, 1984, p. 46) at a football club and whether it is replicable in other sporting contexts.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Post et al., (2002) developed a view of the firm that stressed the role of stakeholder relationships in the creation of organisational wealth, which has been extended to demonstrate that business is about how customers, suppliers, financiers, communities and managers all interact to create value. The relationship between stakeholder theory and sport has been studied by a number of authors. Mason and Slack (1996) found that stakeholder theory provided a different way of looking at sporting relationships, with the recognition that wider stakeholder interests must become an essential element of the business strategies of sporting organisations.

Breitbarth and Harris (2008, p. 183) suggested that the idea of stakeholders was not new to football, especially in England and Germany with their heavy intertwinement with other social networks. Further, that football clubs can position themselves as highly relevant and influential social, economic and political agents (Breitbarth & Harris, 2008, p. 186). Esteve et al. (2011) found a strong link between the quality of the relationship between sports clubs and external stakeholders related positively to their contributions; similarly Kalliopi (2009) found that in the Australian context, despite an increased commercialised and professional environment, a cooperative approach to stakeholders meant that volunteers were still the most valuable asset to sports. Despite this, there is still little empirical research that sets out how working positively with stakeholders, widely construed, can impact in a football club context and whether such work is replicable at other sports organisations.

Methodology and Data Analysis

Data was collected in three ways over five years between 2012 and 2016. The first author was Secretary of the Supporter's Trust during this period and made use of notes made during this time; a series of semi-structured interviews (8) were carried out in 2016; in addition to

secondary material. The methodological approach to the study was informed by the interpretive research paradigm. The method for data collection was underpinned by the idea that there are multiple realities, co-constructed by the interpretations of the research participants and the researcher in answering the main research question as to how Dulwich Hamlet has been able to increase its attendances so markedly over the seven year period under consideration. In this case the interviews were broadly analysed for reasons related to the success of the football club (as defined by increasing attendance), together with those linked to concepts from stakeholder theory and the corporate social responsibility literature. The same approach was taken to secondary material. These central themes, supported by both primary and secondary data, are detailed in the results and discussion section below.

Results, Discussion and Implications

The analysis of the data revealed three inter-linked themes relevant to the increased attendances, two of which can be specifically linked to stakeholder theory and corporate social responsibility. Firstly was the support of new owners which opened-up the possibility of greater interaction with its local community; secondly, the development by a number of individuals of specific campaigns to attract a wide range of people that may not previously attended non-league football. Linked to this was the friendly approach of existing supporters, which helped to turn visitors into supporters. The third theme related to the style of football, might also be argued by some to be good practice in attracting bigger crowds and socially responsible. In conclusion, it can be seen that an inclusive approach to stakeholders, widely construed, can have a very positive impact on attendances at sports clubs and specific elements may be more widely replicable within a strategic stakeholder management plan.

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