A challenging tackle

Engaging football fans in the Middle East

The issue of fan engagement is a constant challenge for all sports. Even for football—the world’s most popular sport—determining how best to attract, engage and ultimately leverage the relationship with fans is a top priority for the game’s administrators. The dynamic and ever-changing environment of Middle East football adds its own unique challenges.
Middle East football is currently experiencing a period of unprecedented change and development, both within the region itself and in terms of international profile and influence.

The Middle East has emerged over the last 10 years as an important host of major football events, staging several high-profile tournaments such as the FIFA Club World Cup and the AFC Asian Cup. This trend is set to continue until 2022 at least, when Qatar hosts football’s ultimate showpiece, the FIFA World Cup. Against this backdrop of major events, the region’s governing bodies are also re-organizing, with football club mergers and privatization under way in several emirates like Dubai and Sharjah and in Saudi Arabia.

Internationally, Middle East investors have taken controlling ownership stakes in some of the world’s biggest football clubs, while regionally controlled media companies have likewise acquired a variety of important football broadcast rights.

What about the region’s football fans? How do they fit into this changing landscape and just how engaged are they with the local game compared to international football?

Middle East football fan engagement study

Earlier this year, Deloitte partnered with the Josoor Institute—the training and development arm of Qatar’s Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy—in publishing a study entitled Middle East Football Fan Engagement. The study looked at the attitudes and behaviors of football fans across 10 Middle Eastern countries, with a particular focus on comparing fan engagement with local leagues against engagement with major international leagues, especially those in Europe.

The study confirmed, as expected, the overall popularity of football but it also revealed a genuine depth of passion for the game amongst fans, with 73 percent of fans stating that football is very important to them and 89 percent saying they watch football whenever they can. When it came to comparing interest in local leagues with interest in the big European leagues, the study yielded some important revelations. While international football is certainly a major driver of overall interest in the sport, particularly in expatriate-dominated countries where interest in international leagues is greater than interest in local leagues, this preference is not to the exclusion of the local game.

Perhaps the most important finding of the research however, was that almost 40 percent of football fans across the Middle East had made no team or league-related purchase over the previous 12 months. Such a large proportion of fans not
directly spending any money on the game represents a huge untapped market and a significant commercial opportunity for teams and leagues across the region.

Grasping the opportunity
What can be done to put more fans through the region’s football stadium turnstiles? More importantly, what can be done to turn this clear underlying passion for football into meaningful engagement that generates a financial return for the region’s clubs and leagues? The findings of the study present three possibilities for consideration:

1. Leverage the popularity of international football
Middle East football fans follow European football with great enthusiasm. The challenge is to find ways of tapping into this enthusiasm and connecting it to the local game. Whatever the tactics, the strategy must be to convince fans that what they love about following European football, they can also find in the local game.

2. Create an engaging match day experience
A clear outtake from the study was that the typical match day experience in the Middle East presents many barriers to attendance. The quality of stadia and infrastructure was a major factor and is something already being addressed in several countries. Other key issues discouraging attendance included match atmosphere, quality of services such as parking and catering, and suitability for families. Local leagues must focus on improving these basic match day elements to establish a solid foundation on which to build the wider fan experience.

Once the fundamentals are properly dealt with then, and only then, should Middle East clubs and leagues consider pursuing the kind of immersive, Smart Stadia experience being created at the world’s leading sports and entertainment stadia. Technology-led features such as food and beverage ordering from your seat via smartphone apps, augmented reality wayfinding and ticket entry using near-field communication are developing rapidly in the world’s leading sports venues. But while these represent the cutting edge of sports stadia technology, for now the Middle East should consider these as extra frills and focus on the basics: providing convenient parking, efficient entry and exit, together with affordable, quality food and beverage, to name just a few.

3. Build engagement beyond the stadium
The area where Middle East football can immediately look to leverage technology and emulate top international sports leagues for quick wins is in building the relationship with fans beyond the stadium. The global sports industry is becoming increasingly sophisticated in how they engage fans before, after and between games, with smartphone apps and social media playing an ever-increasing role. Our study showed that while television is still the most popular way to follow football, social media is a growing force and plays an especially important role in maintaining a connection with fans and building loyalty in the important space between match days.

Despite the unprecedented and high-profile developments in Middle East football over the last decade, the region’s football market still has huge untapped development potential. The first FIFA World Cup in the Middle East in 2022 can be a powerful catalyst for unlocking that potential and propelling the game forward. But as our study with the Josoor Institute has shown, the influence of expats on Middle East football fandom has created a unique combination of interest in both local and international football. Successfully tapping the region’s potential therefore challenges the region’s football leaders to work out a uniquely Middle Eastern solution.

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