



Book review

Great Brand Stories: Arsenal Winning together: the story of the Arsenal brand John Simmons & Matt Simmons

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Reviewed by John Old

Who is this aimed at? Any book, especially one as brief as this, needs a focus, but it is difficult to see whether it is targeted at the football follower who would like to know a bit about marketing and branding, or the student of the latter who would like to know something about football.

On the face of it, football clubs seem to be the epitome of branding style outweighing football (or any other) substance: 60,000 people fill Arsenal's new stadium to watch a team full of players who have no connection with Britain (leave alone north London) perform in a strip radically changed from last year. The only link with the past that keeps them coming is the brand name, Arsenal. If there are beneficiaries of this brand loyalty, they appear to be the players, in terms of their salaries, rather than the club or its fans. The merchandising opportunities offered by a successful brand appear huge, and can encourage a Malcolm Glazer to spend – or borrow – hundreds of millions to acquire Manchester United, yet an accountant can estimate the value of most football brands, in terms of enhancement to net income streams, as zero. What is going on here?

The authors begin their answer with a potted history of Arsenal Football Club. Unfortunately this contains the sort of avoidable and checkable errors (for example the length of Frank McLintock's career and captaincy at the club, and the Cup Winners' Cup Final defeat of 1980) that undermine confidence. Elsewhere in the book there are contradictions that appear to betray the dual authorship of the book, and which

better editing might have tidied up. The biggest disappointment, however, is that by the end, one is little wiser about how important 'brand image' is to football clubs in general, or how that of Arsenal is distinct from those of any other clubs.

Most of the book is top-heavy on opinion and assertion and light on critical analysis, not only of Arsenal (both the authors are self-confessed fans) but also of football generally – for example, discussion of the Rangers and Celtic 'brands' manages to avoid any mention of religious sectarianism.

There is no index, and no references or bibliography. In consequence, not only are there no pointers for the would-be student of branding (or football), but it is also impossible to judge whether some of the more startling and sweeping assertions the book makes represent the authors' own opinions, a wider consensus or the outcome of research. There is, for example, the assumption that success on the pitch is vital; while this might be true for generating revenue from TV and for prize money, it is not obvious that this applies to the brand image or customer base. The popularity of Manchester United grew rather than waned in the 26 years in which the club failed to win the League (and they recorded the highest attendances in the country while in the old Second Division); Newcastle United continued to attract huge gates when it had not won the Cup since the 1950s or the League since 1927.

Then there is a statement as fact that "the days of football as the 'working man's game' have gone, and



will not return". This is rather at odds with the amount of coverage given to the game in 'working men's' newspapers, the amount of time spent by 'working men' watching the game on satellite television, either through their own subscriptions or in pubs and clubs, and the amount of money spent by them on memorabilia, even if they seldom or ever attend a game. It is a pity there is no deeper statistical analysis of the differing income flows and their ultimate customer source. With Arsenal season tickets costing over £1,000, the club may have an increasingly middle-class and middle-to-upper income matchday crowd, but even with the increased capacity of the new Emirates Stadium, ticket sales provide only a minority fraction of total revenues. What – and who – is responsible for the rest? And what is the club doing to encourage, nurture and develop these sources of income?

Which leads me to the most glaring omission in the book: the absence of any first-hand input from officials of the club itself. There is the account of an interview with Pat Rice, erstwhile captain and current first-team coach, and mention of a meeting between one of the authors and David Dein, Arsenal vice-chairman – in 1998. But if there was any contact with the club's marketing department, or attempts to probe what the latter perceives the Arsenal brand to be, it is not shared here. There are hints of some of the thinking that went into a long-term sponsorship arrangement

with Emirates Airlines, but it would have been reassuring to have it confirmed by the club that their approach to marketing, and their perception of the Arsenal 'brand', was as described by the authors.

'Winning together', the book's subtitle, appears to have been suggested by the authors rather than the club, and the book itself is certainly very uncritical of the club, its image or its brand. The authors identify a number of key 'Arsenal values' – high personal standards, tradition, commitment, and the view that no individual is more important than the team – yet it is hard to imagine the supporter of any football club, Accrington Stanley no less than (or even more than) Arsenal, who does not subscribe to these ideals. It might have been illuminating to survey Arsenal supporters and find out what they perceive to be distinctive about their club, and to compare this with the views of other clubs' supporters and what they have to say about Arsenal.

It may be that the football club 'brand' is a pure example of what Tom Peters has described as the customer creating their own value from what the producer offers. So perhaps the most insightful piece of football branding in Britain is Manchester United's promotion of Old Trafford as The Theatre Of Dreams – the club, and the brand, can be whatever the fan needs it to be.

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