

# Professionalism, football and a global sports megabrand go hand in hand

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*"All citizens should have the opportunity to be active, but all will not respond. Those who do respond carry the burden of our free society. I call them the Responsibles. They exist in every segment of the community - ethnic groups, labor unions, neighborhood associations, businesses - but they rarely form an effective network of responsibility because they don't know one another across segments. They must find each other, learn to communicate, and find common ground. Then they can function as the keepers of the long-term agenda."*  
(John W. Gardner, "Civic Partners", 1997)

Gardner's quote exemplifies the importance of people who are willing to go the extra mile to build networks and thereby create positive innovations that will secure sustainable solutions for future generations. David Beckham has had an impressive football career so far and it is still running. On top of that, he has been able to build a legacy around his merits on the pitch by for instance establishing a football academy for young and aspiring football lovers. By doing so, he falls into the category of "Responsibles". A one day visit to the David Beckham Academy in London, the UK definitely reflects this fact and visiting the academy is worthwhile for all football enthusiasts. Not only does it give kids great chances for shared experiences in the dream universe of professional football; it is also an experience that facilitates a positive approach to growing the popularity of this world famous game.

## **Employees as important assets and storytellers**

I had the pleasure of visiting the academy in May, 2009. I was welcomed to the academy by Roxanne Bennett who serves as Assistant Director. She gave me a tour of a fantastic site. Along the tour, we had the chance to speak with the native tongue of football - this language again proved its nature as a good common denominator. A major strength of the academy is to have employees like Roxanne, who has been involved with the academy from the very beginning in 2005. Hence, she is able to relate to David's person and thus to involve aspects of that in the daily operations. That serves the academy well and gives it a good deal of credibility in the eyes of all stakeholders (ranging from a professional visitor like me to sponsors and most importantly the kids that come to play football). Everyone wants a piece of David Beckham and that is the main reason why people are willing to travel from remote destinations, such as for instance Singapore or New Zealand, to check out what this facility is all about. Employees like Roxanne meets this stakeholder demand via her storytelling regarding David's engagement with the academy.

## **Functionality of modern football facilities**

From a sport marketing perspective, the academy seems thoroughly planned and well implemented. With kids being the main target group, the facilities of the academy serve kids well. The functionality in terms of equipment for football practices and hence different football drills is up-to-date and kids are offered a great opportunity to play on two full-size indoor field turf football pitches. Moreover, the coaches employed are all licensed coaches. Ergo, the basics for a good football experience are fulfilled but good functionality is not the panacea for top-notch football experiences.

## **Walking the wall of fame**

On the other hand, taking the good functionality of the academy is only one side of the organization that adds to the overall customer experience. The David Beckham Academy seems fully aware of that! The emotional and experiential side that frames everything else is unique. From my viewpoint, the David Beckham Academy gives kids a unique and sensory-appealing opportunity to interact with the intersection between football, fun, learning, and the David Beckham Brand. That is a great way for a great footballer like David to give back to the community and to the grassroots that are so important for the continuous growth and development of the game on and off the field.

David Beckham played for Manchester United. The club's stadium Old Trafford is also referred to as "Theatre of Dreams", a nickname proposed by Sir Bobby Charlton whose soccer school David Beckham took part of as a boy. The walls of David's own academy leads me to think about a place where dreams are put at the heart of football - kids come to the academy, take the walk down along the "wall of fame" on their way to the locker rooms and leading them from the locker rooms to the pitches is an area that may have slight elements of the players' tunnels of the big stadiums. The wall in the entrance and reception area lists the words "Start of a dream" along with pictures of David Beckham and this is accompanied by a long wall full of jerseys, boots, pictures, and quotes from and about David and other big football personalities such as for instance Zinedine Zidane and Ronaldino. That's the way to the locker rooms. Yes, identification processes (with the world of famous footballers) and dreams are staged in a good way. The quote from David Beckham about Zinedine Zidane where David states that Zidane is "the greatest player I have ever seen, played against and played with. To even be on the same pitch as this man is an honour" exemplifies the transformation process that young players go through on their way to stardom - even they are touched by different elements of the game and that is what makes sport so appealing.

The facility illustrates a good example of utilizing physical evidence in the form of the transformation process from an unknown youth player to a famous world-class football star. This is exemplified with shirts from David's childhood career and his professional career as well as from physical evidence ala that from his friends from football, i.e. the wall works like a historical timeline and puts things in the right perspective. I am 33 years old and I really felt like playing football when visiting the academy. It is in your veins when you are at the academy. From the entrance to the locker rooms, the cafeteria, the educational rooms, the medical centre, the trophies (yes, young football players and fans also identify with winning) - all is done with a good deal of positive appeal to the senses of visitors. Good experiences start with sensory perceptions that end in something that gives meaning to you (Boswijk et al., 2008).

### **Fun football experiences above all**

Elite youth development is not the main purpose of the academy. Professional clubs all over England and the World for that matter are taking care of that already. At the David Beckham Academy, fun football experiences should overrule entirely elitist mindsets where kids are pressed to perform at every instance. That adds a softer appeal to David Beckham's brand and thus underlines the fact that he is not only in this game for the money - but on the contrary for the authenticity and the passion of the game. Leading experts in branding and corporate social responsibility argue that being authentic equals "knowing who you are and what your attributes are and knowing what your mission is" (McElhaney, 2008). According to this, there should be alignment between the social responsibility branding, the communication, and the strategy - that is fulfilled in the David Beckham Academy case. This academy is David Beckham's chance and way of giving something back! And in the employees of the academy, David has the "internal champions" to match daily operations with strategic objectives.

Given that, David Beckham Academy can offer relevant stakeholders (football fans and players of tomorrow) a significant virtual and physical access point to the David Beckham Brand (Pine & Gilmore, 2007). This is exemplified via the academy's web site and the training facilities. From a professional standpoint, this leads to higher brand recognition through experiences - and hence positive experiences in the form of happy football memories lead to a lot of positive stakeholders for the David Beckham Brand. The fact that he is also a competent player, has a celebrity wife, and receives a lot of media exposure, makes it no wonder that the academy is popular.

### **Edutainment and involvement of schools**

Another factor that sets the David Beckham Academy apart from other football academies is its exclusive method of integrating local communities and hence schools in the daily operations. These operations include the National schools programme where kids from various schools are invited to experience a day at the academy for free. As a matter of fact, kids can gain a first-hand experience of what the academy is all about. This means gaining insight into the aim of the academy which among other things is to give kids good experiences in terms of football and healthy lifestyles, let them have fun and get involved in the game and the teambuilding experiences surrounding the game.

Edutainment is the contraction of the words education and entertainment. The academy has been successful in taking advantage of this concept in a practical and strategic way. Kids from schools, including kids with disabilities, can all experience a set-up where everything is "staged" for the purpose of experiencing the world of football from a holistic and exciting angle. For instance, the build-up has been themed like a World Cup - kids are divided into different teams, e.g. England, France, or Sweden and then competing against each other. The teams will then have to solve challenges in the form of physical challenges and role challenges. The physical challenges take place on the pitch and include for instance team development, skills development and culminate in a mini World Cup Tournament. The role challenges involve kids playing different roles in which they compete with others in that role in the pursuit of solving educational challenges such as that of a physiotherapist, a team nutritionist, a scout, a team manager, a fitness coach or a sports journalist. All of the off-the-field activities take place in coordinated class-rooms and the content is connected to the National Curriculum which acts as a quality indicator. Consequently, a kid's expected value from his/her meeting with the academy is put on the board, i.e. the experiential value promise is to a large extent stated in this situation where sport works as the medium that trigger at the brand level (Schmitt, 2003).

### **Reaching out to the local community**

Representatives of the academy also seek to meet the local community. There is a close collaboration with the neighbour next door, i.e. the O2 Arena. Moreover, the academy runs football coaching educational programmes, teambuilding days for corporations with scents of football, a 7-23 (his shirt number from respectively Manchester United and Real Madrid) after school club and a special needs programme aimed at kids with disabilities. Concerning this outreach, the academy is working proactively to encourage the growth of the game of soccer as well as utilizing football as a learning platform, also regarding learning linked to the National Curriculum. Sports development is on public and private agendas and the David Beckham Academy has found a superb way to emphasize and implement the supporting cornerstones of sound sports development and good corporate citizenship.

### **Brand extension in the US**

The David Beckham Academy also has an equivalent branch in Los Angeles in the US - a clever strategic decision given David Beckham's contract with the Los Angeles Galaxy of the Major Soccer League. This branch was opened in 2006 and is located next to the Galaxy's home ground the Home Depot Center in Carson City in the southern part of LA. It serves as a good attempt to build and grow the game of football in the US where the word football is often associated with the American style of football. Having the US Soccer Federation along with two MLS clubs and other prestigious sports facilities at the same spot along with the presence of David Beckham himself (when playing for the Galaxy) is definitely something that should help!

### **From global megabrand to global role model**

To sum up, this article is about a global sports megabrand (David Beckham) and how this branding effect can be utilized from a professional standpoint by creating good experiences for football enthusiasts. Thus, David Beckham is a megabrand but when all comes to all; he is just a modest footballer with a passion for the game that keeps him related to the roots of the game and his own childhood experiences as a footballer - a brilliant example of a sports personality who found the connection between sport management and experience economy and a perfect example of a huge role model for the stars of tomorrow in modern football.

**For more information about the academy, which has almost 30 full-time employees (coaches, medical staff, administration etc.), please visit [www.thedavidbeckhamacademy.com](http://www.thedavidbeckhamacademy.com)**