

21ST CENTURY STRATEGY FOR ATTRACTING AND RETAINING YOUNG ATHLETES

By Frank Dick

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Coaches and others involved in the technical sector of athletics must learn to see athletes as their customers. In this article, first given as a presentation at the 2002 International Athletic Foundation Workshop on Youth Athletics, the author outlines an approach for building and maintaining customer satisfaction. One key is an understanding that customers must be worked for, that customers have a choice and that there is a need to constantly pursue new ways to deliver what customers want. It is also important to think of customers as single people, each with individual needs and each with an ever-developing individual perception of the sport's 'personality'. The ability to meet customer needs and present the most desirable personality, distinguishes sports from each other and determines their relative success. The author concludes by saying there is no single solution for competing successfully for customers and that it is therefore important to share ideas that may make activities more successful.

Whether we operate at domestic, national or international level for our sport, we must have 20-20 double vision! By this, I mean we must focus both on meeting the challenges of today's arenas and preparing persistently for tomorrow's very different ones. To do so, we each deliver on three responsibilities:

1. Performing our respective roles to the best of our ability.
2. Pursuing continuous personal development
3. Preparing others to be better in their roles.

So, although we exist in a very competitive culture, we accept the strength of interdependence in endeavoring to realize the Double Vision. Central to making this happen is the credo that one person's experience is a learning opportunity for the entire culture. Because we compete with each other in the athletics arena does not mean competing with each other when competing with other sports. In fact, the only way we can compete with them is by thinking, behaving and acting as a team. We are, then, interdependent. We collectively compete with other sports and

activities. They are our opposition. Our ability to learn faster than them is probably our only sustainable competitive advantage.

Those who lead the commercial sector of athletics, constantly encourage us to think of our modern sport as a business. In a business, there are customers. They purchase what the business makes and or the service provided. For the commercial sector, what we 'make' are meetings, sponsorship opportunities and so on. The service we provide helps televisions, sponsors etc. capitalize on their investment and viewers, readers, spectators etc. become lifelong paying fans. Customers, for the commercial sector, are quite readily identified as such and will be fought for in the general sports market place.

But we, in the technical sector, also have customers. They are the athletes. In this respect, we have much to learn from the commercial side of things. We must learn fast from that world of business, not so much in terms of the economics, but in terms of marketing our business to our potential customers and providing the quality of service that ensures existing customers become customers for life! We must become seriously proactive in this purpose: constantly looking for better ways to attract or even recruit new customers and to add value to the experience of existing customers.

People in business work for customers. Their job is to satisfy customer needs. What keeps them in business is the ability to keep on satisfying those needs in the face of competitive efforts to satisfy those needs differently and/or better. This means that customer satisfaction is not a one-off activity but a dynamic, continuous activity. It must be worked at. In working for customers, we work on their behalf: we also work to win (attract, recruit) and keep (retain) them. We must become as competitive in this as our athletes are in their arenas.

Being competitive requires that we see ourselves as being in a service industry at the service of the customer. Customer satisfaction is the main criteria of an effective business. What we produce, all that makes up our sport has, for too long, been regarded as an end in itself, rather than a means. What we produce only has value if we're making what the customer needs and wants. We may think that our responsibilities are to the people who run our sport, administrators, officials, coaches and so on; or to investors, sponsors, media and supporters; or to a locality or nation. But all of these worthwhile objectives die on their feet if we cannot win customers.

Working for our customers, our athletes, means just that. Finding them, listening to them, thinking like them, anticipating their needs and solving their problems.

How can we be better at serving our customers?

The answer starts by remembering that we are in competition for customers. This brings advantages:

1. We understand that customers must be worked for. We should not be deluded into thinking that we own customers or that we have rights to them.
2. We are obliged to be aware that customers have a choice. There are, from their point of view, alternatives.
3. We are motivated not only to become better at what we do but also to continuously pursue research and development. We must be innovative and seek new and relevant ways to deliver what the customer wants.

Because our customers have a choice, they look for what is different in our offering compared with that of our 'competitors'. We should persistently pursue ways of doing things differently and of doing different things to meet customers' needs. We must have our own USP (unique selling point)! And each of our customers is different. They are people, not dots nor digits, nor a faceless mass. They are vibrant human beings. This means each has many and varied needs, both overt and hidden, tangible and intangible, rational, emotional and social. We can only understand them and identify them if we can think of our customers as people.

This has three main advantages:

1. It helps us to identify what a customer needs (What would I want from athletics? What am I not getting at present?).
2. It involves us in a dialogue with the customer whom we see as having a long-term relationship with us rather than a one-off encounter!
3. It helps us develop along right lines for the future.

The other side of the coin, in all of this, is how the customer perceives athletics. Just as it is better for athletics to think of the customer as a single person; so also for the customer to see us as 'a single person' with an identity, an image embracing values, purpose and so on. It is as if athletics has its own 'personality'. Our performance, whether at a personal level or at our 'product' level affects the customers' perception of the athletics 'personality'.

That 'personality' is determined not by what we believe, but by what the customer believes, or feels, about us. The customer's perception, then, is the only reality. This comes from his or her experience and observation of product, service and people in the sport, this will include:

- What is known about athletics via the press, broadcast media, literature, e-information, etc.
- Costs and value
- Availability / accessibility
- The people who coach, manage, officiate, etc.
- How the sport is presented in relation to current interest trends.
- What other people say
- Etc.

What this means is that every single experience the customer has of athletics contributes to the picture he or she has of it. But this is not a still life picture; it is a movie that is changing and can be changed at any time, according to the customer's most recent experience of athletics.

This is a far from trivial issue, because if we don't all understand its impact we will not see it as our personal and collective responsibility to create and maintain the 'personality' that will win and retain our customers.

When our customer chooses athletics ahead of other sports or interests, he or she has decided that athletics affords benefits and solutions in meeting his or her needs. It has, then, a 'fitness for purpose'. It represents a total package of benefits and solutions. If we are to persistently be the customer's choice, we must be able to check what we offer compared with our competition, in addressing our customer's needs. You do this by producing three lists.

	Customer Needs	Athletics Performance	Other Sports Performance
1.			
2.			
3.			
Etc.			

Some sports are already well down the road with such an approach. In Soccer, UEFA for example, has prepared outstanding materials for resourcing academies, etc developing and preparing young players for their playing careers.

In developing, or reviewing, a total package, the options for changes are limited only by the limits of imagination. Each of these options must be continually reviewed. The complex of previous decisions cannot be considered as carved in stone. All assumptions must be challenged. All advances in human history have come from challenging assumptions! Why? Because customers change; their perceptions of value change and the rate of change is accelerating.

But whose responsibility is it to ensure that athletics is working for our customers? All of us! We are all involved. We cannot think that it is down to someone else. Each of us must become aware of that role and deliver it effectively. None of us is alone in this venture, even if ours is an individual sport. We cannot see ourselves as mavericks. As stated earlier, we are interdependent. We can each take time to listen to our customers; learn more of their changing needs; share what is learned with and from colleagues; and adapt and modify what we do to stay ahead of the game in meeting those needs.

Ideas do not care who their parents are. We can all be creative, innovative. We can all share our ideas to increase the global reservoir of resource to enrich our product offering of benefits and solutions. Of course, we need to tell potential customers who we are and why we should be their choice. We should also tell existing customers how we are meeting their needs and why we should remain their choice. We can only be honest and accurate in this, if we listen continually to what they believe their needs to be and how well we are meeting them. How we achieve this should meet the following requirements of good and effective advertising:

- Visibility:
 - Does it stand out in whatever medium?
 - Are we using all available media?
- Identify:
 - Does it register who and what we are?
- Promise:
 - Does it communicate the benefits we offer?
 - Does it indicate where and when they can be accessed?
- Single—Mindedness:
 - Does it reflect an integrated cohesive picture of our athletics promotion strategy from values to vision?

Remaining the customer's choice is about ensuring their experience of athletics and us has quality consistency. This, we can achieve through the sum of the following:

Dream:

1. Reaffirm athletics' values and vision.
2. Identify objectives — short, medium, long.
3. Relate 1 and 2 to winning and retaining athletes.

Plan:

4. Know athlete's needs (as customer).
5. Create product and service offering to meet needs.
6. Identify and access resources to deliver.
7. Set timescales and assign roles.

Do:

8. Train / retrain all service providers and product deliveries.
9. Design process for being proactive in winning and retaining athletes.
10. Communicate Dream and Plan to entire national organization and via the IAAF website to other national athletics federations.
11. Deliver on Plan.

Review:

12. Review athlete's needs regularly.
13. Review athletics and other sports' effectiveness meeting needs.
14. Review process of winning and retaining athletes.
15. Review the Dream, Plan and Do detail.

Although we are talking about quality here, we are also thinking about performance, our performance in making quality happen. This almost returns us to the start of this article. Performance is the first of our 'three responsibilities'.

Personal development, the second, ensures we continue to perform even better. The most important 'coach' we have, in this, is the customer, the athlete. We coach the athlete (third responsibility); he or she coaches us! Working for customers means working with them. We are, once again, interdependent. They know what we need to know to meet their needs. We must constantly request their involvement in their future development and in the sports. If we don't ask we can't learn. It is the most relevant research you can undertake in working out how to win and retain customers.

We should all understand that there is no single solution here in competing successfully for our customers. My challenge to you is to apply what you believe to be most relevant from this article; to learn from the experience; and to share it with our colleagues world-wide. Out of this will grow a vast reservoir of ideas which each of us may use or adapt to make our own programmes, processes, campaigns or whatever, even more successful. Much of what has been discussed here can also be applied for another kind of customer, for example coaches, administrators, and officials. We need them as lifelong customers. Let's help them need us!