

# Diehard Fans: The Wellington Phoenix and Yellow Fever

Football franchise the Wellington Phoenix owes much of its success to tech-savvy fan community the Yellow Fever, say Alex Natelli and David Pauleen. The broader lesson: there is no substitute for genuine enthusiasm amongst consumers.

In just their third season (2009-2010), the Wellington Phoenix became the first New Zealand franchise to reach the semi-finals of an Australian Football competition. As the Phoenix progressed through the competition, their fan base also received excited media attention. These developments are all the more remarkable given New Zealand's poor record in international football. A critical element of match success and increased fan support has been the emergence of the Phoenix's fan community, the Yellow Fever ([www.yellowfever.co.nz](http://www.yellowfever.co.nz)), and their use of online technologies. In this article, we investigate the ways in which the Yellow Fever and their vociferous online interactions appear to be a crucial ingredient in the club's success.

As professional sports attract an ever-increasing number of internet-savvy supporters, questions arise with regard to the influence of such technologies on sport, and especially on their ability to improve communications between geographically dispersed groups of people. Use of these tools vary according to the tools available, number of people and topics (Wilson and Peterson, 2002). For example, some groups use chat rooms, instant messaging or web conferencing which provide a real-time or synchronous quality to their interactions. Others use asynchronous tools, such as email lists, discussion forums and wikis. The Yellow Fever website includes several asynchronous tools, including blog articles, discussion forums, member polls and podcasts. While these tools enable fans to share information, stories and experiences, it is the interaction between people that generates fan support – or, in this case, the 'fever'.

"Who are the Yellow Fever?" Judging by the official community response, one can surmise that the fans are using online technologies to drive enthusiasm for their team and sport.

"It's a helluva tricky question to answer. Like any religion or sweeping pandemic it's pretty hard to pin down, and impossible to deliver any definitive list of the afflicted.

Is Yellow Fever everybody bantering about football or biffing Aussie commentators on the messageboards? Is Yellow Fever everyone packed into the general region of Aisle

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22 at the Ring of Fire? Is Yellow Fever simply everyone who roots for the Phoenix or is a fan of the beautiful game in this country?

The answer is probably all three, and many more.”

## The Business of Sport

New Zealand epitomises a society in which professional sport has a prominent role. The success of the Wellington Phoenix, the marketing of Rugby World Cup 2011 and the success of individual athletes figure prominently in the news and in the break rooms and pubs of New Zealand. Spectators look to sport for entertainment, distraction from daily issues or for business opportunities. The spectators are not just the individual fans but also include local communities, corporate sponsors, and television and other media. In Australia and New Zealand, annual commercial activity associated with professional sport represents approximately A\$1.3 billion. The competition between major sport codes, including rugby union, rugby league and soccer, is increasing. These codes are competing for media budgets, corporate sponsorships and spectator attendance.

Considering the importance of sport to society and the competition between professional sport codes, it is worth considering the key influences on spectator attendance. These include camaraderie, a team's ability to entertain, fan attitudes and behaviours, large spectator crowds, and diversion, entertainment and family ties. Many of these factors suggest that spectator attendance relies more on engaging people's hearts than their heads. Smith and Wheeler (2002) explored loyalty and the emotional connections required for people to affiliate with an organisation or product and proposed that marketing activities can cause customers to advocate on behalf of the organisation. Murrell and Dietz (1992) argued that fan support of a sport team was closely associated with overall team success. The key to their assertion is the distinction of fan identification which they argue is both independent of attendance and a better determinant of fan support. Fisher and Wakefield (1998) support this finding in a more general sense when they state that strong identification with a group supports consumption behaviours. In the case of the Yellow Fever, we show how fan enthusiasm via the Yellow Fever website appears to have contributed to the success of the Wellington Phoenix.

## The Case of the Wellington Phoenix

Professional sport organisations generally look to the Internet in four specific ways: as a supplementary source of revenue, as an easier method to record participant data, as a way to conduct sales transactions and as a means to build the spectator base (Beech, Chadwick and Tapp, 2000). In this case study, we sought to identify how Yellow Fever online interactions impact overall fan support for the Wellington Phoenix. Using data collected from the discussion forum archives, as well as a short web survey, we found that people became Yellow Fever members for five primary reasons: to discuss their views of the Phoenix, to be part of something fun, to support the Phoenix, to get timely information about the Phoenix and to achieve a sense of camaraderie. As a professional football club, the Wellington Phoenix have their own goals, including selling tickets and merchandise, increasing attendance, promoting

corporate sponsorships and increasing media awareness.

In the next section, we look at the benefits generated by fans for both the Wellington Phoenix and the Yellow Fever.

## Developing the Fever

One perspective on fan support involves spectator loyalty and emotional connection to a sport figure or group (Smith and Wheeler, 2002). Numerous examples of Yellow Fever member online interaction from the inception of the Wellington Phoenix discussion forum tend to support this perspective. When a member pledges that they will support the Phoenix regardless of the match results, other members join into a discussion of tactics to support the team.

Topic: Should Wellington Phoenix play some “Home” matches outside of Wellington? (April 2007)

“As much as I'd love some games in (Auckland), the team needs to be centred in one spot. They're going to be starting behind the 8 Ball so (going to) need good loyal local support especially if they get a run of results that don't go their way early on.”

They appear to agree that this football team cannot succeed without a grassroots effort to increase fan support. A month later, a member posts an idea that would most likely guarantee a full stadium for the Phoenix's first home match. On the surface, the member's suggestion that the team buy up the unsold tickets and distribute them for free appears to be a reasonable idea for generating more fans. However, posts from other Yellow Fever members argue that the financial burden on the Wellington Phoenix would not justify the effort. These reactions denote an apparent regard for the financial health and well-being of the football club that exceeds mere entertainment. This sense of responsibility to the team is of enormous value to the Phoenix.

## Producing Identity

The second perspective on fan support relates to how spectators identify with a sport individual or group, the strength of which influences consumption behaviours (Fisher and Wakefield, 1998). This type of fan support is the most difficult to gauge. Although the online forum contains examples of members who identify strongly with the sporting franchise and purchase tickets and merchandise, the relationship cannot be further explained with the given data set as the direction or existence of a cause-and-effect relationship is not apparent. An example of spectators identifying with the team includes the member who posted the “Missed Opportunity” topic in July 2007.

Topic: Missed Opportunity (July 2007)

“I went to the open day today. It was a good experience and a chance to meet current and former (New Zealand football) heroes. But two things stood glaringly out of place - which were in fact missing completely. 1. There should have been a kiosk there for the Yellow Fever to recruit new members and make them aware of this website and the involvement with the club. 2. There should have been a merchandise shop open for fans to buy jerseys, tee shirts, hats, flags banners, coffee mugs etc as per most professional...”

“... The points that you make are very valid ones. Those

two things have been a worry to me [as well], as all professional football clubs provide this kind of service to their fans and it brings in revenue. I'm not sure how much of this is being controlled by the Aussie A-League authorities rather than the club themselves. Great first posting.”

Reading the initial post, one might think that the member was a salaried employee or marketing consultant. The topic begins with his lamenting two missed opportunities. The first was that Yellow Fever did not organise a recruitment booth. A sceptic could argue that this support was directed toward Yellow Fever rather than the Wellington Phoenix. However, the second missed opportunity involves a Wellington Phoenix merchandise booth. Though it is possible that the member was just thinking entrepreneurially, one cannot dismiss the reactions of many other members who endorsed both ideas because they saw a potential benefit for the football team. A third example of fan support occurs in October 2008. A member notices that spectators can buy student-rate tickets without presenting student identification. Several members appear to be irate that stadium staff members are not looking after their team's interest. Still, the most poignant comment belonged to a moderator who simply stated that he could not understand why anyone would want to cheat their own club. It is that sense of ownership and inclusion that denotes identification not only with the online community, but also with the club itself.

It is certainly clear that the Yellow Fever online discussion focus influences fan support for the Wellington Phoenix football club.

## Building Team Support

The third perspective also points to the conditions that can promote fan support for the Wellington Phoenix. Previous research discusses four areas in which Yellow Fever members demonstrated fan support behaviours. One is by attending Wellington Phoenix matches and includes participating as a spectator and purchasing food and related items. Though the discussion forum data cannot link member intentions to actual attendance, the Yellow Fever members declare their eagerness to attend matches as well as pre- and post-match functions throughout the 2007-08 season.

Topic: Wellington to have the weekends largest attendance (September 2007)

“With only 8,800 at the game in Brisbane, and 12,200 in Adelaide - there's a good chance that Wellington will have the highest attendance of the round, I don't think Perth will get more than 10K (they only had 8.5K for their opening game at home), so really anything over 13K and we'll be tops!!”

“Got 5 coming with me, can't wait !!!!”

Member-conducted attendance polls in June, July and September affirm member intent to attend and loudly support the Phoenix. Members even debate the potential rate of attendance growth within the “Getting Bigger Crowds” topic of September 2007. This data suggests that Yellow Fever members do support the Wellington Phoenix by way of attendance.

According to Frey and Eitzen (1999), fan support can also involve access to sporting events. Since they do not distinguish between direct event attendance and indirect forms of access, it is assumed that this method of fan support can include television, radio and the internet. The Yellow Fever members mention these media in their posts. In July 2007, a moderator announced that the Yellow Fever website would transmit a “live GameCast” of a Wellington Phoenix match. This would supply members with real-time information on the match. At first glance, this service appears to conflict with ticket sales and TV viewing. However, member posts suggest that many will access the match via this website in addition to watching it on television. In August, the members watch another away match while interacting online. For another away match, the members organise a “Fever Lounge” to watch a match together at a local pub. The Yellow Fever GameCast provides fans with another information channel. While seemingly in conflict with ticket sales and television sponsorship revenue, it is also likely that the Yellow Fever are extending the fan experience through further online access. While some fans may choose to consume this information on its own, the core members are more likely to use it in combination with stadium attendance or television viewing. For example, members can access match statistics and supplement the information provided by the stadium, television and radio broadcasts through the use of mobile phone applications. In addition to furthering the fan experience, the Yellow Fever are potentially showing the Phoenix a new sponsorship opportunity.

A third way that Yellow Fever members can display fan support is to advocate on behalf of the team (Smith and Wheeler, 2002). There are several examples of this throughout the 2007-2008 A-League season. For example, in the topic “Message to Wellington” in April 2007, members agree that the Wellington Phoenix do not have a traditional following of fans to rely on and they pledge to organise a grassroots effort to increase support for the team. In May, members discuss the availability of merchandise and help one another obtain items from local shops. Later in the season, a new member posts a topic that asks the Yellow Fever for assistance with tickets and pre-match function information and then receives assistance from members. Lastly, the members declare an overall satisfaction with how well the first season went in terms of attendance. This is despite the poor win-loss record. The Yellow Fever members consistently represent a sense of community, inclusion and fun. Their efforts suggest that they do advocate on behalf of the Wellington Phoenix.

The online discussion forum contains numerous examples of collaboration, emotion and support. Though not explicitly mentioned in the posts, we suspect that the fourth and final way that Yellow Fever members displayed support for the Wellington Phoenix was through camaraderie (Westerbeek et al., 2005), or by adding to a sense of community amongst the spectators. We believe this strong sense of community is instrumental in providing a loyal fan base for the Phoenix.

## Marketing Goods and Services

Topic: Phoenix playing kit? (July 2007)

“Anyone know where I can see the playing kit of the Phoenix?...”

“Are you in Wellington? If so pop into the store and I can show you otherwise ill try and post these on Tuesday once I’m back at work...”

“...Try this link mate! Official kit as revealed on Soccer NZ website under the link more news and ...”

Finally, fan support can equate to spectator consumption of sporting events or extension products (Murrell and Dietz, 1992), the discussion forum provides a number of examples (as above) where members enquire about match tickets and merchandise. On each occasion, other members appear eager to assist others to obtain these items. Again, the benefits for the Phoenix are manifest.

In sum, the case clearly demonstrates that the Yellow Fever members support the Wellington Phoenix in several ways, including attending matches, purchasing merchandise, accessing other matches via media channels, advocating on behalf of the team, assisting others with issues and experiencing a common sense of community.

## Conclusions

The parallel growth in internet usage and professional sports consumption represent two significant trends in modern society. Essentially, the Yellow Fever is a subgroup of Wellington Phoenix fans. They distinguish themselves through a strong commitment to assisting the newly-formed team. This case indicates that Yellow Fever members influence general fan support for the Wellington Phoenix. With the community website preceding the football club, early fans visited this website for information and discussion followed. Fan support translates into member attendance and merchandise purchases, match access via media channels, assistance to other members, advocacy on behalf of the team and co-creation of a sense of camaraderie and community. We suggest this process is transferable across sport, recreation and volunteering sectors. The lesson is that there is no substitute for genuine enthusiasm amongst consumers.

On a final note, the 2011 Rugby World Cup is fast approaching. As the host nation readies itself, we suggest that the internet is bound to affect marketing, promotions and even social activities related to this major sporting event. We believe that the Rugby World Cup organisers and business partners can benefit from the recent experiences of the Wellington Phoenix and their enthusiastic fans – the Yellow Fever.

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