

Going Digital

Paul Clapham spoke to Paul Mace, MD of sports PR specialists Mace Sport



You're heavily involved with sports personalities. Do you think brand owners serve the needs of independent retailers with these sponsorships?

Brand owners certainly make a serious effort to keep the retailer top of mind. The key issue is that brands should focus on the authenticity of their chosen ambassadors and in truth some brands don't always get a good match. As a case of how it works effectively our client Precision Training has Graham Taylor, the former England football manager as ambassador who does have the credibility to talk training requirements. He also has a grandson playing sport so he is involved on two levels. Both retailers and their customers understand and value a message from Graham. I suspect that some brand owners are seduced by the big name without researching the qualities of the individual. A high profile is only part of the equation. Some are not engaging, not empathetic and others just take the money and run.

Do retailers make full use of the marketing support brands offer them?

This is about communication. We are currently in a rapidly evolving situation. The end-user picks up a vast amount of messages from a wide variety of sources. Especially amongst younger customers the impact of social networking sites has been huge and is still growing. We find that viral campaigns reach customers very effectively and create two-way communication which is increasingly important. We see the best communication between brand owner and retailer as those which can be monitored. We typically achieve over 50% 'opening rates' with digital communications. That may not sound so impressive, but it is tangible whereas with other communications you simply don't know how successful or otherwise your programme has been.

You're putting heavy stress on digital issues. Is that really so important to retail sales?

It's vital. The good retailers already have a handle on this but others are simply not involved. They don't stay in touch with customers often enough. With mobile phones, e-mail, networking sites and Twitter the rising generation in particular are used to far more communication and any business which is not involved with the wired world rapidly becomes invisible to these customers.

What sales opportunities do you see for independents?

The way we buy sports goods is a changing landscape. I can see a trend which creates a renaissance for the high quality, specialist retailer. Because of that mass of information available from so many sources the customer is increasingly knowledgeable. "Don't know" from an untrained assistant just doesn't cut it. The independents are much better. They aim to educate their customers; they talk with them and become involved with their sporting lives. That said they must embrace the digital revolution or die. Apparently the average family now spends more time online than watching TV and young people – my 12-year-old son as a case – don't read newspapers: they get their facts from the web.

Apart from your own clients whose efforts do you admire in the business?

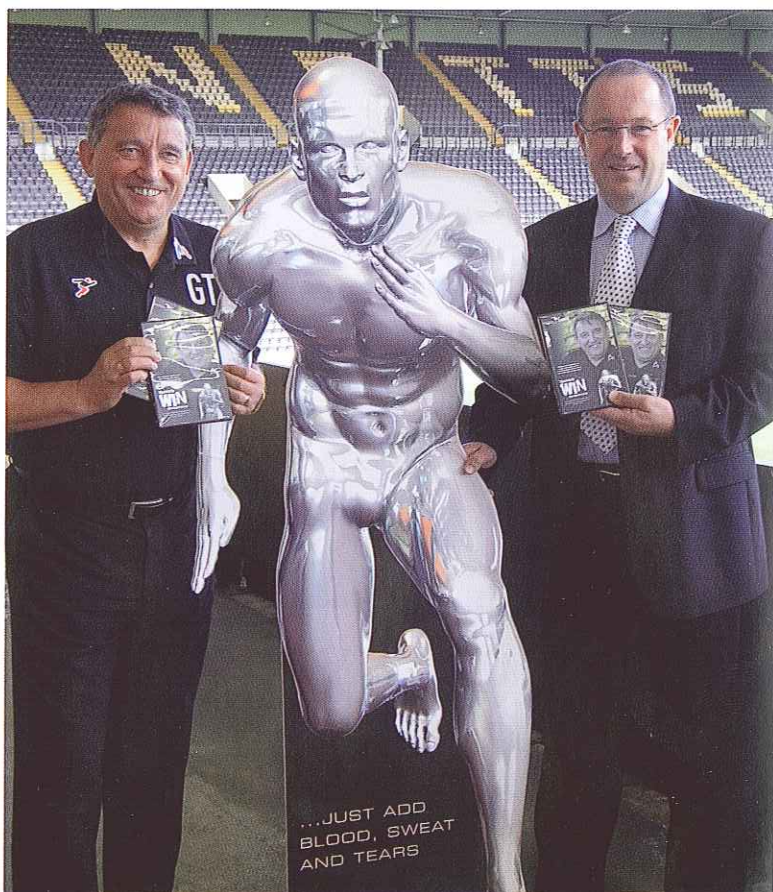
I'm a big fan of the people behind the Great Britain cycling team. In a short time they have taken the sport from a low ranking to being the best in the world, with involvement in the Tour De France to come. I don't know the sales results but they should be impressive. The team itself are role models not just on the track but off it too.

Do you feel positive about the current sports market?

Absolutely 100%. These are very exciting times for the whole sports world and particularly here in the UK with the Olympics on the horizon. Both in terms of participation and support across all sports involvement is growing. As an example of why I'm positive, when I went to football matches thirty years ago maybe 3% of the audience were women. Now it's more like 25 to 30%. I have no truck with the negative attitudes I hear in some quarters. I'd say we've never had it so good and I invite the whingers to be quiet.

What recommendations would you make to retailers to enhance their business?

As before, embrace and harness digital. But also most retailers are miles off the mark on database building and data capture. That really is a low cost way to build a loyal customer base. At the same time, maintain a reputation for good old-fashioned customer service and expertise – I would even mention good manners because in the big stores you don't get a 'good morning'. S



A shining example: Former England manager Graham Taylor (left) is the ideal ambassador for the Precision Training ethos