



Mark Johnston's

Straight Talking

RACING MUST PRIORITISE RETENTION

I WAS pleased to read that ARC are drastically cutting back on their number of after-racing music events. I would have been even more pleased if this wasn't simply due to an increase in the price the artists are charging and actually marked some realisation that they are in the racing business, not the music business; that the customer base in the two industries is entirely different; and that promoting one not only fails to promote the other but actually detracts from the core business.

I don't know who first came up with the idea of putting on concerts after racing and started this trend that we have had to endure now for more than a decade. I suspect it might have been The Jockey Club, maybe under Simon Bazalgette. It strikes me as the sort of scheme he might have come up with. Whoever it was, I wonder if they are proud of it and might be willing to stand up and claim credit. I wonder if anyone has any figures on the number of new, younger-generation racing fans that this policy has created. After all, racecourses have always claimed that that was their principal objective, rather than an opportunity to collect a higher price on the gate and sell more alcohol. I'll bet my bottom dollar that there are no figures on the number of racing fans that concerts have alienated and driven away from the sport.

I had no formal training in how to run a business. As far as I am aware there is no such training specific to horse training, or, for that matter, veterinary practice, available. I had to learn as I went along, by trial and error and from others like Brian Palmer (who, incidentally, didn't have any formal training either) who had been successful in their chosen field. Rightly or wrongly, I imagine that the racecourse groups and large independent racecourses do

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employ people with a track record and qualifications in business management and sales and marketing. However, it rarely seems so when I look at the way racing is marketed on course. Or maybe, as I have always said, they see their core



The bundle of badges mark out this man as a regular racegoer, the sort of fan racing must aim to retain

product as food and beverage rather than horseracing. They shouldn't because there will always be better and cheaper places to eat and drink and, for that matter, to listen to music.

Furthermore, anyone in racecourse management who can count knows that for most racecourses the vast majority of their income comes from media rights and it is not pictures of the after-racing concert that they are being paid for. And yet, despite the value of the pictures and the fact that the racecourses so determinedly fought racing's participants for ownership of the media rights, no racecourse in Britain makes full, or even good, use of the pictures of away racing available to them. Far more screen time on-course is given to promotion of non-racing events and other sports than is given to racing. It is a travesty and a constant reminder to me that the wrong people have control of the media rights.

At Hamilton Park, where I sit on the board, we have a superstar on sponsorship sales called Anne Doyle who sets a very high standard in sales for all others to aspire to. At our last board meeting of 2022, when senior members of the team were invited to tell the board about

their achievements in the past year and their targets and aspirations for the coming season, Anne had, as usual, exceeded all expectations. Our chairman Sir Ian Good asked her: 'How do you do it, Anne?'.

'My mantra', she said, 'is retention, growth, new business, in that order'. That is probably a standard principle for those who have been formally trained in sales, but I had never heard it before and it hit me like a ton of bricks. I came home and immediately said to Charlie that we must make greater effort to apply these principles to our business. We must do more to ensure that we retain our existing customers by ensuring that we are satisfying their needs and requirements; we must try to 'grow' the amount of business – the number and quality of horses – we get from those existing customers; and, lastly, we must look for new business.

It also struck me that racing as a whole must apply these principles and at present, in Britain, I don't think we are making a very good job of it. As we started on the subject of after-racing concerts, let's consider those customers who go racing. Of course, at any given race meeting, the regular racegoers (epitomised by the man festooned with badges in our picture) might be outnumbered by those who rarely or only occasionally attend, but the regular racegoer is the mainstay of our sport and is the customer whom we must first be aiming to retain. Do courses focus on the needs of the regular racegoer, the true racing fan? I don't get the impression that they do. All I hear is that the average age of the regular racegoer is increasing, the inference being that they'll all soon be dying off, and we need to look to a new generation of young racegoers.

PERHAPS there is some truth in that but, as Anne Doyle so clearly pointed out, only after we have made every effort to retain our existing customers, ageing or not, for as long as possible and grown the business that we get from those customers. And it is abundantly clear to me that selling alternatives to horse racing, such as music, is not going to aid retention, growth, or new business. It might, temporarily, bring some new custom and increased alcohol sales for racecourses, but it does nothing for horseracing.

Racecourses, the BHA, and all of us charged with trying to secure the future of horseracing need to look at the aspects of our sport which led the man in our picture to attend the best, and generally most expensive, enclosures at racecourses on hundreds of occasions. We must then seek to promote those aspects of our sport and sell them to a younger generation to create new business that will endure.

Publicity is their target

I WASN'T going to comment on the protesters at the Grand National as I think the best policy in combatting these people is to starve them of the publicity that they crave, but I feel I must add something to James Willoughby's take on the subject (see page 7).

James is not alone in his concerns that the Grand National, being quite an extreme and unique example of horseracing, might bring the wrong kind of publicity to the sport. In fact, one prominent Newmarket trainer told me that he felt 'the race must go' and he urged me to join him in calling for that drastic action. I cannot bring myself to do so as, of all those races in which I have no involvement, it is still the one I make greatest effort to see every year. It is also the race which, through the exploits of Red Rum and others of that era, leaves me with the most memories of watching horseracing in my youth.

I cannot argue with James's arithmetic and his statement that reducing the field size by 25% would reduce the risk of fatalities by at least 25%, but I must point out that the protestors were not there because the Grand National is the most dangerous race in the world for horse or rider; they were there because the race attracts the biggest audience of any race in the world. No other reason. They chose the race that would give them the most publicity. So, in effect, they were confirming that this is the most popular race on the planet.

The protestors in their pink t-shirts were from a group calling themselves Animal Rising (formerly Animal Rebellion), an offshoot of Extinction Rebellion. Another offshoot of Extinction Rebellion, Just Stop Oil, recently staged the protest where one of its members poured orange powder dye on the table at the World Snooker Championships. Well, if that was down to some particular link between snooker and the oil industry or a particularly high demand for oil and its multitude of by-products arising from the staging of the World Snooker Championships, then the connection was lost on me. They were simply looking for television coverage and snooker presented an easy target.

The same principles drew Animal Rising to the Grand National and, if the Grand National wasn't there, they would look to Cheltenham or the Derby.