

A PERSONAL VIEW

Ged Shields owns shares in 15 horses. Dismayed by the way the sport fails to place the retention and acquisition of owners at the heart of its vision for the future, he co-founded the Keep Owners in Racing pressure group in 2020. Outside of racing he is best-known for developing and launching Ronseal's iconic 'Does Exactly What it Says on the Tin' tv advertising campaign.



CAN YOU (or anybody?) complete the following sentence: 'Premier racing will attract new fans to racing because . . . ' Answers on a postcard please. I pose the question because there is increasing concern that insufficient marketing support has been devoted to the launch of our sport's 'Premier' racedays which, in case you haven't noticed, began at the start of this month. When asked how I would market Premier racedays I'm reminded of the old Irish gag in which a tourist asks a local farmer if he knows how to get to a particular town.

'I do', he says 'but I wouldn't start from here'.

The punchline encompasses a widely recognised truth that starting from the wrong place can make it very difficult to get to your intended destination. This is sadly the situation British racing faces as we move into 2024. The strategic planning process racing has undertaken and the marketing of what appears to be its sole output to date, Premier racedays, is deeply flawed. Let me explain.

Most people without a marketing background think marketing is all about advertising and promotion. They think marketing comes at the end of the process. Here's the product: now advertise and promote it. Wrong. In fact, most of the impact of marketing takes place well before the product is launched.

Marketing is like an iceberg. What you see above the line is advertising and promotion but most of the work that really matters is unseen and takes place below the line in developing a very deep understanding of market segments and the motivations of end-users.

Marketing is the process that matches the capability of the organisation (in this case racing) with the needs of end-users (in this case, existing and potential racing fans). It's the job of the marketing team to develop a very detailed knowledge of those end-users. This is the work that should have driven racing's strategy. Instead, it has been all about racecourses and fixtures without any consideration of the end-user.

This is why the marketing of Premier racedays is in such trouble. A lot more work should have been done to identify Premier racing's precise target audience before detailed intervention on the fixture list was even contemplated.

A marketing team should play a key role in the development of a carefully constructed strategic plan. Step one is the gathering of data. Step two is analyse it. Step three is develop a deep understanding of the market and end-user segments and their motivations. Step four is set objectives. Step five is decide on a strategy. Step six is develop a plan. Step seven is establish metrics to measure progress. Racing has just jumped to step five with no evidence that steps 1-3 have been undertaken.

Another key marketing action that is notably absent is the development of a positioning statement for Premier racing. Positioning simply describes the role of a product in the life of a target user. For example, Amazon is a one-stop shopping site for consumers who want to purchase a wide range of products online with quick delivery. It's very simple and easy to understand. But so far nobody has explained the process through which Premier racing will attract new racing fans. And that brings me back to the question with which I began this piece. How will Premier racing attract new fans to the sport?

I totally agree that racing should showcase its best events but I'm struggling to see how Premier racing will do it any better than the major festivals at Cheltenham, Royal Ascot, Goodwood etc which already have a very clear identity. In fact, I suspect that in spectator

terms, 'Festivisation' – where the message could be tailored for a national or regional or local audience – is a much stronger idea than Premierisation. Similarly, and I genuinely hope I'm wrong, but I'm struggling to see how Premierisation is any different to the current situation where ITV and the Racing Post focus on the day's main races. What's truly different about it? Why will it engage new fans? Extra prize-money is obviously valued by participants but racing fans and punters couldn't care less.

Moreover, racing has a slightly different problem in that, venue apart, a higher-class race looks just the same as a lower-class race (except very often the lower-class races have bigger fields). Compare this to football where the top teams in the Premier League and the teams in the lower leagues look like they're playing two different sports.

It's obviously so difficult to effect real change in racing that moving (but not reducing) a few fixtures and remembering that Sunday is part of the weekend is presented as radical innovation. Compare that to cricket which has completely transformed itself and found a new audience with the advent of T20 and day-night cricket.

Just before the launch there were vague comments that Premier racing was all about 'growth' but very little was said about the target audience that would deliver this growth. And there were virtually no details about the proposed launch campaign itself, other than the idea Premier racing would have its own identity (a logo) and the making of warm noises that Premier racing would look 'different'.

There was also an admission that promotional support would initially have to come out of Great British Racing's existing annual budget and that the complete launch campaign not being ready from day one was 'sub-optimal'. I'm sure the people involved are well-meaning, but this is very disappointing.

IT's said you don't get a second chance to make a first impression and I suspect the launch of Premier racing as this Klarion went to press will have turned out to have been a damp squib. I hope I'm wrong. But, that said, I would be reluctant to invest significant funds in Premier racing as it stands because it hasn't been thought through properly.

What would I do? It's an unfair question because, as I hope I've made clear, that in the words of that Irish farmer: 'I wouldn't have started from here.' However, once it became obvious that Premierisation, albeit through a flawed strategic process, was the only show in town, I would have striven to find out through extensive dialogue and research with the likely target market segments what needed to be offered in order to engage and motivate them to attend or place wagers.

If I was able to find some worthwhile answers, then that would have helped to drive the marketing and promotional strategy. If I couldn't find such answers, I would have aborted the launch and urged the strategic planning team to come up with something much bigger and better.

But it's too late now. Premier racing has set sail. Let's hope there are no icebergs. ■



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