

CHAPTER 4 - Case Study: AZ Alkmaar

Bas Schnater is the Head of Fan Engagement, CRM and Digital at AZ Alkmaar, a Dutch professional football club from Alkmaar and the Zaanstreek. The club plays in the highest professional league in the Netherlands, the Eredivisie. Schnater shared some insights and strategies on how the club prepared for the GDPR and how he sees it as not just hoops to jump through but also as an opportunity to really get to grips with the team's fan data.

"I started thinking about the GDPR in advance, gathering lots of information that was relevant to each department. I visited some informative events at law firms and asked other companies how they prepared for the GDPR because, in the context of football, we tend to think short-term, and May can seem very far away from now [December]. For me, May is only five months away, and we really need to step up the game."

The Dutch Federation of Professional Football Clubs (FBO) is taking the GDPR very seriously. It set up a pilot audit programme for its member clubs, and AZ volunteered to be part of it. Schnater gained a lot of valuable knowledge from it, which the club aims to put into action.

"AZ has been very proactive in this area, starting a task force some time ago that includes a lot of people from the organisation that work with our data, to see what the main problem points are that we need to take action on before the 25th of May.

"But it goes way broader than just our marketing data. Of course, we collect a lot of data on the football players, and with the GDPR going into effect on the 25th of May, which is a few weeks before the transfer market opens up again, we have to understand what happens if a player gets transferred to a different club and we have two seasons' worth of data from them."

What do we have to do with that data? Do we have to transfer that or make that available to the player? Do we have to erase that information because they are no longer one of our employees? And what about other employees? If an employer collects information on me, for example, if I pay for lunch on my card every time, then they know exactly what I eat. What do they have to do with that, and what are my rights as an employee regarding that data?

So there are a lot of questions that still need to be answered, and that's why we're forming the task force: first, to create an action list, and later, to collect the information that we need to be able to answer these questions."

Marketing and Opt-Ins

A significant area of focus for Schnater is marketing data; mainly how to deal with opt-ins in future. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, they will be vastly different under the GDPR. Schnater, however, sees this as a positive change, and one that will help AZ get more from its fan data.

"GDPR gives us a lot of opportunities rather than cramping us up. It gives us the chance to really ask what communications people really want, and what they don't want. In that sense, it will hopefully increase engagement percentages. I see it as a big opportunity to become truly relevant to the right audience."

AZ has been using opt-ins since 2015 when it installed its new ticketing platform, but the method of collecting opt-ins is no longer relevant. This has led to the creation of an opt-in management strategy.

"We need to outline what we can send the fans, and what we can't. We've been using soft opt-ins, so if someone bought something from the web store we know that they were probably interested in information about the web store, or that they're probably interested in more information on the club. So we use that as an implied opt-in.

But of course we can't do that any more, so to deal with these we decided to run continuous campaigns to collect as many compliant opt-ins as possible from the fans that we already have in our database. We started this programme in September 2017 and it's working really well – we're letting our fans know we're not being irresponsible with their data."

Naturally, the club wants to secure as many opt-ins as possible, but it's also vital that it doesn't spam its fans with too many requests to that effect.

With a new website planned for November 2018, Schnater already has a plan in place to make sure that as many fans as possible are reached for opt-ins in an organic way.

“It’s going to be relatively easy for us as we’ll be renewing our website, both back and front end, and GDPR compliance is actually a considerable part of the process that we’re going through. We’re also asking potential suppliers for the website how they will handle customer profiling as we will have different fans using our website for different purposes.”

GDPR Awareness and Implications

It’s important to make sure that everyone in the organisation is on board with the GDPR changes. Like any business change, it can be challenging to get everyone to work together, but Schnater is doing his best to ensure that everyone at AZ is preparing and changing their processes to be as compliant as possible with the legislation.

“We are trying to prepare our staff already and trying to unlearn behaviours that aren’t compliant with the GDPR. As an example, it used to be common practice to share lists of people between departments via email because it was the easiest way of working. One of the first things is that we need to unlearn habits like that. We’ve always had secure servers for internal use, but now on every server we also have a data transfer folder and we’ve started using them. We’ve already had meetings with the task force to discuss what we can do to make our internal data storage more secure, and that is one of the first aspects that came out of it. It’s more inconvenient than emailing it, but it’s way more secure.”

That’s where the task force comes in. Every department has different elements of the business that need attention from a data security perspective. The HR department’s needs for employee contracts and for how it deals with sensitive corporate data differ from the needs of the sponsorship team, which will deal with more commercial data. Essentially, the task force is set up to include all parts of the business that will be contributing to things that may be effected by the GDPR and making those decisions and discussions organisation-wide, rather than leaving them as the remit of a single department.

For Schnater it’s vital to ask as many questions as possible to make sure that everyone is thinking about their data in the right way, not only for the employees of the club but also for how they deal with fan data. If a fan purchases from the club’s web shop, is it right to assume that they would also be interested in ticketing information, allowing them to transfer from the retail to the ticketing silo?

Specifically for Schnater, the right to erasure (or ‘right to be forgotten’) raises some serious questions:

“Is our data supplier going to deliver a platform where fans will be able to check what kind of data we have on them? The other question is, will that actually happen? I mean, we are an emotional business, so fans are more likely to be interested in our product. How do we manage that? Are we going to get a request from a fan once a month for their data, or are you going to get it twice a week or twice a year?”

“It’s very hard to estimate how often we will get those requests, and of course, that will be important for us to decide whether to dedicate resources to that. Do we need to build a platform for fans to check in real time, and how will the internal processes be created for that?”

This becomes important not just for fans, but for other aspects of the organisation as well. Players are employees, but clubs have data on them that a lot of other organisations would not have. They have access to health information, medical records and other sensitive data that will need to be navigated and made available to the players on request. Schnater doesn’t see any of this as an obstacle. Instead, he sees the opportunities that the GDPR presents.

I asked Schnater his advice for any rights owner who hasn’t yet started planning for GDPR or may be in the early stages.

“Make use of current connections. Use your sponsor network. I’m not sure that the sports industry will be the first targeted for GDPR. Therefore, a lot of other industries that have wider customer bases will be much better prepared for it. So, for example, if you have a Telco [telecommunications] sponsor, ask them how they’ve prepared. Ask them how they can help you decide on what steps to take to prepare your own organisation. I think we can get a lot of knowledge and value out of our commercial networks.

The GDPR creates massive opportunities and helps you to get genuine open rates. It will get you closer to genuine click rates and genuine engagement. It will help you to get quality data, not just quantities of it. Less is more, in this case. If that results in you having a smaller database because you have to eliminate inactive records, it will only help, as it will allow other fans to become more visible. It’s a great opportunity to cleanse your fan base of old and outdated records that don’t show any engagement.”

Source: (Schnater, 2018).