

ISO 9000 scores in professional soccer – but who is the customer?

One of the principal features of the ISO 9000:2000 series is its focus on customer satisfaction. However, it may not always be evident who the customer is. The authors helped a professional soccer club, RBC Roosendaal, in The Netherlands, to implement ISO 9000 and they use their experience as the basis for discussion of the question: just who is the customer – in this case, is it the spectators, players, sponsors or shareholders?

The essence of the ISO 9001:2001 quality management system (QMS) is its focus on the customer. But who is the customer? This is not always obvious, as the following discussion of implementation in professional soccer¹⁾ will demonstrate.

Soccer is more than just a sport. In many countries, it is close to a religion. The national leagues draw much attention and winning an international match is an occasion for national celebration. Professional soccer is also a business and tremendous sums of money are spent on it. No wonder that, as in many areas of business, ISO 9000 is used to improve performance.

However, applying the standard to a professional soccer club poses a problem. ISO 9001:2000 is directed at enhancing customer satisfaction by meeting his or her requirements. But, who is the customer in this case? Should the fans and spectators be regarded as the customers – or the players? And, in the latter case, should one consider only the first team, or all the club's players including amateurs? Or are the sponsors the real customers? Or should we include all interested parties?



Customer focus: the soccer club as theatre company

Let's assume that the soccer club opts for the spectators as its customers. The next question is – what are the

products delivered to these customers? The “product” in this case is a service package. According to the conventional definition, services are performed at the interface between service provider and customer. So, in order to study services systematically, we should investigate where service provider and customer meet. Take the case of a first eleven²⁾ home match in professional soccer.

We can identify the various activities, from announcing the match to guiding the visitors to and from the stadium – **Figure 1**. In this figure, Box 9, “support activities”, includes those

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1) Depending on the country, “soccer” may be better known as “football” – or both are used interchangeably. We primarily use “soccer” in this article for the benefit of our US readers, for whom “football” evokes a very different sport!

2) A soccer team has eleven players. The “first eleven” is a club's top team.

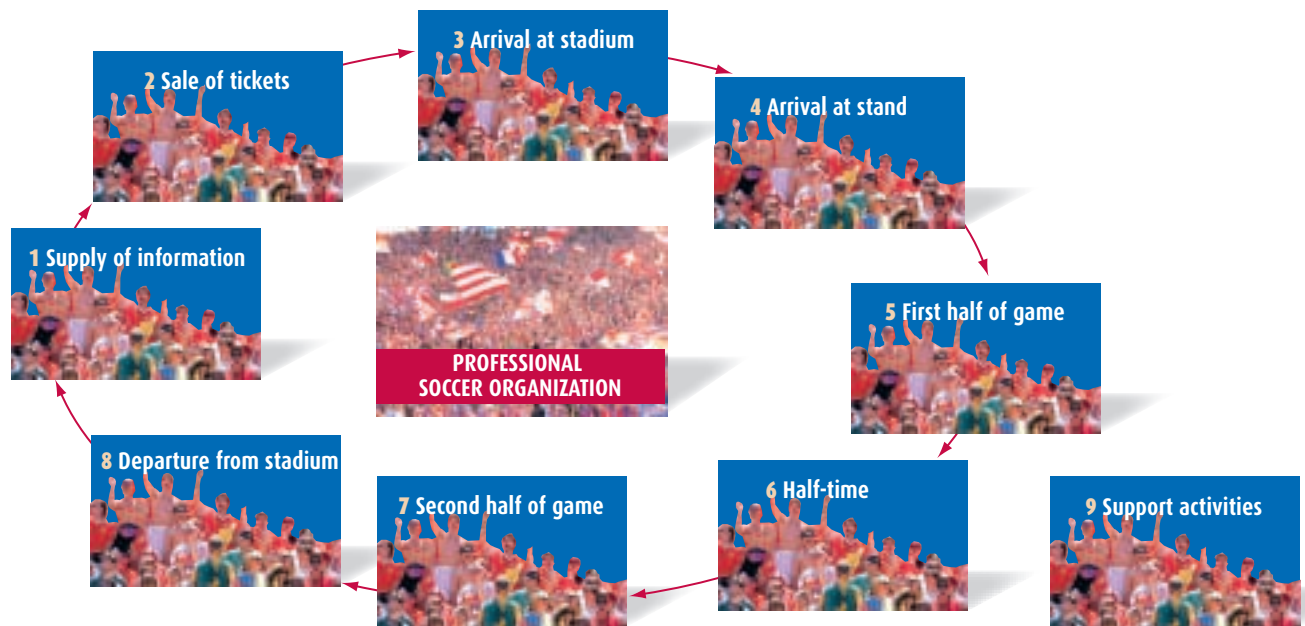


Figure 1: If the spectator is considered to be the customer, then a soccer match provides numerous 'moments of truth' – the different service delivery points.

elements of service that are not directly related to the match, such as selling club articles, issuing a magazine, or arranging transport to away games.

Processes can be identified and developed for each of these activities and this must be well done if the resulting service is to be effectively performed. In all instances where activities are critical to meeting customer requirements and enhancing satisfaction, ISO 9001:2000 requires the organization to take measures to ensure fulfilment.

In the perception of the spectator, the match itself will be the core of the service. Strictly speaking, however, the actual playing of the match need not be included in the scope of the QMS. The football club can be regarded as a theatre company, with its regular actors, namely, the first eleven, performing the show together with their opponents. This group of actors is "hired" to perform the match. In that case, only the ISO 9001:2000 "purchasing" requirements need apply.

Of course this choice may be disputed, as customer satisfaction will be related to the entertainment value of the match and winning will normally be better appreciated than losing. This requires good purchasing policy or extending the scope of the QMS to the activities of the first eleven.

Player focus: the soccer club as an association

Is it possible to opt for players as the customers? In the case of professional footballers, this would be a little odd, as they do not have to pay for being allowed to enjoy the services of the club. On the contrary, they receive payment. There are more arguments in favour of this option when it comes to amateur players. In this case, the soccer club tries to manage its processes in order

to satisfy the players.

An amateur club is, to a large extent, run by volunteers just for fun. Are they customers as well? But then, isn't everyone somebody's

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Or are the sponsors the real customers?**

customer, and everybody someone's supplier?

In this case, it is difficult to apply ISO 9001:2000 since the standard presupposes a purposeful approach by the club in order to meet the requirements of external parties. So performance and purpose are separated. In sport and in many voluntary activities, however, the situation is different. The performance and the purpose of the performance merge. Playing soccer is just for fun. The fact that sport is healthy and spectators may enjoy your performance is all the better, but that's not why you play soccer.

Neither is this the right atmosphere in which to apply ISO 9001:2000. The formalities required by the QMS might even affect that atmosphere. However, it might still be useful to agree on how to perform certain processes and, for instance, to define them in procedures or instructions. In this case, ISO 9001:2000 (and ISO 9004:2000!) may be a source of inspiration for managing the club in a satisfactory way. But creating a formal system would be inappropriate and certification would be inadvisable.

ISO 9001:2000 regards employees as (human) resources, elements of a wider set of resources and reflects an instrumental approach. This need not be a problem, provided organizations understand and recognize the limitations of a QMS. However, if they fail in this respect, they will treat man as part of the production machinery. It is clear that the authors of ISO 9001:2000 had a work environment in mind. They certainly did not write the standard for people who enjoy playing soccer!

Sponsor focus: the soccer club as advertising agency

The money paid by the spectator represents only a small percentage of the income of a professional soccer club. Most is derived from sponsors. But this is not simple generosity - sponsors hope to earn money from their investment.

In the quality model that defines the customer as one who pays for the service, then the sponsors are the principal customers of the club. In this case, the club can no longer be regarded as a theatre company - though many sponsors

will watch the match from their sky box! Here, the soccer club functions as an advertising agency. Playing soccer and everything related to it becomes simply a means of promoting the sponsor's name and stimulating sales of his products. Such a choice of customer requires a different application of ISO 9001:2000's scope since the product is different and, therefore, the product realization processes will differ as well.

Shareholder focus: the soccer club as a quoted company

Professional soccer is more than just a game. Money plays an important role and clubs pay millions to sign new players. Large sums are also spent on multifunctional stadiums, television rights, sponsoring of team shirts, training and talent scouting. Today's professional soccer club has become a true business enterprise.

A few professional soccer clubs have even applied for a stock market quotation in order to generate more income. Once this step has been taken, managing will be based on profits and shareholders become the customers. The tendency then is to make decisions that affect the quality

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Footballers can be both customers and service providers too! ISO 9000-certified Dutch professional football club Roda JC in a match against AC Milan.



Barry Meesters' involvement in improving quality management at the RBC soccer club in Roosendaal, The Netherlands, has resulted in better youth training procedures for these young would-be stars of the future.

of service to other stakeholders, such as spectators and players.

Take Ajax Amsterdam as an example. The contract of one of the club's better players allowed him to leave for another club without the buyer paying Ajax a transfer fee. In order to force the player to renew his contract to include a transfer fee, Ajax did not line him up for first team selection. In other words, Ajax was influenced more by the potential loss of income – not receiving a transfer fee if the player left for another club – which could influence Ajax's share price negatively, than by the quality of the first team.

This example demonstrates that the choice of the shareholder as customer is rather inconsistent with the spirit of ISO 9001:2000. Here, customer satisfaction is achieved by generating as much money as possible. The main objective is creating money instead of real goods or services. Creating such products for customers willing to pay for them is therefore just a means, not a purpose. Yet, in practice, companies that are focused on optimizing profits for shareholders succeed in obtaining ISO 9001:2000 registration.

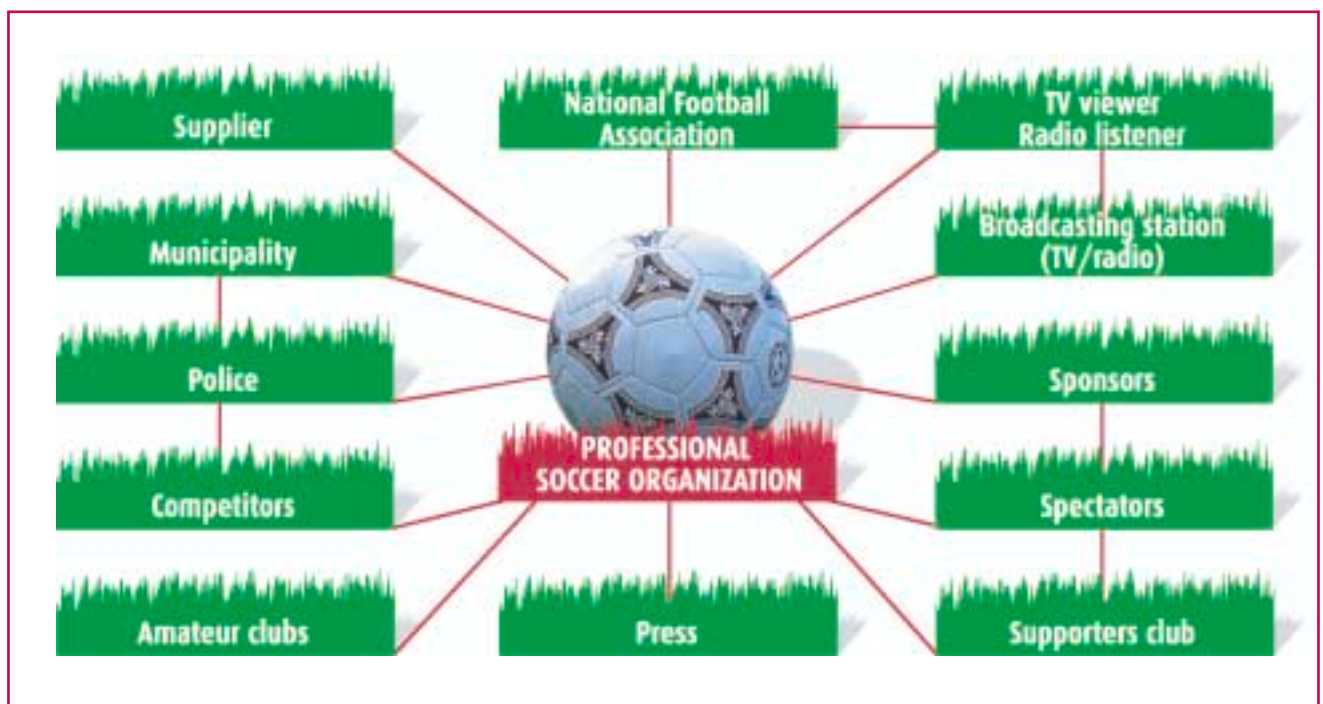
Multi-customer focus: the soccer club as professional organization

It is possible to identify many more parties the club has to deal with as customers. These stakeholders are shown in **Figure 2**.

A company with a portfolio of different products for different customers has to distinguish several supplier-customer relationships and several parallel processes when implementing ISO 9001:2000. Professional soccer clubs may do this as well. The QMS can then encompass an additional sum of product realization processes. In this model, the professional footballers are not customers, but employees for whom top quality education, training and skills apply.

Moreover, the club will try to make itself attractive for these players, so that they will not leave for other clubs. In this case, the players can be regarded as customers to the extent that the processes needed to educate, train and bind them to the organization are essential to the club's performance. These processes, then, should be managed via the ISO 9001:2000 system.

Figure 2: A multitude of stakeholders can be identified having an interest in a professional soccer club.





The right selection of 'customers' can be made only if the club is clear about its objectives

The right selection of "customers" can be made only if the club is clear about its objectives. For instance, if it aims for the highest possible ranking in the national football league, then the questions are why and for whom? Perhaps the Board, to demonstrate total transparency, should admit that they are not really interested in any objective (with corresponding stakeholders) other than their own honour and reputation. If winning is, indeed, the main purpose, then the best players should be recruited. In this case, significant investment would be required and sponsors would become an important target group.

Some soccer clubs consist of a professional and an amateur organization. The QMS might be restricted to the professional part. This is difficult if the amateur and professional elements are not clearly separated. Where amateur players are regarded as customers, resources, suppliers or even products (all these options are possible with ISO 9001:2000!), the character of the club as an association will be affected.

Playing soccer and everything related to it becomes simply a means of promoting the sponsor's name

Conclusions and considerations

Different options exist in implementing ISO 9001:2000 in a professional soccer club, depending on what type of stakeholder is defined as the customer. Defining several categories of stakeholder as simultaneous customers is possible as well. In that case, the services and the processes needed to perform these may differ. To deal with the multi-stakeholder character, ISO 9004:2000 is also an appropriate standard.

Implementing an ISO 9001:2000-based QMS would affect the "sport just for sport" character of amateur organizations. The fact that ISO 9001:2000 is applied in professional soccer implies that sport is considered as a business. However, the customers of this type of business have not yet been effectively defined.

The original spirit of the Olympic Games that "to participate is more important than to win" is past history in professional soccer. But the Games are no longer what they used to be either. When will the International Olympic Committee begin implementing ISO 9001:2000? ■