

Corporate Bonding at the Races

Summary of an SIRC research report by Kate Fox

What is ‘corporate bonding’?

‘Corporate bonding’ is a term used to describe the establishment, development and maintenance of good social relationships between business contacts or colleagues. (The term ‘corporate bonding’ was coined by the author of this report, anthropologist Kate Fox, as there was no existing shorthand term for this particular form of social bonding.)

Why was this research undertaken?

This project is a sequel to a more wide-ranging study entitled The Racing Tribe (TRT), conducted in 1996/97. The TRT research provided a broad overview of the culture, customs and social dynamics of the racecourse. The Corporate Bonding study focuses in more detail on one of the key categories of racegoer identified in TRT, namely the ‘Suits’ or ‘corporate racegoers’.

- The principal aim of the Corporate Bonding study was to identify the means and mechanisms by which the culture and social dynamics of the racecourse facilitate social bonding in the corporate hospitality context.
- The study was funded by the British Horseracing Board and racecourse caterers Letheby & Christopher (with additional practical support from the Racecourse Association) and was designed to provide these organisations with a new insights into the psychology, behaviour and needs of their corporate customers.
- The findings will also be of interest to users of corporate hospitality at the races, particularly to hosts who want a more in-depth understanding of the role of racing in building business relationships.
- The study is also part of a wider Social Issues Research Centre programme of research focusing on positive aspects of human interaction and the causes of good behaviour.

What did the research involve?

- The Corporate Bonding at the Races research was conducted by Kate Fox, Director of the Social Issues Research Centre, using the ‘participant-observation’ methods normally employed by anthropologists studying tribal societies. The original TRT study proved that these methods provide insights into the psychology and behaviour of racegoers which cannot be obtained through conventional market research.
- The study involved 11 months of observation work, participant-observation and interviews with hosts and guests at a representative sample of corporate events

at different types of racecourses and race-meetings. The field research sample included a wide range of events, from major sponsors' hospitality at prestigious meetings to small companies entertaining a few clients on a modest budget.

- Field research was conducted at the following racecourses: Ascot, Brighton, Cheltenham, Chester, Goodwood, Hamilton, Huntingdon, Newbury, Newmarket, Nottingham, Perth, Sandown, Towcester, Uttoxeter, Windsor and York.
- Although this was not a comparative study, interviews were conducted with corporate racegoers on their experiences of corporate hospitality in other sporting contexts such as rugby, golf, cricket, football, rowing etc., and participant-observation fieldwork was conducted among a small 'control' sample of corporate hosts and guests during a Test Match at the Oval. This element of the research was designed to distinguish between factors common to all corporate hospitality at sporting events and those peculiar to horseracing.
- While the findings of more conventional market-research surveys were consulted as part of the background desk research for this study, the Corporate Bonding research was a purely qualitative, anthropological study – designed to provide insights, not statistics.

What were the main findings?

Natural affinity

- There is a natural affinity between horseracing and corporate hospitality, mainly due to the following factors:
- Corporate hospitality has not been 'grafted on' to the sport, but has evolved as an integral part of the social structure of racing. Unlike other sports, racing has a long tradition of embracing large numbers of spectators who have no interest in the sport itself and attend for purely social reasons. The introduction of corporate hospitality has therefore not provoked the 'real fan backlash' experienced by many other sports.
- Racing is by far the easiest spectator sport to specific mechanisms by which racecourse culture facilitates such corpor understand – making it the least daunting and most immediately enjoyable for complete novices.
- Racing could have been designed for a non-enthusiast's attention span, with races lasting only a few minutes, interspersed by half-hour intervals dedicated to sociability. Socialising at the races does not involve 'missing the action': it is a central part of the action, even for enthusiasts.
- The social micro-climate of the racecourse – the distinctive customs, rituals, values, etiquette and social dynamics of racing culture – creates ideal conditions and 'tools' for the establishment and development of friendly relations between business contacts. Theate bonding are described in more detail below.

Facilitation of corporate bonding

Sense of 'belonging'

- The tradition of social racegoing and established position of social racegoers in racecourse culture mean that corporate racegoers feel *welcome*. They are not made uncomfortable by the implicit or explicit disapproval/resentment of 'real fans'. They are not physically or culturally segregated from the rest of the crowd, and they do not feel conspicuous or different or alien. This sense of belonging is critical in promoting relaxed, confident, unselfconscious behaviour.
- The traditional good relationship between enthusiasts and social racegoers is also important in promoting friendly relations among members of a corporate party. Hosts revealed that at other sporting events they had experienced problems of friction among their guests when some members of the party were serious enthusiasts while others were chattering 'socials'. Racing culture accommodates both, as enthusiast guests are happy to socialise between races.

The 'quality-time' interval

- In the context of corporate bonding, the half-hour intervals between races are of critical importance. This is not just for the obvious reason that they allow far more *time* for social interaction than many other sporting events, but because of the special *nature* of that interaction – the customs and rituals and unwritten rules which shape and regulate the behaviour of racegoers during these intervals. In terms of social bonding, the half-hour between races is 'quality time'.

The micro-climate

- This is because the social micro-climate of the racecourse provides the right 'conditions' for friendly interaction between strangers. The research found that racegoers do not behave like a normal crowd, but more like members of a small village or tribal community.
- Race-meetings, like many carnivals and festivals, involve a degree of what anthropologists call 'cultural remission' – a temporary relaxation of a society's normal rules and social constraints. At race-meetings, this socially sanctioned disinhibition is balanced by equally powerful laws of courtesy. The behaviour of racing crowds is thus characterised by a highly unusual combination of relaxed inhibitions and exceptional good manners.
- The relaxation of inhibitions encourages strangers to initiate social contact, while racecourse etiquette 'regulates' their interactions, providing reassuring structures and boundaries. These factors are particularly important in the corporate hospitality context, where strangers are *expected* to interact.

- Although descriptions of this social micro-climate are not included in corporate guests' invitations, their behaviour shows that they are clearly influenced by these remission and regulation factors, even if not consciously aware of them. This may be due to some extent to 'behavioural contagion' – a well-known process by which emotions and behaviour-patterns spread rapidly through a crowd, resulting in increased similarity in mood and conduct.
- The rapidity with which novice corporate racegoers grasp the specific rules of racecourse etiquette and ritual practices is nonetheless remarkable, and one of the most initially surprising findings of the study. Closer observation indicated that corporate guests are particularly susceptible to behavioural contagion as they know that they will be required to interact with strangers and are therefore highly sensitive to the behavioural signals of those around them.

Rituals

- Within the ideal conditions created by the micro-climate, the traditional rituals of racing provide specific 'tools' for the facilitation of corporate bonding. Racing is a highly ritualised culture, and almost all activities, conversations and interactions at race-meetings are conducted in accordance with ancient
- The rituals of racing are particularly conducive to corporate bonding as they provide a structure, a formula to follow, ready-made opening lines, scripts, props and an endless supply of 'fillers' and displacement activities. The ritualisation of the half-hour between races ensures that corporate guests are never at a loss for something to do or talk about, yet as none of the ritual activities are compulsory (not even watching the races), no-one feels coerced or controlled.

Racecard rituals

- The racecard, for example, is a vital social tool for all racegoers, used in many social-bonding rituals, but it is probably more important in the corporate hospitality context than among any other groups. One of the racecard's primary social functions is as a passport to conversation with strangers. It is used in the standard 'Introduction Ritual' in which any racegoer can approach any other and ask "What do you fancy in the next?" This opening line is almost always accompanied by a racecard-gesture, in which the initiator indicates his/her own racecard, gestures towards the stranger's racecard, or brings the two alongside each other, sometimes even touching the edges together in a clear symbolic indication of the social contact desired. Without being instructed in this ritual, all of the corporate guests observed in the fieldwork instinctively used both the standard phrases and the racecard gestures.
- In addition to the Introduction Ritual, the racecard is in constant use as a social device and indispensable prop throughout the day. Corporate racegoers rely more heavily on the racecard in their social interactions than any other group. De-coding the racecard is a standard 'default' conversation among corporate

racegoers, and the racecard is brought into play whenever there is a potentially awkward pause or the conversation seems to be flagging. Corporate racegoers are very quick to recognise the social value of the racecard: it is carried around like an actor's script and consulted whenever one is in need of a 'prompt'.

Ritual conversations

- Other traditional raceday rituals such as the 'Chances and Choices Debate' and the 'Post-Mortem Ritual' contribute significantly to the corporate bonding process. Again, participation in these ritual conversations seems to be instinctive: by the third race, even total-novice first-timers were observed discussing whether a fancied horse would handle the soft ground. These rituals promote social bonding by providing a shared focus of interest as well as opportunities for reciprocal exchange (of information, tips, advice, opinions), for friendly mock-rivalry and for displays of consensus, empathy and solidarity.

Celebration rituals

- Celebration rituals – an integral part of racing culture – are also a critical factor in the corporate-bonding process. Celebrating together creates a positive mood and an automatic sense of harmony and good-fellowship, and racing offers more opportunities for celebration than any other sport. Racecourse custom requires as much celebration as possible: if one has lost a bet, one celebrates someone else's win – and as at least one member of a corporate party has usually managed to win something, there is always an excuse for a celebration.

The Circuit Ritual

- The Circuit Ritual – in which racegoers complete a 'circuit' involving studying the runners in the parade ring, placing bets in the Ring, watching the race from the stands or grass and cheering the winner into the 'patting enclosure' – provides a further opportunity for shared activity, as well as a sense of participation and involvement. In many cases (though by no means all) corporate racegoers only complete the full circuit for one race, usually the 'feature' race of the day. For most corporate racegoers, the circuit is something of an event, an exciting expedition, an adventure. For those completing only one circuit, it also serves as a kind of symbolic punctuation mark, giving additional structure to the interval between lunch and tea. Clever hosts use the circuit for a variety strategic social purposes, knowing that at every moment during the half-hour cycle, the circuit provides some useful distraction, activity or focus.

The Card-marking Ceremony

- In addition to these traditional raceday customs, corporate racegoers have developed distinctive rituals of their own, such as the 'Card-marking Ceremony' in which a knowledgeable person (often a jockey or other racing personality/celebrity) talks the party through the racecard, giving tips and snippets of information about the runners. This ceremony is not always

practised and is not essential, but it has the effect of ‘adding value’ to the existing, traditional racecard-rituals and ritual conversations by providing a shared point of reference, always an important factor in social bonding.

Sponsors’ Rituals

- Corporate hosts who are also sponsors, even if their company is just sponsoring one minor race at a small meeting, benefit from the bonding effects of further rituals including the best-turned-out judging and, often, a drinks-with-winners ritual in which the sponsors are invited to a special room or box for a celebratory drink with the owner and trainer of the winner of their race.
- These rituals invariably increase the level of intimacy among the corporate hosts and guests involved. Observation of participants’ body-language before and after the best-turned-out judging and drinks-with-winners ritual indicated more relaxed and friendly relationships following participation in these rituals, with reduced interpersonal distances, increased eye-contact, more ‘open’ postures and synchronised gestures.

Betting

- Betting is of immense importance in the corporate bonding process. Shared risk-taking of any kind has a bonding effect, and betting on horses seems particularly conducive to the formation of friendly alliances. Among corporate guests, strangers who had backed the same horse seemed to discover an instant affinity (often referring to it as “our horse”). This was particularly evident among females, for whom the discovery of shared opinions or indeed any factor in common is always an important element of social bonding. Ironically, mock-rivalry between individuals or groups who had backed different horses seemed to have a similar bonding effect (particularly among males, perhaps due to the competitive nature of male-bonding processes).
- Mock-rivalry *between* the sexes over betting is also a source of endless amusement and facilitator of sociability among corporate racegoers. The standing joke is that women go for whims, names or pretty colours and win, while men study the form properly and lose. It may seem odd to talk about a ‘standing joke’ among people who have only just met for the first time, but in the racecourse micro-climate traditions grow very fast. Even when practised by first-timers, this joke has all the hallmarks of an established Ritual Conversation, with exactly the same phrases and tones heard at every race-meeting.

Eating and drinking

- The research findings indicate that corporate hospitality at sporting events may currently be performing a valuable function as a socially acceptable substitute for the long, boozy, business lunches of former times. Corporate guests confided that while going out for lavish lunches was frowned upon in their companies, attending a sporting event with business contacts was acceptable.

- The function of the corporate hospitality event as a socially sanctioned alternative to the indulgent business lunch may be temporary, as the cultural pendulum swings away from Puritan ideologies, but food and drink will continue to play a central role as facilitators of social bonding at corporate events.

The 'Commensality' factor

- In terms of corporate bonding, the current 'New Puritanism' and American-inspired obsession with healthy diets and lifestyles is an unfortunate trend, as the traditional long, boozy, business lunch is based on sound psychological and social principles. Eating and drinking together are the most intimate shared activities possible in most business relationships, and the most effective means of developing friendly relations with colleagues or clients. Anthropologists use the term 'commensality' to describe the special bond between people who eat together, and the role of alcohol as a social lubricant is well documented.

The 'Potlatch' factor

- The study found parallels in social function between corporate hospitality and the famous 'Potlatch' ritual feasts of the Kwakiutl Indians, where provision of wildly excessive quantities of food and gifts was essential for hosts to maintain social rank and prestige. While the lunches and teas provided by corporate hosts at the races are not on the same scale, a similar protocol is observed, which requires that the quantity of food provided must far exceed the amount that guests could possibly consume. Food is used to make socially significant statements about the host's generosity and goodwill towards the guests.
- While both commensality and 'Potlatch' displays of generosity are important aspects of corporate bonding at the races, meals are if anything less vital to successful bonding in this context than at other sporting events which lack racing's rich variety of social-bonding rituals.

Etiquette

- Behaviour at racecourses is governed by a special set of unofficial, unwritten rules. Like all other racegoers, corporate racegoers obey these laws of etiquette instinctively. They do not feel restricted or coerced as they are not conscious of observing any regulations.
- The unspoken etiquette governing racecourse behaviour is highly effective in eliminating potential sources of friction and promoting goodwill among corporate racegoers, and novices seem to grasp the principal laws with exceptional speed. They instinctively copy the behaviour of more experienced 'role models', and a frown or raised eyebrow is enough to set them right should they inadvertently commit a breach of racecourse etiquette.

The Collective Amnesia Rule

- They do not need to be told, for example, that there is a ‘Collective Amnesia Rule’ whereby erroneous pre-race assessments and predictions are conveniently erased from the collective memory after every race. Even the most thick-skinned quickly learn that a friendly jibe is the most serious criticism allowed. This rule is important in the corporate-bonding context, as it eliminates a potential source of discord among ‘punters’.

The Modesty Rule

- The ‘Modesty Rule’ also helps to promote and maintain harmonious relations between corporate racegoers, by prohibiting the sort of self-aggrandising behaviour that might otherwise cause irritation and resentment. It means that the more knowledgeable, experienced racegoers in a corporate party are very careful to avoid ostentatious displays of their superiority, and never patronise or belittle the ignorant novices. In fact, experienced racegoers are likely to be highly conscious of the Modesty Rule, which requires extreme downplaying of one’s expertise and endless self-deprecating jokes and comments. Newcomers are generally quick to copy this behaviour, as they can see that instant social approval is the reward.

The Code of Chivalry

- The unofficial ‘Code of Chivalry’ governing behaviour towards women at racecourses – which states that ‘at the races, all women are ladies and must be treated with due courtesy and respect’ – is a clear advantage in the corporate hospitality context. The Code of Chivalry means that hosts can be confident that their female guests will be well treated everywhere on the racecourse, not just in the company’s own box or marquee. Many hosts commented on the female-friendly nature of racing, often citing this as one of their main reasons for choosing the sport.

The Shop-Talk Taboo

- Corporate racegoers have developed their own codes of behaviour, which are observed in addition to these ‘generic’ laws of racecourse etiquette. For example, almost all corporate parties observe the ‘Shop-Talk Taboo’. It is understood, although rarely explicitly stated, that guests have been invited to enjoy a day at the races, not to engage in serious discussions of business matters. The ultimate heresy in this context would be to subject a client to a lengthy sales-pitch, but even shop-talk between colleagues is sometimes frowned upon.
- When entertaining clients, some corporate hosts operate a slightly modified version of the taboo on shop-talk, which essentially requires that any shop-talk be initiated and ‘driven’ by the client. Even if the client insists on hearing about some new product or service, however, the host should be alert to any signs of fading attention and immediately change the subject. Both hosts and guests

claim that these apparently severe constraints do not prevent corporate hospitality from performing its function as a means of generating and retaining business. Quite the opposite: the taboo on shop-talk forces hosts and guests to get to know each other better as people, rather than just in their professional roles as clients, colleagues, suppliers, etc. This helps to build closer and more friendly relationships, which are ultimately good for business.

The Native Hospitality Rule

- Enthusiasts attending corporate events as guests seem to follow a special code of etiquette – the ‘Native Hospitality Rule’ – which requires them to act almost as though they were hosts. Far from reacting irritably to the naïve comments and questions of novices, most enthusiasts feel compelled to help and look after them. There is a tacit understanding that experienced enthusiasts in a corporate party will help newcomers with their Placepot form, escort them to the parade ring and agree that yes, their horse really should have won that race and would certainly have done so had the winning post been more favourably situated. While there may be some exceptions, hosts can generally rely on the enthusiasts among their guests to exhibit typical native hospitality.

What next?

The Social Issues Research Centre report concludes that racecourses are blessed with a naturally ‘corporate-friendly’ culture, complete with traditional customs and rituals that are highly effective in promoting corporate bonding, and suggests that the racing industry could do more to communicate the social benefits of racecourse corporate hospitality.

The author is also currently advising the British Horseracing Board, Letheby & Christopher and the Racecourse Association on specific means by which the industry can build on traditional practices to enhance corporate bonding at the races.