

PLAYING THE NUMBERS GAME

Statistics provider Opta operates across a multitude of sports for a multitude of clients. As chief executive Aidan Cooney and director of marketing Simon Banoub explain, the company is already plotting its future growth.

By Tom Love. Photographs by Graham Fudger

> The numbers involved in Opta's growth – “50 per cent last year and 50 per cent this year in the worst recession experienced in living memory,” – alongside a company profile of 100 full-time staff and 250 part-time analysts, who work in five international offices across Europe and cover 270 leagues, make for impressive reading. However in Opta's case – operating in a business where everybody is a “sport obsessive in some way,” – the really important figures take the form of shots on target, distance covered and corners conceded.

Speaking in Opta's busy London office, chief executive Aidan Cooney and self-confessed soccer nerd and director of marketing Simon Banoub represent the ambition and passion of the self-styled “hoover of the data marketplace.”

“It appeals to me to work in a company where everybody cares so passionately about what they do,” Banoub says. “It's the first company I've ever worked in where we have discussions about football and I feel out of my depth. The passion is good here; the people are really into it.”

Cooney, who founded the ‘Opta trade’ in 1996, describes how he initially set up the business along, “entirely different lines to where it is now.” Having previously worked for an American sports-internet company where revenue was driven by online fantasy gaming and live coverage of the US major leagues, his original and straightforward business model was to replicate their services and apply them to a European market. “For various reasons it wasn't easy to do,” he recalls. “Firstly the internet, in terms of penetration, was nowhere near as strong as it was in the States. But the other reason is that there wasn't enough content to drive the two product areas.”

At the time of inception the demand for statistics, which traditionally had always been

the domain of American major leagues, arguably better suited to statistical-based analysis, simply wasn't there. “If you think back ten years you wouldn't have known who had assists, you'd have known goal scorers and the match attendance and that would be it,” Banoub says.

In the UK at that time there were only “a couple of small garage-businesses that were doing, fundamentally, newspaper games.” And so, spotting a gap in the market, the Englishman left the company and set out to provide the content that, in retrospect, would go on to exploit an all-encompassing new media revolution so comprehensive it

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would surpass all expectations in terms of opportunity. By Cooney's own admission: “[Opta] has been very lucky in the fact that we set up the business for a very specific niche but we happen to have been at the tipping point in a revolution of several different market segments and obviously benefiting hugely from that.”

In hindsight Opta's arrival onto the statistics scene couldn't have been better timed. At the time though, like many internet-based start-up companies, Cooney experienced a disheartening amount of conservative inertia and resistance to change. “The truth is that when we originally walked into editors' offices in newspapers – I'm talking about old-school newspaper editors – and told them we had this concept of collecting performance information from players, we were told in very short, sweet terms where to go. ‘You're

not going to Americanise our sports,’ was the general consensus.”

It is obvious now to Cooney that in those early years the European market was not yet mature enough for Opta. Things have changed, however, as the company's impressive growth figures and expansive development plans have subsequently proven; despite the initial resilience from mainstream media, “the marketplace has definitely changed.” The past decade's widespread technological adoption and the move from analogue to digital has ensured that huge opportunities have presented themselves in terms of demand, with a technical competence to match it. And when opportunity knocked, Opta was well-positioned and well-helmed to reap the rewards.

Although the irrepressible rise of the internet and the switch to digital platforms has played a huge part in the Opta success story, Cooney is keen to point out that it is very much a two-way relationship. “The media has gradually evolved, and largely as a result of us; we've stimulated that.” Banoub clarifies by adding: “It's evolved through client demand. Nowadays fans are becoming more and more interested in stats. Therefore the media are becoming more interested in it because the fans are demanding to know. Five years ago people knew who was creating the goals and where they were coming from, nowadays you're looking at pass and tackle percentages.”

However it is not simply print media which has seen a complete overhaul in terms of information demand and its eventual usage. “Lots of other revolutionary things have happened in various markets,” Cooney affirms. “Fantasy has grown nowhere near as big as people thought it would do. The media has changed, people's relationships have changed and opportunities in the professional market and betting have arisen that just didn't exist before. It's just fundamental revolution.

Aidan Cooney, chief executive of Opta, photographed at the company's London headquarters on Wednesday 12th May 2010





Opta director of marketing and self-confessed soccer nerd Simon Banoub

If you consider where media has gone, obviously the transfer to digital, a lot of that is driven by data and the way media is organised through data.”

Moving on to the specific revenue streams that Opta targets, Banoub goes on to detail the business model that has served the company well over its eight-year existence. “We collect it once and then sell it on numerous times, our database stats will be used for previews and reviews in the media, online media, print media and it will power broadcast graphics and educate commentators. If you hear a Sky Sports commentator pipe up with, ‘that was Wayne Rooney’s 100th goal, his first and his 50th were both against Arsenal,’ we’ve told them that in advance of the game. We have all that data on our database and our guys mine it for the important stuff.”

Now one of Opta’s most lucrative markets, prior to the onset of the mobile and internet revolution the betting marketplace was predominantly dominated by horse racing. It focused solely on pre-market bets but nowadays the behaviour in betting patterns is an entirely different animal. Much of that is driven by data. Opta’s ability to provide seemingly immediate insightful and reliable data to online betting websites, which, in

return, allows betting clients to present customers with wide-ranging in-play punts, has seen the company secure longstanding partnerships with major bookmakers, including William Hill, Ladbrokes, Paddy Power, Eurobet, Betfair and Pari Mutuel Urbain.

Banoub goes on to explain that, while Opta’s vast wealth of data is able to power

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a variety of different media outlets, it is the company’s ability to identify and sell different information packages based on the same data to different clients in different market sectors that has seen it move from strength to strength. “You’ll collect it from a game,” he says of the data. “The bookmakers are interested in who scores the goals and when; the professional clubs are interested in whose pass percentage was the highest and who wins the most tackles; and the media are interested in bits and pieces of all that kind of stuff. One

collection and loads of different uses for it; that’s the way it works.”

While the revelation that top professional football clubs from all over Europe, including three of the English Premier League’s top four teams, regularly rely on Opta to provide data on upcoming matches and transfer prospects may come as a surprise to some, when Banoub’s claim of owning and processing data “deeper and richer than anybody else’s in terms of on the ball action,” and the enormous monetary values now thrown about in soccer are taken into account, it is no shock that top clubs are willing to spend big for top-level information. Indeed, given the range of clubs that subscribe to Opta’s services, Cooney’s assertion that the Opta brand is a “hallmark of quality” is certainly well-founded. And, when asked why clients don’t turn to other companies providing similar services, Cooney’s retort is equally as self-assured: “The simple answer is that Opta is considered to be the original and best. It’s a trusted brand and people know what they’re going to get.”

Glowing references proudly displayed on the company website from both the Chelsea FC performance director, Mike Forde and Liverpool FC head of technical analysis, Dave McDonough, provide plenty of evidence for such a claim. “Using Opta data has allowed us to steal a march both in player recruitment and now in match analysis,” Forde’s reads.

Citing an example of the increasing importance of data in decision-making at the top level of professional sport, Cooney turns to the incredible situation in 2008 where Kevin Keegan was forced to sign Ignacio Gonzalez at a cost of UK£1 million, solely on the basis of a YouTube video. “What other market in the world is it possible for that level of spending to happen without any form of due diligence?” he asks. “Some sort of model is required, and guess what? Data is an absolutely essential part of that.”

The other side of Opta’s dealings with big-spending clubs takes the form of post-match breakdowns and pre-match briefings. Says Cooney: “An example for a club would be an analysis on their forthcoming opponents and trends during the game. So if for example they were playing Aston Villa next week, we would give them a breakdown of everything Aston

Villa had done in the season: where they're likely to create chances from, who their top performing players are and so on."

Moving to the requirements of broadcasters, "they'd be looking for the quirkier stuff, the things that they can bring a bit of colour to their broadcast with. Professional clubs don't care that Wayne Rooney's first and 50th goals were both against Arsenal, but the media do. The media and the fans love that kind of thing." A claim backed up by Opta's five official Twitter accounts, which have a global following of just under 20,000 stats-hungry fans.

Incredibly, in all of these examples it is simply information packaged in different ways but collected from the same game. Apply this model to 23 different sports, 270 different leagues and consider that, within top level soccer, the company's biggest revenue stream, Opta remain the broadest provider and claim to maintain the most complete database, and the scope for future business growth is enormous.

However, despite Opta maintaining contracts with well-known brands across the company's varied supply range, the opportunistic businessman Cooney remains wary of taking his eye off the ball. "As markets mature, suppliers become more complacent and you run the risk of not being able to meet your market demands," he says. "It's a constant challenge and it keeps us feedback fit. We have to be aware for the change of behaviour and the change in the way people consume media but also the challenges that are faced by the media and clients themselves when presenting that information."

And, while a constantly changing marketplace would seem daunting to many, Cooney appears to relish the ordeal. Well aware that change represents challenge and opportunity in equal measure he goes on to say: "What is very attractive in my point of view is that this is a very fast-changing business. When you're looking at so many marketplaces that are undergoing revolution it throws up all sorts of unexpected twists and turns you have to be ready for. We're in a very exciting phase of development and therefore we are always open to looking at new things and evolving our business to meet those challenges. We've been presented with



Three Opta analysts work on each game the company covers; one for each team and a third to adjudicate



huge opportunities and I think that's going to continue. It's very exciting for the people working in the business, including me."

Across the board, business appears on the up. Examining Opta's growth figures, their range of clients and the broad range of services they provide, as well as plans to expand their 23-sport database several-fold, Cooney's prediction of seeing "some pretty

fundamental growth over the next four or five years," seems justifiable.

"We obviously have a plan and a very clear idea of what we want to do in each market segment and how big the business should be," he concludes. "Ultimately if you look at the story since the company was formed it's been a very strong growth story and we fully expect it to continue to be." ■