

A winning partnership

- on and off the field

Through their global partnership, Aon and Manchester United have both gained new insights into each other that go way beyond the game of football. **RACHEL GORDON** spoke to **STEPHEN CROSS**, Chairman of Aon Global Risk Consulting, and Chairman of Aon's Centre for Innovation and Analytics in Dublin, about the experience

Last April, Aon signed a new eight-year partnership agreement with Manchester United, a significant undertaking, which follows on from the initial four-year shirt sponsorship deal that began with the 2010-2011 season.

This latest move, said to be worth some £15 million (Aon would not confirm the actual investment) a season for the club, is set to build on the strong brand awareness already achieved. The numbers may be less easy to calculate for Aon, but the fact the arrangement has been extended suggests that the benefits cut both ways.

As a member of the Aon Risk Solutions executive committee, Stephen Cross was a strong proponent to sponsor the football club back in 2009 because he believed it would have a transformational effect on the Aon brand – and he is also a huge fan, along with his three children.

People from all walks of life now know the Aon name and as Stephen said: “When I arrived in New York recently, the immigration officer had a Manchester United tattoo. I had to talk to him about it and show him my business card with the Manchester United logo – we had a laugh about

it, it doesn't matter where you are in the world, chances are you'll meet someone who's a supporter.”

Global brand

He explained: “When we first looked at sponsorship, we were in the market for a major deal and had looked at US teams – although in football, there is not the following. We knew it had to be a team and not an individual, so as to fit with Aon's culture. We also wanted a brand that had appeal for adults and children and which was also truly global.”

Aon will retain the shirt sponsorship until the end of the 2013-14 season, however, the new deal is, according to Stephen, “a move from sponsorship to partnership”, and there are clear synergies.

One of the biggest elements is Aon becoming the first partner of the club's former Carrington Training Complex, which is now renamed the Aon Training Complex.

This serves as Manchester United's data hub and the club is a leader in football analytics, used to enable the team – and the business – to



Stephen Cross

achieve its full potential. They have researchers looking both at the playing and the financial side and they will now be able to access Aon's expertise in this area too.

Aon is also the Principal Partner of the Manchester United Business Network, and will provide advice on areas such as risk, retirement, talent, health and capital.

Strong relationships have been created across the two companies – Aon Hewitt helps with recruitment, healthcare and retirement planning, Aon Benfield advised on options for access to capital during the launch of the club's IPO and Aon Risk Solutions supplies risk advice on areas including construction, motor, fleet, D&O, property, travel, events and media.

Emerging markets

Manchester United has fans all over the world and while Aon is already a global business, the sponsorship has also proved rewarding in boosting its international reputation, particularly in emerging markets.

The deal means Aon is the presenting partner on the club's pre-season tours and in 2013 there was the opportunity to engage with some 325 million followers of the Asia Pacific tour involving matches in Thailand, Australia, Japan and Hong Kong.

While sponsoring one of the world's biggest and most famous football teams is something few others can consider, Aon has promoted the role of broking and risk management to a much wider audience. Stephen said that it has also been an opportunity to educate even seasoned business leaders about issues such as the advancement in modeling techniques and the revolutionary use of data.

Differentiation

The use of data and analytics has been a major focus for Aon in recent years, and is not only a way in which they can work closely with Manchester United, but also shows significant differentiation from rivals.

Aon's Centre for Innovation and Analytics opened in Dublin in 2009 with some 60 staff, and in 2014, this has risen to 130. "We're still



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Manchester United striker Robin van Persie



expanding. We launched at the right time – Ireland had severe financial difficulties and there were talented people available who came to work for us," Stephen said.

The centre has been a massive investment for Aon, with some \$250 million being spent annually over the past three years. In 2013, another Center for Innovation and Analytics opened in Singapore. Stephen commented: "It means we can provide clients with 24 hours a day global coverage."

The Aon Global Risk Insight Platform (GRIP) is run from the Center for Innovation and Analytics. GRIP provides fact-based insights into Aon's over \$80 billion inbound premium flow and helps identify the best placement options.

Since the launch of GRIP in 2009, there have been some 1.6 million opportunities to quote and over 900,000 bound placements that have been entered on over 50 lines of coverage. This has been done on behalf of over 85,000 clients in 1,000 industries and nearly 170 countries.

"Data has no meaning unless it is harnessed, but if you can go to a client and show them you understand the risks they face and show them this in a model – we have 2 million simulations – then this is likely to be of real service to them. We can

benchmark their risk profile against their peers and know which insurers have the appetite for that particular risk," he said.

Catastrophe modelling is provided at Aon by seismologists, meteorologists, hydrologists, engineers, mathematicians and geographic information specialists – along with finance, risk management and insurance professionals.

All this expertise is now being accessed by Manchester United in various parts of the business. For example, Aon will provide expertise from its analytics division which the club's sports scientists hope they can use to analyse some of that medical data and minimise risk.

Common ground

There are clearly many areas of common ground for Aon and Manchester United and these can also spill out on to the wider broker community. One of these is succession planning and one of the biggest stories was the retirement of Sir Alex Ferguson, the club's long-time manager who retired in 2013.

Stephen said it had no impact on the sponsorship. "Everyone is replaceable and so we don't shy away from this. That said, Sir Alex was an incredible influence and his attitude to the importance of training helped enormously in what the team achieved. He strived for perfection and followed on from Sir Matt Busby who was equally devoted to excellence."

David Moyes is now in charge and results have been somewhat erratic. But, Stephen commented: "Sir Alex retiring was not unexpected and things are going to settle down."

Stephen's role encompasses a huge amount of travelling, with a typical month seeing him working out of the US, UK, Ireland, Singapore and having limited time to attend games.

But he follows results closely and said a recent highlight for him was the opportunity to meet former greats Dennis Irwin and Peter Schmeichel at a client event in Dublin. "We can learn so much from guys like this, as we do from the first team players who are the ultimate professionals. We want people to gain more knowledge of what we do as professionals – and the next eight years will be the opportunity to do just that."

BIG NUMBERS – AON AND MANCHESTER UNITED

- ❖ A TV audience of more than 3 billion people watched Manchester United during the 2012/2013 season
- ❖ Manchester United's shirt is consistently the Number 1 football replica shirt in Europe
- ❖ Since 2010 Aon's brand awareness has increased 36 per cent among business decision-makers globally
- ❖ In Latin America, 87 per cent of business decision makers are more favourable towards Aon when they are aware of the partnership.