

MARKETING MISTAKES:

THE NORTH AMERICAN SOCCER LEAGUE – A STRATEGY OF TURNING A QUICK PROFIT. RESULT: FRUSTRATION

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PREFACE

“We should learn from our mistakes. This is as true for business firms as it is for (professional) athletic teams. However, in athletics – especially with (American) football teams – mistakes are systematically and thoroughly studied. Movies of games played the previous weekend are carefully examined so that corrective actions can be taken to minimize the likelihood of such mistakes occurring again. Why should not the mistakes of business firms also be studied to minimize similar mistakes in the future, both by the same firm and by other firms? Yet most of our business and marketing books emphasize success stories and disregard mistakes.”¹

This paper, in applying the concept of marketing to a non-traditional activity (i.e., professional sports – and the game of soccer), attempts to convince even the most skeptic critics of marketing systems, that the function of marketing has a place in the sports arena.

In addition, its future application for sports executives is to provide the needed insight for decision making and strategy formulation purposes. Although this paper does not get into the details associated with developing marketing systems (i.e., targets, mixes, etc.), it does remind management (on an historical basis) that marketing has a place in their business (an important one in that).

In doing so, I have attempted to analyze the experience of the North American Soccer League (NASL) which, in the opinion of this student/writer, has been one marketing mistake followed by another marketing mistake...and so on. Yet today, only because of some recent changes by league officials to utilize a marketing systems approach to their problems, does the league start to show signs of not only surviving, but of flourishing as well.

With that, this student/writer will examine the league history with an attempt to focus on the experiences of a franchise which has been in the league since its inception (10 years) and a franchise which has been in existence for a much shorter time (4 years). Those franchises are the Rochester (NY) Lancers Soccer Club and the Seattle Sounders Soccer Club, respectively.

¹ Robert F. Hartley, Marketing Mistakes (Columbus, Ohio, 1976), p. 1.

INTRODUCTION

The story behind the North American Soccer League (NASL) represents an interesting, yet ironic history of an organization which, through ill-conceived plans to expand and turn a quick profit, failed to take advantage of the inherent features of the game to help insure its (NASL and soccer's) success in the United States. Those inherent features being: (1) the natural nature of the sport (running, jumping), (2) the fact that size is not a prerequisite for playing the game as it typically is in other sports, (3) that the game is relatively simple in style and understanding where, at any given time in a contest, each player has an opportunity to be the quarterback (control the ball...direction of the team), and (4) last but not least, the sport of soccer is relatively inexpensive compared to other major sports in the United States like football, baseball, and hockey.

Because of failing to recognize and or apply marketing techniques in conjunction with the inherent features of the sport, the league has come close to closing its door. And at times it's been hard-pressed to substantiate its existence.

With that, it's only been through the application of marketing (as a tool) that the league has been able to show substantial increases in attendance in the past year or two; a fact which signifies the acceptance of the sport in the United States and the future success of the NASL.

HISTORY – SOCCER IN THE UNITED STATES

“Soccer has been played in the United States since the 1840's. In every period of its history, soccer has had some energetic and enthusiastic apostle breathe verve and vigor into it. Yet the game showed no consistent or national pattern of growth until the 1960's and the 1970's.

Probably the first soccer of any sort was played at Harvard in 1830. It was patterned after the English Association game, but it was very informal and had no specific number of players, field size, or rules. By 1844 it had been taken up by several other colleges, and by 1860 a dozen colleges along the Atlantic coast were playing the game that had now become standardized.

In 1913 the United States entered the international soccer scene with the United States Football Association. A struggle ensued between the American Football Association, which controlled professional leagues in the Northeast, and the American Amateur Football Association. Each group sought sanction by the world soccer governing body, FIFA (Federation of Football Associations). They were told to settle their differences and merge. The professionals walked out of the discussions that followed.

When the eastern amateur clubs came out in support of the United States Football Association, FIFA recognized it. The American Football Association ultimately joined, and since 1914 the United States Soccer Football Association (USSFA) has controlled both amateur and professional soccer in the United States.

Records show that sixty candidates showed up for the 1920 Yale team...and that soccer was considered *a fast and very interesting game for the spectator*.

College and school groups developed their own organizations and became associate members of the USSFA. By 1926, interest had risen markedly and the Intercollegiate Soccer Football Association was formed. The National Collegiate Athletic Association, the Amateur Athletic Union of the United States, and the National Federation of State High School Athletic Association soon became involved, and finally the National Soccer Coaches Association with its quarterly organ, Soccer Journal, appeared on the scene to lend further authority to the sport. By this time, of course, public and private schools were playing the game and local teams were being organized, primarily along ethnic lines.

The National Challenge Cup was instituted in 1913. The championship (Dewar Trophy) was open to both professional and amateur teams, but the entries proliferated so rapidly that the USSFA decided to separate the amateurs from the pros. It inaugurated the National Cup competition in 1923 and the National Junior Challenge Cup in 1934.

The first National Collegiate Soccer Tournament was held at the University of Connecticut in 1959 and was won by St. Louis University, which went on to dominate the championships for many years.

U.S. Soccer has had three highwater marks in the international steam. The first was in 1930 when "Uncle Sam" agreed to participate in the first World Cup soccer games in Uruguay. The USSFA got together a team composed primarily of muscular former European professionals. They played a very moder game with eight men on defense and only three on attack, relying on the counterattack to scores (finished in third place).

The second outstanding event was the United States victory over England (1-0) in the 1950 World Cup in Brazil.

Since that time, no U.S. teams has been able to qualify for the finals. An Arthur D. Little research report in 1964 concluded that the USSFA needed greater financing to conduct a program that could establish soccer as a significant sport in the U.S. Money was needed for *publicity and educational programs*, top-level coaching instruction, and more support for the U.S. teams in international competition. United States players need greater opportunity to play together as national teams and greater opportunity for international competition. Nevertheless, soccer has been played continually in the United States since its introduction, although it has always been overshadowed by football.

All countries have adapted the game to their individual temperament and national character, and Americans are no exception. They play a more rugged game – definitely more physical, more forthright, less subtle, and with constant movement (the latter being a great asset in the modern game).

International soccer was promoted successfully in the U.S. for many years by Enzo Magnozzi and William Cox. There also was a National League, a German American League, and a Continental League, with year-round schedules. So, the formation of two professional leagues in 1966 really was not a big surprise. It represented the third big stride in "Uncle Sam's" bid for world recognition.

The mounting of the operation reversed normal procedure. Instead of leagues being formed in answer to a surge of interest, *they were formed in the hope of promoting the game from the top down.*

The United Soccer Association and the National Professional Soccer Leagues began operations in 1966. The formations of these professional leagues and their rivalry stirred world interest in the American soccer scene. The experiment, as was considered by all, was watched with great interest. After taking a bath in red ink the first season, the two leagues merged into the North American Soccer League (NASL) to eliminate rival teams in the same cities and to coordinate their efforts.”²

THE KICK-OFF

The North American Soccer League

In 1967 the North American Soccer League opened its doors in sixteen cities with a total of twenty-two teams. In a Wall Street Journal article soccer backers claimed, “although the sport never really caught on big in the U.S., where baseball, football, basketball, and hockey can keep a sports fan occupied, America is now ready for soccer.”³

With that, the owners, “in a frantic scramble for teams, players, and playing sites invested an estimated \$20 million dollars the first year to get the program off the ground.”⁴ In addition, the league signed a multimillion-dollar long-term television contract with the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS).

“The formation of this professional league stirred world interest in the American soccer scene. The experiment (again), as it was considered by all, was watched with great interest. Again, after taking a bath in red ink the first season and after several disappointing seasons, even with television coverage, the noble experiment expired. Most of the teams quietly disbanded and the foreigners returned home.

By 1969 the North American Soccer League was left with five teams, and it began a low-key operation out of Georgian in the hope of maintaining some semblance of a professional league while a *grassroots* interest was being developed.

In 1970 the central office was moved from Atlanta to New York. A New York team and several others were added as the NASL began to show slow but steady signs of growth.⁵

The Rochester Lancers Soccer Club

The Rochester Lancers Soccer Club entered the NASL as a charter member of the league and have maintained a position, eleven years hence. Although their tenure may imply some favorable level of

² Hubert Vogelsinger, The Challenge of Soccer (Boston, Mass., 1973), pp. 3-8.

³ “Pro Soccer Kicks Off, But Will U.S. Get Boot Out of Sport?,” The Wall Street Journal, February 14, 1967, p. 1.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Hubert Vogelsinger, The Challenge of Soccer (Boston, Mass., 1973), pp. 7-8.

success to their management and organization, this is hardly the case. In actuality, the performance of their management was indicative of most of the franchises (1967 through 1973); a performance which could be best described as a shoddy one (i.e., lack of a strategy, planning, marketing, etc.)

The Lancers played their home games in an old worn-out high school stadium (Acquinas Stadium). Although the stadium was centrally located with some parking and access, it was a poor place to expect thousands of people to relax, be entertained, and hopefully return for more of the same. The condition of the field was poor (noted as the worst field in the league), customers typically had to wait for great lengths to buy tickets and/or refreshments, and security was almost nonexistent.

Away from the field (and its discomforts), the image that the club management perpetuated was much the same as that illustrated above (i.e., personal bias dictated almost all decision making). The management's office was in a poor section of the town, distribution of ticket outlets was limited to two locations (in a city and metro area of 700,000 people), the club's relationship with the press was marginal at best; the club did not have a working agreement with a radio and/or television station. In comparison, a Triple-A baseball team, the Rochester Red Wings, did have a radio deal. Note, the Red Wings were the city's darlings and represented the only real competition for pro-sports fans in the area. The Lancers were perceived by many, including the press, as a threat to their status!

With the team and its foreign-based make-up, in the first 3-4 years the team failed to employ or promote the use of American players. Yet the local area had a strong soccer culture with numerous high school and college teams. Some could argue that Rochester metro soccer culture was in the top 3 soccer cultures behind New York and St. Louis.

The team also failed to take advantage of attracting players from multiple ethnic groups in the greater Rochester area. Their focus here was mostly limited to Italian American players to help attract people in the Italian American community. Granted, this was one of the larger ethnic groups in the Rochester metro area, yet German Americans in the Rochester area, for example, struggled to find anything to relate to when it came to following individual players and/or the club. All of which left an image that would not be conducive to the benefit of the club (and the city of Rochester).

Below is a description of a typical Lancer game – and for many franchises throughout the league, in the early 1970's:

One game...6,103 paid. Throughout the match the spirited though sparse crowd shouted encouragement or derision at the players in voices heavy with Spanish, Italian, and British accents. The fans were mostly middle-aged or older, not the youthful, suburban audience the league hopes to attract.

HALF-TIME

The NASL Regroups

Around the start of the 1974 soccer season, with many new teams, owners, spectators, etc., the North American Soccer League began to take on new approaches to promoting their league and the game of soccer. Reflecting on these changes, Philip Revzin, staff writer for The Wall Street

Journal commented that, “past efforts, besides bringing yawns from the public, have brought financial disaster to some of the promoters. This time pro-soccer executives are trying to benefit from the past mistakes. They are using proven marketing techniques and are attempting, in the words of Phil Woosnam, Commissioner of the NASL, to be very careful to avoid blowing our brains out with overhead.”⁶

With that said, Revzin goes on to reveal that, “not the least of the promotional efforts was the recent signing of the biggest of all big-name soccer stars, the Brazilian great, Pele, to play for the New York Cosmos, a team owned by Warner Communications, Inc., paying him about \$4.7 million dollars for a three-year contract.”

But beyond that major coup pro-soccer promoters have been doing everything from sponsoring soccer clinics in ghettos and suburban parks to endorsing soccer equipment and paraphernalia. There can't be any doubt that an extraordinary promotion effort is needed if the American (public) is to become interested. Soccer, called football everywhere but in North America, has failed to catch on in this country despite its tremendous popularity almost everywhere else!

While fan support is still far from overwhelming, the league now appears to be gradually building a solid foundation. There seems to be a whole new approach this time, says Chris Severn, Executive Director of Advertising Promotion Division of Adidas, the German sports equipment maker. The promoters are going about the business of getting soccer started in a big way here and on a much sounder basis.”⁷

The article goes on to note that, “lately soccer appears to be taking hold in middle-America as hundreds of suburban soccer leagues and high school and college teams have cropped up.

But even now, much of the American sport's public views soccer as a foreign game, played mostly in ethnic neighborhoods in large northern cities by immigrants and their sons and daughters. Professional soccer teams in large cities until recently have still counted almost entirely on these ethnic boosters to survive,”⁸ comments Revzin. In concluding his article, he states that, “a vast majority of the pro-players are immigrants as well. A notable exception – and a notable boost for the NASL – is Kyle Rote, Jr., son of New York Giants football star! Kyle's career is extremely important to us, says Commissioner Woosnam...here's a middle-American kid who started playing the game at age 16 and became a top-pro from scratch. He can be a good model for other kids.”⁹ (e.g., promotion)

The New Strategy

“The owner of the Dallas Tornado, Lamar Hunt, was a pioneer in the league and has been a major force in keeping the North American Soccer League afloat. The problem in 1967, he says,

⁶Philip Revzin, “Elusive Goal: Pro-Soccer Tries Again, Against Sizeable Odds To Score Big In U.S.,” The Wall Street Journal, June 13, 1975, p. 1.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

was that owners went in with budgets that were far too large. With advice from Hunt and others, the ownership strategy was changed from turning a quick profit to slowly building a foundation for the sport.”¹⁰

A marketing approach to handling the situation was advocated and developed by the league; an approach described again by Philip Revzin of The Wall Street Journal: “After the 1973 season, the NASL began a move toward re-establishing credibility and covering all the major markets according to Mr. Woosnam. As the league expanded back to its present 20 teams, NASL officials last year geared up a marketing arm, NASL Marketing Inc., in anticipation of licensing contracts and promotional tie-ins as soccer’s popularity increases.

Frank Kuffel, Marketing Director, says the league has lined up deals for official table games, jacket patches, bathrobes, wallets, frisbees, match books, kites, and similar items. Moreover, American Airlines has signed on as the league’s official airlines and will get the teams’ travel business in return for advertising in the NASL game promotions and running other promotional tie-ins. Adidas is producing and marketing NASL soccer balls.

The league is also accelerating its efforts to put paying customers into the stadium and the game on television, which will give us overnight exposure and credibility, Mr. Woosnam says. Capturing the imagination of New York, the national media, and Madison Avenue is the most important thing in sports today. Gate receipts and television are what pro sports are all about. Mr. Woosnam goes on to add that the acquisition of Pele’ will greatly accelerate our move toward credibility, but the league is counting on the development of American soccer players in the long run to combat the game’s somewhat foreign image. In the pro leagues of 1967, about 99% of the players were foreigners, and in on league, entire teams from foreign cities were brought as units to represent U.S cities. Americanizing the game, he concludes, involves each team putting 5 out of 18 players on their team this year and 6 out of 18 the following year.”¹¹

The Seattle Sounders Soccer Club

The Seattle Sounders Soccer Club, only in its fifth year, models what has been described as the new strategy throughout their short history in the league.

The club entered the NASL on December 13, 1973, and played its first game in May 1974. They played both the 1974 and 1975 seasons in Memorial Stadium on the Seattle Center Grounds just north of downtown. A league record of eleven sellouts over two seasons left the stadium bulging at the seams and dictated that the stadium be expanded during the Sounder’s tenure.

Even with expansion, Sounder’s soccer crowds outstripped the capacity of the stadium, prompting the club to move into the Kingdome, where in 1976, the Sounders shattered league regular season attendance records drawing 285,941 spectators for the regular season games, averaging 23,828 per game. During the 1977 season, the Sounders again broke their attendance figures by drawing over 450,000 spectators into the Kingdome – including over 56,000 for the final playoff game! In talking to Chuck Scott, Director of

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

Marketing and Sales, for the Sounders, he had the following to say about the club and soccer in the United States:

“Soccer is not only progressing in Seattle, but also growing across the nation...and it has gained parity with the National Basketball Association, Major League Baseball, and the National Football League. The NASL enjoyed a record setting season in 1977, drawing over 3.67 million fans, with 450,000 coming from Seattle. This is a dramatic increase over the 1.18 million fans in attendance during the 1974 season.

Obviously, soccer is booming. The Sounders have taken an active part in encouraging this growth on a state-wide scale by putting on clinics, demonstrations, and assemblies throughout the state. Since the club’s birth, Sounder’s players and personnel have put on these programs, excluding games, before more than 500,000 people...all potential soccer fans!

Growth has not been confined to the professional level of soccer. The Washington State Junior Soccer Association’s membership has expanded from 18,000 children in 1974 to over 45,000 for the 1977 season. The state association’s men’s division has more than tripled since 1974, with more than 1,800 now involved. A ten-fold increase has occurred in the woman’s ranks, which now numbers in excess of 1,350 participants, as compared to the mere 150 that started in 1974.”¹²

In addition, he went on to convey to me that marketing was a major area that was neglected in the early years of the NASL – and that it is a significant tool in decision-making for the Sounders. Additional facts he shared about the Sounders and the league...used for promotional purposes were:

“League-wide studies revealed some interesting facts. There is nearly a 50-50 split between male and female spectators at a soccer game. This ratio may be hard to believe, but it has proven to be true, thus opening a totally new market for the more traditional professional sports fans.

Soccer fans are young...80% are between the ages of 10-49 and 54% are between 18 and 49. Two out of every three have attended three or more games during the past season and 54% attended 5 or more games. They are loyal and involved.

They are a highly educated group. 32% have college degrees while 65% have at least one year of college behind them. They learn the game quickly and can appreciate the finer points that make it unique.

With 66% earning over \$15,000 per year, they are at a high-income level with obvious purchasing power. 85% purchased sports equipment within the last year, while 66% purchased women’s fragrances, and 32% purchased an automobile. 88% purchased soda-pop, 72% purchased candy or gum and 56% purchased coffee – all with a frequency of at least 10 times per month. 52% purchased wine at least 3 times per month. All in all, the market is of a magnitude which no other sports franchise has been able to capture.”¹³

¹² Interview with Chuck Scott, Director of Marketing and Sales – Seattle Sounders Soccer Club, Seattle, Washington, March 3, 1978.

¹³ Ibid.

THE WINNER

I n looking at the history of the NASL (and soccer as a sport) in the United States – and what the future holds for its success – I believe these excerpts from The Wall Street Journal, for the most part, identify the direction the league and sport are moving. In essence, the article is written in response to the attendance figure of 77,691 who viewed a soccer game between New York and Tampa Bay on August 14, 1977.

On the success of the game, James Hyatt, staff writer comments, “if our family is any measure (of its success), soccer, at least in these parts, is booming because it is bringing families with young kids together in ways other big-time sports never tried or forgot long ago. Most often, we’re families and neighbors who already find soccer occupying the weekend and who want to see the game played well. Our enthusiasm in part reflects that in most cases our kids are learning soccer on the playing field not in front of the television set. And we love it because it is a unique treat for parents and kids to explore a new sport for the first time together.

We find soccer to be inexpensive. Nobody has to beg the corner merchant – the typical mainstay of little league teams – to outfit the soccer team. Sneakers, maybe shin guards and a ball and you’re off and running!

And parents are delighted to discover soccer is a natural sport for young kids – lots of running and kicking, and everybody gets a chance to do both. In baseball, a youngster can go a season and never get a hit or catch a fly. The way younger soccer players swarm, it is virtually impossible to avoid coming in contact with the ball.

Soaring attendance in most NASL cities tells officials they’re turning youthful enthusiasm into an American sport. They’re hoping for the day soon when they’ll have more home-grown U.S. talent to compete with the imported overseas stars who comprise most teams these days.

In the long run the promoters figure American stars will attract more Americans to the game. Eventually, the army of kids currently filling the neighborhood soccer fields will be make it up there in the stands, or parked in front of the television with a beer reminiscing about the good old days when soccer was new.”¹⁴

WHAT WENT WRONG?

In reflecting back on the short history of the NASL, it is obvious that a poor strategy (or no strategy) was applied to the promotion of the game (i.e., marketing). In short, the game’s positive features were recognized many years ago (note history) and that a study revealing what was necessary for soccer to grow in the U.S. had been conducted, year hardly adhered to until recently!

In addition, many of the team management groups around the league were inexperienced, thus resulting in mismanaged clubs. Again, and because of these misguided efforts, the league suffered.

¹⁴ Editorial, The Wall Street Journal, August 22, 1977, p. 10.

Here are a few more excerpts that sum up the situation. In response to the money (\$20 million) that was initially invested...The Wall Street Journal reported:

“Getting good players apparently is a problem for most franchises. Although amateur soccer has caught on at hundreds of U.S. school in the past few years, there apparently aren’t enough starts of pro-caliber to staff all the teams. But Financier, Weston W. Adams, owner of a soccer franchise in heavily Irish Boston, doesn’t expect any such problems. He is importing the entire Shamrock Rovers Soccer Club from Dublin, for the three-month season.”¹⁵

So much for appealing to middle-America and marketing!

In response to the question of owning a sports team and problems involved, again The Wall Street Journal had his to say:

“Owners are quick to blame their problems on fast rising costs – but that’s not the whole story. The fact is that some – maybe most – sports franchises aren’t especially well managed, says Bill Veeck, who at times owned the baseball Chicago White Sox, Cleveland Indians, and St. Louis Browns, and is now President of Suffolk Down Racetrack.

He adds, sensible, successful businessmen have been known to change once they became club owners. They do things they wouldn’t dream of doing with the businesses that made them successful. Among the common foibles of sports owners are nepotism, interference with coaches even if they lack expertise and a tendency to use their team as a means of boosting their egos rather than making money. Front office operations of many teams would give a management consultant nightmares.”¹⁶

WHAT CAN BE LEARNED?

In Retrospect

“Contributing factors to the downfall of the league were primarily the dearth of Americans on the teams, and secondary the quality of play, the heat of the summer season, and poor promotion, among others.”¹⁷

Although there are those who would argue that the story of the NASL was an inevitable one, I for one feel that with marketing (i.e., promotion) serving as the coordinating body behind the decisions made that the pains and losses suffered by the backers of the league would have been substantially reduced.

With a marketing strategy as a tool, the league would have been more prone to developing the league and the sport from the ground up; a decision or realization they came to agreement on as late as 1975. Attending clinics, assemblies, reaching out to the public should have been first and foremost on the minds (e.g., Seattle Sounders). At the same time, it had the resources to promote you U.S. players in the

¹⁵ “Pro-Soccer Kicks Off, But Will U.S. Get Boot Out of Sport?,” The Wall Street Journal, February 14, 1967, p. 1.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Hubert Vogelsinger, The Challenge of Soccer (Boston, Mass., 1973), p. 7.

makeup of each team in the league. Consequently, they would have been attacking the problem from both ends of the spectrum (e.g., direction).

As McCarthy wrote in his book, Basic Marketing, “the underlying principle of the marketing concept is that a firm should seek to meet the needs of customers at a profit rather than placing the main emphasis on its own internal activities and utilization of its resources.”¹⁸ (e.g., Rochester Lancers)

As the Seattle franchise found out and utilized from its first day in the league, a marketing strategy should be inherently built into every facet of the operation. In essence, this involves the “(1) selection of the target market – selecting particular groups of customers to whom a company wishes to appeal; and (2) development of a marketing mix – choosing the elements which the company intends to combine in order to satisfy this target group.”¹⁹ These elements are centered around product, place, promotion, and price (4-P’s).

Although all four elements are important to any analysis, it is my opinion that promotion is the key to the success or failure of the NASL (acknowledging that the other three elements are given).

As McCarthy states, “promotion is concerned with any method that *communicates to the target market* about the right product to be sold in the right place at the right price. Promotion encompasses sales promotion, advertising, and personal selling.”²⁰

As the Seattle Sounders found out (and the league for that matter), giving talks and lectures to 500,000 potential soccer fans is their way of communicating with the target market. They offered the right product (soccer), promoted the inherent feature embedded in the game of soccer, sold their product in a great location (Kingdome), and at the right price (competitive with other major sports in the Seattle metro area).

¹⁸ E. Jerome McCarthy, Basic Marketing Homewood, Illinois, 1971), p. 26.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 37-39.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 45.

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