The marketing of major league soccer

Bruce G. Hummer Jr.
Rowan University
THE MARKETING OF MAJOR LEAGUE SOCCER

By
Bruce G. Hummer Jr.

A Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements of the
Master of Arts Degree
Of
The Graduate School
At
Rowan University
2002

Approved by

Date Approved: 8-31-02
ABSTRACT

Bruce G. Hummer Jr.
The Marketing of Major League Soccer
2002
Advisor: Professor Larry Litwin
Master of Arts Degree

For the past six years, Major League Soccer has tried to penetrate American homes with its brand of soccer. Television advertisements and in-house surveys have been made to encourage people to view soccer as a spectator sport. The league though has been on decline since its first year and the question still remains why soccer has a hard time being a spectator sport in America. This study examined how Youth Soccer parents perceive the league.

The author went to various Youth Soccer games and registrations and used an intercept survey of the soccer parents. The parents were asked if they had ever heard of Major League Soccer, where did they hear about it and ways to improve the league for spectators. They also answered questions on their child’s favorite soccer player and sports hero to determine if the league is having success in marketing players.

Most of the parents have heard of Major League Soccer and agreed that the games should be on the television more often. Many of them acknowledge that a team that’s closer in proximity to them would draw more attention from the youth soccer parents.
MINI-ABSTRACT

Bruce G. Hummer Jr.
The Marketing of Major League Soccer
2002
Advisor: Professor Larry Litwin
Master of Arts Degree

For the past six years, Major League Soccer has tried to penetrate American homes with its brand of soccer. Television advertisements and in-house surveys have been made to encourage people to view soccer as a spectator sport. The league though has been on decline since its first year and the question still remains why soccer has a hard time being a spectator sport in America. This study examined how Youth Soccer parents perceive the league.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Professor Larry Litwin for his assistance throughout this entire project. Thank you also to my family and friends for their support. Thanks to all those Youth Soccer parents who continue to encourage their kids to play the game.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Statement</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedure</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delimitations</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terminology</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. MLS OWNERSHIP</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. PROCEDURES</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. FINDINGS</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major League Soccer’s Popularity</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Soccer Player’s Background</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major League Soccer’s Popularity</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing Major League Soccer</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey Respondents</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Evaluation</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations for Further Study</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX</td>
<td>PAGE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A SURVEY</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLE OF TABLES

Table | Page
--- | ---
4.1 WHEN WAS THE LAST MAJOR LEAGUE GAME YOU ATTENDED? | 19
4.2 WHO IS YOUR CHILD’S FAVORITE MAJOR LEAGUE SOCCER PLAYER? | 20
4.3 WHO IS YOUR CHILD’S SPORTS HERO? | 21
Chapter One

Introduction

"Tonight, again, the strong and arrogant opponent felt the bitter taste of defeat at your hands. Be happy that you have made the Iranian nation happy."¹ This was the message from Iran’s spiritual leader after the Iranians defeated the United States in a World Cup soccer match. Iran, like many other nations, treats soccer more as a war than a game. Nations feel national pride rides on the soccer matches and if the team loses, the nation loses as well.

In the United States, soccer has yet to capture the hearts of the American sports fan. Football, baseball, basketball and hockey dominate the sports fans’ interest while also dominating the commercial industry. These four premiere sports have the icons to promote interest in their sports. Other sports, like NASCAR and golf, have recently gained icons to help propel interest in the American fan. Soccer is still far behind in America but a plan has been too gain the loyalty and respect of the American sports fan.

In 1994, the United States gained the privilege of hosting the World Cup soccer games. For two months, soccer was played at some of the country’s most well known stadiums and the fan base began to increase. With the World Cup having so much success and the United States national team playing its best soccer ever, a soccer league became inevitable. The United States national team produced stars willing to participate in this league and with help from world stars, the foundation was being established for a successful America soccer campaign.

In the summer of 1996, Major League soccer was born as eight teams took the field in hopes of building an American fan base. Other soccer leagues had tried before, including the defunct North American Soccer League to build soccer’s respect in America but finances, time and interest all led to the downfall of the leagues. Major League soccer hopes to avoid these pitfalls by trying different marketing methods that appeal to culture’s interest.

Problem Statement

Because of soccer’s popularity and speed, its interest to the American public will provide challenges to Major League Soccer. Usually soccer is a low scoring affair and Americans have a thirst for speed and scoring. NASCAR’s popularity is increasing because of speed and risk of injury. Baseball on the other hand, has begun to look at ways to speed up its game so it can appeal to the public.

“Games frequently took three and a half hours or more to play and ended well after midnight on the east coast. It didn’t used to be that way. As late as the 1970s, games took about two hours to play. Many fans are tuning out the longer games now, as lower television ratings show. Critics fret baseball is losing generations of young fans, whose World Series memories end in the third inning when their parents send them to bed. "Time of game has become more of a concern," said Sandy Alderson, the executive vice president for baseball operations."

---

Speed though is not the only problem facing soccer. "MLS didn’t kick off its inaugural season until two years after the ’94 World Cup. By this point, most of the great veterans were in their twilight. Eric Wynalda, Marcelo Balboa, Tab Ramos and Alexi Lalas all put in sub-par performances in MLS’s first couple of seasons, frustrating coaches and driving away fans."³

One strategy Major League Soccer used was placing teams within large Latin communities. Los Angeles, Miami and Tampa were the primary spots to sell MLS to the Latin population and gain their support. But MLS failed to recognize other factors inside the Latin community.

Miami for instance, has the Latin TV channel Univision, which commonly wins the ratings war. Latin Americans have no need to watch MLS’s brand of soccer when they can watch some of the world’s greatest stars piped into their living rooms. Also, the teams inside the Latin community have had trouble with their Latin stars causing these players to be shuffled to teams outside the Latin community.⁴

Major League Soccer’s research has come from in-stadium surveys. The random surveys include questions about demographics and psychographics that are administered to the fans either at the gate or while seated inside the stadium.

"We’ve been doing in stadium surveys for about four years and the information we get, we trade with the other teams marketing researchers. We don’t consider ourselves competing


against one another; we’re all working toward improving the league and gaining the fans loyalty to the team. We want these kids to take their kids to the soccer games and relive their youth."

The in-stadium research methods used by Major League Soccer can produce important information but may not be making the progress needed to gain public support. This study explores the ways Major League Soccer can market itself to the American public and how they can appeal to the parents of Youth Soccer.

Purpose

This study investigates the communication methods Major League Soccer has used in marketing itself to the American public and provides recommendations for ways to increase the interest in soccer. As a result, this study will document for marketing researchers how the parents of Youth Soccer players perceive Major League Soccer. The study will also examine if the success of the United States National team results in a rise or fall of soccer’s popularity within the United States.

---

5 By Steve Pastorino. Head of Marketing for the Chicago Fire. Information gathered during phone interview on Friday November 7, 2001
Procedure

A survey was conducted of randomly selected guardians of Youth Soccer players. The guardians were asked about their opinions on Major League Soccer along with lifestyle questions. The survey sought to uncover Youth Soccer’s public perception of Major League Soccer and whether the guardians would consider attending Major League Soccer games.

Delimitations

Soccer may not be a popular spectator sport for the American fan; but there are many Youth Soccer organizations throughout America. This study is limited to a number of Youth Soccer programs willing to participate in it.
Terminology

**Major League Soccer (MLS):** Developed in 1996 following the success of the 1994 World Cup, which was held in the United States. Currently consists of 10 teams.

**North American Soccer League (NASL):** Developed in 1967 and folded in 1984 due to financial reasons.

**Women’s United Soccer Association (WUSA):** Developed in 2001 following the success of the United States Women’s National team from the 2000 World Cup. Currently consists of eight teams.
This chapter highlights literature relating to the Internet and online information. The author conducted research using the following online databases: VALE ABI/Inform Business and Lexis Nexis. The author also used the Internet and interviews with members of Major League Soccer as a resource.

**MLS Ownership**

Major League Soccer represents America’s answer to the World’s soccer leagues. MLS though, doesn’t have all the freedoms that most of the United States professional sports industries have.

Major League Soccer has only 10 teams in its six-year history but the main statistic calls attention to the owners. “Colorado billionaire Phil Anschutz, through his Anschutz Entertainment Group (AEG), controls five of 12 teams (as of January 2002, 10 teams) in the league and its three largest markets.”

As a result, Anschutz does not have much competition from around the league and the players cannot afford to get into an argument with Anschutz. If this was to occur and a player wanted to leave, the teams left to choose from will have been sufficiently narrowed.

“Anschutz, worth more than $15 billion, does provide a number of positives to MLS. He clearly loves the sport, and by all accounts has done everything possible to ensure he operates his teams for the betterment of the entire league instead of just himself. AEG this year has added

---

several key staffers with deep soccer experience to help manage the empire, most prominently Kevin Payne, formerly the D.C. United’s president and general manager.”

MLS in past years has had a hard time recruiting new investors to buy into the league. Major League Soccer has a single entity for its ownership in which all the teams pool their money together to form one entity. Intrigued investors do not like this system.

“Recently, an Italian group took a brief look at acquiring the rights, to the now contracted, Miami Fusion. The group balked at the single-entity structure. "The way it was structured, you can’t make any money with it," said a source. "Someone else controls your money. The only way to make any money is through gate revenue and local advertising. Everything else is through the league and shared.""

Under the single entity system, the players don’t even have a say in what team they want to play for. MLS attempts to mark players to markets to better appeal to those publics or fans.

“M.L.S. owns all of its clubs and signs all of its players who are then allocated to the teams. Under the single-entity system, so-called investor-operators pay for the right to run their clubs, and all profits are shared with the league.”

---


Though not many investors approve of this single entity system, MLS has enforced it to avoid the pitfalls that the North American Soccer League faced. "The system will prevent wealthier teams from spending freely to acquire top-ranked players. It was such inequalities that helped wreck the North American Soccer League in 1984, the last attempt to create a major professional soccer league. Steve Ross' Warner Communications owner of the New York Cosmos, spent a fortune to acquire such soccer greats as Pele, turning the competition – if you could call it – into a sort of minor league."

Major League Soccer has hoped to learn from the mistakes made by the North American Soccer League. The North American Soccer League has been the most successful professional American soccer league to date but the problems the league faced with keeping its players happy and the big business only a few markets were tasting allowed just a handful of teams to compete in the league. Major League Soccer has hoped to avoid all those tribulations that NASL has faced by having a single entity professional league.

Alan Rothenberg, the chief coordinator behind Major League Soccer said, "One thing is the need for centralized management, which was lacking in the NASL. Also, I expect there to be centralized control of the product so that its league designed and owned logos, sponsorship packages, broadcast packages and licensing. Therefore, it all fits together and the league can more effectively sell to corporate entities or the consumer public. We want to create a complete integrated program rather than having it scattered and slapdashed, and not carefully thought out."

---


Marketing

The 1994 World Cup Soccer Tournament was a huge success in the United States and Major League Soccer has hoped to build off that success. Going into the spring of 1996, Major League Soccer had made huge strides in getting many corporate sponsors to back their franchises. Budweiser beer has become the official and only beer of Major League Soccer, while Nike has become the official uniform for many of the teams.

In January of 2002, Major League Soccer has continued its steps in the right direction. MLS has agreed to terms with the television networks ABC and ESPN. The contract will allow those networks to broadcast all the World Cup games and at least 26 Major League Soccer games a year, through 2006.

But for all of the corporate sponsors and television deals Major League Soccer gains, the organization still has to find ways to get the public to watch. When the World Cup ended in 1994, many marketing experts were skeptical about how the United States public would react to a professional soccer organization.

Many Americans turned out for the World Cup because it was a mega-event comparable to the Olympics, and because it featured the best soccer players in the world. "The question for pro soccer in the U.S.," Singer said, "is can they even come close to matching the level of play and the names of people like Romario and Baggio?"\(^{12}\)

Not only did Major League Soccer have to compete with many of the world’s greatest soccer players and play in different countries, it had to compete against many of the United States’ recognizable faces who also play in other countries. The few well-known American born

soccer players were being offered close to a million dollars in other parts of the world. Major League Soccer could not afford to pay those kinds of salaries.

Without well-known soccer personalities, the league may be slow to attract a large following. Without a sizable audience, TV networks won’t pay large fees for the rights to broadcast the games. Without big TV revenues, the league can’t afford to hire big-name stars. “If you get the big personalities, it costs you money. You need the big TV dollars to support it. So they may have to go with the create-your-own-star approach, which takes time,” Singer said.13

Fortunately for Major League Soccer, only part of this was true. Many of the American born Soccer players stayed in the United States once MLS kicked off in 1996. MLS got to market the United States heroes of the 1994 World Cup to the American public to try and draw a sizeable television audience.

But for Major League Soccer, a star player has yet to take the American public by storm. Instead, Major League Soccer’s plan is to have the United States youth grow up to become dominant soccer players and gain a loyal following. Major League has devised a rule to limit the amount of international players on a team.

“One of things MLS wants to do is treat and develop soccer as an American sport, because it is clearly an American participant sport. The first thing that we will be able to do is attract more fans if more Americans are playing in the league. Second, we want to develop players so that when we compete in international competitions, the U.S. team will be one of the dominant forces. By having a pro league that caters to American players, it therefore becomes an invitation to some of these young, talented players not to give it up somewhere in high school or

college because they have no where to go with their talents. Also the pattern around the world generally is to restrict the number of imported players to three or four, depending on the particular country. I think we will follow the same pattern."

Another question Major League Soccer has faced is the pace of the game and how a televised audience will react to the game. Many Americans favor high scoring games and fast paced action. When the National Basketball Association wasn’t drawing the audience it wanted, the Association developed the three-point line and the 24-second rule to increase the pace of the game. This allowed more scoring and less stalling techniques when the game comes down to crunch time. Major League Soccer has been in the process of developing better ways to market itself to the American televised audience.

Some of the proposed new regulations include the no backpass rule (which grants a direct free kick to the other team if a player passes the ball back to his or her goalie and the goalie uses his hands to stop or pick up the ball). It certainly has speeded up play and removed one of the worst stalling tactics out of the game.

Another proposed regulation grants teams three points for a win instead of two. It means throughout the regulation time, players have to play to win because they’re not going to benefit by just laying back waiting for a tie.

Major League Soccer has spent a lot of time and money on researching why soccer has yet to blossom in America. Soccer continues to produce the highest participation youth sport but yet, falls off the map of many teenagers once they jump into junior high school and high school.


Chris Cannetti of the New York/New Jersey Metrostars is one of the many marketing executives who have conducted research on the matter of Major League Soccer and its popularity. Cannetti says, “We disseminate in stadium random surveys at the gates and seats. We try to find out information about the lifestyles, demographics and geographics of our fan base.”

The results of their surveys are passed to each team in the MLS and each team reviews the results to see if they can be instituted within their audience. Cannetti though believes the success lies within the target audience of the Youth and Hispanic Community.

“Soccer is part of the Hispanic culture. They are emotionally connected to the sport,” says Cannetti. “The community still follows their players from home, even though they believe the competition isn’t up to par.”

“We are trying to develop a father and son connection with the current youth generation in America. A connection needs to develop like the connection of a baseball game. Reminiscing over the times your parents took you to the ballpark. We want the youth of today to do this 20 years from now.”

For Major League Soccer though, other problems persist in the stadiums. Most Major League Soccer games take place inside NFL stadiums. These stadiums hold far more fans than what Major League Soccer draws.

The MetroStars are discovering how difficult it is to barge into a market saturated with 10 other major league teams, and to look even moderately successful when 15,000 fans spread to watch an underachieving team in a massive 77,000-seat stadium.

---


17 By Chris Cannetti.

Major League Soccer has taken notice of this and plans on developing separate stadiums for their clubs. The Columbus Crew is the only team to currently hold its own soccer facility but plans for the teams like the MetroStars are well under way.

Soccer fans are a close-knit group that enjoys singing and parading together in the stands. More compact stadiums will allow these fans to intermingle with each other instead of being scattered throughout a 70,000 plus stadium. These groups will become closer in a stadium that holds only 25,000 spectators.

For the most part though, to attract fans’ attention and to draw crowds, it’s the competition and the team’s performance that will drive people into the stadium.

The best marketing tool is often a winning team, which the MetroStars are not. The MetroStars’ woes are exacerbated, in part, by a core audience that has fond memories of the New York Cosmos of the North American Soccer League, with its roster of international superstars like Pele and Giorgio Chinaglia. The M.L.S. would love to have a wildly popular New York team like the Cosmos, but not by overspending, which doomed the N.A.S.L.  

But again, the problem of the single entity system resurfaces and all of the Major League Soccer franchises cannot choose whom they would want on their team. “General managers can scout players and recommend which ones they want, but if they are too costly, the league will not approve them. The league has never paid more than $2 million for a foreign player, thus restricting its participation in a free-for-all world market.”

---


20 Sandomir, Richard.
Summary

Soccer has become more appealing to the American public. The statistics show that many households tuned into the World Cup in 1994 and the demand for tickets outweighed the supply. Major League Soccer hopes that by winning over the younger generation, they can prolong their company and catapult forward as one of the top professional sports around. However, Major League Soccer has to continue to work with its sponsors and gain support from their fans and the Youth Soccer industry. If the support teeters off, the days of Major League Soccer may be numbered.
Chapter Three

Procedures

For this study, the author examined the history of professional soccer leagues in the United States. Using the online databases Lexis-Nexis and ProQuest in Rowan University’s Library, the author used “Sports marketing,” “Major League Soccer,” and “Youth Soccer” as his keyword search terms. These terms yielded numerous results in Major League Soccer marketing and Youth Soccer related articles in magazines and newspaper articles. The journal selections were very limited using these keyword search terms.

The author visited the Google Internet search engine and continued using “Major League Soccer marketing,” as the main keyword search. Many of the search engines listed had recent developments in Major League Soccer’s marketing strategy. The author also visited the main web site of Major League Soccer (mlsnet.com) and found all 10 franchise’s websites. These websites produced contact names the author contact.

Surveys were conducted of the parents of Youth Soccer. The author chose to survey the parents because of the popularity of Youth Soccer and it should represent the view of Youth Soccer’s attitude toward soccer in a spectator setting. Realizing Youth Soccer’s membership consists of over 600-thousand youths in 47 states, the author chose a convenience sample of Youth Soccer organizations throughout the Central and Southern portions of New Jersey.
Surveys distributed to the parents of the players contained questions that dealt with their opinion of Major League Soccer with psychographic information. The survey was comprised of the following types of questions: yes and no, multiple-choice and open-ended questions. Surveys were hand administered at random Youth registration periods and soccer games, with the promise to keep participants anonymous.

The author conducted a content analysis of the respondents' answers to the open-ended questions on the survey.
Chapter Four

FINDINGS

The following contains the survey findings. The author intercepted 396 parents at different Youth Soccer events. The events included soccer games and fall registration for the youth players. This survey was distributed to groups located in Gloucester and Ocean Counties.

Major League Soccer’s Popularity

Question 1. Have you ever heard of Major League Soccer?

73% (290 respondents) said yes.

27% (106 respondents) said no.

(396 of 396 respondents answered Question 1)

Question 2. Where did you hear about it?

Radio

21% (61 respondents) said they heard radio advertisements

79% (236 responded) said they never heard radio advertisements

Television

80% (237 respondents) said through television advertisements

20% (60 respondents) said they’ve never seen television advertisements

Newspaper

33% (97 respondents) said through newspaper advertisements

67% (200 respondents) said they haven’t seen newspaper advertisements
Billboard
5% (14 respondents) said through billboard advertisements
95% (283 respondents) said they never seen a billboard advertisement

Other
15% (44 respondents) said through other advertisements
85% (250 respondents) didn’t answer Other

(297 of 396 respondents answered Question 2)

Question 3. Have you ever gone to a MLS game?
7% (26 respondents) said yes
93% (355 respondents) said no

(381 of 396 respondents answered Question 3)

| Table 4.1 |
| When was the last Major League Soccer game you attended? |
|Within the past year................................................................. 12 respondents |
|Within the past two years.......................................................... 3 respondents |

15 of 396 respondents said they’ve been to a Major League Soccer game

Question 3B. If no, would you ever consider attending a game?
85% (297 respondents) said yes
15% (52 respondents) said no

(349 of 396 respondents answered Question 3B)
Question 4. Have you ever watched MLS on T.V.?

64% (233 respondents) said yes

36% (133 respondents) said no

(366 of 396 respondents answered Question 4)

| Table 4.2 |
| Who is your child’s favorite Major League Soccer player? |
| Mia Hamm .......................................................... 15 respondents |
| Cobi Jones .......................................................... 5 respondents |
| Marco Etcheverry .............................................. 4 respondents |
| Eric Wynalda ..................................................... 3 respondents |
| Tab Ramos .......................................................... 1 respondent |
Table 4.3
Who is your child’s sports hero?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Athlete</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mia Hamm</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allen Iverson</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Jordan</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donovan McNabb</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason Kidd</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony Hawk</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric Lindros</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Athletes</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 7. How can MLS draw more attention to itself?

**Better Players**
4% (12 respondents) said Bring in Better players
96% (289 respondents) didn’t answer on the players

**T.V. Exposure**
91% (274 respondents) said have more T.V. exposure
9% (27 respondents) didn’t answer on T.V. exposure

**Radio Coverage**
13% (39 respondents) said have more radio coverage
87% (262 respondents) didn’t answer on radio coverage

**Other Ways**
7% (20 respondents) said other
93% (278 respondents) didn’t answer on other ways
Youth Soccer Players Background

Question 8. How long has your child played soccer?

6% (22 respondents) said less than a year
18% (70 respondents) said between one to two years
34% (132 respondents) said between two to four years
17% (65 respondents) said between four to six years
25% (96 respondents) said between six or more years

(385 of 396 respondents answered Question 8)

Question 9. Has your child expressed interest in playing soccer professionally?

31% (118 respondents) said yes
69% (260 respondents) said no

(318 of 396 respondents answered Question 9)

Question 10. Is your child a male or a female?

38% (147 respondents) said male
52% (199 respondents) said female
7% (26 respondents) said they had both a male and a female
1% (3 respondents) said they had two males
2% (9 respondents) said they had two females

(386 of 396 respondents answered Question 10)
Town

27% (105 respondents) were from Glassboro

39% (150 respondents) were from Pitman

35% (135 respondents) were from the Ocean County area.
Chapter Five

Conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter contains the author’s evaluations and conclusions based upon the findings reported in the previous chapter. The author also recommends possible research topics to consider as a result of this study.

Major League Soccer’s Popularity

The surveys of the Youth Soccer parents aided this study tremendously because of their exposure to the sport. Surveying the parents provided the answers needed in knowing whether or not Major League Soccer has been marketing itself efficiently. However, the Youth Soccer parent surveys had some setbacks as parents considered other soccer leagues part of Major League Soccer.

The majority of the parents said they knew about Major League Soccer. Problems did persist though throughout the study as many parents asked if the Philadelphia Kixx, New Jersey Stallions or Manchester United were a part of Major League Soccer. When they were told the answer was “No,” some of the parents changed their answers, while others continued with the survey.

I suspect, a number of parents assumed the Kixx and Stallions were a part of Major League Soccer, when in reality the Kixx belong to an indoor soccer league and the Stallions are in a professional league. In addition, parents who asked questions were already a couple of
questions into the survey and didn’t go back and change their answers, leaving their initial response to be counted.

Interestingly, Major League Soccer’s television coverage was how most of the parents found out about the league. This is interesting because of Don Garber’s (president of Major League Soccer) reaction to ESPN and ABC’s coverage of the league. Garber believes that ESPN sometimes pokes fun at the league, which leads fans into not taking the league seriously. If fans don’t take the league seriously, how does it have a chance at surviving in the over-crowded sports world?

A majority of Youth Soccer parents also answered yes to the question of whether or not they’ve watched a Major League Soccer game on television.

These answers might be a little flawed due to the parents perceiving European teams like the Manchester United or Liverpool, as Major League Soccer.

Though these parents were corrected if they asked about these soccer organizations, it can be implied that some did not ask questions and some didn’t change their answer when they figured out what Major League Soccer really is.

Most parents said they have never been to a Major League Soccer game before. Again though, this question may have been answered incorrectly by a number of soccer parents.

Many of the Youth Soccer parents considered the Kixx and Stallions as Major League Soccer. The problem is that not every parent changed their answer when they found out that the Kixx and Stallions are not considered apart of Major League Soccer.

However, a majority of the parents who said they never attended a Major League Soccer game said they would consider attending a Major League Soccer game in the future.
Marketing Major League Soccer

Many parents believed in order to make Major League Soccer more interesting, the league will have to expand its television coverage of the games. Currently, Major League Soccer runs 30 games a year on ABC and ESPN2, with 24 of them in the “Soccer Saturday” rotation.

Major League Soccer plays on some Wednesday nights, but this is the time that ESPN and ESPN2 have Major League Baseball. Thursday night games could be a possibility, as Major League Soccer will have a few games on Thursday night, but the National Hockey League has Thursday night coverage until their season ends in June.

Saturday is the best bet right now and coverage of 24 games is recommended for a relatively new league. A solution might be to do what the NBA currently does during its playoffs, arrange game times to an entire Saturday to Major League Soccer games.

The marketing of Major League Soccer players has also been a problem. Many children watch their heroes on commercials. This builds their popularity. There haven’t been many commercials that star Major League Soccer players. Only when the World Cup is played every four years does one begin to see commercials, which include players from Major League Soccer.

Major League Soccer needs to find a player that has the caliber of Mia Hamm. Through this survey, a number of parents listed Mia Hamm as their child’s favorite Major League Soccer player and also sports hero. Though Hamm isn’t in Major League Soccer, it was interesting to note that Hamm has become one of the sport’s icons.

Hamm currently plays in the WUSA (Women’s United Soccer Association) and has built a solid reputation, helping the USA to a World Cup victory over China. Hamm does commercial spots for a number of companies and has become the sport’s most recognized female athlete.
Surprisingly though, there was not one parent who placed the name of a Philadelphia Charge player on the survey. The Charge is part of the new WUSA league, which is only in its second season and is trying to get some notoriety.

Major League Soccer will have to look at Mia Hamm and start finding players to match her description. Through the survey, a number of Major League Soccer players were mentioned as a child’s favorite soccer player. Marco Etcheverry and former national team player Eric Wynalda, along with current national team member, Cobi Jones were among those listed a few times on survey.

Major League Soccer will probably have to keep a close eye on the 2002 World Cup. A number of young Major League Soccer stars will have their chance to compete in the upcoming games. Josh Wolff, Landon Donovan and DeMarcus Beasley are all young players who offer exciting play that could catapult some interest in Major League Soccer. These players will be around for at least one, if not more World Cups and can help spark interest in league.

Major League Soccer just has to be careful and retain these players. With the World Cup, a show for the world to see, many teams from different countries will try to sign these players for a considerable amount of money. Major League Soccer has to find a way to keep these players and market them to the American public.

Survey Respondents

Many of the respondents said their child has never expressed interest in playing soccer professionally. Though many of the respondents’ children have participated in soccer for more than four years, the respondents feel their children have no interest in playing the sport in the professional world.
Many of the respondents to the survey have children of the female gender. Though the WUSA is currently trying to build a following, not many games are on the television. Thus, exposure to the young population is limited.

**Study Evaluation**

Some changes will probably be necessary should someone repeat this project. Clarification of an identity for Major League Soccer needs to be presented to the parents. A number of responses might be incorrect, due to the perception of other leagues and teams as part of Major League Soccer.

Also, many parents were tired from filling out four to five pages of registration material. Some parents hurried through the questions without giving much thought. Others didn’t bother to change their answers after discovering what Major League Soccer really is. This could have lead to false answers as some parents just wanted to leave and get on their way.
Recommendations for Further Study

The survey could be a little longer to get more information from the parents. A short survey was used to draw parents into filling out the survey after they completed their registration forms or watched their child’s soccer match.

Also, this survey reached a minimal number of soccer organizations and teams in the United States. This instrument reads only a small sample of the soccer community in parts of Central and South Jersey. It would be interesting to see if the same results would occur in other parts of the country.

Major League Soccer has talked about expanding the leagues in the next few years by adding some new teams. Philadelphia was one of the major cities in which Major League Soccer wants to place a club. If this were to occur, a follow up study of whether or not parents are recognizing Major League Soccer would generate interesting results.
Major League Soccer Questionnaire

1. Have you ever heard of Major League Soccer? _____ Yes _____ No

2. Where did you hear about it?
   _____ Radio _____ Newspaper _____ Other
   _____ T.V. _____ Billboard

3. Have you ever gone to an MLS game?
   a. If yes, when was the last game you attended?

   b. If no, would you ever consider attending a game? _____ Yes _____ No

4. Have you ever watched MLS on T.V.?
   _____ Yes _____ No

5. Who is your child’s favorite MLS player?

6. Who is your child’s sports hero?

7. How can MLS make itself better?
   _____ Better players _____ More radio coverage
   _____ More T.V. exposure _____ Other ____________________________

8. How long has your child played soccer?

9. Has your child expressed interest in playing soccer professionally?
   _____ Yes _____ No

10. Is your child a male or female?
WORKS CITED


Pastorino, S. Head of Marketing for the Chicago Fire. Information gathered during phone interview on Friday November 7, 2001

