Spectator Attendance Strategies: A Best Practices Examination of MLS Expansion Franchises

A Senior Project

presented to

the Faculty of the Recreation, Parks, & Tourism Administration Department

California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Bachelor of Science

by

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December 2015

ABSTRACT

SPECTATOR ATTENDANCE STRATEGIES: A BEST PRACTICES

EXAMINATION OF MLS EXPANSION FRANCHISES

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DECEMBER 2015

The expansion of Major League Soccer (MLS) has dramatically raised league awareness throughout the nation. This impact was influenced by the additional consideration organizations have paid to the role of spectator attendance within professional sports. The purpose of this study was to examine the best practices for spectator attendance strategies employed by recent MLS expansion franchises. The following organizations were evaluated for the comparative analysis: Seattle Sounders, Portland Timbers, and New York City FC. These organizations were analyzed through a best practices comparison guide developed by the researcher. Data were collected from the selected teams' websites, third party organization analysis, and the website for each franchise's supporters group. The results demonstrate that the franchises design spectator attendance strategies unique to their respective cities. This study recommends that MLS franchises pay greater attention to their social interaction elements and increase the team's community involvement to successfully connect with their fans.

Keywords: Major League Soccer, expansion franchises, spectator, attendance, marketing strategies, team affiliation, social interaction

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Background of Study

       Attendance at sporting events is an important measuring stick for fan interest and engagement. Gate revenues for sports teams across North America are expected to continue rising and reach $19.1 billion by 2017 (PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP, 2013). One league in particular relies heavily on game day revenues. While examining Major League Soccer (MLS) franchise valuations, Olshansky (2013) found that venue generated income represents 69% of MLS team revenues. Due to the importance that spectator attendance plays in the league's success, it is imperative that MLS franchises use different methods and strategies in an attempt to increase attendance. The MLS has built a foundation based on a combination of aspects from successful European soccer leagues, as well as premier American sports leagues in an attempt to create successful organizations on and off the field. In 2015, the MLS celebrates its 20th season having made great strides in attendance rates, however there are still vast differences in terms of marketing strategy, community involvement, and franchise value in comparison to other major professional sports leagues. MLS franchises have started to place an emphasis on understanding the needs and wants of their customers in order to provide experiences that transcend the game. Spectator attendance now plays an integral role within the context of professional sports organizations and is receiving additional consideration by all professional sports teams. Through the help of enhanced fan experiences and better business practices MLS franchises have the ability to continue to grow. The purpose of this study was to examine the best practices for spectator attendance strategies employed by recent MLS expansion franchises.

<u>Review of Literature</u>

Research for this review of literature was conducted at Robert E. Kennedy Library on the campus of California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. In addition to books and other resources, the following online databases were utilized: SPORTDiscus and Google Scholar. This review of literature will focus on the different strategies being used to attract higher spectator attendance rates across different major sports leagues. The overview will include information on multiple sport leagues across the world. An in-depth look at the factors that play a role in spectator attendance in sports leagues will be discussed.

Spectator attendance plays an integral role in the context of professional sports organizations. Not only in regards to the direct and indirect income that spectators generate, but also by increasing performance on the field. Because of the significant impact that spectators create, teams have utilized multiple methods and strategies in order to attract fans. Organizations are starting to place a larger emphasis on determining why spectators attend games. "It is expected that understanding factors that affect the consumption of sport will improve the efficiency of marketing communication between service providers and consumers, and, for that matter, possibly influence the entire marketing program of a sport organization" (Cunningham & Kwon, 2003, p. 127). Teams have generally focused on three primary attributes contributing to the psychological, social, and economic factors of a spectator's attendance. Teams have recently been able to categorize the key motivational factors behind sports spectatorship as: vicarious achievement and drama/competition, aesthetics, escape, entertainment, social interaction and family, team affiliation, physical skills and knowledge (Lera-López, 2011). Each of these factors play a key role in a spectator's attendance at a sporting event.

One reason why spectators enjoy attending a sporting event is because of the vicarious achievement and competition involved. Many people treat sport as a way to escape from everyday life, a diversion from the problems that are stressing them out. Others are attracted by the desire for drama and excitement. "When our favorite team wins an important game, most of us have felt the glow and satisfaction that accompany that victory" (Pedersen & Thibault, 2014, p. 324). Sports provide an outlet for many people to express and associate themselves with success. Fans may feel more powerful, important and successful by means of the psychological attachment they build towards their team (Smith, 2008). It is important for sports consumers to experience feelings like self-fulfillment, self-esteem and prestige (Schwarz & Hunter, 2008).

One difficulty that sport marketers face is the inability to actually control the product on the field. Sport marketers are forced to emphasize different aspects of attending a game. Most of the marketing effort is not focused on the game itself; it is placed on product extensions (Schwarz & Hunter, 2008). Since marketing professionals have little or no say about what happens on the field, they must creatively use product extensions to get the message across to the public eye. Sport marketers have started to redirect their efforts to focus on the atmosphere at games. Attending sports is about creating a memorable experience, regardless of how consumer behavior is evaluated. "Psychological and personal forces create the internal push to seek out a sport object or experience that fulfils physical, social, and personal needs and provides benefits" (Funk, 2008, p. 94). Organizations have overhauled their strategy to focus on the elements that they can control. An analysis of the marketing management of the very successful Stade Francais Paris rugby club found that "the club focused on offering highly entertaining games with numerous peripheral elements at very cheap prices (starting from 5 euros), developing the merchandising through innovative replica shirts and extending the brand with innovative

merchandise such as cosmetic products" (Bodet, 2009, p. 253). Marketing departments have needed to get creative in the way that they attract fans.

Sport offers a unique social opportunity for members of the community. In a society where people have become disconnected as a result of changing lifestyles and technological innovations, sports foster a sense of community by promoting communication, involving people jointly, and providing common symbols, a collective identity, and a reason for solidarity (Lever, 1983). This would imply that "attendance at a sport event satisfies not only entertainment needs, but also social needs—needs for affiliation with others. Thus, people are influenced by social norms and significant others to attend sport events" (Cunningham & Kwon, 2003, p. 130). Because of this, organizations have made an effort to encourage a social atmosphere at sport events. As Melnick (1993) observes:

> The party like atmosphere that surrounds sports events makes them especially suitable for satisfying a variety of interpersonal needs. It is the wise team owner or sport manager who seeks to preserve, protect, and even promote the sociability available at his or her venue. (p. 53)

Sport marketers have noticed this trend and have started to promote their tailgates and other various activities before and after the game in order to tap into emotional ties. "For many fans, the party inside the stadium is not nearly as much fun as the party outside" (Melnick, 1993, p. 57). The implications of this for sport marketers have been two-fold. Organizations have placed an emphasis on special group seating and the introduction of membership clubs. Professional teams can look at collegiate teams as an example for how these incentives can have profound effects. Special rates for students along with creative strategies in their use of alumni or booster

clubs have led to greater participation at sporting events for collegiate organizations

(Cunningham & Kwon, 2003).

Another aspect that impacts spectator attendance is the sportscape in which a team plays. "Sportscape refers to service extensions and the physical surroundings of a sports event" (Lambrecht, 2009, p. 165). Soccer organizations in particular have placed an emphasis on having an environment that is uniquely suited to provide spectators with everything they need for a satisfying experience. Parrish (2013) stated: "Since 1999, MLS and its member clubs have sought to leave the confines of existing large football/baseball stadiums and are continuing to aggressively seek avenues to finance and develop intimate soccer specific venues" (p. 66). Recently MLS executives have made it clear that they prefer soccer specific stadiums in any expansion franchise candidates. The MLS considers intimate stadiums to provide the services that influence spectators to stay and continue to attend games at the stadium. By switching to soccer specific stadiums, organizations have to give up the potential for larger capacities that multifunctional stadiums offer though. "However ticket sales are not the only source of facility related revenue. Parking, concessions, corporate suite rentals, merchandizing, special events, and stadium naming rights are just a few of the additional revenue streams that clubs may capitalize on" (Parrish, 2013, p. 67). Spectators expect additional benefits to differentiate the in-person fan experience and that transfers over to the stadium.

The sport industry experiences heightened competition for consumers not only with other entertainment options, but amongst themselves. Fans are very selective in who they root for and an important element to consider is an individual's level of team identification. Team identification is believed to be the most significant factor motivating a sport fan's consumption of product extensions (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001). For many fans, the emotional

relationship with a sports team goes beyond the game and affects them in their daily life. "Athletics function as cultural forms that carry cultural meanings and many of the meanings carried by athletics reflect cultural ideologies of the wider society" (Beyer & Hannah, 2000, p. 105). There are supporters for every team that become so engulfed by their team's successes and failures that it becomes a part of their social identity (Hu & Tang, 2010). Organizations are trying to tap into this emotional connection and create fans that live and die with the team's performance. Once teams have created a connection, fans are more likely to follow the team through media outlets, spend more on team merchandise, pay more for tickets, and stay loyal to a poorly performing team (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998).

Fan identification creates several implications for sport marketers. For example, Sutton, McDonald, Milne, & Cimperman (1997) proposed that teams: increase player accessibility to the fans, increase the team's community involvement, and reinforce the history and tradition associated with the team. Each of these aspects contribute to an organizations overall image. Increasing fan access to the team and its players will result in greater fan identification. Community relations are an important aspect to any franchise. The philanthropic efforts that a team participates in reinforces its position in the community and reflects positively on the team as well as its fans. The primary task of community involvement is to make fans from general entertainment consumers. Activities/programs attempting to meet public interests are staged by sport organizations to establish good faith relationships within the community, which will often lead to an organization expanding their marketing efforts (Jubenville, Goss, & Ledford, 2004). Teams are able to elicit positive memories by drawing on a team's history and tradition. "Additionally the reinforcement of the team's history will serve to increase the connection between the team, the community, and the fans. A team's history communicates that being a fan

spans not only seasons, but generations" (Milne & McDonald, 1999, p. 19). Cities continually

support sports organizations, because the ultimate outcome of effective marketing strategies is an

improved quality of life for the community. Sports as a social facilitator and affordable

entertainment options is a vital part of the post-modern socio-economic system in America (Gorn

& Goldstein, 1993)

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the best practices for spectator attendance

strategies employed by recent MLS expansion franchises.

## Research Questions

This study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the factors associated with spectator attendance?

2. How have the three selected franchises designed their marketing strategies to attract fans?

3. How have recent expansion franchises increased the value of the MLS?

4. How have franchises created a deeper relationship with fans?

Chapter 2

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to examine the best practices for spectator attendance strategies employed by recent MLS expansion franchises. This chapter includes the following sections: description of organization, description of instrument, and description of procedures.

Description of Organization

A comparative analysis was conducted on the best practices of MLS franchises spectator attendance strategies. The following organizations were evaluated for the comparative analysis: Seattle Sounders, Portland Timbers, and New York City FC. The Seattle Sounders set a new MLS single-season attendance record this year with an average of 44,247 fans per match (Seattle Sounders F.C., 2015). The organization prides itself on having by far the largest crowd in the MLS and Sounders games are now the 28th -highest attended soccer matches in the world. A staff of 82 members works to maintain this atmosphere year-round. The Seattle Sounders played their inaugural match on March 19, 2009 and have set the standard for stadium atmosphere within the MLS ever since. The Sounders are able to set the attendance record by utilizing the 67,000 capacity at CenturyLink Field. Clint Dempsey signed on to be the Sounders' star player two years ago and has been the center piece for the franchise's sport marketers. Dempsey has topped the list of MLS jerseys sold on the MLSstore.com for the second year in a row. Dempsey has also provided a lift to the team on the field. The Sounders are the only expansion franchise to have made the play-offs in every single season. The Sounders have leveraged a unique and infectious match day experience, along with a successful team, into a valuation of $245 million (Smith, 2015).

The Portland Timbers joined the league two years after the Sounders and played their inaugural game on March 19, 2011 (Portland Timbers, 2015). Portland's mix of rabid fans, appealing stadium, and support from corporate boosters have made them one of the most successful franchises in the MLS. The Portland Timbers have taken a different expansion strategy than the Sounders, and it has worked according to plan. The Timbers pack 22,000 fans into Providence Park, and fans agree the intimacy of the stadium makes it seem as though everyone is almost on top of the action (Oshan, 2014). Providence Park was revamped before their inaugural season and the stadium is now hailed as a model of urban planning (Belson, 2011). The Timbers employ 72 people in their front office who tirelessly work to keep their intimate stadium special (Portland Timbers, 2015). The Timbers finished the 2015 season with an 85th consecutive home sellout at Providence Park. Portland has sold out all of its regular season home games since joining the MLS. Over the last five years Portland has drastically improved their valuation, to the point where they are now valued at $185 million (Smith, 2015). The Timbers focus less on a flashy name and more on the work ethic of players. Portland doesn't have a single player in the top 20 for jersey sales in the MLS. The Timbers point to their record number of fans and stadium atmosphere as reasons why it really is Soccer City, USA (Timbers Army, 2015).

New York City FC is the MLS's newest franchise. Debuting on March 8, 2015 the franchise has taken the league by storm. NYC is already 3rd in MLS attendance in only their first season. Ticket sales have been strong all season as the team has averaged over 29,000 fans at home games (New York City Football Club, 2015). The club utilizes a staff of 74 front office members in order to take advantage of the New York metropolitan population. Although Yankee Stadium is configured for New York City FC matches to hold just over 27,500 fans, they have

the capacity to sell out the 49,642 stadium for rivalry games. New York City FC's success has been impressive without the soccer tradition that Seattle and Portland were able to tap into. The New York City Football Club could be considered a marketing concept before it was ever a club (Elie, 2015). Without a previous fan base to draw upon NYCFC decided to attract spectators by signing several star players. New York City FC had four of the top 10 players in MLS jersey sales. These signings and attendance figures have justified the $100 million expansion fee that NYCFC paid to join the league.

Description of Instrument

The instrument utilized in this study was a best practices comparison guide developed by the researcher (see Appendix A). The purpose of the comparison guide was to address the specific spectator attendance strategies employed by sport marketers for each MLS franchise. Based on the findings from the literature, the researcher categorized the instrument into three sections: social interaction elements, sportscape elements, and team affiliation elements. Examining these factors allowed the researcher to document qualitative and quantitative information for selected MLS franchises.

The pilot study was conducted on the Philadelphia Union to allow several adjustments to be made with regards to the questions being asked by the researcher. Several questions were altered to provide a better understanding of the organization. The researcher also changed the instrument into a grid to compare results for each company.

<u>Description of Procedure</u>

      A comparative analysis was conducted on the best practices of MLS franchises spectator attendance strategies between the Seattle Sounders, Portland Timbers, and the New York City Football Club. The instrument utilized in this study was a best practices comparison guide developed by the researcher. The researcher began to gather information on organizations during the time period of October 28th, 2015 to November 11th, 2015. The best practices of MLS franchise spectator attendance strategies were analyzed by accessing the selected teams' websites, third party organization analysis, and the website for each franchise's supporters group. Information concerning social interaction items were primarily gathered through the matchday tabs. Sportscape information was found on the selected team's websites under the stadium tabs. The team affiliation information was gathered through the supporters and matchday tabs, as well as respected national newspapers. Both qualitative and quantitative information were gathered, and then organized into a grid to compare results for each selected franchise. The results for each of the three selected teams will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3

PRESENTATION OF THE RESULTS

A best practices approach was used to examine the selected franchises: Seattle Sounders, Portland Timbers, and New York City Football Club (NYCFC). This chapter includes the following: marketing strategies of the aforementioned franchises, factors affecting attendance, and the team affiliation benefits utilized by the selected franchises to raise attendance rates.


Marketing Strategy

The addition of new MLS organizations have allowed marketing departments to get creative while introducing the teams to their respective cities. These franchises started with a blank canvas as expansion teams and have sculpted their marketing strategies accordingly. Each organization had unique challenges facing their communities, but all of them aimed to make a huge presence in their respective cities. The Seattle Sounders ownership group told each other that they needed to aim high in their first year. "The biggest thing is what you do at the very beginning because it's hard to turn around a brand once you've launched," said minority owner and former General Manager, Adrian Hanauer. The Seattle Sounders have embraced two different phrases to drive their marketing campaigns since the franchise debuted in the MLS. The Sounders utilize the slogans 'Every Minute Counts, Give Us Your Full 90' and 'Scarves Up Seattle' in order to build excitement throughout the city before games. In addition, for the past two years the Sounders have run a #GoodPlayoffKarma campaign during their playoff appearances. This campaign called on Seattle to do good deeds throughout the city in order to increase their collective karma and help the team win. The franchise has kept to several principles while marketing their team. Marketing campaigns are meant to engage a younger

generation, represent players as more personable, and to democratize the brand as a whole. The Sounders have had success when they adhere to these guidelines. The recent 2014 season ticket renewal campaign garnered a 92% renewal rate. This campaign featured players, in a romantic dinner setting, asking season ticket holders to sign-up for another year of their relationship with the Sounders. Seattle has stayed away from trying to take on the more established Seattle Seahawks brand for fans and have primarily focused on a separate and distinct soccer demographic.

The Portland Timbers designed their expansion marketing strategy around the city's inherent passion for authenticity and counterculture. Portland recognized that their fan base was unconventional and wouldn't accept a marketing campaign that sacrificed what they stood for. The resulting campaign was subtle and included no call to action, no name of the team, no mention of the sport, not even a soccer ball. The Timbers ran a series of billboard ads that consisted of normal members of the Timbers Army holding an axe with a small logo and the year in the background. "The marketing before that was all about asking for something," former executive creative director for Wieden + Kennedy, Jelly Helm said. "What we tried to do is give something back to the people." The original campaign idea is still utilized five years later and has developed into a Portland tradition. The Timbers have also produced the slogans 'We Are Timbers' and 'Rose City Till I Die' in order to help steer their marketing campaigns. The most recent marketing tactic capitalized on this connection with the city and history of the franchise by running a 5/40 campaign. This represented the five years the club has been a part of the MLS and the 40 years since the Timbers franchise started as part of the NASL.

New York City F.C. was very aggressive with their marketing strategy as they prepared for their first season in the MLS in 2015. The franchise utilized the deep pockets of ownership

groups, Manchester City and the New York Yankees, to bolster support. New York City Football Club took a strong grassroots approach aided with the big marketable names that were added to the squad. The key for NYCFC was the desire from fans to be on the ground floor of something special. Using slogans 'This is Your City, This is Your Club' and 'Welcome to the Club' already connected the organization with New York City. The franchise took their advertisements to the subways, phone booths, building elevators, food court tables, and digital billboards of the five boroughs of New York City. They combined these public displays with a strong presence across all social media platforms. As of November 9, 2015, the organization had 1,242,329 likes on Facebook, 349,000 followers on Instagram, and 207,000 followers on Twitter after the completion of their debut season. The franchise has already doubled the figures that the Seattle Sounders possess on Facebook and Instagram. Public relations campaigns surrounding new players were spread out over time to never allow the team to become old news in their fast-paced city. New York City F.C. has targeted a young, well-educated, tech-savvy, high-earning season ticket base. These are supporters who are affiliating with a team in New York for the first time. Two out of three season ticket holders do not have a season ticket to another sport. "We wanted to give birth to a new club for New Yorkers, to build it with New Yorkers," states team President Tom Glick. They've reached their original goal of 17,000 season tickets with an extra thousand to spare thanks to the club's aggressive marketing strategy.

Social Interaction Elements

MLS franchises have placed a greater emphasis on the social interactions between individuals as a way to increase spectator attendance, build relationships with fans, and improve the overall experience of attending a game. The Seattle Sounders have never lacked for a fan

base. The franchise had to cap season ticket sales at 34,000 as their attendance continued to skyrocket to a total of 752,192 attendees for the 2015 season. In order to unite these fans, Sounders supporters host a March to the Match 90-minutes prior to kickoff. Before rivalry games the march is thousands strong and stretches back several city blocks. The inclusive event encourages singing and chanting on the way into the stadium. Once inside the stadium the Sounders have a pregame activity zone for fans of all ages. Activities range from face painting to live music to an inflatable futsal arena. The partnership with Virginia Mason has created the Match Ball Patient Hero Program that recognizes remarkable survivors throughout the community before games. Young fans also have the opportunity to earn an "Autograph Alley" wristband at the Soccer Celebration booth. The first 50 kids to spin the wheel and land on a specific section will get the opportunity to obtain autographs from two players following the match. The most profound pre-game tradition at CenturyLink Field is the presentation of a Golden Scarf to a group or individual who has made a significant impact within the community. At half-time the Sounders get everyone in the stands rooting and cheering for a visual race on the scoreboard.

The Sounders are active across all social media platforms and utilize them to maintain the connection with their fans. Seattle communicates to their fan base through the use of Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. At the end of the 2015 season they had 204,000 followers on Twitter, 146,000 followers on Instagram, and 662,415 likes on Facebook. The Sounders also use social media as a platform for their Posters by the People contest. The franchise interacts with local artists by offering the chance to design a commemorative matchday poster that represents a home match in the regular season.

The community is always considered within the Sounders franchise. The organization has created a program, United in Green, built on principles of equality and equity. This program is centered around creating community partnerships to leverage the power of the world's game to remove barriers so everyone has an opportunity to thrive. Relationships with organizations such as the Washington Global Health Alliance, United We Serve, and Unified Soccer – Special Olympics Washington, among others have allowed players, coaches, staff, and supporters to engage with the community and give back. Many of the programs focus on improving the livelihoods of children and impoverished families.

The Timbers focus on the experience that the Timbers Army provides in most of their social elements. The Timbers Army doesn't require any membership fees or placement in a certain section. The Timbers Army remains general admission and makes Portland unique. General admission represents who and what the Timbers Army is about: freedom, movement, sharing and spreading the love, making new friends, and connecting with old ones. Pre-game activities around the stadium include a Rose City photo booth, face painting and video board messages. Two select children also have the opportunity to join the mascot, Timber Joey, as he cuts the timber before a match. The Timbers provide an intimate feel for the 359,418 fans that enter the stadium throughout the 2015 season. The franchise had to limit season-ticket holders to 15,300 people and currently have a waitlist 10,000 people long. The organization has created a culture that Portland citizens want to be a part of.

The Timbers don't place as much of an emphasis on social media as the other two franchises, but they still have a solid following. The franchise has 114,145 followers on Twitter, 39,300 followers on Instagram, and 257,490 likes on Facebook. The Timbers utilize social media

as a way to interact with their fan base through the use of interactive contests and polls. The hashtag #RCTID is present in most of their social media activity.

The Portland Timbers repay their fan support by standing by the community on and off the field. The Timbers' Stand Together program is a relationship between the city and the franchise that focuses on improving the lives of children and families through targeted programs, deep partnerships, and philanthropic activities. Partnerships with AC Portland, Big Brothers Big Sisters Columbia Northwest, and Playworks have been formed to achieve this. A unique relationship that the Timbers are a part of is the Friends of Trees program. Every time the Timbers score a goal, the club and JELD-WEN plant a tree in the Portland community as a way to stay green.

New York City F.C. offers a unique social experience within the confines of Yankee Stadium. A total of 493,267 people entered Yankee Stadium to witness the club's debut season. Before the game fans can enjoy the ensemble band, City Beats, which incorporates a global playlist that represents New York City's diverse population and culture. The organization is also focused on staying modern and have a DJ playing throughout team warm-ups. As a way to connect with local musicians New York City F.C. reached out to fans and the selected musician performed his own, one of a kind song alongside City Beats at halftime. Fans are also able to admire a video series which plays on the big screen before games, showing soccer's history in New York. New York City Football Club will also pay homage to their city's finest and bravest as active members of the FDNY and NYPD form a tunnel of honor to lead players onto the pitch before every home match.

The organization has shown a strong commitment to supporting those in areas of need across the globe. New York City F.C. launched Cityzens Giving as a program funded by their

annual revenues to allow season ticket holders to reach out and help others. Each season ticket holder was gifted $8 to support the program and could select the project they wanted to donate to. In addition to Cityzens Giving the organization has created programs and partnerships that support after-school programs and advocate for social change for the young people in New York City that need it the most.


Team Affiliation Benefits

Successful teams are able to communicate to their fans that they are now a part of a family. Franchises want their fans to feel a sense of belonging and an affiliation with the organization. Not only is this a team, but it is their team and that it is essential to compete together as a unit. The Seattle Sounders have maintained MLS' largest fan base because they create a connection with fans and put a good product on the field. Season ticket holders become an Alliance member with a set of nine benefits ranging from discounts at the Sounders Pro Shop, to an Alliance member scarf, to the ability to vote on Alliance council initiatives. Fans have a say in the direction of the club and have the opportunity to voice their opinions. The Sounders give their fans the power to fire the General Manager every four years. The Seattle Sounders have recognized that fans are passionate, active and want to be involved in a democratic process. This passion stems from a fan base that has been around for over 40 years. The Seattle Sounders can thank a heritage that began 40 years ago at Memorial Stadium and the Kingdom for laying the foundation that has led to the success of the team that plays at CenturyLink Field today. The history within the area has led to the city instantly embracing this expansion franchise and generating childhood memories from generations ago.

The Sounders haven't had to worry about firing their General Manager yet, as they have just completed their seventh straight season with a playoff appearance. As a club founded seven years ago the Sounders have been a massive success on the field. The Sounders have successfully utilized their three Designated Player tags on Osvaldo Alonso, Clint Dempsey, and Obafemi Martins. Each of these players have been influential on the field and contribute to the positive association fans have formed with the Sounders. The Sounders showed their commitment to winning when they paid an MLS record $9 million transfer fee for the USA national team's captain, Dempsey. Their work has paid off with a 2014 Supporters Shield and 4 U.S. Open Cup Championships since entering the MLS.

The Portland Timbers sell engagement, not products. They've built passion for the brand through authentic engagement with their fans. This connection spans multiple generations and the Timbers have been a proud part of the Portland sports landscape for decades. The world's game officially reached Portland in the 1970's with the creation of the professional franchise and the team's legacy has lived on ever since. The fans have been included in all marketing campaigns and traditions stretching from before Portland became an MLS franchise have been continued. The Timbers offer season ticket holders benefits ranging from exclusive rewards programs, to discounts at the Adidas team store, to free VooDoo donuts and Stumptown Coffee postgame.

The Timbers have had success on the field to match their presence off of it. The club made the 2015 MLS Cup Final and claimed first place in the Western Conference during the 2013 league season. The Timbers have focused on bringing in players who fit the system and culture of the club rather than a big name to sell shirts. This is apparent with their three

Designated Players. Lucas Melano, Liam Ridgewell, and Diego Valeri have all had success in the MLS, but none were in the top 20 for MLS shirt sales in 2015.

One of New York City Football Club's biggest challenges throughout their debut season was establishing a connection with a fan base that had no previous affiliation with the organization. The lack of any history or tradition was a hurdle that the organization handled by preaching the opportunity to be on the ground floor of something new and special. The club was designed to "give birth to a new club for New Yorkers, to build it with New Yorkers," explained Glick. The organization followed through on their promise to be special by attracting the biggest names that the MLS could find. The franchise enticed Andrea Pirlo, David Villa, and Frank Lampard by offering the lime-lights of New York City. Each of these players instantly entered the league with the most prestigious resumes. Andrea Pirlo brought with him a 2006 World Cup title, two Champions League championships, six Italian Serie A championships, and three different Serie A Payer of the Year awards. David Villa entered the league after leading Spain to a 2008 European Championship title, 2010 World Cup championship, and leaving as the Alltime leading goal-scorer in Spanish National Team history with 59 goals. He was also a member of FC Barcelona's 2011 UEFA Champions League championship. Frank Lampard left the English Premier League for the MLS as one of the most decorated athletes ever. Lampard has won three Premier League titles, the 2011 UEFA Champions League, two consecutive Premier League Player of the Season awards and the 2005 FIFA World Player of the Year: Silver Award. He left England as Chelsea's all-time leading scorer with 211 goals. These players immediately created a draw for soccer fans throughout New York City.

New York City Football Club retains their fan base by offering an assortment of membership benefits with their season tickets. Four different levels of membership are offered

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for NYCFC fans. The standard package offers fans a range of benefits from preferred full season ticket pricing for the life of your account, to an exclusive season ticket holder scarf, to the opportunity to have your name etched in stone and on display as a Founding Member at New York City Football Club's future soccer-specific stadium. The organization's premier Legends package offers members invitations to VIP events and fine dining at the Legends Club featuring high-performance cooking stations. The club's first season ended with an 8th place finish in the Eastern Conference, but team representatives expect NYCFC to be competing for an MLS title within the next five years.

Each of these franchise's marketing departments strive to fill the stadium every game. They've taken different approaches to marketing their respective teams and reaching this goal. The discussion and conclusions that stem from this section are analyzed in the following chapter.

Chapter 4

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to explore spectator attendance factors and sport marketing strategies. This concluding chapter will include the following: a summary of the study, a discussion of the findings, implications of the findings, limitations, conclusions based on research questions, and recommendations.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to determine the best practices for spectator attendance strategies employed by select MLS franchises. The MLS has entered an expansion phase over the last seven years and have introduced seven new teams over that time frame. The MLS currently has 20 teams and plans to expand to 24 by 2020. This trend has increased the valuation of teams dramatically and have raised league awareness throughout the nation. Organizations have focused their attention on determining why people attend games. Expansion teams have categorized several key motivational factors behind sports spectatorship as: vicarious achievement, sportscape elements, social interaction, and team affiliation.

A comparative analysis was conducted on the best practices of MLS franchise spectator attendance strategies. The expansion franchises selected were the Seattle Sounders, Portland Timbers, and New York City Football Club. The best practices comparison guide allowed the researcher to collect data and information from each organization and compare the results in a structured system. The best practices of MLS franchise spectator attendance strategies were analyzed by accessing the selected teams' websites, third party organization analysis, and the website for each franchise's supporters group.

The results of the study show that each organization has implemented a different method and strategy towards spectator attendance. Each franchise has a deep understanding of their city and have connected with their respective fan bases. They all faced challenges unique to their communities, but aimed to leave an impression in their first season. Marketing campaigns for each organization have stayed the same since their respective debut years, although each franchise took vastly different approaches. Fans have been encouraged to partake in social activities over the course of a game day and connect with the team through social media platforms. Each organization has also placed an emphasis on being about more than just soccer. Every franchise has formed relationships with the community to give back and improve the livelihood of others. Teams have developed an affiliation with their fans and maintain their strong fan bases through a range of benefits. The one constant amongst the three teams is that every organization has stressed the importance of success on the field since the club's inception.

Discussion

Franchises benefit by crafting their marketing strategies to relate to their target audience. Marketing campaigns are meant to engage a younger generation, represent players as more personable, and to democratize the brand as a whole. Because each city is different, each franchise must market themselves in a unique fashion. Franchises must make sure that their marketing strategies are consistent across their social media platforms as well. Each franchise has designed their team to be representative of their fan base. MLS franchises are the most successful when they design a completely new strategy, rather than implementing a campaign that was successful elsewhere. Organizations should acknowledge that their target audience is different than any other franchise. Although the demographics might be similar, the people are

diverse and unique. The strategies employed by the Timbers wouldn't have worked in New York because the characteristics New Yorkers possess are vastly different than Portlanders. The Timbers also had a historical presence in the area that the organization could capitalize on. Franchises that expand into areas with a rich tradition should harness the history and focus on emotional ties to the team. There isn't only one singular way to successfully market to an audience, but failing to tailor the message to fit their audience could prove fatal for an organization.

By designing their marketing strategy to cater to their target audience, organizations are building a relationship that pays dividends across multiple sectors. Identification with a team is considered to be the most significant factor in a sport fan's decision to consume product extensions (Wann et al., 2001). This connection inspires fans to support the team through media outlets, merchandise, tickets, and loyalty (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998). Because of the importance that fan relations have on the support of a franchise, the sport marketing department must thoroughly understand the characteristics of the city they are a part of. Teams should embrace the Seattle Sounders' 2014 season ticket renewal campaign and portray their players as approachable, friendly people.

In the MLS, expansion franchises have succeeded by setting standards high and then developing the expectation to exceed them. Each franchise aimed to be the best in their debut season. The Seattle Sounders understood that rebranding a team was much harder once it had been launched. This belief has led the organization to set the MLS attendance record every season since their debut. The Portland Timbers have never had a stadium below full capacity. The New York City Football Club had more inaugural season ticket holders than seven clubs averaged total fans throughout the season. Each franchise benefited from setting the expectation

that their teams would be good on the field as well. Teams should use every resource available to them to constantly improve their team. Each organization has utilized all three Designated Player tags, and their owners have claimed that an MLS title will ultimately define their success. The expectation of outstanding performance both on and off the field generates excitement throughout the community that a franchise can capitalize on. Before ever playing a game, franchises should establish a culture that demands excellence in all facets.

Because sports are used as an outlet for people to associate themselves with success, it is essential that teams are positioned to contribute to that psychological attachment. Fans have developed a tendency to become engulfed by their team's successes and failures to the point that it becomes a part of their social identity (Hu & Tang, 2010). Franchises must examine their entire operations and decide if they are delivering on the expectations of these fans. Sport organizations need to make their fans experience feelings like self-fulfillment, self-esteem, and prestige (Schwarz & Hunter, 2008). By setting a high expectation both on and off the field, teams acknowledge a fan's need to live vicariously through their association.

Having a good team on the field is not enough to draw fans to the stadium anymore. Teams must provide additional extensions outside of the game in order to make a fan feel valued. Each organization showed a commitment to rewarding their fan base. The Seattle Sounders placed the future of the organization in the hands of season ticket holders by offering the opportunity to vote on the General Manager's job security.  This connection fans have to the operations of a franchise is unparalleled in American sports. The sense of value provided through this connection benefits the organization for years, without disrupting the organization's operations. Fans are now looking to be a part of the process and involving them is essential for expansion franchises. Organizations are also able to provide small benefits that increase fan

support. The addition of incentives, such as free food and beverage from renowned companies VooDoo donuts and Stumptown Coffee after the game or etching the names of season ticket holders into the stonework of the stadium, go a long ways toward establishing a loyal fan base.

The emphasis on extra product extensions has arisen from sport marketers' inability to control the product on the field. The marketing departments are forced to get creative as most of the marketing effort isn't focused on the game itself, rather placed on product extensions to get the message across to the public (Schwarz & Hunter, 2008). Game entertainment is going to encompass more than just the 90 minutes that it takes to play the game. Franchises must provide additional benefits as well as account for pre and post-game activities to maintain a fan's interest in the team.

Creating relationships with the community is an integral part of every franchise's expansion strategy. By establishing and participating in programs that are designed to benefit the community the franchise is creating a connection with the city that is deeper than just providing an entertainment option. Each organization showed a commitment to giving back to the community that supports them. Teams can create a beneficial scenario by becoming a catalyst for social change.  Franchises benefit because fans create an emotional relationship that goes beyond the game and society benefits by the support of a large brand (Jubenville et al., 2004). Community programs have been created to facilitate and support programs that produce a positive change. MLS franchises utilize soccer as a platform to support grassroots programs, empower at-risk youth, and attempt to increase the overall quality of life for others. This meaningful relationship with the city can serve as a driving force to solve the challenges that face their community. MLS franchises can capitalize on their ability to reach a wide audience by addressing fundamental health, academic, and safety issues facing people in their communities.

The research faced several limitations due to the internet based research that was conducted. No data were collected besides information that was published and available to the public. The research conducted on the select franchises was also limited to two weeks due to time-constraints. The sample size of three expansion franchises also limited the ability to draw decisive conclusions on the best practices for spectator attendance strategies for sports teams around the world. Further research on the topic is advised. It must also be noted that the researcher was a season ticket holder for the Seattle Sounders from 2009-2012 and although objectivity was the goal, some bias may have impacted the study.

This study has examined the best practices for spectator attendance strategies employed by recent MLS expansion franchises. Spectator attendance plays an integral role within the context of professional sports organizations and is receiving additional consideration by all professional sports teams. Each franchise has employed strategies for marketing, social interaction elements, and team affiliation benefits in an attempt to build a relationship with their fan base. The study showed that these strategies were uniquely designed for each city and franchise. This study could benefit franchises looking to continue being innovative or rebrand entirely. The study results highlighted the best practices for spectator attendance strategies that formed the basis of the recommendations for MLS expansion franchises.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions are drawn:

1. Teams have identified key motivational factors associated with attendance as: vicarious achievement, sportscape elements, social interaction, and team affiliation

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2. The Seattle Sounders, Portland Timbers, and New York City Football Club all rely on marketing strategies uniquely identified to work in their respective cities.

3. The recent MLS expansion franchises have accelerated the growth of MLS organizations, leading to the rise in the average value of an MLS franchise from $31 million in 2008 to $157 million in 2015.

4. MLS organizations utilize non-product extensions to create a deeper relationship with fans by offering exclusive benefits and additional activities before and after games.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. MLS expansion franchises should tailor their marketing to their unique city's characteristics rather than trying to force a successful campaign from somewhere else.

2. MLS expansion franchises should pay greater attention to the social interaction elements that occur throughout the course of game day.

3. Teams should find ways to give their fans a larger voice in the decisions within the franchise. The Seattle Sounders example has provided fans with a sense of value without having disrupted the organization's operations.

4. MLS expansion franchises should increase player accessibility to the fans and portray players as friendly and approachable in marketing opportunities.

5. Sport organizations should increase the team's community involvement overall and attempt to increase the overall quality of life.

6. MLS expansion franchises should continue to harness the history and tradition of soccer in their respective locations.

7.  Future research should examine a greater number of organizations, including

    organizations that are not considered successful in the MLS.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix A

Instrument

| Questions | Seattle Sounders FC | Portland Timbers | New York City FC |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Social Interaction Elements** | | | |
| 1. What are the organization's current attendance numbers? | | | |
| 2. What pre-game social options does the team offer? | | | |
| 3. What community partnerships does the organization partake in? | | | |
| 4. What event marketing does the organization conduct? | | | |
| 5. How does the organization utilize social media differently? | | | |
| 6. How many season ticket holders does the organization have? | | | |
| 7. What post-game activities are available? | | | |
| 8. What half-time activities are available? | | | |
| 9. What marketing techniques are used by the organization? | | | |
| 10. What demographic does the organization target? | | | |
| **Sportscape Elements** | | | |
| 11. What is the average price of a ticket? | | | |
| 12. What amenities does the stadium offer? | | | |
| 13. How does stadium type affect the experience for fans? | | | |
| 14. What is the capacity for the stadium? | | | |
| 15. How does location play a role in attendance for the organization? | | | |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 16. What transportation options are available to the stadium? | | | |
| **Team Affiliation Elements** | | | |
| 17. How does the existence of star players affect match attendance of the organization? | | | |
| 18. What branding elements stand out for the organization? | | | |
| 19. How does club history play a role for the organization? | | | |
| 20. What loyalty benefits does the organization offer? | | | |
| 21. What membership benefits exist for the supporters groups? | | | |
| 22. What non-product related brand attributes does the organization offer? | | | |
| 23. What product extension opportunities does the organization capitalize on? | | | |
| 24. What role does ownership play throughout the organization? | | | |
| 25. What is the image for a fan of this organization? | | | |