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Exploring the Managerial Perspective on Developing a New Sport Team Brand

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Abstract

In recent years, research examining new sport teams has emerged. A total of 10 senior sales and market executives were interviewed from recent expansion teams from Major League Soccer (MLS) to analyze team brand development for this study due to its continued expansion efforts across North America and the fact that the MLS continues to compete for market share against other “Big Four” sport teams in their respective cities. Utilizing content analysis, findings from this study identified four themes when developing a new team brand. These themes were Market Research, Soccer Culture, Brand Associations, and Supporter-Led Initiatives. Practical implications are provided for developing a new team brand.

Keywords: *team brand, professional sports, brand equity, brand associations, marketing*

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New teams have the unique challenge of developing a brand that goes from an unknown quantity to something people care about within their community. In order to have early success, one primary goal of franchise management is to develop a strong consumer base who are consistently engaged with the brand (Wear et al., 2016). Sport management has seen an abundance of research focused on understanding the brand development process for new sport franchises (Davies et al., 2022; Du et al., 2020; Kunkel, Doyle, et al., 2016; Wear & Heere, 2020). It is important to consider the ways in which consumers are attracted to sport teams so that teams and leagues can design and execute strategies that encourage and sustain consumer engagement and attendance (Kunkel, Funk, & Hill, 2013).

One of the fastest growing professional sports leagues in North America and one that has had to develop many new brands within existing sport markets is Major League Soccer (MLS). From 2017 to 2023, MLS expansion included nine new locations in the last seven seasons: Atlanta (2017), Minnesota (2017), Los Angeles (2018), Cincinnati (2019), Nashville (2020), Miami (2020), Austin (2021), Charlotte (2022), and St. Louis (2023). Beyond developing a team brand to compete within the MLS and the broader sport market, these organizations had to develop within existing sport marketplaces, vying for fan and sponsor attention (Grant et al., 2011). The reputation of the MLS is building in North America and has reached new milestones, which is typified by rapid league expansion, the 10-year $2.5 billion streaming deal with Apple TV+, and recent attendance records being broken (Adgate, 2022).

Although much of the research on team and league brand development has investigated new sport teams from the consumer perspective, few inquiries have examined the brand development process from the managerial perspective of the individuals designing and cultivating the team brand. In response, the purpose of this study is to build an understanding of the opportunities, challenges, and strategic decision-making processes that executives of expansion MLS franchises faced in the design and implementation of their new team brand.

Review of Literature

Building New Team Brand Equity

Brand associations have been defined by Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993) as any characteristic, perception, or thought related to a brand that can be linked to a consumer's memory. Brand associations, when effectively developed through strategic marketing efforts, are meant to be favorable and positive toward the brand to help the perception of how the consumer views the product within the marketplace (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). However, brand associations can be different in terms of their strength, favorability, and uniqueness (Ross, 2006). As it relates to new consumers, this is particularly important in the perception and engagement with a team (Kunkel, Doyle, et al., 2016).

One of the challenges for managers of a new sport brand is developing brand equity with limited or nonexistent brand markers. To clarify brand identity, new teams add value to their brand through the team name and logo, which is typically a starting point for building brand equity (Aaker, 1991). When new sport organizations project inconsistent brand identities to the marketplace, the lack of clarity and vision can compound the difficulty in forming viable fan bases (Grant et al., 2011; McDonald et al., 2016). Kunkel, Doyle, et al. (2016) examined a new sport team brand association throughout their inaugural season and found that brand associations were developed initially prior to the first game, which led to team loyalty throughout that first season. Beyond loyalty, consumers developing strong associations with a brand can lead to many favorable outcomes for teams including increased consumption and positive word-of-mouth marketing for the team (Dwyer et al., 2015).

It is important to consider the ways in which consumers are attracted to sport teams so that managers of teams and leagues can design and implement initiatives that encourage and sustain consumer engagement and consumption (Kunkel, Funk, & Hill, 2013). Kunkel, Funk, and Hill (2013) pointed out that teams and leagues need to consider league reputation while establishing team identities in order to build strong brands to attract consumers. Further, Kunkel, Funk, and Lock (2017) investigated the relationships between team and league brand associations as they relate to fan consumption via game attendance, viewership on TV, and purchasing merchandise. Their findings aligned with previous work (e.g., Kunkel, Funk, & Hill 2013), which established a fan's involvement with both the team and league are important factors in driving consumer loyalty.

Research has shown that the branding process appears to be both team-led and consumer-led (Du et al., 2020). Team-led initiatives include the marketing communication, team roster selection, brand releases, and season ticket promotions (Kunkel, Doyle, et al., 2016) whereas consumer-led initiatives fall under the umbrella of team expectations, social identification, social interactions, and supporting a new sport (Kunkel, Doyle, et al., 2016; Lock et al., 2011). This study explored managerial insights into some of these consumer- and team-led initiatives used during the development of the new MLS team brand.

Methods

Participants

This qualitative study recruited 10 participants from seven of the most recent MLS expansion franchises to discuss the evolution of developing the brand and immersing themselves into the city/market. The participants were senior sales or marketing executives who had worked for their club for an average of 6 years ranging between 2 and 13 years. Managers (8 male, 2 female) participated in semi-structured interviews lasting between 29–41 minutes. To maintain the anonymity of the participants, each participant was given a letter identifier (e.g., Participant G) along with their broad job title (see Table 1).

Procedure

The interview included six questions that were asked to all participants. The questions covered a description of the interviewees' current and previous roles within the organization, developing the team brand, understanding their fans/supporters, challenges in a new city, and marketing strategies. All interviews were conducted and recorded over the phone and transcribed using the Otter.ai software before being cleaned and downloaded into Microsoft Excel for analysis.

Table 1
Participants

Participant	Executive Role	MLS Team Announcement	Began Play	Days Between Announcement and First Game
Participant A	Sales	April 16, 2014	March 3, 2017	1,052
Participant B	Marketing	April 16, 2014	March 3, 2017	1,052
Participant C	Marketing	May 29, 2018	March 2, 2019	277
Participant D	Sales	January 29, 2018	February 29, 2020	761
Participant E	Sales	October 30, 2014	March 3, 2018	1,220
Participant F	Sales	October 30, 2014	March 3, 2018	1,220
Participant G	Marketing	March 25, 2015	March 3, 2017	709
Participant H	Marketing	May 21, 2013	March 6, 2015	654
Participant I	Marketing	May 21, 2013	March 6, 2015	654
Participant J	Marketing	November 19, 2013	March 6, 2015	472

Data Analysis

Using the research questions as a guide, five coders analyzed the interviews using both open and axial coding (Saldana, 2013). In order to gain understanding of the interviews, two of the 10 interviews were coded separately to avoid any bias and to ensure reliability. The researchers then met to discuss their codes and findings and develop overarching themes. The coders were looking for recurring patterns or themes (Saldana, 2013). Once the existing theme framework was developed from the first two interviews, the remaining eight cases were then divided up and examined separately. In order to better understand the data set, triangulation through member checks and meetings with multiple researchers through the coding process was used to gain multiple perspectives on a data set (Creswell, 2007).

Results and Discussion

The four primary themes that emerged from the data around developing a new team brand within the MLS were Market Research, Soccer Culture, Brand Associations, and Supporter-Led Initiatives.

Market Research

Learning From Early Supporters

Something noted frequently by participants was the importance of relying on input from their supporters through market research. Speaking with and surveying fans about all aspects from pricing and stadium design to experiences supporters wanted to see on game day were assessed ahead of the first season. Participant A noted that their meetings with fans was an important piece to setting their prices in the stadium. Meanwhile, Participant F shared they would set up brainstorming sessions with supporters where the organization provided food and drink to encourage supporters to come and share their perspectives with the team. He explained,

> We invited our early supporters to show up to our architect's office, which is really a cool downtown office, and gave them breakfast and lunch and as much beer as they wanted, and let them tell us what they wanted out of the stadium.

Using a related strategy, Participant B went directly to the supporters, noting that avid soccer fans are typically found in pubs or bars watching Premier League (soccer) games. They shared, "it was basically one big pub crawl for any significant international match…We would just stand next to them and listen, learn, understand what is important to them to help build a culture."

Meanwhile, Participant H decided to first establish themselves as a brand and then asked the fans for input. They originally solicited agencies to develop four different logo designs. Participant H explained "at one point we narrowed it down to two specific designs. And we actually went out to the public, for our fans and the general public to pick what design they felt would be best representative for the organization moving forward." The team felt it was important to go to the market to understand what represented the team the best.

Learning From Early Supporters

In order to understand the brand development process within the MLS framework, managers conducted research on other teams in the league. Participant B explained,

> It was learning from the best brands in the MLS. [They] are the ones who are most successful on the ticket selling side in the MLS; learning what they did and what their numbers look like to ultimately put together our pricing package.

Meanwhile, where most clubs expressed some level of MLS-level research as it pertained to brand decision-making, one club explained that they were instead using international soccer comparisons to drive decision-making. Participant D explained,

> When we look at our club, Inter Miami, and we compare ourselves, we are in no way, shape, or form, comparing ourselves to other MLS clubs, like we're comparing ourselves against established global soccer franchises, you know, Barcelona, Real Madrid, all those like, because we want to be a global player.

Soccer Culture

Although a heavy emphasis was placed upon understanding the fans' needs and wants through market research, there were challenges teams faced in educating the public and in some cases, internal personnel, about the nuances of soccer culture. Participant J explained,

> You have to kind of educate them on the game of soccer. You know, they're used to (American) football, basketball. Soccer was definitely a new thing for everybody to grasp, and the education part behind that with the locals, as well as others that would come into town.

Participant B told a story about the launch of their team name and the push back they had from fans who were used to more creative North American team names and had to learn about more traditional soccer club name like United. She shared,

> The team name and logo got butchered locally. People wanted a more creative, more fun name. I think it's just showing people's ignorance to the world of soccer where, I think our [team] President put it really well when he said: When we're 20 years from now playing the elite teams in the world, where you know, it's Atlanta United, it's not the Atlanta Hawks, it's not some crazy name and, and when you give a bland name, you make it more about the city and everything and on the brand side and everything, surrounded the team that we've done, it's always been about the city.

Soccer education was not limited to just fans, but also team staff members to make sure there was an understanding of soccer fan verbiage and the overall scope of the game. This was particularly relevant for teams like Atlanta United who shared resources (e.g., sales staff) with another professional team in the market (i.e., Falcons). While using the same facility and several employees, Participant B further explained that beyond education there was a level of convincing colleagues to buy into the MLS side of the business. She said,

> You know, the NFL is the NFL, and there are people that dream of working for NFL teams their whole lives. Now you say, hey, "you've got to spend part of your time trying to launch this soccer team," people are like, huh? So part of my job was truly getting people, you know, to buy into it, and to fall in love with soccer. If we could get them to convert and buy into the culture we were trying to build, then we knew that it could permeate into the public.

This participant also clarified that in order to differentiate the voice and culture between the NFL and MLS teams, the sales department and physical office space was shared, but the marketing departments were completely separate.

Brand Associations

Being able to develop strong brand associations is a key step to building a successful brand, but this process can be challenging before any brand markers exist (Dwyer et al., 2015; Kunkel, Doyle, et al., 2016). As a result, and in line with a lot of the research into early team branding, it was clear that "place" became the focus for the development of the team's brand (Davies et al., 2022; Lock et al., 2011).

City-Centric

All of the managers noted the importance of linking team brand associations to the city and region. This included the team name, crest, stadium design, slogans, chants, and the like. This finding is similar to that of Lock et al. (2011), who found that with lack of history or success to associate with, fans generally cling to the ties of the city or region. Participant H mentioned the direct connection between the city and the team by stating,

> We wanted that identity of being part of NYC, and keeping that grit, swag, and a little pep in your step and energy it takes to make it in New York. That's been our ethos throughout and truly being a part of the community was at the forefront.

Participant B agreed, noting "the history of Atlanta is what makes Atlanta special. Whether it is the history of the railroad or its music…we looked at all the things that made the city special."

Team Name

Participant C highlighted the importance of incorporating the city into the team name:

> Cincinnati is in our name, FC Cincinnati. From a very early onset, they named this team FC Cincinnati because every single time that we come up on broadcast, or that a sports anchor talks about our soccer team, our football team, they have to say Cincinnati or Cincy. So it's not only in the name of our team, but it's embedded in everything that we do.

Participant E agreed by stating, "It was important to put LA in the name. Our actual logo has elements that are tied into the city; the colors, black and gold, that fits in with the city, it's entertainment, it's Hollywood, it's perfect." Participant D again talked about the intention to always be looking to the global stage to drive brand decisions. He said, "it's going to be very authentic to Miami, but also have a global appeal. So, you know, we want to make sure that we're a global club." The findings continue to highlight the importance of each team being unique to their own team market when developing a new team brand (Davies et al., 2022; Delia & James, 2018; Heere & James, 2007).

Supporter-Led Initiatives

One of the unique elements the managers identified in this study that differs from many of the fan cultures across North America was the degree to which supporters got involved in the development of team traditions. Rather than the marketing teams having to develop and lead fan activities, fans largely took ownership of supporter-related activities. For example, Participant J explained that "days before the game, they'll (supporters) kind of all arrive in groups, and we'll let them into the loading dock. That's where they'll paint murals." These "paint parties" are entirely fan-led activities, where the team is only involved by making the space available. Participants C agreed, noting that, "for 95% of fans, this is their passion. They're the ones that are coming up with the chants, they're the ones that are drawing the tivos (banners)." Participant A reiterated the importance of not having a script of when the chants start. Participant E explained he originally tried to create the supporter initiatives, but quickly changed course:

> Initially, in our first season, first couple games, we had the board prompts. But that went away. So now it's entirely self-generated by the supporters. They have their own list of chants they've created that are original. And they have their whole list that's not directed by us at all.

Fans had the opportunity to create some of the brand equity as it relates to the new brand. At a point when there were limited brand markers, fans organically created new (or renewed) traditions early on in the brand development (Lock et al., 2011). Although Kunkel, Doyle, et al. (2016) found that consumers of the new team were able to develop the brand associations prior to any actual games, this study was unique in comparison as the participants noted they mostly were given the keys to the organization to create the brand associations. This finding was also found by Davies et al. (2022), who noted "[the fans] also have the opportunity to iterate on successful, and even common, engagement strategies in order to strengthen fan identification and fan community involvement" (p. 17).

Implications

This study captured the managerial perspective on the brand development of recent MLS expansion teams. Findings revealed several consistencies in the opportunities and challenges around developing a new MLS team brand in North America. Managers drew inspiration for their team brands through extensive market research within their expansion city, but also looked to best practice within the MLS and to global soccer to define elements of the brand.

To achieve this market research, the managers noted the importance of engaging prospective supporters early and in some cases through casual and ongoing conversations in places like sports bars, where soccer was being broadcast. This provided managers with a valuable peek behind the curtain into the existing soccer culture in the city and allowed for direct feedback about the wants and needs of supporters within their market.

Beyond listening to the local fans through market research, findings from this study reveal the consistent trend for MLS supporters to be invested in the brand development process by way of establishing the fan community, developing game day traditions, and so on. Teams should consider ways to help foster these supporter groups as they are important marketing tools to help build early brand equity for the team. Making spaces available to supporters like the loading dock for Participant J or showcasing information about supporter-led initiatives on social media, for example, were some of the strategies reported in this research that could help foster supporter community and ultimately spur added involvement among fans.

Although consumer-led initiatives and extensive market research were consistent strategies by these MLS managers, there were also instances where it was important to play the role of educator and stick to important club-led initiatives. For example, there was pushback in a couple of cases where the public felt the team names were too boring and lacked the uniqueness that other professional team names had in the region. As was explained by Participant B, some of the decisions team leaders made, including the team name, were done so with the long-term vision of being able to align with the tradition in global soccer, which meant using more timeless names like United or FC. There is a balance that must be found between incorporating public feedback and holding ground on important club brand markers. Developing effective communication and education around decisions that may go against public perceptions should become incorporated into the brand launch process.

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