



Brand Marketing to the Soccer Consumer

GILTEDGE
SOCCERMARKETING

Connecting Brands to the Soccer Consumer

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Pretend for a moment that you are a Soccer Mom looking to make a purchase of a new automotive vehicle. You are considering a mini-van - what else!

Your buying process likely involves talking to several other Soccer Moms and finding out what they like and don't like about the mini-vans they drive. You will no doubt jump online and visit one of the many websites that provide all sorts of comparative buying information about vehicles from price, to safety ratings, to fuel efficiency, to consumer opinions, and alike. Between these two endeavors you will narrow your search to perhaps a couple of different options before you even consider getting anywhere near a dealership for a test-drive. Every vehicle you evaluate is probably a good product, but through intelligent market research you will ultimately settle on the vehicle that best meets your individual needs.

Shouldn't your investment in a corporate sponsorship relationship - in any sport - follow a similar process? In some ways the answer should be yes – but it must also be remembered that there are significant differences between buying a product “a mini-van” and creating a sponsorship “relationship.” The point to focus on here is the importance of compiling comprehensive market research before you make an investment commitment.

The challenge in the sponsorship world is that you have to do all your own homework and intelligence gathering. The information and answers you need are not merely a click away on the Internet. In practice, this is extremely difficult since there are hundreds of different corporate sponsorship opportunities, and it is literally impossible to have a complete knowledge base on every one.

When it comes to soccer this challenge becomes even harder, given the incredible breadth and depth of the sport's reach.

Soccer has numerous international, national, regional, and local leagues and events, intellectual properties, grassroots programs, media, and marketing vehicles.

All too often companies and agencies knowledge of the soccer market is based almost exclusively on the merits of conversations with one or two specific soccer properties or sales agencies. This is akin to the Soccer Mom only evaluating Chevrolet and Honda mini-vans because she simply isn't aware of the dozens of other options in the market.

Understanding all the different profiles of the soccer consumer, as well as how different soccer properties, activities, and assets connect with the consumer, is critical to making well-informed soccer marketing investments.

The “Soccer Consumer”

One of the interesting aspects of soccer is that it connects with its consumers in many different ways and on many different levels. Broadly speaking, the soccer consumer is considered anyone who is connected to the sport in a meaningful way. The 18 million soccer participants are soccer consumers, as are the involved family members of youth players. The 4 million people who attend MLS matches each year are soccer consumers. So are the millions of people who watch the world's game on television and follow their teams on the Internet.

Some of these people, of course, are the same people, consuming the sport in multiple ways. For example, a individual could play in an adult league, coach his son, attend MLS games, and watch Champions League on TV. Other people may only be connected through one or two channels. The soccer mom, for example, whose sole interest is her son's or daughter's enjoyment of playing the game recreationally.

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Given the multi-dimensional nature of soccer consumption it is not surprising that the sport has a broad and diverse landscape. This is actually one of soccer's great strengths – but also one of its challenges for corporations trying to connect with the consumer.

To evaluate the opportunities of a soccer-marketing platform, companies must view the market through the process of consumer targeting.

Soccer Consumer Targeting

The soccer market is actually an amalgamation of many different Soccer Consumer Profiles (market segments). Each profile is unique from a demographic and psychographic perspective.

The adult fan profile for MLS is arguably one of the most attractive of all the major sports. According to Scarborough 2008 data, **MLS adult fans** are:

- Young – 64% under 44 years
- Family – 41% have 2+ children in HH
- Affluent – 42% have income greater than \$75K
- Educated – 56% have a college degree

Soccer's influence, however, extends much wider and deeper than just this attractive adult profile. Soccer has become the New America's national pastime as a **youth participation sport**, and has diverse appeal from both a gender and ethnic standpoint.

Kids have been playing soccer at incredible numbers for many years now. To understand the size and scope of youth participation track down a copy of the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association Annual Sports Participation report. Or you can simply head out to a community field in AnyTown, USA on a Fall weekend and you will witness youth soccer players of all ages as far as the eye can see.

Female engagement in soccer is extremely strong on many levels, but particularly in participation where 40% of players are female and there are now more women's college soccer teams than men's. The launch of the Women's Professional Soccer League in 2009 will further help establish connection points to this audience.

Perhaps though the most significant development for soccer has been the impact of population trends and the growing **Hispanic community**. The Hispanic population in the US is estimated to reach 48 million in 2010, (US Census), with 80% coming from countries where soccer is indelibly ingrained in the culture. Soccer is the sport of choice for the Hispanic community, and represents an important passion point to connect with this valuable consumer.

Marketing investments in soccer initiatives targeting Hispanics increases each and every year. Spanish TV Ad spending for soccer programming, for example, hit \$250 million in 2007. It is no wonder Univision declares the top three sports for Hispanics is soccer, soccer, and soccer!

The attractiveness of soccer's demographic profiles and supporting growth trends, has led many marketers to look at the affinity marketing opportunities with the sport. This brings into discussion one additional piece of marketing research – **consumer loyalty**.

For years, the soccer industry has proudly stated that soccer fans' sponsor loyalty index is second only to NASCAR. Well according to the Sports Business Journal's 2007 Sponsor Consumption Survey soccer has now exceeded NASCAR in this regard. Whether this is ultimately true or not really doesn't matter. What matters is the fact that soccer consumers have always shown a strong propensity to support sponsors who support the game they are connected to.

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The combined influence of these three factors; appealing demographics, growth trends, and strong loyalty indexes, has made the soccer consumer an incredibly alluring target audience for many corporate marketers.

Each one of the many Soccer Consumer Profiles could be targeted through a specific soccer-marketing platform. Typically, however, there are three consumer segments that carry strong appeal to marketers:

- Suburban Soccer Families/Youth
- Hispanic Families/Youth
- Hispanic Males

Understanding Soccer Engagement

With a general understanding for the different consumer segments, and having prioritized them based on your company objectives, the next step is to develop a more in depth understanding of the Consumer from a soccer engagement and psychographic perspective. Ask lots of strategic and tactical questions about the consumer, such as:

- What are their touch points with the sport - on community fields, in a stadium, on TV, via the Internet?
- What are their needs/wants related to soccer?
- What soccer assets have equity in their eyes?

Developing an acute understanding of soccer engagement is extremely important to creating the right strategy and tactics for your unique marketing platform.

Developing Your Marketing Platform

You have now completed 50% of your market research, and can turn your focus toward developing the right marketing strategy and identifying the right mix of marketing assets.

As previously mentioned, there are numerous intellectual properties, events, media and marketing vehicles available to reach the soccer consumer. This should be embraced as a positive, since it provides plenty of different tools to potentially work with.

Each vehicle is legitimate and valuable within its own right, but none will offer a blanket program that touches every soccer consumer in the US. This is simply unrealistic and quite honestly unnecessary for the smart marketer, since you have already honed in on your target consumer.

Marketing assets can bring tangible and intangible opportunities to the table. Both are important if you want to create a strong brand connection in the eyes, heart and mind of your target consumer. Again, ask lots of questions about each potential marketing asset, such as:

- How, when, and where does it connect with the consumer?
- Are environments brand-activation friendly?
- Can asset equity be transferred to your brand?
- What is the competitive landscape?

Depending on your objectives and resources, the soccer platform you ultimately create could range from being a relatively simple one-time tactic-driven initiative, to being a comprehensive integrated strategy with multiple associations, marketing and promotional extensions. Regardless, if you want to be confident about achieving a healthy ROI, ensure you don't cut corners on your initial intelligence gathering.

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