



Soccer for a Cause and the San Antonio Scorpions

SuPRWriter and Associates and Morgan's Wonderland, San Antonio, TX, Jan 1, 2013

Summary: 2013 Silver Anvil Award of Excellence Winner — Marketing Consumer Services — Travel and Tourism / Hospitality

Effective public relations led the way in generating awareness and strong support for Soccer for a Cause, an effort to bring pro soccer to San Antonio and benefit the special-needs community. The resulting Scorpions franchise was created to convey all net profits to non-profit Morgan's Wonderland, world's only theme park designed with special-needs individuals in mind. This enables the park to provide free admission to anyone with a special need as well as expand programs and services for those with physical or cognitive challenges. Public relations also played a vital role in the San Antonio Scorpions' successful inaugural season in 2012, including construction of a new stadium.

Marketing consumer services includes programs designed to introduce new services or promote existing services to a consumer audience.

Full Text: Situation Analysis

In 2010, San Antonio philanthropist Gordon Hartman opened Morgan's Wonderland, the world's first and only theme park designed with special-needs individuals in mind. From the start, Hartman proclaimed everyone with a special need would be admitted free of charge. Admission fees alone would not be able to sustain the ultra-accessible park, so Hartman looked for other revenue streams to help it meet its financial obligations as well as expand programs and services for the special-needs community. He concluded that soccer would be a significant contributor.

Shortly after the park opened, Hartman launched Soccer for a Cause, a grassroots campaign to bring pro soccer to San Antonio. Having raised \$34 million to build the park, he had limited resources to pursue professional soccer. So he turned to public relations to effectively and affordably lead the way in creating community awareness and gaining public support. Strong and steady public relations initiatives directly contributed to the creation of the San Antonio Scorpions, the first team in pro sports history to pledge net profits to a non-profit (Morgan's Wonderland) serving those with special needs. Public relations carried the bulk of the communications load in the infancy of Soccer for a Cause, then continued to play a vital role in an integrated marketing campaign that generated revenue from ticket sales, promotions, regional and national sponsorships, etc. Public relations "victories" included growing media interest, vocal citizen support, brisk season-ticket sales and league-leading attendance.

A few skeptics doubted Hartman's ability to organize a pro team, yet he and a small-yet-passionate group of staff members from Morgan's Wonderland and his charitable foundation got the Soccer for a Cause ball rolling, so to speak, and kick-started momentum that intensified with the approach of the Scorpions' first match in the North American Soccer League (NASL) – just one step removed from Major League Soccer – in April 2012. Throughout the inaugural season, public relations continued to communicate one of the most successful startups in pro sports history. The Scorpions not only won the NASL regular-season

championship in year one but also set a league attendance record.

Research

Despite not having a Soccer for a Cause budget for formal research, Hartman and company launched an intense informal-research campaign that confirmed soccer's growing popularity in San Antonio. They learned in more than 100 meetings with community leaders, soccer enthusiasts, coaches, players and San Antonio Sports Foundation staff members that:

1. Top-notch soccer facilities did not exist in the Alamo City and
2. The opportunity to see soccer played at a high level was much in demand.

Supporting evidence came from a study by a Texas economist who concluded that a pro soccer franchise would make good business sense, e.g., boosting tourism. Also, a "test" exhibition match starring former Mexican pro soccer stars drew a higher-than-anticipated 2,000 fans.

Once the decision was made to move forward with Soccer for a Cause, Hartman's team ascertained the best ways to deliver the message to targeted audiences: personal interaction with elected officials and opinion leaders; story pitching to established media relationships and creation of a steady flow of news to Greater San Antonio print and broadcast media; regular social-media messaging to Twitter and Facebook followers as well as a Web presence, www.SoccerforaCause.com. They also searched the Web far and wide and developed a compelling message point – Soccer for a Cause's goal of benefitting the special-needs community via pro sports is unique and commendable. This theme appealed to soccer and non-soccer fans alike, and it even helped attract some top-notch players to the Scorpions squad.

Planning

From the beginning, Soccer for a Cause decided that Greater San Antonians needed to be heavily involved in building their pro soccer team. Fans would be asked to come up with a team name and vote online for the team logo as well as jersey and scarf designs. Thus, Soccer for a Cause evolved to "Our San Antonio, Our Soccer Team" to rally community support. Through interaction with city leaders, effective news media relations, targeted story pitching, timely special events and regular social-media communications, Soccer for a Cause created regional awareness of and support for pro soccer, not only among the general public and sports fans but also among those with special needs.

Soccer for a Cause goals included:

1. Convince business, community and elected officials to voice their support for pro soccer via print and broadcast media.
2. Produce a steady stream of teambuilding news, punctuated at key intervals with news conferences and updates from Hartman.
3. Encourage fans to be active in helping build the team, e.g., entering team-naming and logo-designing contests.
4. Achieve growth in social media followers to more than 5,000 and deliver messages weekly to convert followers to Soccer for a Cause advocates.
5. Generate awareness that would translate into sales of 3,000 season tickets by the 2012 home opener.
6. Communicate regularly with special-needs media as well as sports and general-interest media. The campaign focused on Greater San Antonio, however the compelling story of Soccer for a Cause also attracted regional and national media interest.

Execution

Soccer for a Cause intensified when the NASL announced that San Antonio had been approved

to join the league. In addition to securing pledges of support from community leaders, Soccer for a Cause shared its plans with the Editorial Board of San Antonio's daily newspaper, the *Express-News*. In the course of those discussions, the newspaper pledged thousands of dollars worth of free ad space to promote name-the-team, design-the-logo and select-the-jersey contests.

Each new decision by fans, e.g., choosing Scorpions as the team name, merited a news conference that drew an average attendance of 100 reporters and supporters. The Scorpions began to receive national interest as well, thanks to social media and cooperation of NASL's public relations staff. Other teambuilding topics that sparked considerable media and fan interest included a major sponsorship announcement from sports-equipment icon Nike, the unveiling of the team's jersey by Mexican soccer legend Jorge Campos, the presentation of a jersey to actress Eva Longoria (a huge supporter of special-needs individuals through her Eva's Heroes charity), the hiring of the team's head coach, the selection of the team's Scorpions Girls ambassadors, player tryouts across the country, the signing of players with significant pro experience and plans for the construction of a new stadium home for the Scorpions. Public relations awareness-building also contributed significantly to a major milestone Aug. 28, 2012, when global automaker Toyota announced its presenting sponsorship of the Scorpions' new, 8,000-seat stadium, currently nearing completion near Morgan's Wonderland and now known as Toyota Field. All of this was accomplished mainly through public relations and social media. Advertising was limited to some print ads that touted supportive comments of community leaders and a modest schedule of TV spots funded by Hartman's charitable foundation. Direct PR expenditures totaled less than \$25,000.

Evaluation

Soccer for a Cause achieved all its goals, and in retrospect Hartman gave major credit to the power of public relations. The non-profit effort could not afford comprehensive media monitoring, however it attained regular and increasing coverage in local, regional and national news media such as soccer publications, the *New York Times*, *Family Circle*, etc. Quantifiable results included: Growth in social media followers to more than 15,000; Website visitors numbering in excess of 48,000; 10,000 contest entries; attainment of the season-ticket goal of 3,000 well before the opening match; a sellout of 12,000 for the first home match; league-leading attendance averaging 9,174 per contest. Hartman declared Soccer for a Cause and subsequent creation of the Scorpions to be huge successes. Net profits immediately led to a new soccer program for wheelchair, powerchair and Special Olympics athletes. Moreover, pro soccer helped Hartman bring significant additional attention to his overarching goal – inclusion for those with physical and cognitive challenges like his 19-year-old daughter, Morgan.