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Managing Youth Tournaments:
Attracting Teams and Keeping Them Loyal

A Summary of
Findings and
Recommendations
For Youth Soccer
Tournament
Directors

Overview
Soccer remains one of the most popular sports for youth in America.

According to the *Soccer Participation Study 2003* by SGMA International[1], a projected 17.6 million Americans over the age of 6 played soccer at least once in 2002. While the absolute number of adult participants jumped from 2.8 million to 5.1 million — a rise of 79% from 1987 to 2002 — players under the age of 18 have stalled at 12.5 million.

On the other hand, new youth soccer tournaments continue to be established by clubs and organizations eager to raise money for their programs. In addition to SAY (Soccer Association for Youth), USYS (US Youth Soccer) and other established organization sanctioning events, US Club Soccer is also getting in on the action. For established tournaments, this introduces a level of competition that they have not had to deal with before on such an aggressive level.

These challenges result in the youth soccer Tournament Director looking for new and innovative ways not only to attract new teams, but also to keep their teams coming back year after year. In relation to this, research has determined several key findings:

- The tournament web site is not independent of the tournament
- Potential applicants are looking for immediate access to information and immediate feedback
- Traditional marketing is the least effective way of attracting and retaining teams
- A positive experience before, during and after the tournament is the most effective tournament marketing

Positioning Your Tournament
In many ways, a youth soccer tournament is managed the same as any business. **The most cost effective way to grow a business is to make sure that first-time customers become repeat customers**. Those tournaments that have been most effective in attracting and retaining teams have proven that the best way to keep teams coming back is to give **them a positive experience** not only **during** the tournament itself, but also **before** and **after**.

These tournaments utilize their web site as part of that positive experience. A tournament web site that 'speaks to' the clubs/players/coaches/parents actively engages them from the moment they visit the site to well after the last whistle has blown.

For coaches, the tournament experience starts when they sit down to research the 'playing field', to determine if and where their team will participate in a tournament. Many times the coach needs to make a decision several months in advance of the actual tournament start date; often before the fall or spring season even starts.

An effective tournament web site is a one-stop shop for all the information they will need — information about the guest teams, hotel rooms, a complete restaurant and activity guide — to apply to and participate in the tournament event.

How Teams Find You
In an aggregate survey from 2001-2003 tournament, respondents were asked, "Where did you hear about the tournament?" Using the tournament web site to continuously engage coaches, parents and team members contributes to the most effective tournament marketing known: **word-of-mouth advertising**. Other contributing factors are quick feedback to questions, knowledgeable volunteers, qualified referees, and an overall sense organization and communication. See Figure 1.

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[1] SGMA International is the global business trade association of manufacturers, retailers and marketers in the sports products industry.

Second to word-of-mouth advertising was electronic media. As with most industries, the soccer industry has become digitized. Tournament attendees are increasingly basing their decisions about a tournament on electronic media. The combined number of people discovering the tournament below via the tournament web site, e-mail or their state association web site was 14%. For a tournament of 160 teams, that would denote 23 teams.
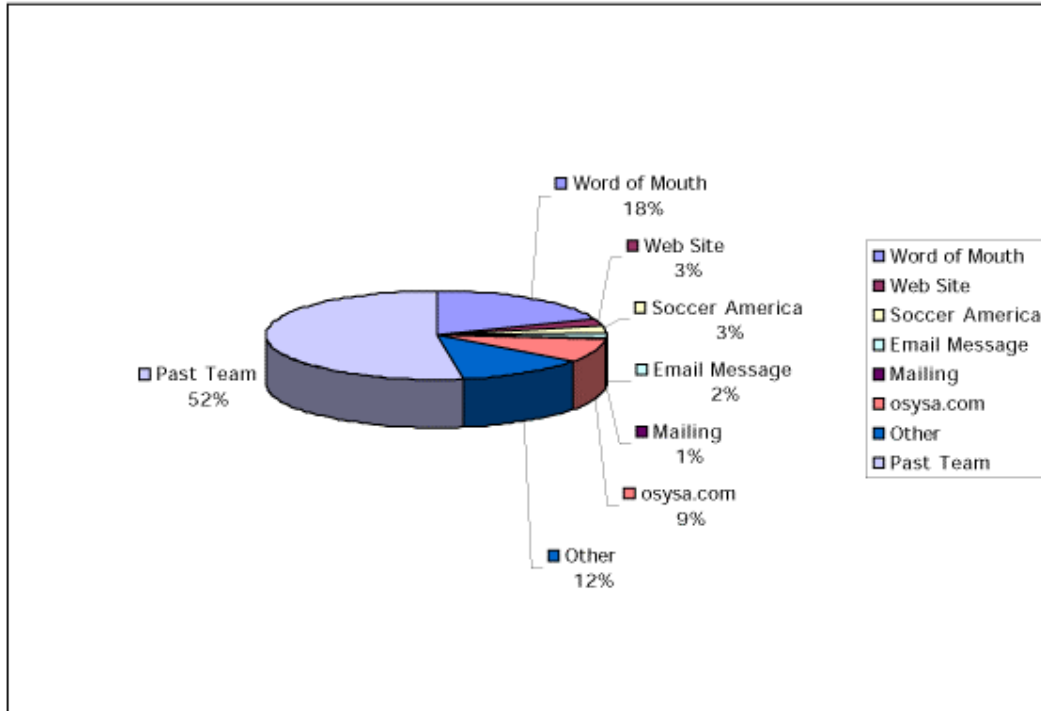

Figure 1: A TourneyCentral Tournament Survey

In the tournament aggregate survey cited above, 70% of the teams at the tournament either participated previously in, or were recommended by, someone previously associated with the tournament. **This percentage is typical for tournaments that use their web sites as the center of their tournament communication and operations program**.

For example, an important part of the communication program is the application form. Although most tournaments now allow teams to apply online, providing a positive experience for participants means doing more. Doing more can mean:

- **Check for errors**. *Does your form automatically check for logical errors?*
- **Logical flow of questions.** *Does your form make sense?*
- **Understand what the application is asking**. *Do you offer a help screen to avoid confusion?*
- **Ask only what is needed to make decisions**. *Is your form complete and concise?*
- **Use data to the create schedule**. *Does your form allow for the re-use of information?*
- **Notify of acceptance**. *Is your notification of acceptance or rejection automated?*
- **Enter data once**. *Will this be the only time the information will have to be provided?*
- **Check dates**. *Does your form make sure applicants are eligible to play in the division chosen?*

Not only will tournaments save significant time and money by using their web sites to their fullest potential, all of the effort supports the positive club/coach/player/parent experience, which will keep teams coming back.

Traditional Marketing
Research also indicates that search engines are not an effective way to attract or retain teams and can be a waste of volunteer time and money. In general, potential tournament attendees will visit their state association for a list of possible tournaments and click through to the tournament site. As an alternative to search engine optimization, **listing in organizational and press directories** has proven to be somewhat effective.

For mailings, the function of the brochure has changed. Now that the soccer industry is digitized, it is no longer necessary to use the brochure as the main source of information about a tournament. The tournament web site should supply all the information solicited by clubs, coaches, players and parents. The brochure should focus on the call-to-action, or what they would like the reader to do.

The **goal** is to get the reader to **apply for the tournament**. Therefore, this is an opportunity for the tournament to set themselves apart from other tournaments, as well as set the tone for their own. Postcards have been a very effective medium in driving potential tournament participants to the tournament web site and reminding them to apply. This option is also beneficial in that it can save the tournament club money on printing and postage.

Attracting U9/10 Teams
Consider the U9/U10 first-time tournament teams. Not only are they are very profitable group; highest per capita revenue and highest profitability of on-site purchases, but they are also the most expensive to attract. So how does a Tournament Director attract these teams?

Research proves that a Tournament Director can attract these teams by providing a great experience for older teams of the same club. In short, the clubs and teams will do your marketing for you. Many U9/U10 coaches indicate that they were Past Teams, referred by an individual or individuals with prior experience of the tournament. In the case below, 58% of new U9/U10 teams had prior experience or knowledge of the tournament. See Figure 2.
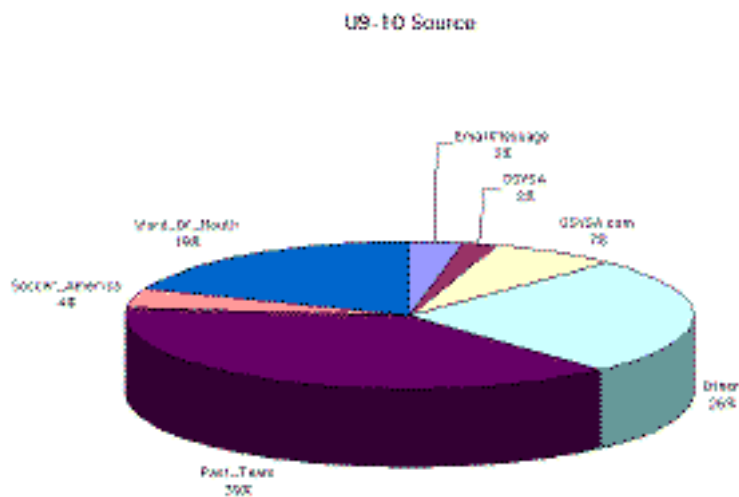

Figure 2

Mini Case Study

In 2002 the Evansville Elite Soccer Club's Veteran's Invitational Soccer Tournament had 70 teams participate in their event. In 2003, they hosted 168 teams. It was only their second year. Evansville realized early in the process that communication before, during and even after an event is important for retaining teams.

Upon realizing that their **web site was not independent of their tournament**, Evansville gained a significant competitive advantage over other tournaments. Those teams that had a positive experience the previous year were more likely to return and tell others. Their well-designed web site worked overtime to either convince new coaches that the tournament was a quality one or establish reference credibility.

Summary

Providing a positive and rewarding experience for tournament participants produces big rewards for the Tournament Director. Not only does the team retention rate tend to be high, but also referrals and recommendations make finding new teams easier. This saves the tournament on precious resources, such as volunteer time and money. Compared to traditional marketing, proactively engaging clubs and teams electronically has proven to be a better alternative.

As most tournament attendees view the tournament web site as an extension of the event itself, it becomes clear that immediate access to information has become necessary. An integrated tournament web site makes good business sense.

About The Marketing Series

An Industry Study was commissioned by TourneyCentral to analyze data and trends provided by fourteen youth soccer tournaments over the period of 1999 to 2003. An independent marketing firm analyzed the number of teams, players, referees, coaches and (cumulative number) tournaments in order to provide the Key Findings presented in this paper.