



The Fan Factory

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When Wexley School for Girls won a pitch in 2008 to create the launch campaign for the Seattle Sounders, a new MLS franchise, it was not, as Wexley cofounder Cal McAllister put it, "the best time to be a sports fan in Seattle." That same year had brought a perfect storm of awfulness in local athletics. In football, the Seattle Seahawks, a Super Bowl contender just two years previously, won only four games and the once-venerable Washington Huskies football team shockingly lost every game they played, going 0-9. Meanwhile, in baseball, the Seattle Mariners had the second-worst record in MLB, and in basketball—well, there wasn't any basketball -- the NBA's Seattle SuperSonics had been sold to Oklahoma City.

It's hard to imagine a more depressed sports market in which to launch a new team, but if any agency was equipped to build a fan base from scratch, it was Wexley, which had, through a series of experiential brand-building campaigns for clients ranging from Rainier Beer to Oberto, come to nickname itself, aptly, "The Fan Factory."

"We create fans for sports teams or ski resorts or even Microsoft products," said Ian Cohen, Wexley's other cofounder. "We know fans make time investments to talk about the brands they love, whether they're at the cocktail party or the water

cooler. We look to give them every opportunity to get them to show their excitement or show their involvement with the brand."

In its pitch to the Sounders ownership, which includes comedian Drew Carey and film honcho Joe Roth, Wexley stressed education as a key component of its launch campaign.

"This is a soccer town, so we didn't have to tell people you're not allowed to pick up the ball and run with it," joked McAllister. "But we did want to show how soccer fans around the world behave in sports stadiums, and we wanted it to be like no other sports experience in Seattle, maybe in the country."

Wexley's efforts to teach Seattle a new kind of live sport experience resulted in the tagline "Give Us Your Full 90," a rallying cry that issued a challenge to fans: if they expected their Sounders players to give it their all for 90 minutes (the length of a soccer game) on the field, then they should be expected to give it all for 90 minutes in the stands.

Seeking something tactile that could help activate the tagline in the live moment, Wexley discovered that "one of the things that represents passion of soccer around the world is the scarf," said Cohen. In addition to keeping its owner warm, scarves could be raised and twirled like colorful flags when the game got exciting.Â

"When Liverpool's stadium is full and they have their scarves up, it's a really cool visual," said Cohen, "and we love how anyone can walk down the street and badge [themselves] with it."

The term "badging" is an important one in Wexley's arsenal. "We like to get things into people's hands so they can hold them, feel them" said McAllister. "We want things that are collectible, things that are up on your wall, things that you look at and go, 'I remember that great time.'" So when [a team is] losing or having a tough time, you still remember all the feelings you have."

As the Sounders' inaugural home game approached, Wexley began distributing thousands of scarves across the city. Fans were encouraged to upload pictures of themselves in the scarves to different social platforms, and scarves popped up wrapped around Seattle icons ranging from local bridges to the Space Needle. Tickets to the very first Sounders home game were even stitched onto scarves, ensuring every fan who attended received one. Almost before the team had even begun playing, "if you didn't have a scarf, you sort of felt naked," said McAllister.

Along the way, Wexley also helped to implement Seattle's own "March to the Match," a gathering of fans prior to the game that, as its name suggests, march toward the stadium in an "intimidating, unified manner," said McAllister. "At our first March, we thought it was going to be me, Ian and our 50 friends. We had almost 6,000 people, and now there's 15,000 people."

The Seattle Sounders sold out their first game on March 19, 2009, and proceeded to sell out every game thereafter, averaging 40,000 fans per game. Last year, capacity at the Sounders' home stadium, CenturyLink Field, was expanded to nearly 70,000 seats.Â

Now in its fifth year promoting the team, "the honeymoon is over" for Wexley, said Cohen. "What we're challenged with now is keeping up the love and not just making ads to get seats sold. If we can get to a point where the team sells a whole season of 70,000 seats, that's pretty amazing, but there's a balance. Our goal is to keep the buzz not about wins and losses but what we can do that makes people come for the experience and not just the game itself."

[Images courtesy of Wexley School for Girls]