

Major League Soccer's Attitude and Access Scored It a New CMO

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Major League Soccer has a robust post-pandemic story to tell, and it's found just the person to tell it.

Newly announced senior vice president and chief marketing officer of MLS and Soccer United Marketing (SUM) Radhika Duggal joins the league at a pivotal point in its history. MLS has grown from 19 teams in 2014 to 29 teams this year—with a San Diego franchise on the way in 2025—after adding Inter Miami, Nashville SC, Austin FC, Charlotte FC and Saint Louis City SC since the Covid-disrupted season in 2020.

As a former CMO at fintech and ecommerce company Super.com, a marketing leader at JP Morgan Chase and Pfizer and a management consultant at Deloitte, Duggal joins the MLS executive team as it creates its sports marketing strategy and programs while building a global fanbase. Plus, as an adjunct assistant professor at New York University's Stern School of Business and author of the textbook "Consumer Behavior: A Marketer's Look into the Consumer Mind," the CMO is looking to provide the league insight into the mind of the modern fan and customer.

The league's already given the exec plenty to work with.

In 2022, the MLS signed a unique 10-year streaming rights deal with Apple to air every league game on Apple TV with no local blackouts. Last July, less than a year after winning his first World Cup with Argentina, superstar Lionel Messi joined MLS in Miami—boosting team attendance by 35%, league attendance by 5% and signups for Apple’s MLS League Pass by 280% from the start of the season. This year, multiple Miami away matches featuring Messi have already drawn National Football League-sized crowds.

Lingering just beyond all of that is the next men’s World Cup, which the international soccer governing body FIFA is bringing to the United States, Mexico and Canada in 2026.

ADWEEK spoke to Duggal about her first six weeks at MLS, the marketing opportunities she sees throughout the league and how Messi’s spotlight can illuminate even more MLS stories..

ADWEEK: What are the opportunities and obstacles ahead for MLS as it approaches the North American World Cup?

Duggal: This league has an incredible volume of tailwinds, and I’m just lucky to be along for the ride.

Messi—you think of the World Cup; you think of Apple, and all those things combine not only for MLS to have a moment but for North American soccer to have a moment ... a time to connect with and influence fans. There’s not been a better time for soccer in North America to do that job than over the next two to five years because the World Cup is sort of the beginning of how you take and nurture and grow that fandom.

How did your time at Super.com, Chase and Pfizer prepare you for this role with MLS?

I’ve had the opportunity to work across management, consulting

very large companies and very small companies. From those very different types of experience, I've learned three lessons that are going to start me well here.

No.1, I've learned how to build from scratch, but also for scale. If you think of where the league is in its history, that is exactly what we needed here. From a marketing perspective, there are some capabilities we build from scratch, but mostly, we have an established team. They do great work, and continuing to scale the great work they're doing is critical.

No. 2, in many of those experiences, whether at Deloitte—where I was working on a project and going deep in some aspect of marketing—or in these large companies or small companies, where I was running a P&L or running marketing for various products, I had the opportunity to touch end-to-end marketing. It's important for a CMO to be someone who understands data and creative equally. This notion that someone is an artist or a scientist, I think, is a bit silly.

The last [point] is I've had the opportunity to manage tiny teams. At one of the startups [I worked at], I was the second hire. There's no marketing budget and you just figured it out. JP Morgan Chase and Pfizer are not the same thing: big team, big budget. Learning how to optimize across both environments—optimize spend, optimize people's time—that's critical.

What opportunities do you see for MLS to speak to fandoms on a more personal level?

I teach consumer behavior at NYU Stern in their executive MBA program, so a lot of what we talked about in the classroom is 100% applicable to what we do here. What we probably should be thinking about in marketing is that science is as important as

art. When I think about what our job is here, it is about building fans. Well, how do you build fans?

Fandom is an attitude, so one of the things I've been thinking a lot about is I like this particular model called the tri-component model. It's a model for how consumers form attitudes based on three things:

The rational attributes of the product: The play on the field—is it good, is it not—the cost of a ticket, the ability to get a Season Pass.

How it makes you feel: The stories we tell, the excitement on the field, the excitement you can see through the broadcast.

Actual access: Whether through social media, highlights, Season Pass or being able to be on the field.

What I think is so exciting about being here is that marketing in a league office can touch all of those three aspects of how you form a fan's hopefully positive attitude. It is certainly a shared responsibility between the club and the league office, but yet you help people form a love for the game. We can do it in this very scientific, driven way that's very clear and well-understood in pharma and finance, but less understood in the industry of sports.

What kind of advantages has MLS's deal with Apple presented you as a marketer, and how can the league, its partners and its fans benefit from them?

I see two things: No. 1, when you think about that model for how you form attitudes, access is important, and access starts with knowledge—a game is on this day at this time. One of the things we've benefited from with Apple is that games are all in one place at a consistent, repeatable time. As a human, I

need to hear things five times for them to stick. It is repeatable. It is very clear.

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The other thing is, as a marketer, I have the opportunity to work with the teams that created content—just a ton of digital content— and manage our social media channels. Part of this experience is about Apple, but part of it is about the whole ecosystem that MLS and the clubs create day in and day out. The volume of content that is created across the league, the clubs and with our partners like Bleacher Report and others is tremendous.

Different consumers—and they told us this in research—consume sports content in different ways. For lots of people, it's about going physically to a game. For lots of people, it's about watching on TV at home. For lots of people, it is about catching highlights on YouTube or reading through content. It's the full ecosystem of content that's important for our fans at the end of the day, and what's going to form that fandom is access to multichannel content.

How does Lionel Messi affect the work of the league's lead marketer?

What an incredible opportunity to have a star player perform on the pitch and drive massive awareness of the league. He's one of many stars, some of whom are homegrown, some who come to the league from external leagues. We're fortunate to have a once-in-a-generation kind of talent that is Messi. But as we think about the volume of stars and incredible players in the league, we have the opportunity to work with his spotlight.

That's what's so exciting leading up to the World Cup: One of the jobs of marketing, both for the clubs and the league, is, "Hey, tell us stories." These are people who do an incredible job on the pitch, but these are whole people. And how do you

tell the stories of where they come from, where they want to go, what they've accomplished and how they got there?

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