The saying is it takes 10 years to be an overnight success. What has been the key to the continued growth of Major League Soccer (MLS)?

The key has been thinking long term and making decisions strategically. It's been enormously important to have very committed (and wealthy) owners who have adopted this long-term view and been willing to collectively support our vision.

In starting the MLS, what lessons were learned from the failure of the North American Soccer League in the 1980s?

First, we learned that we needed strength in all markets as opposed to just a strong team in one market—NY Cosmos. Second, we created a very centralized revenue-sharing model that provided each team a chance for on-field and economic success.

How important has it been to the league to have kept marquee players like Landon Donovan and Freddie Adu and not have them go overseas to play?

Every sports league needs star players. Today, we're not able to keep them all in the US—at some point we will. We do, however, do all we can to keep the players that can have an impact financially, promotionally, and strategically.

How important has the national TV contract been in strengthening the brand of the league?

It has been enormously important. In 1980, the NBA did not have its NBA Finals on live network television. We've been live on ABC since Day One. Network and local game broadcasts are two-hour commercials for our product.

What does the MLS offer to its corporate partners that make the partnership unique or different than from other sport properties?

The league offers access to the youth and Hispanic markets—two very important and hard-to-reach demographic groups. We also provide national sponsors rights in local team markets, something that most major leagues do not do. Most importantly, we work hard with each of them to have their MLS relationship satisfy their marketing goals.

How would you describe the relationship or degree of communication between the league and individual franchises in terms of marketing strategy? Do teams cater to the market or is there a “league” philosophy that is promoted?

The league establishes a national platform—“Welcome to the New Soccer Nation” or “Soccer Saturday,” etc. Each team will support the national message but establish a local brand message that is tactically important (ticket sales, support of a particular player, etc.).

How important are the building of the soccer-only stadiums to the future success of the league?

It is crucially important, as it is in every sport. It’s necessary for economic reasons, but also to provide our fans, players, and sponsors an environment that is appropriate for soccer—as opposed to baseball or football.

Two teams are being added for the upcoming season, Los Angeles and Utah. Why were these markets selected?

Los Angeles (was selected) because it will be the home for a Mexican-branded team—Chivas USA—and Los Angeles is a massive Hispanic market. It also will provide us with our first local rivalry. Salt Lake City (was chosen) because it is a market with limited pro sports competition, has a massive youth soccer audience, and has a growing ethnic population.

The league has taken a conservative approach to expansion. What has been the reason?

We don’t need to expand to fund operations. We want to expand to strategically grow the league geographically. We also want committed owners with a strong soccer-specific stadium plan.

What have men like Lamar Hunt and Phillip Anschutz (MLS investors and team owners) meant to the league?
If you look at other successful pro sports leagues, they have all had visionary owners that have helped build and grow the sport. The Hunt and Anschutz families believe in the potential of pro soccer and what a strong league can mean for our country and for the sport globally. Without their vision and support, MLS would not be where it is today.

Soccer has always had the participation numbers. What initiatives have been successful in turning them into MLS fans?

The vast majority of our fans are buying group tickets and come from the youth group market. We have a wide variety of local and national programs from grassroots participation events to media campaigns, player appearances, etc. Most of our marketing efforts are focused in this area.

In terms of quality of play, where would you rate the MLS in comparison to other professional leagues around the world?

We are certainly in the top 10.

The U.S. team went far into the 2002 World Cup. Did the league feel the effects of that success over the long term? How will the team's performance in 2006 impact the league?

The US advancing to the quarterfinals was a huge boost to the sport, here and abroad. We went further than many historic soccer powers—Italy, Portugal, France, Argentina. People watched games in the middle of the night. Our players were splashed throughout the national media. We were covered in the mainstream press. It's too early to know what the long-term effects will be. But in the short term, we have more credibility, respect, and overall awareness.

What has been the biggest challenge to the MLS over the 10 years of the league?

Converting participants to fans and convincing the hard-core (primarily ethnic) fans that they should support the league.

Where will the MLS be 10 years from now in terms of size of league, markets, attendance, etc.?

We have not established goals for 2010. It is fair to say we (hope to) have at least four more teams. I certainly hope our attendance can reach 20,000 fans per game.

Interview conducted by Dr. Matthew J. Robinson, University of Delaware