

Angel City FC's off-field successes provide model for future

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Premium

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Angel City FC's sold-out crowd in the club's final home game of the season on September 25, 2022 (Getty Images).

- **NWSL expansion franchise earmarks 10 per cent of sponsorship funds to return to community**
- **Club working extensively to infuse its brand into pop culture**
- **Significant resources being allocated to in-stadium experience**

Angel City Football Club has been associated with glitz and glam ever since the club was announced as the National Women's Soccer League's 11th club.

Beyond the celebrity ownership, the Los Angeles, California-based team didn't have the debut season it wanted on the field this year, falling short of the playoffs after an injury-riddled campaign.

But off the playing field, the team has been a major success story for the decade-old league. By leveraging an uncommon sponsorship model with companies to give back to the local community, implementing a mission-based business strategy, and creating a festive, in-stadium atmosphere that averages around 19,000 fans at home matches, the club has laid a strong operational foundation for the growing sport.

"We are that marriage of business and purpose, mission and capital coexisting. If there weren't the business case for what we're doing, we wouldn't be there," Angel City's head of community Catherine Dávila tells *SportBusiness*. "If every four years people get excited about the women's World Cup, but nobody goes to the NWSL games in the meantime, why is that and what can we do differently to ensure that those same people have a place to go every week during our season and see those players that they love?"

Angel City's founders had a plan before there was a logo, employees, or even formal acceptance into the league. Those involved worked on a three-pillar system. The first focused on club supporters and the gameday experience. The second honed in on grassroots outreach into the local community. And the third pillar was the 10 per cent sponsorship model.

The 10 per cent model

Jess Smith, the club's head of revenue, oversees all sponsorship, ticketing, data, and analytics, among other duties. She and the club's president, Julie Uhrman, created a business model to do something different with the team's sponsorship revenues.

What emerged was a model in which 10 per cent of Angel City's sponsorship funds would be placed back into the community in various ways. The model's design is philanthropic in nature and practice, but can also limit the universe of potential and actual club partners.

"We've walked away from many conversations with brands where it felt like they want to partner with us and use that 10 per cent to show something that is disingenuous to what their company was or what their product was," Smith tells *SportBusiness*. "That's important for us."

While they are not part of the 10 per cent sponsorship model, Angel City has also done plenty for its players, who are after all the club's primary product. The club has helped players battle social media abuse by partnering with safety tech company GoBubble.

Players additionally receive 1 per cent of ticket sales, so the club creates graphics for them to post on matchdays on their personal social media pages along with links to purchase tickets.

The club sold more than 15,000 season tickets, which start at \$180 (€184) per seat, for its inaugural season. Thanks to the successful season ticket sales, Angel City averaged 19,104 fans over the teams' home games while selling out 22,000-capacity Banc of California Stadium four times.

The stadium is also the home to Los Angeles Football Club of Major League Soccer. Angel City leases it from LAFC, which has posed some sponsorship challenges for the NWSL side.

Food delivery service DoorDash, Angel City's shirt sponsor, was one of the club's first two sponsors along with Heineken. Immediately, they were all-in on Angel City's sponsorship model.

"We were drawn to Angel City's dynamic partnership model and are proud of the work we've done together to increase food access, create exciting experiences for fans, and ignite city-wide pride as we activate our shared mission to level the playing field for all," Donna Lupton, DoorDash director of cultural partnerships, told *SportBusiness* in an email.

Banc of California Stadium and LAFC, however, are sponsored by DoorDash rival Postmates. Along the touchline wall in the upper deck of the stands lies a Postmates advertisement that Angel City cannot cover up during its events. Fortunately for Angel City, DoorDash was able to look past that as they inked their partnership.

“When you don’t own the building or you’re second tenant, which I would say 99 per cent of women’s teams are, it’s an issue that you run into,” Smith says. “We’re very honest with our partners from the beginning that this is one of the issues holding women’s teams back when it comes to monetizing itself.”



Angel City FC players pose prior to a match. Postmates' sign is visible behind them. (Getty Images)

DoorDash has been much more than just a shirt sponsor for Angel City. South Los Angeles' All Peoples Community Center linked up with Angel City before the club began playing in the NWSL. Through the team's partnership with DoorDash, whenever Angel City scored a goal, DoorDash would donate 1,000 meals to the All Peoples Community Center. After each game, the team updated the meals tally on social media. Angel City scored 24 goals in its inaugural campaign, equating to 24,000 meals.

As a result of supplemental meal donations from the club and DoorDash, the All Peoples Community Center received more than 305,000 meals for its members as of August 31.

“Since DoorDash’s inception, our mission has always been to grow and empower local economies. Partnerships with purpose are imperative for us as a brand, and we’ve continued to pursue partnerships that allow us to create change, empower local communities, and reach new audiences to share our mission like Angel City,” Lupton says.

Saundra Bryant, the executive director of the All Peoples Community Center, tells *SportBusiness* that during the peak of the pandemic, the food distribution program received triple the demand from prior to 2020.

Angel City, which also gave the community center a \$150,000 grant that has allowed All Peoples to get new volunteers and employees, is doing more than just feeding community members through at the center.

Through Angel City's partnership with Crypto.com, the All Peoples Community Center is able to address one of the most important issues the area faces: generational poverty. The partnership has provided financial literacy classes and savings programs for community members ranging from grade-school aged children to adults.

Thanks to Angel City, other partners have helped All Peoples with other workshops and have been able to supply the center with much-needed fresh produce.

“They’ve really done so much in a short period of time,” Bryant tells *SportBusiness*. “It really is what makes a good corporate partner a good community partner. This is a great partnership. I’m very grateful.”

As part of Angel City's partnership with car company Chevrolet, up to 100 fans who cannot get to matches with ease will be driven by Chevy. Through grocery chain Sprouts, whose logo is featured on the back of Angel City's jersey, local community gardens have sprung up in LA. The team also uses its partnerships to help local girls and gender non-conforming teens with leadership and soccer training.

The cohesion between revenue and marketing with community at Angel City is a modern concept. Dávila and Smith both agree there is often a natural tension between the community and revenue teams in the sports world, but at Angel City, it's been different.

“We’re building something together that’s so much more meaningful and it feels impossible to think about it in any other way,” Smith says. “I just can’t envision separating them in any other way anymore.”

Creating a welcoming atmosphere

Angel City has sought to create a family-friendly matchday environment for just about all ages, differing from the more adult-oriented atmosphere often seen elsewhere in the sport, and the industry at large. In a widespread fan fest before games outside of the stadium, fans can get their faces painted, grab a beer, play games, bump into club owners, and buy merchandise hours before kickoff.

Angel City's community and street teams work together to mobilize fans by doing community outreach, which begun well before the team began play in the NWSL.

At games, their team members wear pins of the colorful cartoon teddy bears, Care Bears. In the television cartoon adaptation, the Care Bears use their “Care Bear Stare” ability to defeat their heartless enemies.

“Care Bears come up against the evil with not conflict but pure love and joy,” Dávila says. “It sounds goofy but that is how we are approaching what we’re doing. This is an experience we want you to feel when you come to our stadium. Everybody is doing the Care Bear Stare and it should radiate out of that stadium.”

Beyond the age demographics, fans of all ethnic backgrounds have also been sought after for Angel City games. The club this year organized friendlies with Mexican club Tigres and the Mexican national team as an outreach to LA’s large Mexican community.

Following the United States Supreme Court’s decision to overturn legal federal abortion, fans attended the next Angel City game in green clothing articles and donned pro-choice signs that earned loud cheers when shown on the stadium screens.

“This is a space for a lot of people who never had a voice or had a space that they felt was theirs in sports. This is their place,” Dávila says. “In everything that we do, in the impact that we do, we have to make sure that it’s relevant to them, that they feel welcome and that they feel that they have a voice there as well.”

That fan voice, Dávila says, manifests itself into something well beyond just attending games and buying merchandise, and instead a deeper investment into the mission of the club and its sponsors.

“I think there’s an inflection point in business in general right now where we’re seeing that consumers across the board care about where their money goes,” Dávila says. “There’s this real understanding that ‘if I give my money to this company it is going to other things beyond that.’ People are starting to think about sustainable practices, what political organizations someone’s supporting, what causes they’re willing to speak out about.”



Angel City FC players Jun Endo and Stefany Ferrer Van Ginkel take a selfie with a fan and poster after a game (Getty Images).

At a game, Smith was approached by a fan who said they and someone else were purchasing customized Angel City jerseys. These jerseys, however, would not have players' names or their own. Instead, one shirt would read "Cedars Sinai" and the other "Corner Kick" to commemorate Angel City's sponsored corner kicks by healthcare provider Cedars Sinai.

"As somebody who has come from the [National Hockey League], Major League Baseball, and Major League Soccer and has been slinging these partnerships for decades at this point, it's just surreal to see the fan support of our partners," Smith says.

Blueprint for the future

Angel City quickly became a recognizable brand of women's soccer in the US, much of which is thanks to the celebrity ownership. Alexis Ohanian, one of the club's founding owners, has worn Angel City gear while supporting his wife Serena Williams at numerous tennis matches.

The club has sold merchandise to fans in 48 countries and counting, Smith says.

"The early stages of what we created was really about creating that Yankees cap of women's sports we're seeing that data coming in it's already becoming that. People will wear and support what Angel city is without necessarily following soccer but because of what it stands for," she says.

That understanding of purpose that Angel City is trying to create can be compared to that of the Women's National Basketball Association and its popular orange-hooded sweatshirts that have been worn by celebrities and men's basketball players, showcasing their support for women's sports.

Angel City is also trying to tap into the international audience to support the team as well. With international stars like Jun Endo of Japan, Claire Emslie of Scotland, and Ali Riley of New Zealand, among others, the team is earning a global viewership audience.

“When you look at some of the powerhouse, global brands in men’s sports like the [National Basketball Association’s] Warriors, I think it’s less than five percent of their fanbase will attend a game,” Smith says. “That’s really what we’re building at Angel City too. It’s certainly an incredible environment in Los Angeles but that’s just a piece of who we are and our fandom.”

Being in Los Angeles has helped Angel City’s business successes, but there are parts of the club’s model that smaller-market teams in the NWSL and in other leagues believe they can follow. Angel City regularly meets with other NWSL teams to discuss their marketing and community outreach successes and failures in a rising-tide-lifts-all-boats effort to grow the young league.

“There are markets that are more conducive. Proper resourcing is the start,” Dávila says. “That is a blueprint of ours you can follow. Put people who are exceptional at these jobs. The rest of the playbook is really about identifying what your community really cares about. If you compare that and those values, along with a product that feels like entertainment and an experience, that to me seems like a part that can be replicated.”

Further listening: [Julie Uhrman on the development and debut of Angel City FC](#)