

World Cup Librarianship: Using the NWSL to Introduce Key Concepts in Competitive Intelligence and Information Literacy

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In 1991, the inaugural FIFA Women's World Cup was hosted in China and every four years, like clockwork, the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) has produced a winning Women's National Team (WNT) to bask in the global limelight of professional sports. When introducing concepts of competitive intelligence and information literacy, tangible and timely examples help students grasp how companies (NWSL and each of its teams) function within industries (U.S. professional sports, televised sports, and arena ticket sales) and how terms like market size, market segmentation, and market share fit under the umbrella of market research. This article capitalizes on the on-field success of the WNT as reigning world champions and WNT's class action lawsuit addressing the gender pay gap between them and the men's national team as launching points to introduce competitive intelligence (CI) and information literacy (IL) concepts to business students, and enhance their comprehension of industries, companies, markets, and consumer research.

Company profiles are based on CI information gathered on consumers, competitors, and the market to make educated predictions and drive business plans with reliable information. In a systematic literature review, Ottonicar, Valentim, and Mosconi show the need for an interdisciplinary collaboration of information science and CI in business management to increase information quality, propel innovation, and support decision making (2018). Business librarianship is a natural interdisciplinary guide to deciphering reputable news sources and combining them with database articles and reports.

In an introduction to CI research, the NWSL and its teams provide business classes with an opportunity to compare and research similar companies. Each soccer team is its own private company, and although the NWSL and its teams are often covered in regional and national sports news, the depth of information and financial details may be hidden because they are private companies. The secrecy of private companies is an ideal opportunity to use databases like Mergent, MarketLine, Dun & Bradstreet, Nexis Uni, S&P NetAdvantage, Library of Congress resources, and others to develop a comprehensive company profile, which is an apt challenge for business students studying private companies (Library of Congress, 2020).

The NWSL is composed of nine teams across the US, with two expansion teams in the works: Racing in Louisville in 2021 and Angel City in Los Angeles in 2022 (NWSL, 2020). This team diversity allows business classes to divide into groups and research a team and regional market, make projections for the expansion teams, and develop a four-year business plan for their team based on the World Cup calendar. This is where the complexities of market size and market segmentation get fun. Although there are only nine NWSL teams, the US has 384 metropolitan

areas and soccer lovers of all genders in rural and city populations (U.S. Census, 2020). How does a team measure their consumer market? Which TV channels carry NWSL games and in which regions are they broadcast? How does accessibility to games on TV increase the fan base? Apparel sales? Ad revenue? Attendance?

As students dig into the markets, they will see the competition of their fellow NWSL teams is mainly on-the-field. Being a small market professional sports franchise, NWSL teams function more like allies, building their brand and boosting market interest, visibility, and a durable consumer fan base. NWSL competitors include other professional sports teams who compete for arena space, TV broadcast time, news and talk sports coverage, and even competition from music or entertainment events for arena space and ticket sales. If it is a question between saving to go to a NWSL game or a Billie Eilish concert, *TIME Magazine* warns Eilish is “not just for Gen Z” (Bruner, 2019, p. 54).

When introducing consumer marketing and market research, it helps to start by confronting confirmation bias and anecdotal evidence. It may be known generally that professional athletes are not compensated equally across sports or genders, but anecdotal evidence fails to convey just how drastic the trends of inequity can be. As Spiggle notes, “The minimum league salary for a player in the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) was \$16,538 in 2019. Compare this with \$70,250, which was the minimum salary for a Major League Soccer (MLS) player in 2019” (Forbes, 2020, para. 11). A Megan Rapinoe jersey is available today on Fanatics.com, but how long will they carry that jersey? The same is true in women’s basketball. Why did it take so long to nationally promote WNBA merchandise? The WNBA’s #OrangeHoodie sold out, making it the “Hottest Garm in the Bubble” (Wolf, 2020).

Hunches and gut reactions are just the starting place of the initial curiosity and excitement that sparks a business idea. Intuition can be way off the mark. When money and business capital are on the line, decisions need a factual basis. Information literacy teaches students to use reliable and trusted sources, check facts, and apply market and industry research to create a CI portfolio. Creativity and innovation often get credit for flashy, successful business ventures. Hiding behind the business section click bait is a complex depth of research involving hours of gathering information, combing through publications and reports, and analyzing data that serve as a foundation for taking risks.

The NWSL intersects with many other industries. Providing students with an opportunity to brainstorm and search within an industry database like IBISWorld helps students begin to conceptualize what industry or industries fit their company. They begin to internalize industry trends, supply chains, major players, outlook, projections, and how to read an industry SWOT analysis and understand a business report. To internalize the intersections of the NWSL, searching for industry reports or by NAICS code for U.S. professional sports franchises, TV

providers, sports coaching, athletic apparel, or internet publishing and broadcasting will help students begin to piece together the elaborate moving parts of professional sports: ESPN, NCAA, sports medicine, nutrition, vendor and area contracts, shoe deals, and social justice (WNBA, 2020).

Undergoing a degree program in higher education is an expansion, a stretching of the mind and of limits, and a time of experimentation and innovation. CI and IL give students tools to make distinctions between opinions and fact-based research, to critically think about sources' credibility, and to draw conclusions based on evidence. Using sports and the NWSL's recent celebrations on and off the field is an engaging, relevant avenue to set the tone and encourage an expansive mindset needed for business research. As professional sports teams expand their reach to impact gender discrimination and racism, so can business librarianship expand interdisciplinary collaboration of competitive intelligence and information literacy to enhance instruction and comprehension.

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