

MOBILE TICKET

FESTIVAL



GATE B
TICKET 0012A

FAN EXPERIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, AND THE NEW NORMAL

By Tod Caflisch

With all the sporting venues, concerts, and other large events closed down and sports seasons disrupted at best, if not altogether canceled, during the COVID-19 pandemic, it's not hard to understand why people got excited earlier this year about vaccination numbers going up and infection rates going down. Sports and other events were coming back!

FILLING SEATS SAFELY

Major League Baseball (MLB) and Major League Soccer (MLS) teams were the first to open in the spring of 2021 despite the pandemic. They were faced with the challenges of dealing with a mixture of vaccinated and unvaccinated attendees together with a variety of local and state mandates around attendance maximums, masks, and social distancing. The leagues took major steps in adopting standardized protocols and procedures to open venues and ensure they stayed open throughout the season.

Surprisingly, potential digital solutions for getting fans safely into and through events in a pandemic world have existed for years and were probably in many venues' long-term technology roadmaps but deferred due to budget or venue-infrastructure challenges. Because options to get fans into events and keep venues open were limited, teams and venues had to invest in

the digital solutions. This also opened countless opportunities for new and adapted technologies and sports startups looking to prove themselves at a critical time. People will be asking, "Why didn't we do this ten years ago?" These technological adaptations are being driven by safety protocols and to recoup some of the estimated billions in revenue lost by the five major sports leagues and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) during the first year of the pandemic shutdown.

With venue seating maximums to accommodate social distancing, there was a lot of stress on already-overburdened ticketing groups at the team level, partly due to staff reductions as a way to balance budgets after revenue shortfalls during the previous pandemic season. Many teams turned to technology to bridge that gap.

DIGITAL TICKETING

As a way to address team needs and serve the digital-ticketing-buying public, TicketMaster (the ticketing partner of a majority of professional sports teams and large venues) modified its ticketing platform to accommodate social distancing. Online ticket buyers (and their in-house team ticketing partners) were permitted to purchase and sell tickets in a manner that would ensure open seating around the desired

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DUE TO THE PANDEMIC, CONTACTLESS POINT OF SALE TOOK A HUGE LEAP FORWARD NOT ONLY IN ADOPTION BUT IN THE TECHNOLOGY AS WELL.

number of seats. As seating capacities were increased through local mandates, the surrounding seat buffers were reduced to accommodate the changes until full venue seating capacity status was granted.

Mask mandates were also pretty common, although enforcement was another matter. As teams were charting new territory here, while trying desperately to maintain a positive fan experience, little was done in many venues to require masking once fans passed the security checkpoints and ticket scanners.

Ticketing operations, other than the TicketMaster system upgrades, also saw changes due to the pandemic. Teams and venues that had put off migrating entirely to digital ticketing finally made the leap due to fears of virus transition through hard tickets. In addition to health safety, digital ticketing serves some very good business purposes. First, teams can save hundreds of thousands of dollars in printing costs for hard tickets. Second is data collection and analytics. Analytics is nothing new to sports teams, venues, and events. But where digital ticketing is concerned, it's a virtual goldmine. Pre-event digital ticketing data reveal information about how and when fans purchase tickets and can also drive real-time dynamic ticket pricing where supply and demand impact ticket prices as the start of the event approaches. Digital ticketing also helps teams manage the secondary market, or resale of their tickets.

In-event digital ticketing data are valuable as well, as they provide information about where fans enter the venue, what time (in relation to event start), and more. This can dynamically generate alerts for team staff when VIPs arrive and help venue operations managers better balance staffing needs. Digital tickets can also be used for

access control into premium areas like suites and clubs, as well as special offers such as seat upgrades and experiential opportunities. Gaining the digital ability to match all these data with specific fans builds better demographic profiles for future sales and marketing efforts. Teams are always looking for new revenue opportunities; this gives them opportunities to sell merchandise and tickets to other types of events and promote team sponsors.

The way in which tickets are validated at venue entries also has taken a step forward. Many venues, due to the staffing shortages and exposure concerns, have moved to self-scanning solutions, much like many airport gates when boarding a flight. Many have moved back to the old-school turnstile-type access control, with fans scanning their own tickets. Companies like Axess, VenueNext, and Skidata have been providing these gates for years but have been particularly busy over the past year outfitting venues with this new technology. They tie in natively with ticketing systems (wired and wireless) and can be managed by fewer staff, even during heavy ingress periods right before the start of an event.

CASH MANAGEMENT TECHNOLOGIES

Fears of virus transmission through the transaction of cash was another concern for teams and venue operators. Due to the pandemic, contactless point of sale took a huge leap forward not only in adoption but in the technology as well. Cash management technologies, fairly new to venues, were introduced, including “reverse ATMs.” As the name implies, you feed the machine cash and it gives you a debit card in the same amount. These debit cards are then accepted at contactless point of sale for concessions and merchandise as another

way to curb transmission. The public safety aspect of contactless point of sale is undeniable, with the ability to purchase concessions and merchandise completely touch-free using a smartphone or contactless credit card.

The most universally available touch-free payment option is “tap-to-pay” with a smartphone, smart watch, or a contactless credit card. Tap-to-pay uses either near field communication (NFC) or magnetic secure transmission (MST). Apple Pay, Google Pay, and contactless credit cards all use NFC technology to communicate payment to the venue point-of-sale terminal. MST is a technology currently only on Samsung Pay (although NFC is also supported by Samsung) where your smartphone mimics the act of swiping your credit card on a terminal that does not support NFC.

Contactless point of sale is fast and easy, two elements that fans expect at sporting events. Large event venues are poised to take point of sale to another level with new state-of-the-art venue “grab and go” concessions.

Amazon introduced the “grab and go” concept with its brick-and-mortar Amazon Go stores, and the same idea can be seen on a smaller scale in airports. A customer scans an app when entering a store and then begins shopping by picking up items, putting them in a basket or in bags (without needing to scan each item), and just walking out when finished. There is no need to check out, and items can be replaced at any time.

The Seattle Kraken and Climate Pledge Arena will debut Amazon’s “Just Walk Out” cashier-less technology at four food and beverage stores when the NHL season begins in October. The arena stores will also feature Amazon One palm-scanning tech, which lets customers enter and pay with the wave of a

hand. This is another great step forward for teams and venues with tech related to fan experience as fans don't like to be away from the action for long for fear of missing the "big play." And for sports like hockey or soccer where scoring can be sporadic, it can be very disappointing for fans that miss out because of lines at the concession stands or bathrooms.

MOBILE CONCESSIONS

Addressing lines at the concession stands and bathrooms is another area where teams and venues have integrated technology. Outside of concerns around social distancing, attendees stuck in lines also present negative impacts on fan experience, and can result in significant revenue loss due to line attrition at concession stands. Solutions like Armored Things and WaitTimes have been deployed by venue operators to give better insight into where fans congregate and for how long. Through the use of video analytics and aggregation of other data, venues can determine in real time if too many people are occupying a specific space or for too long, especially where social distancing is a concern. Other uses of the data are in mobile apps and digital signage displays during events that inform fans where the shortest lines are for bathrooms or their favorite concessions. Shortening time in lines directly correlates to increased concessions sales and improved fan experience.

We've all heard of or even used mobile concessions ordering at sporting events since its introduction with the opening of Levi's Stadium in 2014. This was a great idea that's never fully realized its potential, although the pandemic may renew interest in it. The convenience to the fan is undeniable, but the biggest issues tend to be logistical: In-seat delivery can be challenging because many venues have policies against pedestrian traffic in the bowl during play (especially for hockey), which affects keeping your burger hot and beer cold. An option for fans that incorporates mobile ordering is the self-pickup. This seems likely to gain traction, especially with a pandemic spin, as the systems are designed to

accommodate the convenience of mobile ordering. They also help reduce or eliminate the line wait as you can pick up your order whenever you want, and the order isn't prepared until you "check in" at the stand. This usually guarantees the hot burger and cold beer.

Mobile devices have also been used in Europe as "health passports." These app-driven solutions hold digital proof of vaccination or recent negative testing in order to gain access to events. To the author's knowledge, nothing like this has been tried in the United States due to privacy and HIPAA concerns.

SMART CLEANING

Beyond the impacts of new pandemic-related technology being deployed for use during events, there are other solutions in play after hours or on "dark" days. Venues are generally prepared to bring in an army of staff following events to clean the facilities. In many cases, they are there overnight, when the arena is hosting a variety of events on consecutive days.

In a pandemic-afflicted world, venues are turning to robots and aerial drones to clean (think a Roomba on steroids). Many stadiums and arenas began using cleaning robots to disinfect floors and other surfaces post-event, some using UV light technology. Hospitals have been using UV light robots effectively since early in the pandemic to disinfect COVID patient rooms as it has been shown to quickly inactivate the novel coronavirus. Aerial drones have also been in use in larger venues like football stadiums. They have proven to be more effective delivering disinfectant in the larger areas of seating in stadium bowls. Both of these solutions also remove the possibility of traditional cleaning staff contracting the virus through contact while cleaning.

While there has been a lot of change in the fan experience during and because of the pandemic, many observers estimate that COVID has helped accelerate the adoption of technology in general in the sports and entertainment industry by five years. That may be a silver lining to this whole pandemic dark cloud, but there are others.

With the Texas Rangers successfully launching their 2021 season with a full house of 41,000 at Globe Life Field without it becoming a "super spreader event," it looks as if the efforts teams and venues are taking around mitigating the spread of COVID-19 through technology and analog methods are working. The MLB and MLS seasons have progressed fairly successfully, which has the teams in the NBA, NHL, and NFL, and the leagues themselves, confident they can replicate that success, despite the recent Delta variant spike. Some NCAA football and NFL teams have taken additional precautions, however, in requiring fans to have proof of vaccination or recent negative testing for entry into games.

Teams, venues, and leagues have been making substantial investments in the safety and security of their fans due to the pandemic. Ultimately, it's up to the fans to make the final decision on whether they feel comfortable enough to attend an event or will stay home and watch it on TV. But fan confidence is up as polls show fans are eager to get back out to stadiums and arenas this fall. Technology has played a positive role in that.

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