

Missing the game? Your team knows

By David Pollak

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The phone rings.

It's the Giants. They're calling season-ticket holders. The team wants to make sure they know all the options for reselling or donating seats they can't use. They ask if there's any interest in sharing seats next season with someone else who hasn't been making it to many games lately.

Wait a minute. The Giants know who isn't using their tickets?

Yes, they do. That and more.

Data collected electronically from tickets as each fan passes through the turnstiles tells the team not only who is and isn't showing up at SBC Park, but also what time they get there and what entrances they use. And the Giants aren't the only ones who have invested in what the industry calls customer relationship management software. Four of the Bay Area's other major pro teams -- the A's, Raiders, Warriors and Sharks -- have similar technology. Only the 49ers still rip tickets by hand.

"Information is power, and to be able to have a way to get the pulse of your consumer base is what every marketer wants," said Paul Swangard, managing director at the University of Oregon's school of sports marketing.

How teams use the information varies. The Sharks, for example, learned they didn't need to open the doors quite so early before each game. The A's came up with an equitable way to distribute 15,000 bobblehead dolls at one game by looking at entry patterns.

"We use it primarily for operational purposes, figuring out trends and appropriate staffing," said Cameron Stewart, the A's marketing and advertising manager. "We check it from homestand to homestand."

Early trial

The Giants were the first Bay Area team to use electronic ticket scanning. When their new ballpark opened in 2000, it had 28 hard-wired turnstiles with connections coming up through the concrete floor and 18 others that could be moved from one gate to another.

The system was almost instantly obsolete because of advances in wireless technology. Handheld scanners now gather the same type of information at HP Pavilion and Oakland's two sports venues.

Setting up a system for the Sharks' 2002-03 season was complicated by a WiFi operation already in place. "With a wireless computer system and a wireless ticketing system, you had to be very secure and keep things separate," said Malcolm Bordelon, the team's executive vice president of business operations.

For the Giants and other teams, learning about fan behavior isn't necessarily the ultimate goal. What the bar-code system does, they point out, is allow them to provide other services that can help retain season-ticket holders, or even attract new ones.

"The biggest threat to our fan base is a ticket left in a drawer," said Bill Schlough, the Giants' chief information officer.

To avoid that, he said, the Giants set up electronic "ticket relays" that, for a \$2 fee, allow any fan to forward tickets to friends without having to meet them face-to-face or direct them to a will-call line. "We deactivate one printed ticket, then activate another," Schlough said.

Other teams offer the same service, but with restrictions. The Sharks limit it to season-ticket holders; the Warriors make it a club seat perk.

The Giants -- and later the Warriors -- took things a step further, creating their own resale market at prices that can be above face value, then taking a cut from the seller and buyer.

The bar-code system also undercuts traditional scalpers because buyers can't tell by looking whether a ticket being sold has already been used, then resold outside the arena.

"The system is most important to us from the standpoint of making sure our consumer has a ticket that works," Warriors President Robert Rowell said of the resale effort. "It also helps if tickets are stolen because we can just deactivate them."

Resale value

About 500,000 tickets have been resold through the Giants' "double play" window in six seasons, Schlough said, with \$25 million changing hands. Tracking those sales, he added, led the Giants to modify their own pricing.

Tom McDonald, the team's senior vice president of consumer marketing, said the Giants noticed that fans in the resale market were paying a premium for lower box seats in the sections between first and third base.

After the 2003 season, he said, the Giants created a separate pricing category and charged an extra \$3 for the more desirable sections.

The relays and the resale market are two options the Giants mention to season-ticket holders when they call them about missing games. They also suggest donating unused seats to the Giants Community Fund.

Are fans ever spooked by the fact the Giants know their attendance habits?

"I don't think so," McDonald said. "In most cases, the call is from someone they're familiar with."

Schlough said it's important for the team to know why fans stop coming to games.

"Maybe they had a bad experience at the park and we can do something about it," he said. "Even if it's, 'We're not showing up because the team stinks,' that's important to us. If we're adjusting payroll, we know team performance is the main thing."

Team's promise

While there may be a Big Brother-like aspect to the data monitoring, an official with the San Francisco office of the Electronic Privacy Information Center said there are fewer concerns if the information is used solely for the team's own market analysis.

"The important question to ask is whether that data is leaving the stadium," said Chris Hoofnagle, the center's senior counsel. "If data is being sold to third parties, that's where consumers are more concerned about privacy."

McDonald said the Giants have been asked to sell their data, but "we absolutely do not do that. To us, it would be a violation of trust."

Schlough said the electronic turnstiles are considered "mission critical" at SBC Park, and there's a backup power source. There have been blips on several occasions that created longer than usual lines. But only once have employees at the turnstiles had to resort to tearing tickets by hand.

Even so, the timing was bad.

"That was the night Barry (Bonds) hit his 600th" home run, Schlough said.

And fans who would have liked an intact memento went home disappointed.