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NETWORKING

How Mobile Technology Impacts the College Sports Fan Experience

Strong Wi-Fi and other connectivity solutions are helping engage college sports fans on game day.

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by Erin Brereton 🐦

Erin Brereton has written about technology, business and other topics for more than 50 magazines, newspapers and online publications.

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Today, with 18- to 24-year-olds checking their smartphones once every 5 minutes on average, the scoreboard may not be the only screen fans are glancing at during college sporting events.

To provide attendees with ample network access, some colleges and universities have augmented their sports venues' connectivity capabilities, allowing them to implement new tech-centric game day services, such as digital ticketing and app-based concessions ordering.

In 2019, the University of Pittsburgh outfitted its Petersen Events Center, a 12,500-seat arena used for the school's men's and women's basketball
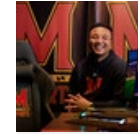
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Does Your University Have the Infrastructure to

games, with more than 200 Extreme Networks access points, along with directional antennas pointed at every seating section, to supply Wi-Fi for fans, says Seth Graham, assistant athletic director of IT.

"It's much more of a commodity these days than a feature," Graham says. "We started to notice, just trying to keep up with the times, if people can't pull their phones out — check other scores, check their social media, take photos, post photos — they get frustrated."

Pittsburgh Panthers fans can now enter the arena using mobile tickets and place food and beverage orders from their seats using a mobile app, thanks to the facility's robust Wi-Fi coverage, which proved its importance when COVID-19 pandemic protocols encouraged social distancing.

"You were trying everything you could to minimize human interaction," Graham says. "We were so grateful we had done it, because we wouldn't have been able to switch to mobile ticketing and mobile food ordering had we not put it in."

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Hardware Additions May Help Address Network Coverage Concerns

Pandemic pressures generally helped speed up higher ed sports venue connectivity efforts, according to Anthony Di Fino, deputy athletic director for external relations at the University of Cincinnati. The university still offers printed tickets for fans upon request, but largely transitioned in 2021 to digital versions fans can download to their Apple Wallet or Google Pay accounts.

Many universities, Di Fino says, have focused on placing Wi-Fi routers near stadium gates to ensure fans can download their tickets on the spot.

"That seems to be the largest issue when it comes to implementing this," he says. "Once they get to the gate, if you don't have Wi-Fi, or you have weak signals because of the number of phones that are around the gates on game day, it's a struggle. It holds up lines."

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Establishing connectivity can pose challenges in older structures, which can be an issue for some colleges and universities. Cincinnati's Nippert Stadium, for example, is more than 100 years old.

The University of Minnesota's football stadium, meanwhile, was built in 2009, and its hockey arena was built in the early 1990s. Williams Arena, however, where the school's basketball games are played, has been in use since 1928.
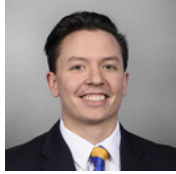
> **"** The Wi–Fi network is a foundation that lets us push messaging, like, 'Hey, get on the Wi–Fi, take photos, post them to social media, use these hashtags.'"
>
> **Seth Graham, Assistant Athletic Director of IT, University of Pittsburgh**

To boost cellular connectivity at the venues and enable digital ticketing and parking passes and other aspects, the school is using a distributed antenna system (DAS) from AT&T, according to Travis Cameron, chief revenue officer and assistant athletic director.

"Running wires through old buildings obviously presents a lot of challenges," Cameron says. "Anytime we do work, we try to introduce avenues for future work, whether that's cordoning off additional ductwork or conduit, or whatever the task might require. We've found that anytime we need to do this type of work, it's a significant investment, and a big part of that comes from the lack of that type of infrastructure."

Cincinnati's football stadium, constructed in 1915 at the center of campus, was designed to be openly accessible to the community, Di Fino says. At any given time, teens could be using the field for a flag football game, or local residents could be running up and down the stadium's stairs during a workout. As a result, the stadium lacks permanent, defined gates that network access could be wired to.

"We don't have a physical structure that says, 'This is Gate A, enter here,'" Di Fino says. "Our IT folks found a way to get it done by putting transponders on buildings and making sure they're pointed to the gates we generally set ticket scanning services at. There are a lot of buildings around, and that allows us to wire from those buildings."

*LEARN MORE: Stadium Wi–Fi connectivity and the college sports fan experience.*

To implement the Bearcats Fast Pass entry option — which lets game attendees circumvent the line by getting their tickets scanned in a separate tailgating area and wearing wristbands that grant access to certain gates — the school discovered adjustments were necessary to ensure ticket scanning devices would function properly.

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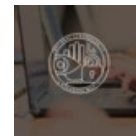
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"We were actually out there three or four days before a game saying, 'OK, let's try to see if we get signal strength here,'" Di Fino says. "When we went to go scan in some of the tailgate areas, we didn't have the network coverage on our scanners. So, we again had to work with our IT team. They figured out we just had to move a transponder."

182 million

The number of people across the U.S. who regularly follow or have a favorite college team

Digital Access and Entry Offer More Than Fan Convenience

While substantial planning and investment efforts can be required to establish enhanced connectivity, digital ticketing and other tech-fueled amenities, those services can ultimately provide significant operational and marketing benefits.

Digital ticketing is notably less expensive than designing, printing and mailing thousands of hard copies, Cameron says. The University of Minnesota also found digital tickets provided another advantage during the pandemic.

"Where we really saw the value was the flexibility," he says. "We had canceled games. We had games that were moved to different days because teams were had players that couldn't play because they had COVID. Because we can solicit everybody who has a digital ticket, we can get that information out. We can update the time on the ticket. We can update the date. We can put on the ticket that the event's canceled. It just really became a huge asset in a year of heavy uncertainty."

" If you don't have Wi-Fi, or you have weak signals because of the number of phones that are around the gates on game day, it's a struggle. It holds up lines."

Anthony Di Fino, Deputy Athletic Director for External Relations, University of Cincinnati

The University of Pittsburgh, Graham says, sees its expanded Wi-Fi access — which the school has been pleased to find about 20 to 30 percent of

attendees use during games — as a way to increase engagement with fans during games.

"The Wi-Fi network is a foundation that lets us push messaging, like, 'Hey, get on the Wi-Fi, take photos, post them to social media, use these hashtags,'" he says. "We can take those tweets and put them on our scoreboard during the game."

Season ticket holders for Cincinnati's basketball and football games can now change the location of their seats annually during a roughly 10-day time frame online — a process that used to take over a month via phone, Di Fino says.

As workers at football games scan tickets before kickoff, their handheld devices will alert on any attendees at the gate who have been tagged prior to the game. Software will tell a guest services team member that the person set to sing the national anthem has arrived, for example, or a VIP.

"Especially in higher ed, when you have so many donors coming to your events, it's specifically helpful for your fundraising team," Di Fino says. "If I have a list of 100 people, and I know 50 of them have season tickets, I could see if all 50 showed up and just go say hello, because face time is important. The back end of that technology really helps us manage the game day — and our clients."

> **PITT BY THE NUMBERS**
>
> The scale of the Petersen Events Center required a robust connectivity solution. Here are the stats:
>
> - 430K-square-foot venue
> - 6K-square-foot broadcast facility
> - 12,500+ capacity
> - 100+ annual events
> - 40 point-of-sale devices
> - 4,250+ staff, student and guest devices
>
> *Source:* *Extreme Networks*

ILLUSTRATION BY RYAN OLBRYSH