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COMMAND CENTERS

NFL invests in technology to keep fan behavior in check

by DAVE BROOKS



A screen shot of the VenueSoft software system in use for the 49ers.

SAN FRANCISCO — From his vantage point inside the command center of Candlestick Park in San Francisco, Jim Mercurio can see just about every angle of the sprawling stadium. Police officers pan the crowd with binoculars in search of fights and drunken disturbances. Flat panel televisions linked to closed circuit cameras capture dozens of hidden angles around the building, while radio-equipped ushers and police officers walk the stands in search of troublemakers.

“I’ve got plenty of eyes out there; that’s the easy part,” said the San Francisco 49ers Director of Stadium Operations. “It’s processing all those eyeballs into a single brain that can be difficult.”

Mercurio said he’s now found a software program to do all the things his brain cannot. Earlier this season, the 49ers signed a contract with Oakland, Calif.-based VenueSoft to use its command post software to assist with dispatch operations and help mandate the National

Football League’s new Code of Conduct policy.

The 49ers are joining the ranks of NFL teams using new technology to enforce the new behavior rules. The Oakland Raiders and San Diego Chargers are also using the software in hopes of becoming more family friendly, while teams like the Miami Dolphins are instituting text-message technology to keep security teams alerted to potential problems.

“When we first started this project, we realized there was no software in place to track venue security,” said Chad Ladov, CEO of VenueSoft. Ladov first created the software while working with the Oakland Raiders, teaming up with venue professionals and former Oakland Police Department officers to build and market the system.

The software was being developed as the NFL was undergoing its own image makeover. Internet sites like YouTube were displaying videos of rowdy fans, and HBO’s REAL SPORTS did a segment on fan behav-

ior, showing scenes of public drunkenness, obnoxious behavior and brawling.

“We increasingly heard from teams and fans that we needed to do a better job to make the game day experience pleasant for everyone,” said Brian McCarthy, vice president of Corporate Communications for the NFL. “We are asking fans to behave as they would during the rest of their day. It is a relatively small number, but it should be no number at all.”

The new rules include a ban on foul language, excessive drunkenness or verbal or physical harassment of other fans. Violators can be kicked out of the game without a refund. Teams must appoint a liaison to oversee fan conduct, and must make regular reports to the NFL about their progress. To keep an eye on teams, the NFL is sending league personnel to various football games to monitor the game day experience.

Ladov’s product provides a tracking system for stadium operations officials to pinpoint where problems are occurring, provide real time status updates and set facility reminders that can get overlooked during the chaos of game day operations.

The ActiveRFID management system is run on a laptop computer and 42-inch plasma television that can display multiple real time screens of the stadium. The operator can look at a dispatch log with an ongoing list of incidents and status, or they can view a map of the facility with color-coded dots to pinpoint particular events and see which agencies have responded.

The software system is licensed on a per-year cycle based on total attendance, although most licenses average \$24,000 per year. Additional hardware is also available for an added cost. One of VenueSoft’s key components is a GPS-equipped handheld device for ushers, security and medical personnel. Once a button

on the device is pushed, a light-probe flashes and an electronic message is sent to the command post, detailing incident type and location. The accuracy of the GPS is based on the sophistication of the facility's wireless system.

"One of the most important components of this system is that it reminds me when I have incidents that still need to be dealt with," Mercurio said. "If something gets ignored, the system will remind me and over time it helps me track trends in certain seating sections."

As Mercurio makes this statement, he notices that he's received a fan complaint about illegal smoking in one of the seating sections. A quick look at the venue map shows that these individuals have already been warned once about smoking.

"Alright, escort them out of here, they've already been warned," he radios to his security personnel.

And for stadiums that can't have eyes and ears at every location, teams are now using text-messaging technology to help fans report rowdy behavior that could be ruining their experience. The Miami Dolphins have instituted a text message system for fans. Signs are posted throughout the stadium with the number, encouraging fans to contact security if they feel they're being harassed.

"It's by no means the judge and jury and we won't eject someone without due cause," said Dolphins COO Bryan Wiedmeier, who reported that his team gets more text messages than any other team in the league - over 100.

"I think that's a testament to the signage we have throughout our stadium. People are using the system and it's another tool we can bring to the command center to track misbehaving fans," he said. The text messages are displayed on a computer monitor with a scrolling tab, like a news ticker. After a call is received, Wiedmeier said his operations director often dispatches a security team member to observe the site before taking action.

Mercurio said the 49ers also use a text messaging service to track fan behavior. Each call is manually inputted into the VenueSoft system and at the end of the day, he can print out a report tracking all incidents throughout the stadium.

"It's improved the way we do operations and helped us plan our staffing levels," he said.

"If I'm seeing an increase in incidents in one section of the parking lot during pregame, I know to move officers to that location in the future. Conversely, I can use these reports to show the NFL we're making progress with

our security operations."



Interviewed for this story: **Jim Mercurio**, (408) 562-4949; **Chad Ladov**, (510) 922-8617; **Brian McCarthy**, (212) 450-2000; **Bryan Wiedmeier**, (954) 452-7000

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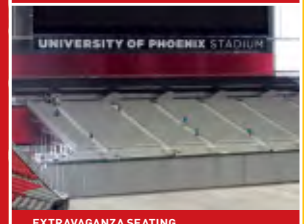
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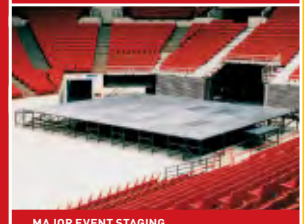
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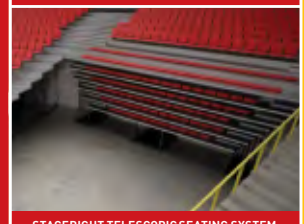
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