

BUSINESS

Mobile phones are the ticket to Rangers games

First, there were tickets ... Then, there were tickets you printed from your PC ... Now, the tickets are on your cellphone

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Billboards for the Texas Rangers suggest fans go see a baseball game and give their BlackBerry some alone time. But now the team is encouraging customers to bring their mobile devices to the stadium.

Starting today, your mobile phone can be your ticket to the game.

The Rangers are among a handful of Major League Baseball teams to launch Tickets@ Phone, a technology that sends a barcode to a mobile phone or device that's read by a scanner to gain entry to a game.

For busy baseball fans, the new technology means being able to buy tickets online at the last minute while avoiding lines at the will-call window.

"We're giving people the flexibility to buy tickets anywhere and anytime," said Andrew Silverman, the Rangers' executive vice president of sales and marketing.

The Tickets@Phone launch also will give the team more detailed information about its customers – and how best to sell to them.

While the so-called mobile tickets today include only a bar code, officials hope to soon be able to target key customers with customized offers for tickets and merchandise over their mobile phones.

Whether on your personal computer or mobile phone, electronic tickets enable the team to do the kind of targeted marketing that wasn't possible with paper tickets.

For example, a customer who went to three games this year might receive an e-mail offer for a mini-package for next season.

"We can present offers based on the day of the week they've purchased games for in the past," Mr. Silverman said.

When the Los Angeles Angels came to town this month, the team scoured its database for folks who bought tickets to previous Angels games and sent them special offers.

The Rangers have learned that fans are getting more comfortable with online promotions and offers. Two years ago, 26 percent of the Coca-Cola Rangers Family Pack promotion sales were redeemed online. This year, online redemptions account for more than half of them.

Data mining

Data mining isn't new to the world of consumer products and services. But professional sports teams are playing catch-up. The industry is putting more energy into electronic ticket sales, where customer data is more efficiently captured and analyzed, said Eric Fisher, who writes about baseball and technology for *SportsBusiness Journal*.

With paper ticket sales – even to corporate customers – "the team didn't have much sense of who was using them and why," Mr. Fisher said.

That kind of information is particularly important for midmarket teams such as the Rangers, whose games regularly have unsold seats, Mr. Fisher said.

By learning more about their customers, the team can create targeted campaigns at key segments, through loyalty programs and marketing additional products, in hopes of gaining a greater share of sports and entertainment spending, said Sucharita Mulpuru, an e-commerce

analyst with Forrester Research.

"This is a whole new slew of data, and they're trying to leverage real-time marketing wherever possible," Ms. Mulpuru said.

The Rangers' mobile ticketing technology was developed by MLB Advanced Media LP's unit Tickets.com and partner Mobiqa Ltd. of Edinburgh, Scotland.

2002 debut

Mobile tickets made their global debut in 2002, during a Primal Scream concert in London. Since then, the technology has been tested at more than 200 events and is regularly used at 20 venues around the world, said Don Cameron, Mobiqa's director of sales and marketing.

Mr. Cameron said adoption has reached as high as 50 percent for a handful of events with a young, tech-savvy audience, though it's still in its embryonic stage.

"The biggest challenge is convincing mainstream groups to go for it," Mr. Cameron said. "A few years ago, no one thought about print-at-home tickets, but now everyone does it, whether it's your airline ticket or your ballpark ticket. We're following the same curve."

Derek Palmer, who leads Tickets.com's sales and operations efforts, said the new technologies reflect a transition in the ticketing industry, as teams and other entertainment providers try to build stronger connections with their customers.

"We're trying to turn walk-up customers into presale candidates who get additional promotions and maybe become season ticket holders," Mr. Palmer said.

New this year

The Oakland Athletics, Pittsburgh Pirates and Washington Nationals started offering Tickets@Phone this year, and several other MLB teams

are considering adding it.

The digital delivery has been used for relatively few tickets in its first few months, which officials say is due to its newness and the predominance of ticket sales before the season begins.

The Oakland A's sell about 100 tickets a game delivered to a mobile device. The technology is used for a little under 100 tickets a game for the Nationals and for around 50 tickets a game for the Pirates.

Tickets.com rival Ticketmaster is also developing a mobile-ticketing technology and expects to launch it in Ireland this month and in the U.S. next year, spokeswoman Bonnie Poindexter said.

The Rangers' technology efforts are picking up speed.

While tickets have been sold online for more than a decade, Rangers fans have been able to print them at home for only two years.

Since 2005, the Rangers have also allowed season ticket holders to electronically forward their passes to a friend or associate – especially helpful when busy schedules don't permit going at the last minute. Not incidentally, it gives the Rangers insight into potential customers who wouldn't be visible with paper tickets.

Secondary market

The team has also tapped into the secondary market, allowing season ticketholders to sell seats through an MLB-sanctioned site. The team and its partners get a percentage of the sales and additional leads for new customers.

The six ticket kiosks that debuted this season at the stadium have been gaining traffic. The Rangers plan to add more kiosks next year and are considering ways to place them in heavy traffic areas such as shopping malls during the off-season.

Arlington resident Juan Salazar used a kiosk recently to pick up tickets he bought online. In less than two minutes, the kiosk spit out his 14 tickets.

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"It's just more convenient," he said. "Look at how many people are in line" at the will-call window.

Mr. Salazar typically just prints tickets at home, but for such a large group, "I thought it would be a waste of toner," he said.

The system still has some glitches. Mr. Salazar's online purchase included a food voucher, which he had to collect at the will-call window.

The new mobile tickets will have some inevitable glitches as well – for example, if your phone's battery runs down. But will-call can always look up your ticket by the credit card number, Rangers officials said.