

REENTRY PLAN

College football marketers working to bring fans back for next season

BY JAMES ZOLTAK

REASSURING GUESTS WARY of returning to events like college football games in a post-pandemic environment is a continuing challenge that can only be met by communication, a panelist at Paciolan's Pacnet '21 virtual conference said.

"For us, it's just been all about transparency," Matt Carabajal, senior associate athletic director for ticket sales and operations for the University of North Texas, said during a panel discussion, "Ticketing: Pricing & Packaging (Renewals, Packages and Singles)," at the event in late February. "So, I think those conversations are better had usually one on one than trying to mass communicate it."

Be transparent "about what you're doing in your stadium," Carabajal advised.

"At least (at North Texas) and I think a lot of places, a lot of the safety procedures and things for those of us that had fans last season, I don't see them going away really anytime soon," he said. "A lot of that stuff worked, and that's just going to become a part of the normal game day, I think. So, just (reassure) fans about that."

Carabajal, who spent nearly 10 years in ticket operations at Ohio State University before moving to North Texas, also advised ticket managers to "be smart and do your research about your community."

"What are restaurants doing?



C'MON BACK: North Texas is telling potential football ticket buyers that it had 25% to 30% capacity at Apogee Stadium last season and will be ready for more in the fall.

What are other places where people spend their free time doing, so that you can fit into that lane of comfort for your fans," he said.

Michael Solomon, senior vice president of annual fund and donor services of the Texas A&M 12th Man Foundation, said for 2020 that fans were encouraged to defer if they were not feeling safe. For the coming football season, A&M is working to convince fans that being a season-ticket holder is the best way to guarantee seats for the season.

"And then, if we get to August and we can't have a full stadium, then we'll work with you, but you've got to be a season-ticket holder to be a part of whatever program we roll out," Solomon said

Dan Boyd, associate athletics director of sales and service at the University of Miami, said the Hurricanes fans who attended reduced capacity home games

at Hard Rock Stadium in 2020 demonstrated their commitment, so the communication strategy for that segment involves thanking them "for going through the season with us" and then telling them there's "one more step to continue the good times" as a "momentum type of dialogue."

"And then, really from there for those fans who didn't attend, we focused a lot of energy on painting the picture: It's been a while since they've been at Hard Rock Stadium to enjoy 'Canes football," he said. "So, reminding them of the memories that they made with their family. Maybe that's a different message for someone with a youth ticket or with our young alumni, talking about the tailgating experience and getting back to normal, things to look forward to."

In response to a question on allowing season-ticket holders to essentially defer again, Carabajal

said North Texas customers haven't been seeking that option.

"For us, our message is centering on, 'Hey, we had almost 25% to 30% capacity with seven home games last year.' I think it's a safe assumption to say, and you know, we all knock on wood and hope, that's only going to get better going into '21, so in our situation we feel very confident that we're going to be able to accommodate the large majority if not all of our season-ticket holders. That's really just what we're trying to reiterate with them," he said.

Boyd said the Hurricanes "went strong with our no-risk renewal messaging, saying that at this time, it's not an option to defer and save your seats year over year."

When it comes to handling accounts that have more money in credit than what a customer purchased for 2021, Solomon said that "by default, we're rolling that

money to 2022.”

“We’re going to try to convert it to a donation this year ... but we’re not pressing too hard,” he said. “We press so hard for those gifts in the fall all the way through to Dec. 31. We’re giving them a little bit of leeway right now and just kind of saying let’s just move that money to ’22.”

Boyd said one approach might be to get such customers to apply their credit to an away game or a bowl game, “something that can keep it in this fiscal year, get a full renewal in ’22 maybe.”

On pricing strategies in light of cost sensitivity, Boyd said the Hurricanes have 33 price levels for football (A&M has 53), and the team looks at price sensitivity per area, “whether that’s through historical data, secondary market resale value and other data points to arrive at pricing decisions.”

On auto-renewals, Boyd said the Hurricanes went to a 12-month billing cycle, introduced in 2018.

“It starts in August and runs through July of the following year, so technically you start paying be-

fore the first game even kicks off for the following season,” he said. “Initially, it was well-received. We got a great start to it, with about 7% of our base, from account level perspective, enrolled. And we were able to grow that to nearly 16% in 2019 and that’s an auto renewal cycle that you have to opt out via written consent to be able to stop that billing plan.”

On the subject of packaging, Carabajal said his team goes through the schedule and tries to focus on the top two games first.

“So, if we have a nonconference home game that’s pretty big, you know, if SMU’s coming down, or if we have a pretty good conference rivalry game at home, that’s going to get the bulk of our early attention and packaging with the goal of trying to sell those out,” he said. “We’re still doing your traditional two-game, four-game, three-game mini-plans, but we’re really trying to put the emphasis on those big two or three games and get those to be ... great experiences.”

The thought, Carabajal said, “is if we get you in here for our

two best games ... hopefully that’s the hook for you to come on out to three games, four games, become a season-ticket holder.”

Solomon said A&M has taken a more traditional packaging approach.

“We play Alabama and Auburn at home in the odd years and in the even years we play them both on the road, so the odd years, we always do an Alabama-based three-game package and Auburn-based three-game package. Those are big draws for us. In the even years we usually make it more of a customized three-game pack. We usually don’t have the anchor game. LSU at home is big, but it’s Thanksgiving weekend and it’s just been a challenge for us. So, we’ve got a more traditional three-game package. You get an A game, a B game and then the less fan-favorite game called C game; the 30-point game.”

Boyd said the Hurricanes haven’t gotten overly complex with their mini-plan packages.

“I think we’ve used it more of a marketing tool, a new way to message almost single-game

inventory at the end of day,” he said. “Our marketplace here in Miami is very active in the secondary market from a volume of tickets standpoint and that’s more of a lifestyle decision, when you’re looking at all the other pro sports teams here in the South Florida region as well as all the events and festivals and things like that in the Miami area. So, our consumers are naturally gravitating toward some of those secondary markets like StubHub, almost creating their own packages that honestly, from a margin standpoint, it’s hard to compete (with) sometimes.”

Boyd’s team has tried to find a balance, “whether it’s selective inventory or that difference between the season-ticket holder discount and the individual game price and try to find a middle road.”

Solomon said A&M is looking at creating a flexible seven-game pass that appeals to the under-40 crowd “who isn’t going to decide what they want to do; they’re not going to commit to coming to every game ... to be a season-ticket holder.”

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