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WHERE WILL TICKETS GO NEXT?

What is the technology roadmap for event and venue ticketing? *Dave Birch of Consult Hyperion discusses how contactless smart tickets will not only help anti-counterfeiting, but open up a whole new world of benefits.*

When the City of Manchester Stadium became the first all-smart card stadium in the country, it was a major step on the road to next generation event and venue management. People had been talking about smart cards for years, but it took the arrival of new "contactless" smart cards (like London's well-known Oyster card) and a bit of vision to make the technology work quickly, reliably and safely in a stadium environment. Today, the public are familiar with contactless: their new Barclays' debit cards are contactless, their transport cards are contactless and soon their phones will be contactless too as "near-field communication" or "NFC" interfaces arrive for mass market handsets.

Shifting away from paper tickets to contactless smart tickets opens up a whole new world of costs and benefits, not only anti-counterfeiting and revenue management on the ticketing side. Contactless cards are secure enough to replace cash, for example. Cash-free venues, for example, are a great proposition for all stakeholders and the results from the Ricoh Arena, the home of Coventry City FC, bear this out. Before they went cashless, the average half-time transaction time was 63 seconds and it is now down to an average of 22 seconds, which means supporters receive their food and drinks quicker. The number of transactions as a percentage of the attendance has increased from 47 per cent to 57 per cent and the average spend has gone up as well.

Cashlessness is only the beginning though. As more and more venues move over to contactless systems (and LiveNation have announced they want to move to contactless for music venues as well), the ability to deliver value-added services through mobile phones will become a win-win: the simplicity and security of contactless combined with the ease of use and connectivity of the mobile phone. Ever in the forefront, in fact, Manchester City ran a pilot using Nokia handsets three years ago and discovered that fans loved it. So much so that Duncan Martin, then their Head of Retail, said that[1] "we believe that eventually more mobile phones will be used to gain entry to the stadium than smart cards."

Our experiences with NFC – for Barclays and TfL, for the O2 Wireless festival, for London Fashion Week — have been the same. Customers loved being able to just wave their phone to get on the Tube or buy a coffee, using phones instead of expensive gates to read fans

[1] Duncan Martin, Head of Retail at MCFC, quoted in Card Technology (April 2007).

wristbands worked perfectly and using phones to pick up information on clothes by simply touching displays was quick, easy and appreciated. The benefits are just as great for the service providers, vendors and other stakeholders: more information coming back from points of access and sale, interactive channels to customers, real-time data.

There's just one snag: the mobile operators and handset manufacturers have been slow in getting their act together, agreeing standards and defining device profiles [1]. So now service providers are beginning to move ahead without them in two ways: by putting the contactless chip in stickers or microSD cards to attach to phones or adopting 2D barcode technology as an interim. 2D barcode technology provides a great way to get started on mobile: obviously it works best for online systems (because barcodes can be copied, of course). When I went to Swindon vs. Brentford last weekend (a magnificent 3-2 win for the Robins), I was at one of the first games in the country to offer mobile ticketing: Swindon made 150 mobile tickets available for the fixture.

What does all of this mean? It means that it's worth experimenting with both contactless tokens (whether cards, stickers or wristbands) and mobile barcodes for tickets and coupons as a way of putting in place the building blocks for the next generation: the combination of mobile phones and contactless interfaces is inevitable and will deliver a rare and genuine win-win for venues, clubs, vendors and fans alike. A good strategy, then, is to use the 2D barcode system to get the back office in place and get the fans use to using their phones for coupons and specials offers. Use existing contactless cards and stickers to get fans in and out the venues quickly and to introduce cashless vending.

Then, when the NFC handsets come into use, everything is in place to give the fans next-generation ticketing, payments and value-added services on the platform that they really want: their phone.

REFERENCES

[1] P. Gauthier. *NFC Past, Present and Future*. at (16th Feb. 2010).