

## BASKETBALL: Winning is a high-tech effort

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By Sam Hiser

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Basketball lends itself in special ways to digital repackaging and consumption. Its scale, its physicality, the absence of equipment and the audience's close proximity to the action help explain why technology fits the sport so well; its intimacy is ideal for technological amplification.

In creative hands, technology will add value and has become important to a professional basketball team in the US. But it does not make the game.

The business of a basketball franchise could be seen as boiling down to two mutually dependent things: selling tickets and winning games.

For selling tickets and managing the fan experience, IT systems and web services are key, and techniques are still evolving. But you know the technology is getting good and becoming an integral part of the game when you stop noticing it – like a good referee – and the important information applications basketball deploys are quickly disappearing behind the hot dog stand and up into the rafters.

One tool that helps with ticketing is StratTix, a web service provided by Stratbridge, of Cambridge Massachusetts. A good example of the software-as-a-service trend, StratTix offers an online browser-based visualisation of an arena's seating diagram (in National Basketball Association vernacular, arenas are called "buildings").

The service collects data from the buildings' and ticket agents' back-end sales systems and offers salesforces a view of the seating chart, updated over the internet in close to real time. It provides data weeks in advance of an event and helps sales teams identify contiguous seating availability when they create block specials, plan affinity packages, organise discounts and manage promotional initiatives.

Since the relationship began last year, the league itself (NBA Entertainment) and 26 of the 30 NBA teams have started using StratTix. League officials indicate that StratTix seating plans might one day be viewable by the public.

In the secondary ticket market, there is StubHub.com, an online clearing-house for buyers and sellers of tickets for all kinds of entertainment, including basketball. StubHub, like Ebay on a good day, has increased confidence among participants in the secondary ticket market, while making secondary pricing more efficient.

Barcoding and online ticket transfer systems like those offered by Ticketmaster (Madison Square Garden's outsourced ticketing agent), for example, also increase market efficiency and may even increase game attendance. The standard case is when Uncle Harry has spare tickets and can't get them across town to his nephews by game time. Now he can make the transfer via e-mail. This explains in part why NBA attendance continues to squeeze its natural vacancy rate downward.

For the team, video has always been important and vital to performance analysis, but digital video adds a new dimension. Mike Budenholzer, an assistant coach with the San Antonio Spurs, says that video makes him more efficient. He adds: "Organisation in teaching always helps. You can put things together to make it all make sense using the best examples."

The Spurs take one of the high-angle broadcast camera feeds during the game and rip it into a compressed digital format on to a local server. The team's video coach sits court-side with a laptop tagging the digitised media. In addition, the team's statistician sits alongside, keeping another set of electronic books.

During tagging, the video coach is clicking in nearly real time on an interface that frames the streaming video feed. According to the action, he selects a player's name along with a game situation or context.

Coaches and players can later watch sequences of clips sliced and diced by player-name and keyword, and some of these clips can even be used at half-time – in moderation.

Mr Budenholzer indicates that the art is in communicating the right things at the right time, because basketball needs to be instinctive on the court. "Players can't be out there thinking," he explains. "You don't want to bog them down with too much information." For the Spurs, technology is important, but it is not the team's first concern under the JumboTron. Mark Cuban, owner of the Dallas Mavericks, agrees: "The challenge is finding the data you need and then having good management in place to use it correctly."

The area in which digital video has made the biggest difference to basketball is distribution, consumption and branding. The NBA's 44,000 hours of programming produced in 2005-2006 went to 215 countries in 43 languages.

The NBA's leadership has captured and codified distribution opportunities to provide NBA coverage across many outlets and modes of access – from the living room, to the sports bar, to the desktop computer at work and home, to the handheld device and the cellphone.

As content, basketball is highly attractive to distribution interests because it's so compelling to viewers. Asked if content is really king, Mr Cuban says: "When distribution is in place, it's the defining element. Without distribution, it's not."

There is now so much basketball programming in so many places – some free, some paid-for – it is impossible to watch it all. But this is not a glut; it exists because people like basketball and are willing to pay for it.

The league office – NBA Entertainment – also produces a lot of content itself. Its programming facility in Secaucus New Jersey is where the NBA's video loggers – one person logging each live game – capture video and log the content and statistics used by the league (this is in addition to video and statistics captured by the team video coach and statisticians at court-side).

The capture includes the video stream plus metadata: game time clock, score and the searchable tags.

Game video in Secaucus is provided in two flows – one available almost immediately for highlights on NBA.com, NBA TV or the local news broadcast, and the other at a less frantic pace for the NBA's weekly or long-form content through the same channels and for the vast NBA video archive.

This does not even begin to describe the interesting life of a raw basketball statistic passing from creation on through the various statistics distribution chains – one of which is the new LED advertising banners on the roofs of taxi cabs.

Nor does it include the interesting 3D HD initiative the league is incubating with technology from Hollywood producer, James Cameron, and his cinematographer, Vincent Pace. It was to be showcased in Las Vegas during the NBA All-Star weekend this month.

David Stern, the NBA's feisty commissioner, gives a clear picture of someone driving the bus – someone awake, not a technophile but someone canny to the value of information and not shy of using it to build the business.

As Mr Cuban says: "The NBA is reaching an international audience, and technology certainly is a benefit there. Our website has more international visitors than North American ones."

What's more, NBA Entertainment reports that 20 per cent of the page-views on NBA.com come from China.

Overall, technology means basketball is bigger, clearer, more available and more itself. This should worry the stewards of all the other beautiful games.