

Club taking a swing at no-cash concessions

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The Wichita Wingnuts are telling their fans their money is no good at the ballpark.

In an effort to speed concession lines, reduce employee theft and make a little history in the process, the Wingnuts will this season become the first U.S. sports team to operate a cashless facility.

Fans will buy food, drink and merchandise and access kids zone attractions with credit cards or Wingnuts stored-value cards in \$5, \$20, \$50 and \$100 increments they buy at the ballpark.

The only time they will use cash, other than to buy game tickets at the box office, is to buy the stored-value cards at four to six kiosks and mobile vendors stationed near concession stands inside the building. Money will never touch the hands of Game Time Food and Beverage of Chicago, the team's concessionaire.

Are the Wingnuts nuts? Some in the industry think maybe, but team officials say they relish the opportunity to innovate.

Wichita Pro Sports, the local group that owns the first-year independent American Association baseball team, has signed a five-year guaranteed contract with smart-card marketer Total Venue Control to activate the new point-of-sale system at 6,100-seat Lawrence-Dumont Stadium.



WICHITA PRO SPORTS

Wichita Wingnuts fans will pay by credit or stored-value cards at Lawrence-Dumont Stadium.

The deal comes at no cost to the team or concessionaire. Chicago-based TVC is investing about \$50,000 upfront to install the equipment.

"If you want to get ahead you take risks, and this is a very minute risk in my opinion," Wingnuts President Chris Presson said.

In its deal with the Wingnuts, TVC generates its revenue by sharing in the increase in per capita spending, signing card sponsors and collecting "breakage," or unspent card balances, said Bill Rayner, firm president and a 30-year sports concessions executive.

Because the Wingnuts have no sales history, TVC provided them records showing per capita increases from using smart cards at European sports venues. TVC and the Wingnuts agreed on revenue splits that vary depending on the food and merchandise items, Rayner said.

In a separate agreement with Game Time, TVC shares in the revenue the concessionaire saves by not having to pay labor and other cash handling expenses associated with counting money at the end of a game.

That figure is projected to be \$18,000 this season in Wichita, said Game Time President Brian Klassman. It could be \$100,000 at a major league facility, according to Rayner.

The team, through TVC, is talking to regional convenience store chain QuikTrip about the possibility of sponsoring the cards, a QuikTrip spokesman confirmed.

Total Venue Control is scheduled to go online May 7 for the first of 48 Wingnuts home games at their 74-year-old ballpark. The team has planned events in the next two months to show season-ticket holders how to use the cards to make purchases and then claim their unspent balances on site. TVC will double its normal staffing at the ballpark for the first few homestands to coordinate concession transactions.

Some industry professionals think eliminating the cash option might alienate some fans. Food consultant Chris Bigelow tested TVC's system during a circus in a suburban St. Louis arena in 2006 and still wonders why a team would force its customers to take the extra step of buying a stored-value card to pay for popcorn.

"Everybody is going to be very interested to see if it works," he said. "If the operators could get rid of cash it would be the greatest thing in the world, because it is time-consuming. My concern is what the customer wants."

The Jacksonville Jaguars, Carolina Panthers and Chicago White Sox are among major league teams that tried using smart cards in the mid- to late 1990s and discontinued them because of limited fan interest.

Ken Young has the unique perspective of being president of Ovation Food Services, a concessions firm, and owner of four minor league baseball teams. Young predicts the Wingnuts will accept cash at concession stands before the American Association season ends in late August.

"You're forcing people to get in a second line," Young said. "It's a huge disservice to the fans."

Game Time expects to reduce employee theft of cash, which can account for up to 5 percent of annual sales, Klassman said. That's greater than the 3 percent figure Rayner says exists in some markets, and much higher than the one-quarter percent Bigelow said is common at most arenas and stadiums.