

REBUILDING FAN CONFIDENCE

Mark Zhang, Ed.D., Lou Marcianni, Ed.D. and Christopher Kinnan, MIS, MAAS, MS, examine some of the lessons learned for venue reopenings in North America during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Covid-19 pandemic is a new experience for almost everyone in the world; something not seen since the 1919 Spanish Flu pandemic.

The staggering financial losses stemming from virus control measures and social distancing policies, require the sports and entertainment industry to be creative and translate lessons learned into practice to ensure health and safety for fans and stakeholders.

The Innovation Institute for Fan Experience (IIFX) commissioned a study to determine what managers and executives think about the effectiveness of current sports reopening practices. The study authors interviewed eight industry executives representing the **NCAA Division 1 (D-I)**, the **National Basketball Association (NBA)**, the **National Hockey League (NHL)**, **Major League Baseball (MLB)**, **National Football League (NFL)**, and an entertainment venue about reopening events to media and fans. The executives and managers surveyed reveal:

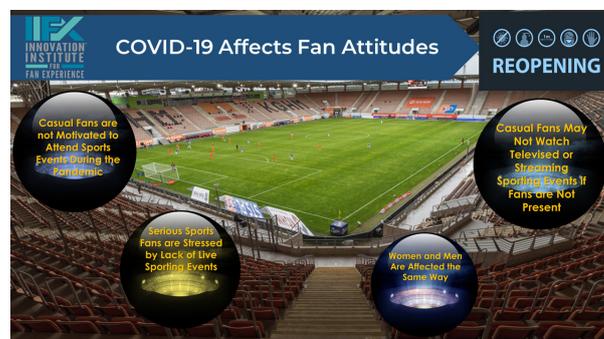
- 91.4% think wearing masks is important.
- 79.4% think social distancing practices are important.
- 79.4% think additional cleaning staff and enhanced sanitation is important, but are split about whether extra sanitation, cleaning, and housekeeping are a burden (38%) or a help (34%).
- 65.7% are optimistic about resuming normal operations after there is a vaccine.
- 60.6% have venues that are currently closed, and 15.2% allow spectators.
- 60% say Covid-19 will have long-lasting effects on the industry.

- 41% are not optimistic about the industry resuming some pre-Covid normality.
- Most are uncertain about the importance of temperature checks – 34.2% are neutral.

Technology and the fan experience:

- 85.7% say cashless systems are needed for concession sales
- 83.5% say pre-packaged food products important
- 82.8% reported that mobile phone ticketing practices are important
- 80.1% agree that cashless systems are the future for events
- 77.1% say social media is an important way to communicate health safety information and practices
- 75.7% have team or franchise apps
- 67.3% agree that an integrated, sport-focused social platform helps fan engagement with teams and athletes
- 58.8% indicate that contact tracing is important
- 55.8% say financial losses will prevent investment in technologies and innovation
- 52% do not envision full automation of floor or service jobs, but cashless payment systems will reduce the need for service workers

Key Takeaways from the casual fans (television or online viewer), moderate fans (viewer, attend a couple of matches a season), fans (regular viewer and attends matches a few times a season), and serious fans (regular viewer, attends often, and season ticket holders):



- The pandemic is affecting male and female sports fans the same way.
- The serious sports fans (26.72%) are much more stressed by the lack of live sporting events than moderate sports fans (29.77%).
- Casual fans (17.6%) might not be interested watching sporting events on television or online when matches are played in an empty stadium or arena.
- Casual fans (17.6%) are not motivated to attend sports events in person, during the pandemic, even when the stadiums allow fans to attend.

The surveys show that fans, talent, athletes, staff, vendors, stakeholders, and entire communities need reassurance that their health and safety are a high priority. Fans need to hear it and see it from the most senior executives and the staff.

Fans are watching management, so every word, action, sign and activity must build fan confidence so that they can again enjoy the spectacle and have great memories and experiences at future sports and entertainment events. ■