There’s an unusual city in South Florida that spends all but 65 hours a year empty. But during that brief window of time, it’s a bustling hub of competition, celebration and consumption. About 10 times a year, some 70,000 of its citizens make the pilgrimage from the surrounding region onto a half-a-square-mile plot that many consider sacred. The citizens pay willingly for what is, to most, an emotional experience, while city officials try to work at peak efficiency in this thin slice of time to ensure the city’s financial health and gather the resources to invest in a strong future. Finally, after about six hours, the tide of citizens recedes back up the roads they came in on. And if their memory of the experience is good enough, they’ll come back and do it again.

That “city” is Sun Life Stadium, home to the Miami Dolphins of the National Football League (NFL), as well as home of the Miami Hurricanes, the Orange Bowl, and a number of other events throughout the year. The Miami Dolphins, the anchor tenant for Sun Life Stadium, is beloved by fans and an integral part of the community’s identity. Three years ago, the opportunity to be a part of that mystique led Jim Rushton to join the team as its Chief Revenue Officer. Now a part of sustaining the team’s winning legacy, it’s Rushton’s job to ensure that every phase of the operation is in sync to generate maximum revenue, the lifeblood that keeps the team on a strong footing both now and into the future.

Jim Rushton, Senior Vice President and Chief Revenue Officer, Sun Life Stadium

Leadership Spotlight

As Chief Revenue Officer of Sun Life Stadium, Jim Rushton has a direct impact on the local revenue of a storied football franchise with a loyal fan base. He saw the opportunity to strengthen that loyalty by making the game day experience more convenient, personalized and satisfying for fans.

How Sun Life Stadium got smarter

The fact that Sun Life Stadium, home of the Miami Dolphins, sits on Don Shula Drive says something about the importance of tradition to one of the NFL’s most winning franchises. That said, the Dolphins have a clear sense of the challenges all sports teams face today in competing for eyeballs and loyalty with media options like HDTV and mobile devices. The Sun Life Stadium and Dolphins front office team recognize that solidifying that loyalty requires the team to redefine the game-day experience so that fans leave more satisfied than ever and resolve to come back for more. Its challenge was to extract order from the extreme complexity of stadium operations, and use it to shape every facet of the fan’s experience into a day to be remembered.

Let’s Build a Smarter Planet
Higher expectations and higher stakes

There was a time when selling more beer and hot dogs might have been good enough revenue enhancers. But today it’s a far more complex equation, with teams now obliged to think about their fans’ total experience. After 17 years of playing quarterback for the Miami Dolphins, NFL Hall of Fame inductee Dan Marino knows something about keeping Dolphins fans loyal. While winning helps, Marino explains, true loyalty comes from the quality of the game experience, and from the sense that the team cares about delivering that experience. “On game day, it starts outside the stadium—in the traffic flow, the parking, getting through the gate quickly, finding their seats and having their favorite food and beverage close by. All those factors help to build loyalty,” says Marino.

Indeed, between the trips to and from the game, the fans’ experience within the stadium is also marked by mobility – getting from the parking lot to and then through the turnstiles to one’s seat, and then on to the restroom, to concession stands, then back to the car at the end of the game. And like anything in motion, friction points like long lines can disrupt and slow this traffic flow, with adverse impacts on fan satisfaction and game-day revenue.

The expected benefits of Sun Life Stadium’s smarter stadium solution

- Increase process efficiency within stadium operations by more than 90 percent
- Increase the ticket revenue and non-ticket revenue (such as concessions sales)
- Reduce power consumption related to HVAC
- Increase fan loyalty, leading to wider game attendance

Like his peers on other NFL teams, Jim Rushton recognized the inherent competition posed by growing ownership of large-screen HDTVs and peripheral devices, which have closed the gap between the live and televised experience. “It’s no secret that for a lot of fans, the quality of their live-game experience will determine whether or not they come back for more,” says Rushton. “That’s powerful motivation to make the game-day experience as easy and rewarding as possible for our fans.”

Rushton got a sense of how seriously the team took the issue just days into his tenure, when Dolphins CEO Mike Dee took him aside and advised him to push the boundaries of his job description to include finding new and innovative ways to improve the fan experience and strengthen the business model. “The goal was to save our fans time by alleviating friction points, and on the monetary side, to enable a more efficient business that would lessen the need to raise ticket prices and provide the resources to invest in the future,” Rushton explains. “It was a clear mandate for a new way of doing business.”
Redefining the fan experience

About a year later, that vision was set in motion through a series of free-ranging discussions involving key Sun Life Stadium and Dolphins executives, members of the IBM Smarter Cities team and Flagship Solutions Group (“Flagship”), the team’s longtime technology provider and an IBM Business Partner. Over the preceding months, Rushton had worked with Terry Howard, Senior Vice President and Chief Technology Officer of Sun Life Stadium, on a vision to pull together all the disparate streams of information needed to run the stadium into a common, unified resource, which could be used to streamline and coordinate processes for the benefit of fans and the team’s bottom line. The gap in their vision was the actual mechanism to make it happen.

When the conversation turned to the IBM Intelligent Operations Center (IOC), and its ability to unify a city’s operations through centralized intelligence, Rushton sensed a turning point. It was he, in fact, who first invoked the comparison of Sun Life Stadium to a small city. Around that intuitive point of agreement, the team soon formed a consensus that IOC would serve as an ideal foundation for incorporating the principles and practices of Smarter Cities into the stadium’s day-to-day operations and put a plan together to move the idea forward.

Leadership is...
The creativity of cross-industry thinking

Stadiums aren’t cities, but they have similar challenges and, by extension, can have similar solutions. That was the premise that Jim Rushton followed in looking at the IBM IOC solution.

“Like a city, we have the challenge of coordinating a series of complex and often separate operations to maximize our revenue. What makes us different is that we have to compress that down to about 65 hours year.”

– Jim Rushton, Senior Vice President and Chief Revenue Officer, Sun Life Stadium

Thinking like a team

Job one was for Rushton and Howard to work with the team’s internal stakeholders, whose buy-in and process insights were essential to the project’s success. Their most fundamental task was to explain to process owners—in areas such as concessions, security and facilities management—what the big picture was, and what it meant to their parts of the business. This was consistent with a Dolphins culture that stressed consensus-driven change over top-down edicts.

Their second, more practical mission was to get a handle on where the data streams were generated within the stadium’s operations, and how they could be tied into the stadium-as-smart-city model. Workshop-style meetings with process owners and IT staff produced a short list of attractive sources, with point-of-sale data from concessions, traffic data from ticketing gates and security monitoring data at the top of the list. To go even deeper, the Flagship team went behind the scenes on game days, observing those process flows that—while invisible to game attendees—had a major impact on the quality of their experience.

Lessons learned...
Want buy-in? Talk about it.

Jim Rushton knew he had a mandate for change, but he knew that putting teamwork first was essential to getting all the essential players on board with the smarter stadium vision.

“It’s always been about getting people in the room and explaining to them how it will benefit their departments. It’s a collaborative approach that works best in promoting change.”

– Jim Rushton
A new nerve center

When Flagship rolled out its first iteration of the intelligent stadium control center a few months later, the valuable lessons it took from these “fly-on-the-wall” exercises were put to good use. The most important action may be on the field, but the most comprehensive measure of a stadium's pulse is in the control room. There, the operations center dashboard (developed by Flagship and powered by the IBM SmartCloud® platform) is displayed front and center on a large screen. The facilities staff has a single real-time summary of weather, turnstile traffic and the status of public safety activities, which frees up more of that expertise for smart tactical decision making.

Down below the executive suite, the development team is translating the operational transparency enabled by IOC into a faster, smoother and more satisfying experience for fans on game day. For instance, by combining real-time turnstile traffic data with live digital video feeds, the stadium’s gate staff will be able to automatically direct fans to the shortest line using digital signage. Similarly, real-time analysis of point-of-sale data will provide the stadium's concession crew with the means to optimize staffing levels at each station to keep lines short and increase overall concession throughput. What’s more, insights from concession sales patterns will be used to target fans with personalized food and beverage specials based on their preferences.

New operational challenges, new solutions

Pro sports teams like the Dolphins know that satisfied fans are the backbone of their franchise. But they also recognize the importance of operational efficiency in sustaining their team’s ability to compete, to keep ticket prices down and to invest in the future. The decision of the local professional baseball franchise to move its 81 games per year out of Sun Life Stadium into its own presented management with an operational challenge. As its revenue sources became more variable, the stadium needs to find a way to make fixed facilities costs – such as heating, ventilation and air-conditioning (HVAC) – adapt accordingly. IOC will eventually be the foundation for the team to develop a smart environmental control solution that combines digital video monitoring and imaging algorithms to detect when various parts of the stadium (such as function rooms) are occupied and automatically shutdown the AC when they aren’t. Given that HVAC is among the largest of the stadium’s facilities costs, intelligently controlling it is expected to save in overhead every year.

With Jim Rushton as the driving force, Sun Life Stadium in Miami is the first major sports venue to employ the IBM IOC solution. The vision to apply the Smarter Cities framework to running a stadium sets the Dolphins apart as a sports franchise willing to think out-of-the-box. And it exemplifies the expansive, creative approach that CEO Mike Dee wanted Rushton to take. Ever the team player, Rushton is loath to claim that the job of chief revenue officer is becoming more important these days – although a clear case can be made given the increasing competition from other sports entertainment content. But he readily acknowledges that the direction he and Howard have taken the team, down the smarter stadium path, promises to strengthen the franchise where it matters most: in its relationship to its fans and in the esteem and respect that the greater Miami community holds for the Dolphins organization.
The right way to build loyalty

Though his boss is pleased with the smarter stadium progress so far, Rushton points out that it’s still early in the game. Much effort is being directed at developing the next phase of the solution, which will incorporate a richer array of fan-directed services that will make the game experience smoother and more satisfying than ever. These include automated alerts that tell fans: when their usual parking lot is full and where to park instead, or which gates have the shortest wait; or when foul weather is imminent. As these capabilities come online, Rushton expects the biggest payoff to come from changing attendance patterns, with more of the team’s fans choosing to attend multiple games throughout the season. “By getting more people into the stadium more often, we’re getting our fans to engage our brand in a more personal and long-lasting way than television,” says Rushton. “As the project unfolds, we are anxious to share how our smarter stadium strategy is making us a stronger franchise. Stay tuned.”