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After a few weeks at home under Louisiana's stay-at-home order, I called one of Northwestern State athletics department's most loyal alumni, supporters, and fans. We did not talk about money, donations, or the new weight room facility campaign. Instead we focused on our families, his business, and how much we were both missing Demon sports after just only two weeks. We hung up an hour later and I realized that the everyday reality of this crisis cannot make me, as a development officer, forget that our donors need us just as much as we need them.

The Northwestern State athletics development and fundraising team is small, consisting of our Athletics Director, Greg Burke, our Associate Athletics Director for External Affairs, Dr. Haley Taitano, and myself. We work extremely hard to maintain those meaningful relationships with our donors, while still addressing the many other administrative tasks in our department.

When COVID-19 shook our day-to-day efforts and functions, we knew it was an important time to nurture these donor relationships. We had to ensure that we were there for our supporters in the same way they are always there for us. Our staff has accomplished this goal in several different ways.

Our first initiative was to ask 60 student-athletes, who were scholarship recipients of athletics endowments, to record 1-minute personal video messages to their benefactors. Every year we invite these benefactors to campus for an annual scholarship banquet, which was canceled like many other university events. In their videos, our athletes thanked their respective benefactor for donating to their scholarship, apologized they could not meet them this year, and encouraged them to stay safe and positive. Our benefactors were thrilled to hear from their student-athlete.

The Northwestern State athletics department also partnered with a local sporting goods store to create an "ALL IN Natchitoches" T-shirt that shows support for our local businesses. It was decided that a portion of the proceeds from the T-shirt sales will also help support scholarships for our student-athletes. We recognize that so many of our sponsors are small local businesses and we want to encourage our community to take care of their

own. To go along with this effort, we have used our social media platforms to highlight and promote our local restaurants and stores and help them generate business.

Lastly, we have not forgotten how important a simple phone call can be. Sometimes, just hearing a familiar voice can lift spirits and encourage others to keep fighting through difficult times. We are calling each donor just to simply check in with them. We understand that we have a responsibility to make sure they are well and to do anything we can to help them.

We have received positive feedback from our outreach efforts, and it has been a welcomed break from the monotony of our current situation. We know sports will return and when that day happens, our donors and supporters will be "ALL IN" cheering for the Demons and supporting our student-athletes the way they always have!



George Seliga

Florida State University
Manager of New Ticket Sales

Selling through a Pandemic

While many of us have endured different trials and tribulations working in sports, very few have experienced the unique challenges that come about when working in athletics during a pandemic. When I began my professional career eight years ago, I never once imagined the possibility of entire sports seasons canceled, student-athletes sent home, and championships claimed with no games played. Processing refunds, communicating with season ticket holders, and handling all of the other tasks associated with the end of winter and spring sports was challenging; however, the most difficult feat to overcome is the tremendous loss of athletics as a whole, which we had to deal with rather abruptly. With uncertainty of how long COVID-19 may impact the world of sports, booster organizations and athletics departments are left in a nightmare scenario unable to wake up. Despite all that is happening, those of us

within the sports industry remain hopeful that there is a light at the end of this dark path. This message of positivity is a sentiment I emphasize heavily

with my sales staff and one that I ask them to share with our fans and potential season ticket holders.

My current team consists of four full-time sales representatives who focus on selling season ticket packages, group packages, partial plans, and booster memberships. When we went on sale for the 2020 football season, the team was successful and on a great start with new sales. Then COVID-19 came to the U.S. and new revenue has now slowed down rapidly. My team is still able to secure some new business, but it is not occurring at the rate it was in the previous three months. Unless something drastically changes, this slow buying period will continue as customers have a "wait and see approach" with the fear that a football season may not ever occur this year. Unfortunately, there is no surefire answer on how to bulk up your ticket sales in such an unprecedented time, but I can share how we are handling our outbound sales approach for now. Hopefully, these points will be able to help guide your sales efforts as well:

For Leadership:

- Set a distinct plan on who should be contacted by your staff
- Check in with your reps daily to see what they are hearing on the phones

For Sales Reps:

- When calling all prospects, let them know that you are thinking of them
- Take a service approach to your calls rather than an aggressive sales approach
- Utilize texting/emails/video calls in addition to phone calls
- Don't be afraid to talk sports!

Sales and service representatives should share a message of sincerity and understanding while maintaining confidence and belief that college athletics will return in the fall. Until then, we must continue to support our fan base through this difficult time and fill our pipeline with new prospects!