





Cutouts are cool, but firms say banners & signage have a bigger return (left); Sponsor activations are popping up alongside cutout fans in some venues (center); The sports event experience is not the same without fans (right).

PHOTOS: AAA FLAG AND BANNER

Fan experience firms pivot to keep venues safe and virtually bring back crowds

COVID-19 has truly turned the sports world upside down in 2020.

And nowhere is that more evident than at venues, most of which have been forced to hold competitions without fans.

The effects go well beyond the teams and fans, literally upending the universe for companies in the business of enhancing the fan experience at live events and forcing these firms to change their game plans on the fly.

"COVID-19 has reduced our business significantly, as most events have been cancelled across the country," said Craig Furst, president and CEO of AAA Flag and Banner. "The silver lining is that we pivoted to providing COVID-19 products and services at the start of the pandemic, which has yielded us some great new relationships that we plan to continue to pursue post-pandemic."

One of those coronavirus-era products has taken a star turn: cutouts of team backers as seat fillers. The avatars not only give televised events a video game-like array of fans in the stands, but teams are selling seats to fans who can then have their likeness "attend" the game.

"We have a great technology for the fan cutouts, which are being placed in seats and bleachers at stadiums and arenas around the country. We have developed online ordering portals that teams use to allow their fans to create a fan cutout with a great user experience," explained Furst.

While the erstwhile stadium crowds look like cardboard cutouts, they are actually 18-by-30-inch replicas created from fan photos, mounted on coroplast, a polyvinyl chloride (PVC) material that is sun, wind, and rain resistant

AAA Flag and Banner's has worked with more than two dozen teams on fan cutouts, from both the professional and collegiate ranks. The idea for producing the avatars actually was the result of another pitch the firm had made to teams: "We initially approached the teams we work with about seat kills, field signage, and COVID safety products," said Furst. "Several MLB teams informed us of their desire to create fan cutouts since the entire league was planning to host

games fan-free...we are onboarding multiple new teams every week, as they realize the demand for fan cutouts is strong among their loyal fan bases."

Furst has been surprised at how popular the cutouts have become, but he said the initiative has spurred

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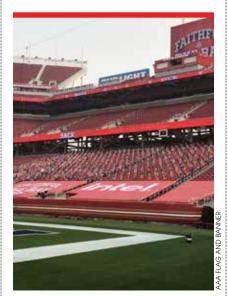
CRAIG FURST

PRESIDENT AND CEO

AAA Flag and Banner

some ingenuity at ballparks. "Teams have done a great job offering clever options for their cutouts, such as the Foul Ball Zone at the Oakland Coliseum, and we're only seeing demand continue to grow."

Fans and sponsors who have enjoyed the novelty of the cutouts but haven't yet taken part may get a mulligan. AAA Flag and Banner's cutouts have become a real phenomenon. "We're hearing rumors that teams may



Great seats, eh buddy?! Cutouts let fans pets, and sports legends virtually attend games

continue offering them well into their 2021 seasons, said Furst.

Opportunities beyond the Avatars in the Outfield

The nascent line of faux fans has been an unexpected windfall for companies making them, but Furst noted they don't offset the signage opportunities when stadiums are filled with human fans. And while the cutouts grab the headlines, there are other new areas of growth for versatile, enterprising fan experience firms.

Some companies have been providing sports clients with a new array of products. AAA Flag and Banner's new line of offerings include anti-microbial films, floor graphics, safety signage, and germ shields. "We have been providing COVID safety products to these facilities and teams, some of which have never been sold before," said Furst, adding, "notably, we worked on the NFL Network's offices in Culver City, California, installing over 1,600 elements throughout the campus to protect staff from germs and bacteria."

The fan experience executive said corporate clients have been even bigger buyers of COVID safety products than sports customers, which account for 40% of revenue for the Los Angeles-based firm. AAA Flag and Banner has been working with professional and collegiate sports teams and leagues since 1984. That's when the family-run company was awarded the contract to provide graphics for the entire 1984 Los Angeles Summer Olympic Games.

The company's clients span the sports spectrum, including the hometown L.A. Rams, the Golden State Warriors, and Miami Dolphins as well as boxing and MMA promoters, the NHL, and action sports.

When fans once again return to fill the stands and watch sports en masse there will of course still be a thriving business for companies who have long provided flags, banners, and other signage, but some of these firms are using the pandemic as an opportunity to refocus their business for what's next.

"We are utilizing this time to reposition our company and transition into a

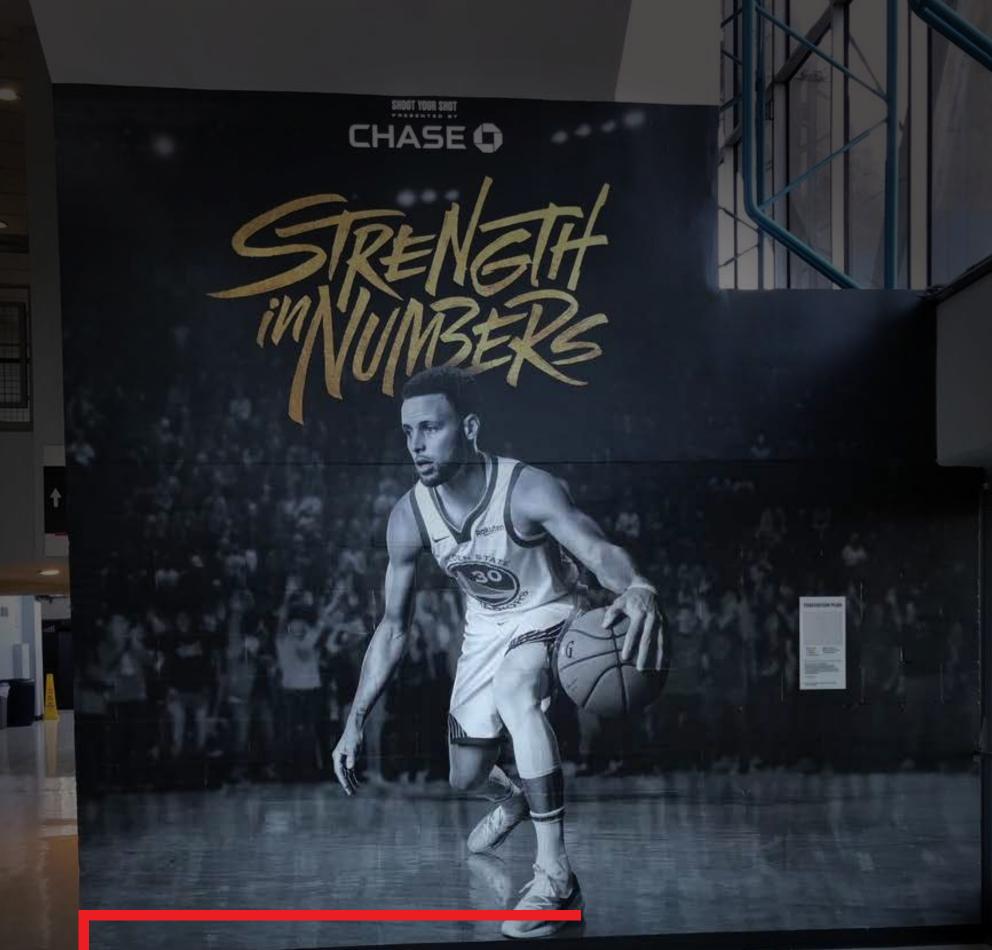


Avatars are cut out to meet current COVID-19 challenges

complete visual solutions provider. More specifically, we are working towards a full company rebrand, substantial expansion of our manufacturing capabilities, as well as a host of new and valuable service options, many of which our customers have been requesting for quite some time," explains Furst. "Digital is the next big thing. We are developing a full line of digital products to offer our clients in the coming months."

This year has obviously been a trying one for everyone, but sports have been particularly hit hard by the absence of fans at most events. As work continues on potential vaccines for COVID-19 and the eventual return to capacity crowds, Furst said AAA Flag and Banner's clients that are able to get through this difficult period are optimistic about 2021, which will be the company's 50th anniversary.

"Sadly, we have heard from some clients who said they are going to shutter their businesses. But thankfully, most of our clients are large organizations that are financially stable and able to wait out the shutdown. Some sports teams are holding back budgets to re-welcome their fans in a big way! Everyone we speak to seems to think sports will be back to a more normal place by next year, if not sooner."



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