

# CROWDPLAY APP LETS FANS ENGAGE

Keep your eye on the ball ... and your phone

BY BRIAN KOONZ

ON A CHILLY SUNDAY AFTERNOON in Foxboro, Massachusetts, Andrew Pizzi '19 discovered his eureka moment as a Quinnipiac sophomore. He was at Gillette Stadium with thousands of fans watching the New England Patriots play when he noticed how many people were staring at their phones.

During the action. During timeouts. During any opportunity, really, to check emails, texts and social media.

"The Patriots are a great team, obviously, with multiple Super Bowls, but I noticed everyone kept looking at their phones," said Pizzi, who studied entrepreneurship and small business management. "This one person was on her phone the entire time. The husband was getting mad, but I realized that I kept looking at my phone, too."

What if there was a way to connect people to the game with their phones, he mused. Even better, what if there was a way to monetize the idea with sports teams and advertisers. He realized he had the entrepreneurial seed of an award-winning business plan.

After three years of developing the concept, building a brand and signing clients, the CrowdPlay app for iOS devices has become a reality for Pizzi, the startup's CEO, along with Dan Picone '19 and Mike Cusano '14.

The free app engages fans at games by having them compete against each other for cash prizes. The app generates questions about the teams during the game. To play, fans follow the game instead of their social media timeline.

"What we discovered—as fans ourselves who go to live sporting events—is that we've been distracted by our phones, too," Pizzi said. "If people constantly look at their phones for reasons unrelated to the game, it diminishes the fan experience, and you have a less-energized crowd."

The CrowdPlay app enables teams and advertisers to build deeper relationships with fans at a time when revenue streams are not as lucrative as they have been. "Fan engagement is a problem that's happening across the board, from all the major sports leagues to the minor leagues and college athletics," Pizzi said. "Attendance affects all of it—ticket sales, concession sales, millions of dollars in lost revenue. If fans don't come to the games, that's all lost revenue."

The CrowdPlay app helps to stop the revenue bleed by enhancing the fan experience and making it fun for those at the venue. "By sending out questions strategically during stoppages in play," Pizzi said, "it encourages fans to follow the game more closely so they can answer the questions correctly.

"Sponsors choose the question categories where they want to appear to better connect with fans. We've proven this avenue to be more effective than the more traditional signs on scoreboards and other locations at the stadium."

So far, People's United Bank has emerged as one of the main sponsors in the CrowdPlay app. The app's sports clients include the Hartford Yard Goats minor league baseball team and college athletic departments at Quinnipiac, Yale, Sacred Heart in Fairfield, Connecticut, and the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts.

After each game, CrowdPlay users are asked how many sponsors they recall seeing on signs around the stadium and whether they can name those sponsors. Users also are asked how many sponsors they recall seeing in the app and to identify them. Out of nearly 1,000 survey respondents, 71% recall every sponsor in the app, Pizzi said.

"Andrew did exactly what our program is designed for," said Dale Jasinski, associate professor of entrepreneurship and strategy. "It's not a very good major for passive learners. But if you're a jockey and you find a horse you want to ride, it can be an awesome experience."



Last year, Pizzi and the others piloted the CrowdPlay app at Quinnipiac men's hockey games at the People's United Center. They also won a student pitch contest at the People's United Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship. The judges included Sara Longobardi, senior executive vice president, retail banking, at People's United Bank, which funded the contest's \$5,000 in prize money that included the \$3,000 grand prize.

"The CrowdPlay app truly stood out as a great solution to a contemporary problem," Longobardi said. "It's such a logical, tech-savvy way to deal with our obsession with our phones and engage attendees at a game. I was so impressed with CrowdPlay's approach."

The CrowdPlay team followed that win with an impressive showing in the annual MassChallenge Boston program for aspiring entrepreneurs. The app was among 105 startups chosen out of 1,800 to receive funding, office space, mentorship and other assistance.

"That was really big for us," Pizzi said. "It was validation that we were on the right track and doing well."

A Quinnipiac University men's ice hockey fan uses the CrowdPlay app last season during a men's ice hockey game at the People's United Center.