

# Big League IT

Story by Mike Rogoway • Photos by Kerry Dahlen



LARRY WITHERSPOON

Before throwing a single pitch, Seattle Mariners southpaw Jamie Moyer makes a point of knowing opposing batters' tendencies better than they know themselves. The crafty veteran will deliver a tight curveball to a batter with a weakness for inside pitches, then frustrate a big swinger by fluttering a changeup just off the outside corner.

Enough little advantages add up to victory.

Larry Witherspoon, the Mariners' vice president for technology and services, makes sure he knows his customers just as well. The man responsible for concessions, tickets and overall fan satisfaction, Witherspoon helped the M's implement customer relationship management (CRM) software that tracks everything from luxury box sales to a fan's hot dog preferences.

Such information technology (IT) innovations helped the Mariners cope with the influx of fans following Safeco Field's opening in 1999 and now helps them maximize the opportunities the new ballpark presents.

"We made the decision based just simply on the fact that we were growing fast with Safeco Field," said Witherspoon, who is also a student in the University of Washington's Technology Management MBA program. CRM helps the M's gather information on customer preferences so they can offer the most sought-after condiments, for instance, and tailor promotions to the fans for whom it will be most effective.

"There's a reason an IT guy is also in charge of food and ticketing, and that's because of the way we use the data to make decisions."

One way the Mariners gather information is through the team's rewards program — Compass Club — which Witherspoon describes as a "frequent fan system." Whenever the club's 74,000 members use their membership cards to buy such things as tickets or concessions they earn points toward future discounts. Data generated by these transactions tells Witherspoon about customers' buying patterns and habits, information that is used both to improve sales and increase fans' satisfaction.

The system also tracks requests and complaints from all customers, cross-referencing them with fans' seat locations so the team can spot trends. During the first week of the 2002 season, for example, there was a flurry of requests for sauerkraut at hot dog stands.

"If 10 people took the time to write you a letter requesting it, you know there's hundreds more that want it," Witherspoon said. M's officials had sauerkraut at the concession stands by week's end.

Similarly, the Mariners track the food and beer preferences of season ticket holders, matching what they buy with where they sit. That helps them tailor the mix of products at concession stands to match the preferences of fans sitting close by.

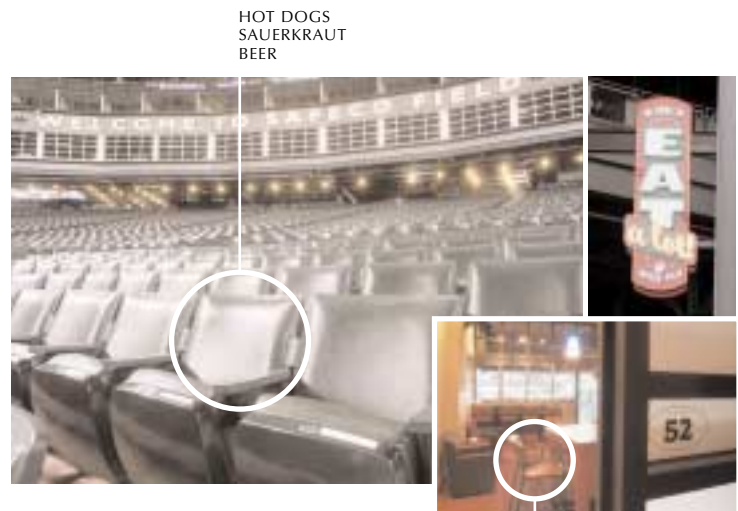
The Mariners began their technological approach to customer relationships when they opened Safeco Field more than three years ago.

Annual attendance at M's games grew from 2 million annually to 3.5 million last season.

By automating processes, such as food orders in luxury boxes, the CRM software helped the team manage that growth without adding accounting or sales staff. At the same time, Witherspoon said, the Mariners were continually improving fans' experience.

The Mariners' approach to customer relationships is an example of the evolving way businesses use technology, said Keith Everett, executive director of UW's E-Business Program. According to Everett, the short-term focus of the dot-com days has faded, and successful businesses are implementing long-range systems to improve their performance and build barriers to competition.

"All businesses that serve consumers are increasingly aware of how technology can change their relationships with customers," Everett said. CRM software is one way companies are serving their customers better, he said, and protecting themselves from predatory competitors with access to the same high-tech tools.



"It's both an opportunity and a defense, I think."

The Mariners credit their technological approach to managing customer relationships with helping increase season ticket holder numbers, boost revenues from suites and increase concession spending. Still, they acknowledge that success on the field has contributed to their success on the business side.

"We like to say that winning solves a lot of problems," Witherspoon said. "It's easy to be successful when a team is winning 116 games."

It's when the Mariners run out of winning seasons that the team's customer relationships and fan loyalty will be most valuable.

"I think the biggest part of being a successful franchise is making the stadium itself a destination, not just the team," Witherspoon said. "Now's the time to build that loyalty."