For the Minnesota Vikings, SSB Central Intelligence is a Real Game-Changer

Though they're not the oldest team in the NFL, the Minnesota Vikings have been playing football in the Twin Cities area for over 40 years—so it's no surprise that they've cultivated some of the most die-hard fans in the league.

Nevertheless, there's always room for improvement in the fan experience. That's why, after years of development and construction, the Vikings organization moved the team to a brand-new field in 2016. The state-of-the-art U.S. Bank Stadium was designed to offer the kind of unparalleled technology and amenities that would get more fans off the sofa and into the arena.

PROBLEM

With massive amounts of data trapped in siloed technology systems, the Vikings organization had no way to leverage customer behavior and preferences for more effective marketing and a better bottom line.

SOLUTION

SSB's Central Intelligence platform now cleans and unifies data across all of the Vikings' information systems, making it easy to understand and readily accessible in real time.

RESULTS

- More complete and accurate picture of the "typical" Vikings fan
- 20-30% increase in email open rates, thanks to more personalized marketing campaigns
- Centralized data capture helps CRM database jump from 10,000 to 1M+ records
- Data-driven staffing helps increase operational efficiency
- New sales and partnership opportunities based on real-time customer insight
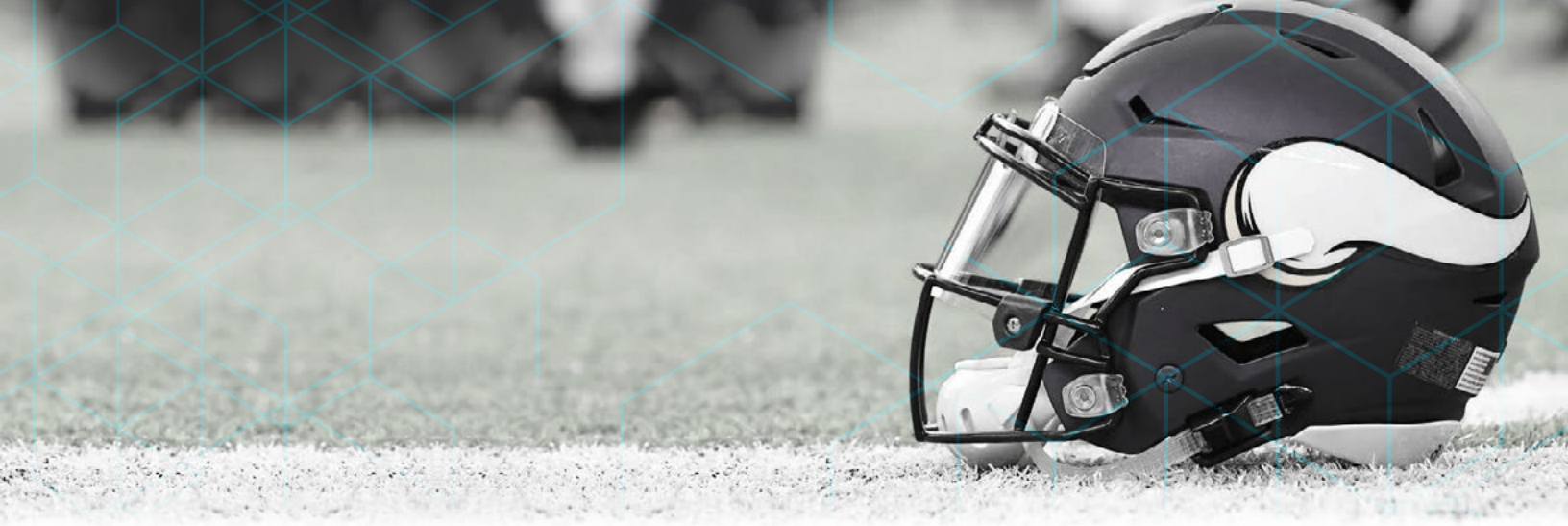
Lack of Centralization Meant Data was Trapped—and Wasted

Around the time the new stadium was nearing completion, Rich Wang joined the Vikings as head of its Coordination, Logistics, and Global Data Strategy team. He brought a wealth of experience in helping sports organizations leverage data to operate more efficiently and effectively—and he saw immediate opportunities for the Vikings as well.

"The new stadium had all this integrated technology meant to enhance the fan experience," he says, "but I'm not sure people knew what they were going to do with the information that the technology could give them. So I was the person in the back of the room who raised my hand and suggested that we invest in a data warehouse."

> "We really started this relationship with SSB on the right track," Wang recalls. "We didn't have to explain our business to them—they had all the expertise already. It was a pretty turnkey experience."

Wang knew the challenges of managing data in a heavily siloed industry like sports, where one organization's many business areas often run through disparate systems. Tickets, for example, are sold through Ticketmaster. Concessions are sold through Appetize. Merchandise goes through Maingate.

"Everything was separated, and we had no way to connect the dots between data points," says Wang. "If you were a season ticket holder for 20 years, you might buy a hat at one game, or log into your online account to view your ticket, or spend money on concessions—year after year. We might be able to see that those purchases were made, or that the interactions took place, but we had no idea that the same person did all of those things." Wang knew that the Vikings could do so much more, given the tech built into the new stadium, if they could just centralize that data and see what kind of insight it might deliver.

Making the Play for an Integrated Data Warehouse with SSB

The first step on the journey to more accessible data was the implementation of a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system that would enable the team to capture its ticket holders' information in a user-friendly database. The Vikings opted to work with Stone Timber River and Microsoft Dynamics and began inputting the data it had on hand right away.

Next came the data warehouse project. As luck would have it, Wang had a few connections working with the Kansas City Chiefs and the Oakland Raiders—and both teams had hired SSB to complete similar endeavors. "They highly recommended that we also work with SSB, and that led to some introductions. Before we knew it, things were underway."
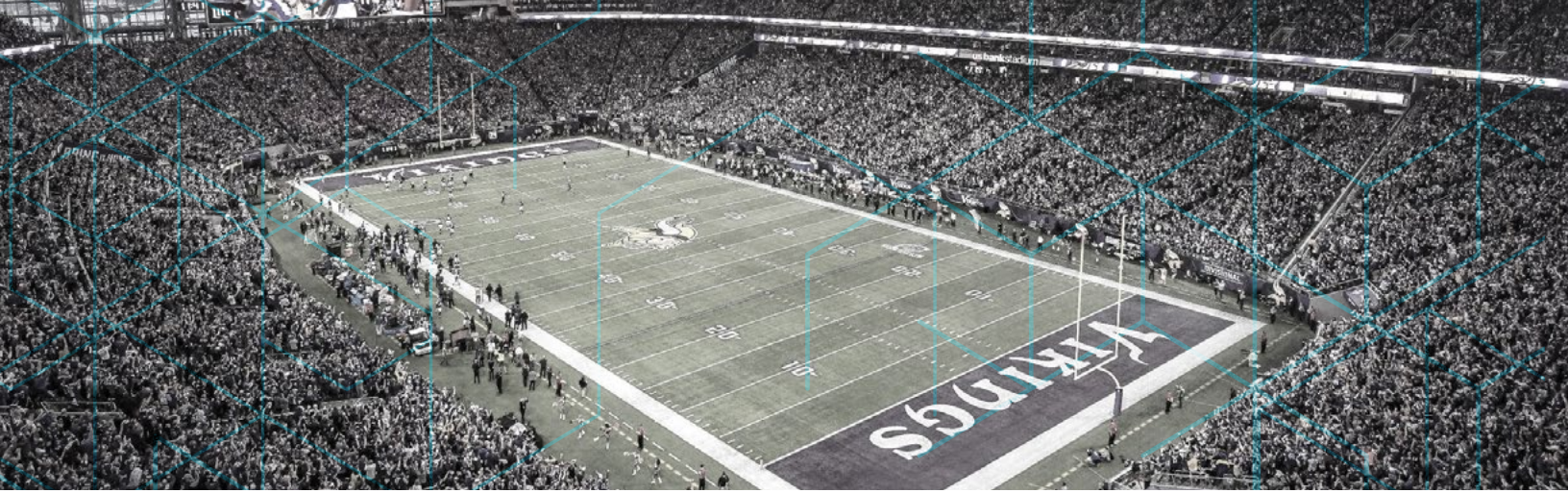
Implementation of SSB's Central Intelligence Platform was surprisingly quick and accurate. The Vikings signed a contract, and within a month, they had a functioning system and results in hand—thanks to joint efforts between SSB and Stone Timber River, the Microsoft implementation partner that built the integration between the data warehouse and the Vikings CRM system.

New Data Access Helps the Vikings Make Immediate Enhancements

Wang says the use of SSB's platform has opened the virtual floodgates to valuable data. "We literally had hundreds of thousands of people buying merch and tickets before, but that data just sat in siloes," he says. "SSB opened those doors and let it all in. They collect it, they clean it, and they make it all accessible now."

The Vikings have been steadily working to maximize the use of that data over the past two and a half years. At first, the organization "played a lot of defense," according to Wang. "We started with segmentation by behavior for the most basic improvements to the game-day experience. If we saw you'd be sitting close to the East endzone, we'd send you directions to go into the East gate. That sort of thing."

Next, they took an offense approach and worked to drive greater operational efficiency. "We'd note trends about how many fans arrived early to games, or we'd see which gates were busiest at what times before the games, and we would shift personnel or make other adjustments to improve staff productivity and minimize congestion."

Data Builds a More Complete (and Surprising) Picture of Fans

More recently, the Vikings have been using data to better understand their fan base and engage more effectively—and they've had several eye-opening surprises along the way.

To begin with, they had no idea how much information they would get from their mobile app. "Seriously, we found that 80% of our data was coming from the mobile environment," Wang recounts. "And it was incredibly detailed, useful information—things like how you buy your tickets, where you park, what time you arrive, even how many steps you're taking from your car to the gate. We weren't expecting that level of analysis, and it was a pleasant surprise."

Also astonishing were the numbers Wang's team uncovered about fan gender. In the past, the organization assumed that its game-day attendees were probably 80% male. "But that just didn't pass the eye test when you looked around," Wang states. Using gender data from ticketholder purchases at games, Wang's team came to realize that the real breakdown was often more like 50/50 between men and women—and sometimes even more 60/40 in favor of women!

"Having that kind of insight made a tremendous impact," says Wang. "We now cater our programming and concession and merchandising plans around that. We've been able to support our Vikings Women initiative with pretty hefty resources—all because we have the proof points that at least half our fans are female."

Wang's team upended another assumption when analytics showed that the people attending games with season tickets weren't always the season ticketholders themselves. "We all thought that 60-80% of these season ticketholders were coming to every game," he says. "But once we started pulling the digital ticketing information into the warehouse, we saw that the original ticket/barcode was being transferred one, two, even three touchpoints before the final attendee that comes into the game." That's important insight—because many of the people the organization assumed were now veterans at navigating the new stadium were actually first-time visitors, potentially in need of greater assistance with parking or concessions. "There was a huge opportunity to build new fan relationships," Wang notes.

Personalized Fan Marketing Delivers High-Impact Results

Overall, the Vikings have determined that they don't really have an "average fan" for the team—at least not the way they once thought. The team now uses actual data points to craft multiple fan personas that model how real Vikings fans behave, what they prefer, and what entices them to return. Armed with that information, the marketing team can then send personalized email campaigns based on proven customer preferences.

The results have been astounding thus far. "We've seen a 20-30% increase in email open and click rates," Wang says. "We can say in an email that we know you were at five games and saw 25 touchdowns, and we

can speak right to your experiences—so you're more likely to engage. And we know definitively that creating that kind of customized journey for our fan base is going to yield conversions."

Having those kinds of detailed fan personas available also aids in forecasting for future initiatives. "Knowing that someone who drinks cider beer, has kids, and runs our 5K is also more likely to be a Lexus driver, or an SUV driver, is really powerful information when we are talking with partners and planning other events," says Wang.

Integration between the Data Warehouse and CRM Enhances Service and Sales

To date, with the integration between SSB, Stone Timber River, and Microsoft Dynamics, the Vikings have grown their CRM database from 10,000 to almost a million customers.

"Now, whether you're engaging with us by email or our app, or by any in-stadium purchase, all that information is sucked back into the warehouse and presented into a user-friendly interface," explains Wang. In turn, when someone calls in to talk to guest services, for example, all those data points are in front of the person receiving the call.

"Or," he continues, "we can take those data points and create highly personalized email campaigns for season ticket renewals. We'll say that Everson Griffen is the one that's asking for you to pay your invoice—

because we know you bought his jersey, and he's probably your favorite player. You're more likely to open and convert on that kind of payment email. So our sales metrics are going really well."

> *Now, whether you're engaging with us by email or our app, or by any in-stadium purchase, all that information is sucked back into the warehouse and presented into a user-friendly interface*

Ultimately, Wang's team would like to turn all this new-found information into an enterprise tool across the organization, so people can "just press a button and uncover these insights," he says. "They're that valuable."

Next Steps

Next on the agenda for Wang and his team are additional predictive analytics. He's hoping to build solid forecasts of where fans go once they enter the stadium, to promote sales more effectively. He also wants to adapt with fan feedback—so if people complain of long lines in one area or bad audio in another, they can make broad adjustments to enhance the game-day experience. "We want to use that data for everything," Wang says. "Like game presentations. We want to know when is the right time to play that pump-up video? When should we be talking to our fans? What type of fans consume what type of content and when? We'd like to translate the insight that we have currently from our one-to-one email marketing efforts and try to shift our entire organization that direction."

Overall, the Minnesota Vikings believe they've made a sound decision in working with SSB. "SSB's Central Intelligence Platform is really the engine to our car," Wang states. "Without it, we wouldn't be able to do this work, so it's the backbone to our operation. Before, we were stuck in data mining, tying up data sources, building code. SSB now frees us to do the actual work that we are paid to do. And," he continues, "while I talk a lot of data and technology, I'm a believer in people, too. The folks at SSB really personalized this relationship for us. We could tell they care about our fans. They understood what our challenges were. At the end of the day, it's that personal touch that makes a difference."