MLB Taps Business Students and Machine Learning to Improve Its Digital Experiences

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As the 2019 baseball season winds down, the MLB is already thinking about 2020 by putting college students and machine learning to the task of improving fans' online experiences.

Major League Baseball has teamed with creative software developer Adobe to offer dozens of business school students access to data on fan behavior as part of the software giant's yearly analytics competition. For a chance at $60,000 in cash and prizes, the students will analyze the information, which includes stats like in-game purchases, web traffic and customer drop-off tallies, and distill it into recommendations for how the league can better expand its in-person stadium and retail experience to its digital properties.

This year's contest will be the first in the decade-old Adobe Analytics Challenge to include machine learning software among the tools to which students have access, namely Adobe Sensei, the artificial intelligence engine that powers much of the creative software giant's customer targeting and predictive analytics suite.

Specifically, students will look for anomalies and behavioral patterns in the data that might point to elements of the MLB's digital user experience that are driving people away, or particularly successful features upon which the league's

developers should expand. The data is segmented by customer demographics and spans the MLB's flagship website, mobile apps and other digital properties.

"The competition has shown that regardless of discipline or technical background, data is critical in driving business objectives and helping a brand maintain competitive advantage," said Barbara McHugh, the MLB's senior vice president of marketing, in a statement. "We're proud to support and learn from this educational initiative."

More than 1,500 students at 100 business schools applied to participate, from which Adobe chose six school-based teams—Yale School of Management, Duke University, University of California at Davis, Brigham Young University, Cornell Tech and the University of Texas at Dallas—as the finalists to compete at its headquarters in San Jose, Calif.

Adobe claims its analytics challenge stands out from other competitions promoting data literacy in that it provides real-life customer data from a household brand. Past partners have included T-Mobile, Comcast and Wired magazine.

MLB has long worked to differentiate itself with data and machine learning in other ways, most notably through a partnership with Amazon Web Services to power everything from data-backed broadcast integrations to regionally tailored streams and its Player Tracking System, a tool marketed to fans as Statcast that uses artificial intelligence to offer more data about players.

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