

# Are You Leaving Money on the Table?

## Part One: How FECs Can Maximize Laser Tag Operations & Revenues



**By Erik Guthrie**  
VP of Zone LaserTag

Erik Guthrie has nearly 25 years in the laser tag industry serving in many capacities. Starting out as a part-time game marshal in 1993, for the past 14 years, Guthrie has been Vice President of Zone Laser Tag, the global leader in laser tag manufacturing. (The company says it has 40 percent of the world market.) In addition, he was the Executive Director of the International Laser Tag Association for seven years and is also an owner/investor in several laser tag facilities. Guthrie has been quoted in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Inc. Magazine*, *Fast Company*, as well as numerous trade publications. He serves as the Curator for the Laser Tag Museum and was recently featured on the hit television show *Storage Wars*. He owns and chairs the Laser Tag Convention held annually throughout the U.S. Guthrie is also involved in the R&D of the laser tag experience now enjoyed by millions of players every month around

I travel extensively and just got back from a tour of 26 locations in four days, most of them bowling centers, but also some theaters and stand-alone laser tag centers. What's interesting from these visits is that the standalone laser tag operators always do better than those running multiple attractions. The question is why?

What is it about the stand-alone operators? I think it's because, for them, laser tag is their bread and butter. They need to wake up every day and say, "What can we do to make laser tag better today?"

For FEC operators, there are a lot of things conflicting and demanding their attention, so from their point of view, as long as the laser equipment works and they can run games on time, that's good enough. But it's not. They're leaving money on the table. Here are some things FEC — and standalone laser tag — operators can and should do to get more out of their systems.

### The Golden Opportunity of Briefing

One thing I've noticed is a lack of energy from the staff members. In laser tag today, it's too easy for the employee to enter the briefing room and simply push a button to start the video. There's no real need for that employee to be personable. I think all FEC operators with laser tag are missing a golden marketing opportunity — a chance to create a memorable experience — right off the bat in the briefing room.

Operators can make more money in this one area alone just by having staff members who have a strong, dynamic personality or at minimum, a sincere, caring attitude. Honestly, your employees really don't even



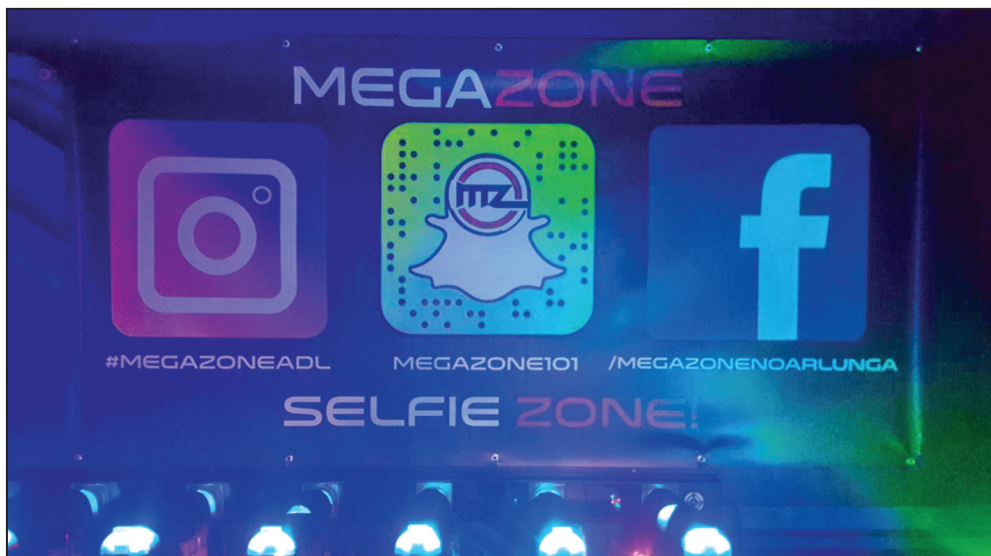
need to be that outgoing. They just need to engage with your customers, saying things like, "Oh, be sure to come back on All You Can Play Night" or to let them know about the late-night adult laser tag special or deals for church groups. Don't miss the chance to connect, upsell or cross-sell during that briefing room experience.

Let's look at examples from outside the laser tag and FEC world. Southern California has In-N-Out Burger that has a cult-like following. They make a good hamburger, but it's not gourmet. What then makes In-N-Out great? It's the service: from the moment you walk in, you're greeted by friendly, cheerful employees.

The same is true for Chick-fil-A. They always greet you, and they're really happy and friendly as they get you your food. It's just a chicken sandwich, but it's delivered in an extremely personable way.

Now these companies could just do what McDonald's is doing and install automated kiosks for ordering, but they aren't. The result of that and the way they treat their customers has created a cult following for their brands that, for example, McDonald's really doesn't have.

The point I'm making is that we are miss-



**Some ideas** are easier to implement than others in terms of maximizing your laser tag center or FEC, but among the simpler ways to engage with your players (and get them to boost your marketing through their social media accounts) is the selfie wall. Guthrie said an attendee at one of his presentations took this idea and within a week or so had crafted his own selfie wall (from Megazone Noarlunga, Adelaide, Australia).

ing out on the chance to develop a cult following of strong enthusiasts who want to come back and re-experience our laser tag because we've automated it and dumbed it down. In the laser tag briefing room, we have a captive audience paying attention — or should be

paying attention — and what is our answer? We push a button and have them watch the same video over and over and over. This is fine for the lawyers and it's fine for the consistency in the deliverable, but it doesn't make for an excellent deliverable. You can do better.

## A Selfie World

I'm not a social media expert, but it's very clear to me that if you're running a laser tag attraction or FEC and you don't have a selfie wall, you're definitely leaving money on the table. Everyone should have at least one.



**The selfie wall** at Guthrie's own Q-ZAR location in Toledo, Ohio. In addition to serving as a for-profit laser tag center on its own, the site also become a sort of laboratory where ideas and best practices for laser tag in general get real world testing.

In the center I own, we have a selfie wall in our vesting room and have specifically built time into the game experience for the customer to put their equipment on and take pictures. This is encouraged because it helps promote our facility.

Just about everyone who walks through your door will be on some form of social media — players under 25 will have Snapchat, Millennials will have Instagram and the older, baby boomer crowd will have Facebook. You need to provide a visually interesting place for them to share their experience — and promote your business.

The reason the vesting area is a great spot for a selfie wall is because there's usually a bit of dead time in the vesting process. Another is simply that laser tag is a very photogenic product. When a customer takes a picture of himself wearing a laser tag pack and sends it out, it doesn't matter whose gear it is, everyone seeing the picture instantly recognizes that he's out playing laser tag. All we have to do is stage it with a selfie wall so the facility gets the brand awareness.

For anyone out of touch about why a selfie wall is such a big deal, think of it this way: The under 25 crowd is the most photographed demographic of all time. They're comfortable in front of a camera and, in fact, they want to be in front of a camera taking pictures of themselves and their friends. If we don't give them a selfie wall, we're actually denying them the experience they're expecting!



And by the way, creating a selfie wall is easy. It can either be painted on, or a sign company can put it on laminate and then it can be stuck on a wall. There are lots of ways to skin that cat to solve the “problem,” but it’s not expensive no matter how you do it.

The vast majority of laser tag centers — 90 percent or more — still don’t have a selfie wall. And while a lot of FECs have one, they don’t have as many as they should. Just think about all the places people like to take selfies and how that translates in an FEC. People want to take pictures in the party room, showing their food, taking a picture with a game they’re playing, showing off the prize they just won. What I’m specifically advo-

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cating is for operators to put a selfie wall in one of the most visual places in the center: the laser tag area. Why? Because laser tag is vibrant, dynamic and very visual. It’s the best place to put a selfie wall as far as I’m concerned (although I admit it’s from my very biased point of view).

From a guest experience point of view, the consumer wants to have that selfie moment and we, as an industry, are actually not

really doing a good job at providing that for them.

## Operational Improvement

Sometimes you can be leaving money on the table by not taking care of maintenance issues. Here’s a prime example. So many centers I go into don’t have a fog, haze or atmospheric smoke machine in use, and that’s a big part of the appeal of laser tag. Part of the reason laser tag went from a fad to a staple attraction was that as you entered an arena you were venturing into an other-worldly experience.

Most laser tag systems are designed for the laser beam to refract on the fog. By not running the atmospheric effect, the laser beams do not carry the visual impact that they should. (Most laser tag manufacturers use a red or a green beam, and without fog the red beam especially looks very weak.) So now the guest experience is not as visually appealing. Think about your clientele: everyone under 25 is visually stimulated and oriented, and then we go and not create the other-worldly experience the fog creates. That one decision alone negatively impacts the game experience because we’ve removed or reduced the visual cue of the

laser beam. It also has a negative impact on return visits to your center and the enthusiasm with which they tell others about their experience.

What I think has been happening is that the people running the center either may not realize (or don’t care) that these atmospheric machines require monthly maintenance. You need to run distilled water through it, and it needs to be cleaned. So there’s that part of it. Also, the machine may eventually break for whatever reason. After all, they’re put through a lot of use. When that happens, it seems the operator either decides not to get them fixed or replaced. Sometimes it’s as simple as deciding not to spend the money on the haze or fog juice. (Typically, a center will go through from one to four gallons of the stuff per month at a price that ranges from \$25 to \$50 per gallon).

The average or typical operator I’m running into today doesn’t spend that necessary money. They’re either not fixing or operating the machine or they’re not buying the fog juice because to them it’s a monthly recurring expense. They’re hurting their sales in the long run.

Bringing it back full circle, standalone laser tag center operators are more likely to understand this since it’s their main attraction (though even they could do a better job). For an FEC operator who’s got a lot of moving pieces in their operation, laser tag can be a “set it and forget it” operation. The problem is that there’s too much forgetting.





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