

Who's Your Champion?

Empowering a Team Member to Become Your Laser Tag Hero



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, a 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 of the Laser Tag Museum and was recently featured on the hit television show *Storage Wars*. He owns and chairs the annual Laser Tag Convention. Guthrie is also involved in the R&D of the laser tag experience now enjoyed by millions of players every month around the world.

What sets high-earning laser tags apart from all the others and why are some bowling centers doing \$800,000 or \$1,000,000 in laser tag sales while others are only doing \$150,000?

There are a lot of variables, but higher-earning centers all have some form of dedicated staff member — even as far as full-fledged managers — for their laser tag. These are people whose only job is to work the laser tag and oversee its operation.

As an example, Dave Haness of Country Club Lanes in Sacramento, Calif., has a wonderful employee named Rhoda Tabaka who's been the laser tag manager there for some time and the result is that his bowling center does nearly \$1,000,000 in laser tag sales annually!

Think about this: If there are a bunch of other laser tag centers in your market — and there pretty much is today — they're typically all suffering the same pains. The guy who comes along and starts to promote laser tag as an experience — and makes his center special — is going to win.

The key to making more money lies in how you market and run your laser tag experience.

Remember, laser tag is different from any other attraction you have in your location. A customer isn't going to know everything about what your laser tag center offers. It's up to the staff to educate them. But, the key question you need to ask is whether your staff even knows all they should. For example, in my Q-Zar location in Toledo, we offer 54 different game formats! How can customers know about them if the person running the attraction doesn't?

With laser tag, there are also more cus-



Who's our champion at Q-Zar in Toledo, Ohio? This great young man right here, Carlos Carthage. He enthusiastically makes the laser tag experience great for players, which means great things for the location.

tomers touchpoints. We interact with players in the calling of the game, briefing, vesting, in the arena providing encouragement and enhancing the customer experience, scoring and debriefing. That's six touchpoints right there. In contrast, think about go-karts with two touchpoints (getting the customer in the cart and checking the harness and then getting them out of the karts). Same with a Spin Zone, for example.

Today, we're seeing a number of clients who want high-end laser tag systems with all the bells and whistles. And that's great! I love their passion for it, but it all falls flat if the system is so complex that no one takes advantage of all those bells and whistles. You need someone on staff who learns them and then shares that enthusiastically with the players. I say this in every column: laser tag is not a "set it and forget it" attraction!

So, the key to greater profits in laser tag — at the level you've been told you should expect — is in finding a person who is empowered to advocate for game formats, post promos on your website and social media, and generate interest and excitement



These Instagram post examples promote the various game formats available for play.

for players. You need a champion!

So, Just Who Is This "Champion"?

Ideally, the laser tag advocate is a supervisory or manager-in-training type of role. This isn't a person in direct management control with key-holding responsibilities, but a promising employee you want to keep. Just think of what this could mean to an 18-year-old employee who you empower with the responsibilities of enhancing the game playing experience for the guests.

Look around your center. Who on your staff seems to gravitate toward laser tag? Invariably, in any bowling center or FEC, you'll have at least one employee who does. You might even recruit one of your most avid players if you feel like adding to your payroll.

It doesn't take a fulltime person to promote laser tag.

What it takes is for someone to care deeply at least some of the time.

Your champion should participate in meetings and come up with ideas and suggestions for laser tag promotion. He or she should be asking if management is promoting laser tag on the Facebook page or if they're posting laser tag memes, for

The reality is that getting someone to care deeply some of the time is much better than what's happening industry wide right now.

example. With the excitement of this role, your champion can enthusiastically look for ways to promote your laser tag experience without any further prompting from management.

Maybe the advocate sees the potential of a cool movie tie in and talks to leadership about putting something in motion. For example, there was a movie out this summer called *Tag* that would have made a great tie-in.

While the advocate might not be able to go down the street to the Regal or Cinemark theater himself to set up a promotion, he should be able to ask the questions and offer up ideas. What you want to do is encourage that laser tag enthusiast who's most likely already on your payroll and encourage them to put their imagination into high gear and help take things to the next level.

The key is that you need someone thinking about laser tag first and foremost, and what's really cool is when that person succeeds and grows. The possibilities really are endless. There's really no downside: If this person fails in the mission, the worst that happens is that your laser tag stays at the level it was before. You can't lose by trying this!

Ideas You Can Use Today

Here's something that could be implemented with the help of the laser tag champion: The creation of marketing messages for

social media. Since my Q-Zar location in Toledo is an incubator of different laser tag ideas, we've been working on ways to promote our 54 different game formats. We've created a series of 28 marketing images (54 divided by two is 27 so we doubled up on

one) to promote them on Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat. Basically, we're promoting two game formats for all-you-can-play sessions in each image).

One image might be "Come to our all-you-can-play on Friday and play games like *Speedball* and *Greed*." Then we'd have another one for Saturday's all-you-can-play games like *Zone Ball* and *Random Phaser Madness*. On Thursday of the next week, we promote our all-you-can-play Friday with games *Commanders* and *Time Warrior* laser tag games.

We've made keeping track simple by labeling them "Friday Number One, Saturday Number One, Friday Number Two, Saturday Number Two, Friday Number Three, Saturday Number Three and so on. The result is that we now have a 14-week cycle of promotions all ready to go.

With that, our laser tag supervisor can either post (or remind management to post) the promotions on Facebook, Instagram and



Snapchat.

While one element relates to game formats, the second has to do with interactive arenas. Every laser tag manufacturer has targets, be it mines, respawn boxes or other unique items of their own. For example, Laserforce has Beacons and Zone has Pickup Pads. So, what you should be doing – and this is another great job for the laser tag champion – is promoting the “Easter Eggs” or unique hardware within your arena.

What we’re doing at Q-Zar is creating a whole series of “Did you know...?” messages teaching players how to increase their scores. “Did you know you can increase your laser tag score by tagging bases? Bases are worth 2,001 points. That’s like tagging 20 people at once!” “Did you know you could take different weapons by standing on the pickup pad?” “Did you know you can reload in the left and right corners of the arena with a reload station?” “Did you know you can control the arena by taking control of the Zone Gates?”

These tips are often brought up during the player’s second or third game and verbalized by the laser tag marshal.

We’re also creating Tag Tips, which are similar to the “Did you know... messages” in that they give players tips to maximize their score and fun. For example, they tell players to be sure to get their base and also how much bases are worth. But they are designed for our social media platforms.

Once you create them, then you have another whole set of social media posts that promote more interactive gameplay for your guests.

By the way, with Zone and also with Laserforce, bases are worth 1001 or 2001 points. We do this because it allows the staff to look at the score and see if someone’s tagged their bases. If you were to go play in a Zone or Laserforce center, and you tagged the opponent’s base, your score will end in a one for each base tag. So, instead of say

8,000 points, you’d actually have 8,001 if you tagged one base.

As an overall laser tag strategy, tagging your base early in the game is always good because then you can then spend the rest of the time tagging players. Customers don’t know that and generally neither do the employees. They also don’t know that you can tag a number of different devices in the arena. All of the laser tag equipment manufacturers have them so it’s a matter of educating your staff – or empowering your champion – to help your players get more out of the experience.

Another great tag tip might be, “Remember, if you hold your phaser with both hands, you’ll increase your accuracy.” Laser tag uniquely needs this awareness spread with its player base, but the downside is there’s too much information to give somebody in a briefing. Tips like these going out regularly on social media, informs the player and also gets them thinking about going to play!

Why not promote these things on Facebook using an in-house marketing image versus the usual “Come play our all-you-can-play-on-Wednesday-nights message”? That’s a promotion, but that’s not advocacy.

Remember, today’s savvy

consumer doesn’t really necessarily want to be “marketed to.” They want to be “part of.” They want to be included! So now, let’s give them inclusionary ideas and suggestions, letting them know the ins and outs of getting bases, tagging targets, ways to hold the phaser and everything else that increases the fun!

Again, I’m not just talking about operators of Zone laser tag systems. Lasertron has a screen on the back of their phaser that lets the player scroll through and pick a special weapon, but a lot of operators don’t promote this “pick your power” feature. Instead, players go into the arena and simply pull the trigger – pew, pew, pew – and get a score. It’s not the problem with the system, it’s a problem with how the laser tag experience is run.

The Power of Social Media

Your champion should be advocating this information across the major social media platforms: Facebook,



Instagram and Snapchat (the most popular platform for the under-25 crowd). These Tag Tips make for very “Instagrammable” imagery which also work well on Snapchat. You can do Snapchat by having people follow you on that platform and then you can post the tag tip picture to your story. (For those unfamiliar, Snapchat posts only stay active for 24 hours – unlike Instagram and Facebook which store posts which can be reused any time. Your laser tag champion would need to store your Tag Tips on a computer, tablet or phone for reuse and upload to your Snapchat story each time.)

When it comes to marketing laser tag, most owners don’t know this stuff. And they might not even be asking the question, “How do we promote laser tag?” Instead, their comments

tend to be along the lines of: “My arena just isn’t earning as much as I was led to believe it would.” When you have a champion – someone with an interest or passion — that’s when the question of “How do we market laser tag?” or “How do we raise awareness of laser tag?” gets asked.

In-House Promotion

Social media posts are all about how we market or advocate for laser tag externally, but we also need to question how we’re pushing it internally. Is laser tag signage prevalent or does it even exist at all? Can you see it when you walk in the fun center? Is there a pop up? (You can get those 24-inch- or 36-inch-wide, five- to six-foot-tall pop up displays you see at trade shows to put in your FEC.) You

briefing room

can also put table tents around your dining areas.

You need a champion to ask those questions, to say, “How can we raise awareness internally? Is a game of laser tag available in the redemption counter?” Why don’t we have free game passes at the redemption counter?” (The cost is virtually nothing ... you can sell that for 900 or 1,000 tickets and it costs you something like 14 cents to redeem.)

So, where is that champion at your fun center? In a bowling entertainment center, you wouldn’t run your business without a house mechanic to fix the bowling equipment and games, right? Likewise, you need a squeaky wheel for laser tag who says, “Oh my gosh, three packs are down. How is that possible?”

Your champion can oversee and advocate, making sure that laser tag is promoted externally and internally, that the packs are all up and working, that everything in the arena is functioning (like the fog machine which makes play much better), and that the arena is relatively safe. Most operators don’t even realize the fog machine isn’t working.

You task that champion with a job duty or responsibility that is customized to laser tag. All of this is to combat the “set it and forget it” mindset that laser tag has developed in the past five years, where operators have bought this whole package. The thinking is, “I’m going to buy a laser tag arena and equipment, I’m going to stick it in the corner, and it’s going to make me money.” But after a year or two,

they’re quizzical: “My sales are down. I wonder what’s going on?”

This “who’s your champion” concept nurtures an individual in your organization who helps it not be forgotten because their job is to constantly make laser tag awareness a focal point to the management and marketing staff of the facility.

You’re also giving a young staff member a chance to be a supervisor or manager-in-training. Better yet, think of it as an introductory supervisory role, a reward for someone who has an aptitude for the laser tag attraction. Instead of embracing the cost of making them a “manager,” which typically comes with salary instead of hourly pay, paid vacation and all that, you give them this supervisor-in-training position. It elevates them within your organization, but with very little cost/risk to you.

So if you’d rather have a laser tag experience that makes \$500,000 or as much as \$1 million a year instead of sitting in the \$150,000 to \$200,000 range, it needs to be on the forefront of someone’s mind. Laser tag is not going to be successful if it’s treated as an afterthought. Customers love laser tag and virtually everyone knows what it is. The untapped potential of what happens when they know even more is incredible!

So, who’s *your* champion?

P.S. Be sure to send your champion to the Laser tag Convention March 26-28 in Las Vegas. Learn more at www.lasertagconvention.com for more details.

