

Are You Your Own Customer?

*Seeing Lower Revenues Than You Expect?
Play Your Own Laser Tag to Understand Why*



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.

When was the last time you played laser tag in your arena? How often do you play? When did you hold your own team-building event in your center? Also, do you stand outside and listen to customers as they come out? Do you have a friend “secret shop” your laser tag experience? Have you considered why someone would hold an event there and if they’d come away satisfied? What are you doing to make the birthday kid feel special?

I’m barraging you with all of these questions to get you thinking. If you want to maximize the success and profits of your laser tag arena, you need to be your own customer. It’s not rocket science. If you play your own attraction and get closer to your customers, you’re going to know if you’re offering the best laser tag experience: one that brings them and their friends back.

What We Don’t Want to Hear

I hate to be negative, but lately and more and more often, I’ve heard from fun center operators — bowling center operators, trampoline parks and so on — that their laser tag sales aren’t what they hoped (or should) be.

In fact, because I’ve been hearing this for a while, I decided to address it directly in my presentation at this year’s Bowl Expo. My message was that laser tag has been marketed, particularly by the arena-building companies and consultants, as a “set it and forget it” attraction. And, the problem is that people *are* forgetting! This has everything to do with game experience. The laser tag experience is not memorable because it’s not set



“Are you your own customer?” Erik Guthrie asks? He vigorously asserts that it’s the only way for a laser tag owner/operator to know if the play experience is one that will maximize the profits of the attraction and get repeat visits. Guthrie dons vest and phaser to get a guest’s-eye appraisal.

up, run or managed right.

Unlike most other fun center attractions — an example might be *Spin Zone* where you have an attendant stand there and push the button, or go-karts where you have an attendant clip people in — laser tag is really different.

Think about this for a moment: a lot of laser tag operators have bought highly themed environments to enhance customer appeal and increase business. Theming companies tell them that this will result in higher revenue, but even as great as these environments are, this hasn’t proven to be the case. It’s not the theming or whether or not the arena looks cool or trendy, it’s the game play that matters most.

Quite often, the arena company you’ve used is putting a different version of that same highly themed environment three miles away. For example, your laser tag location might be in the only bowling center in town, but they’re installing the same steam punk theme into a trampoline park two miles up

the road. It's no longer special. It's going to affect revenues even though it's not the same category of amusement. The competitive advantage of the highly themed environment is actually being lost because someone else comes into your market doing the same thing.

We have additional issues with people designing the layout of the arena without working with the equipment manufacturer to ensure the final result will play well. It's a huge frustration

when you understand the potential of laser tag when all those working on the build-out *do* work as a team.

"Because they don't know the arena is flawed, they don't realize the customer is having a bad experience. If the customer is having a bad experience, he's not repeating and coming back, and therefore sales are going down. It's all interconnected like some giant conspiracy theory. As a result, we're seeing this unnecessary, slow decline in the laser tag industry with sales going down.

We had one location where we were told that the themers were finished and we could get in to install our equipment. Despite our drawings submitted ahead of time, one of the base structures was just six feet off the

ground where anyone 5' 9" tall could smash it with a phaser. Another had dead spots. The problem with all

of this isn't just that that one arena doesn't play as well as it should. The bigger issue is that a player will have a less-than-positive experience playing laser tag and as a result, will come away with an overall down

attitude about laser tag in general.

It might seem like I'm on the attack against the arena builders, themers and consultants, but it's simply that most of them don't have a clue about how to play laser

tag. (Sad to say, but even some of the people at the laser tag companies aren't players!) As a result, the foundation becomes flawed. I have to call it as I see it. After all, we're not loyal to the arena companies, we're loyal to the client who's given us the \$70,000, \$80,000 or \$90,000 for equipment.

The underlying issue in the industry is that because they may believe they bought a "set it and forget it," turnkey product, center owners and operators may not realize how intrinsically flawed the design of their attraction actually is.

How does this tie into being your own customer? Well, if the owner never puts on a pack to go into his arena, he'll never know that

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the player will end up running into a dead end, that a key section doesn't play, that there's no way to shoot

across the arena, that there are no port-holes or half walls. It's not until they feel the frustration the customer feels, that

the light comes on and they say, "Oh, we need to fix this." Until they suit up themselves, they don't and can't say that. You see how this comes full circle to people asking me why their laser tag doesn't perform as it should?

It's because, from the outset, they're not seeing it from the game/guest experience perspective. They don't know that the arena design is flawed. Because they don't know the arena is flawed, they don't realize the customer is having a bad experience. If the customer is having a bad experience, he's not repeating and com-

ing back, and therefore sales are going down. It's all interconnected like some giant conspiracy theory. As

We can have an academic conversation about all the factors that interrelate, but here's the bottom line: Go play your laser tag, find where it sucks and improve it. Your players will thank you... and the laser tag industry at large will thank you. And, you know what? You'll make more money, too.

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People, for the first time in 20 years, are now saying, "Well, I might not do laser tag. I might do virtual reality instead." Or, they tell me they might do mini-golf because there's just so much laser tag taking place in select markets. My experience tells me that bowling, skating, trampoline and family entertainment operators—not all, but some—are starting to notice a decline or they never hit the sales that they were led to believe by their consultants

or arena providers. (By the way, it's always puzzled me why bowling and roller rink operators will actually bowl or skate in their facilities, but don't play their own laser tag.)

By being your own customer, you'll know when the fog effect isn't working, when the briefing and vesting experience isn't right, when your staff isn't properly engaged with players, when the birthday party child isn't treated as special as they should be, and so on.

You also need to listen. I often stand outside a laser tag attraction and listen to customers as they come out. They say things like "my gun didn't work" or "that score or that base didn't work." Or the opposite: "That was so cool!" "Wow, that was fun!" and "Did you get that snake target?"

Keeping It Fresh

Everybody's laser tag equipment has some cool feature that makes the game exciting, but are you taking advantage of those? An operator reading this may say, well, "I don't have mines," "I don't have a 'respond bot,'" "I don't have pickup pads" or "I don't have beacons or video bases." There's the problem right there: Go buy something from your supplier! If you haven't added some hardware devices to your laser tag in the past 18 months, this is part of the reason your arena is stale.

It's important to update your arena at least once a year. Keep in mind that the average customer is only

going to visit twice a year so you don't want them coming back the next year to find the arena is the "same old, same old." A good rule of thumb is to budget into your capital expenditures an annual spend of \$2,000 to \$3,000 (at minimum) to do some sort of interactive arena enhancement.

I don't say this as the VP of Zone Laser Tag. I'm saying that every equipment manufacturer has interactive hardware devices that can be put in post-sale, after it's open. Delta has video bases, for example; you can play soccer with these. Laser Blast has just introduced projected targets. We've all got something to enhance the play experience.

It all harks back to "set it and forget it" which is the one umbrella that covers most of why laser tag revenues might not be a great as they should be. A fun center owner gets the arena open and expects people to come in and spend money without any further promotion, upgrade or environmental thought. None of that is considered because they simply don't understand. Since they don't play themselves, they really haven't a clue about what a player would want to get out of the experience.

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