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RINKSIDER

Celebrating our 60th year!

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Social networking dos and don'ts.....p. 9

Take it from three successful rink operators: social networking is beyond trending, it's a necessity for reaching today's tech-savvy customers. Facebook is easy-to-use, but requires a little creativity and regular maintenance to make it a top-notch marketing tool for your rink. Find out how, here.

Celebrating good times..p.23

The Pennsylvania rink with the longest-running single owners has changed hands after 64 years. Instead of dropping the old for the new, the skating center's new owners are relying on the rink's family-friendly history, retro '70s atmosphere, and tradition of "everything skating" to stake their claim as Southern Pennsylvania's "place to go" for roller skating.

Yard sale anyone?...p. 13

Virginia rink owners think outside of the box and outside of the rink by holding a yard sale in their parking lot! Tables sold to both individuals and businesses created a win-win situation of profit and publicity for all involved.



When you've been around 60 years, you have a lot of memories to share, and a lot of friends to embarrass! Check out page 24 for our special collage of memorable Rinksider pictures throughout the years and find the identity of the toddler above who became a successful rink owner! Help us celebrate 60 years of the Rinksider!

Lazer Frenzy offers unique twist on laser tag, redemption profits to boot

By Catherine Bennett

Imagine ducking under and hopping over multi-colored lasers, momentarily pretending to be the hero in a mission impossible, breaking into a top-secret building for private information. Creative Works, a company specializing in family entertainment attractions, gives this experience to the customers of dozens of family fun centers in the U.S. through the affordable technology of Lazer Frenzy—also known as a laser "maze."

"You have to dodge the lasers," said Timothy Marks, co-owner of Fun Warehouse in Myrtle Beach, S.C., "You are crawling through this room, but you are

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Three rink operators share how to boldly explore the high tech universe of laser tag

By Connie Evener

Back in the '70s when skating rinks were attracting disco lovers in droves, "Star Wars" and "Star Trek" were creating an almost cosmic spin-off potential. But the concept of laser tag didn't come from a galaxy far, far away. It came from Texas, where George Carter, III, drew up the schematics for an arena-based laser tag system after watching "Star Wars." Carter opened the world's first laser tag facility in Dallas in 1984.

Is laser tag a viable option for rink owners considering adding attractions? Manufacturers, suppliers and consultants can provide valuable information. But, said Jerry Weber, who's been in business since 1999, the best



MJS Photography Limited
Cincinnati, Ohio

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Teens and adults rock out at Corban's Temple in Kane, Fla. (photo credit: Kenneth Miller)

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Unique twist (cont'd from page 1)

go-to guys are other operators. "Go and talk to people who are actually running operations. Find out what's worked, and not worked, for them," he said. So The Rinksider contacted three operators who have been in business since the late '90s.

According to funattheweb.com, "One night Jerry (Weber) was struck by lightning, went insane, and the next day he decided to build a laser tag facility." The real story, Weber noted, was a bit less wacky and a lot more labor intensive. Since 1999, his Cincinnati Laser Web has morphed into The Web, which, in addition to laser tag, features go-karts, mini golf, mini bowling and a full-service restaurant. Weber also owns Laser Web in Dayton.

Lazer Blaze in Louisville, Ky., opened in 1987. Ten years later Jack Turner took over, subsequently bought it, and has expanded three times in the last seven years, adding mini-golf, an arcade, and a full service restaurant which also houses the ILTA (International Laser Tag Association) Laser Tag Museum. A charter member of the ILTA board, Turner received their Golden Phaser Award for Operator of the Year in 2011.

Karl Ross has owned and operated Laserdome in Manheim, Pa., since 1999. Ross began putting his business plan together when he was 19 and opened when he was 21. Within a year he lost interest in playing. "I went from being a total game enthusiast to being a total business enthusiast and haven't stopped since," Ross said. Laserdome also has an arcade and the Dome Theater, where live music is featured on Saturday nights.

High tech laser tag (cont'd from page 1)

under the gun because the clock is counting down. You have to touch the check point button and the faster you do that the more points you get."

While it is a larger attraction, Marks said he categorizes Lazer Frenzy as an arcade game because it is set up to spit out tickets based on each player's success, and these tickets are redeemed for game-counter prizes.

The Lazer Frenzy idea is not a new idea, said Armando Lunati, Creative Works' creative experience broker, but has been around for about a decade. However, a decade ago it wasn't feasible to put an attraction as costly as Lazer Frenzy in family fun centers. Over time, as technology has become more compact and affordable, Armando said owners of these centers have found the attraction attainable.

Lazer Frenzy's price tag ranges from \$30,000 to \$40,000, depending on the desired size and complexity of the attraction. On average, business owners that invest in the Lazer Frenzy attraction are able to make back what they paid for it in 6-8 months, Lunati said. He said he has seen a business get back what they paid for it in 30 days, but some have less luck and don't start profiting until after the year mark.

"Some of the big perks with our Lazer Frenzy is we have created 'Z tow-

Man does not live by laser tag alone...

"At The Web, we do have multiple attractions under one roof, so there's something here for everybody," said Weber. With adult groups, like corporate team-building for example, there's resistance to laser tag because they think it's just for kids. "That's one of the reasons I wanted to have something adults would be comfortable with. Our electric go-karts are a big draw with them." That said, though, he noted that once adults loosen up and give it a shot, "laser tag ends up being one of their favorite events."

Weber and Turner have both added full service restaurants, neither serving alcohol. "We wanted to be geared to a family environment, catering to parents as well as kids," said Weber, so the menu at The Winner's Café includes chicken breast, wings, burgers and deli sandwiches, Cincinnati chili, and fries that are baked - thus healthier. Ice cream specialties are available at The Web's Sweet Spot.

At Lazer Blaze, fare at the First Contact Café includes pizza, burgers, fries and nachos. But the big draw is the big screen plasma TVs. "Kentucky is all about basketball," explained Turner. When the University of Louisville and the University of Kentucky play, parents won't bring their kids in and hang out in the café if they can't watch the games, too. And while they are in the restaurant, thanks to the way the facility is designed, parents can keep half an eye on their kids, too. Turner has nothing against selling alcohol, he said, "but we're in the middle of the Bible Belt, and

ers," Marks said, "and what they allow you to do is rearrange the components in your maze without having to do any reconstruction or hard modifications. All you need is a screwdriver."

At Fun Warehouse, Creative Works installed a 42-inch monitor outside the Lazer Frenzy that links video footage from inside so passersby can see what players are experiencing at that moment, Marks said. This is one way to promote the attraction, urging customers to test their stealth in the maze.

"The video monitor always gets people's attention," Marks said. "And one other thing we do for our clients is host tournaments."

On scheduled Friday or Saturday nights a manager will put an attendant at the attraction to help the flow of traffic and make sure the tournaments are running smoothly. The goal is to race an opponent through the maze and reach the end the quickest without touching any of the lasers. Marks said this is the only time Lazer Frenzy needs an attendant.

To give the Lazer Frenzy room an additional purpose, Marks said he will convert it into a glow room and allow customers to host birthday parties inside.

Bob Hansen, owner of Skateland in Savoy, Ill., said where he put his

parents don't go out and drink while their kids play laser tag. It's just a matter of knowing your market."

Rollerdome doesn't have a full service restaurant. Ross has been hearing from other operators who have added restaurants, with alcoholic beverages, to draw more adults. "But I don't have room to expand," said Ross. "Besides, I think families are going to want a place to go where there's no alcohol."

Birthday Parties help laser tag arenas live long and prosper...

Laserdome's first five years were "scary," admitted Ross. "But now we've got a strong position in the community." In Lancaster County newspapers, Roller-dome consistently wins the readers' choice awards as best birthday party venue.

Guests love seeing their own big smiles on Roller-dome's Facebook Timeline, but Ross promotes parties the old fashioned way - snail mail. "We do a postcard that goes out to the birthday people, or their parents, a month to six weeks before their birthday," said Ross. "We spend six to seven thousand dollars a month to send out lots of postcards." Some of the addresses come from the American Student List, but, said Ross, "We supplement that with our own in-house list, which is thousands of names per month because since 2004, every one of our customers has signed in to play laser tag."

Weber has decided to enlist some professional help to do more online marketing, including Facebook. He runs commercials on cable TV, ads in magazines, participates in coupon books, and may

Lazer Frenzy in relation to traffic made all the difference in the attraction's success. He also found that making it part of a package deal with other similar games urges customers to see what Lazer Frenzy is all about.

Hansen relates package deals to what customers at Disney World want in their vacation experience. He said when any amusement park fanatic goes to Disney World they want to see it all. Of course, they aren't going to ride one or two rides, he said. This is how family fun centers must treat their attractions as well. In addition to having an attraction package Lazer Frenzy is included in, he also offers customers a birthday package where they can experience this active game.

"We bought Laser Frenzy because it was different, unique, fun and challenging," Hansen said, "and on top of that it looks cool. It gives our establishment the image of being different. If you don't put new things in your facility, customers stop coming."

Rink owners who have larger facilities with a variety of options already available to customers will have the most success purchasing the Lazer Frenzy product, Marks said. Fun centers that have more options can have it as a piece rather than a main attraction.

start mailing postcards again. "I'm a firm believer in rotating advertising," he said. He figures that by rotating, he'll eventually reach everyone in his target market, no matter which method most influences them.

When it comes to advertising and promotions, laser tag operators are every bit as opinionated - and diverse - as rink operators. Turner does no advertising at all. He relies on word of mouth. Back in the old days, he did it all, TV commercials, radio ads, the backs of cash register receipts, and ads between movies at local theaters. "And we never saw anything from any of it," he said. "But when we stopped pouring all that money into marketing and started pouring it back into the business, that's when we saw our numbers going up."

Buy - and take good care of - the best equipment you can afford...

Although these three laser tag entrepreneurs have differences of opinion when it comes to marketing, they do agree on the need for equipment that's durable and easy to repair. Much of the appeal of laser tag is its high tech futuristic quality. If customers don't perceive your equipment to be as state of the art and cutting edge as that of your competitors, you're going to get zapped.

Creative Works' Journey to Laser Tag and Beyond

Creative Works began its journey in family entertainment specializing in laser tag arenas. As technology continued to evolve, Lunati said the company implemented black-light miniature golf and are excited to announce their most recent attraction Atomic Rush, which was first introduced November 2012. "This is an evolution in arcade environment staying in the idea of a mini attraction using our unique touch LED technology," Lunati said. "We've developed a room full of panels, and these panels can each illuminate in 100 different colors and react to the slightest touch of your pinky to a full smack of the hand." Those who play Atomic Rush get points for reacting to the colors, he said. The game requires players to run around the room and touch the illuminated colors, making it fast-paced, active game. Creative Works prides itself in creating laser tag arenas, Lazer Frenzy and Atomic Rush because they get people up and moving, encouraging a healthy lifestyle, Armando said. All business owners who purchase attractions from Creative Works can rely on a full-time staff for technical support. Creative Works has worked on more than 400 projects, Lunati said, and the staff has solved dozens of problems that have been brought to them. "We guide our clients through opening the attractions, which saves money and time," Lunati said. "Choose a vendor that can give you peace of mind all along the way."