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FLORIDA'S NEWSPAPER FOR THE C-SUITE

Business Observer

Burger Time



The fast-food industry is known for high rates of employee turnover, but Checkers franchisee Craig Joy has kept such churn to a minimum while turning over something else: profits.

Over the past decade, Joy achieved a \$400,000 average sales increase across his six Tampa area Checkers locations, resulting in a \$1.6 million annual sales average. That led to the Checkers and Rally's Decade of Sales Growth Award, which he received late last year. The award is given to one of the Tampa fast-food company's 260 franchisees.

The accolade is particularly remarkable considering Joy, 68, is Checkers and Rally's first franchisee. He joined the company in 1989, when he left a secure, six-figure-salary position with Taco Bell to take a chance on the new kid on the fast-food block.

"He's done a remarkable job in pushing the sales of his restaurants to the levels that he has," says Robert Bhagwandat, Checkers and Rally's director of franchise development. "A 20% jump in revenue in a decade is a pretty significant move, especially in a fast-food environment that hasn't really seen a lot of price increases."

Joy attributes his success to a few factors. One is real estate, in picking the right locations. Another key is maintaining steadiness in staffing and operations.

"Being consistent day in and day out is the key to this business," says Joy, "whether it's a full-service restaurant like Outback Steakhouse or fast-food like us or Wendy's. We don't have a lot of turnover, so that really helps with the consistency."

On some days Joy works behind the scenes at his office in Clearwater. But more often than not he's on-site at one of his restaurants, clad in the same red uniform as his employees and helping out on the register, grill or deep-fryer as needed.

Bhagwandat says Joy's willingness to "roll up his sleeves" and abandon his desk when duty calls is motivating — and another factor in the success.

"A lot of his employees are excited to come to work and they're happy to be there, and that translates into success," says Bhagwandat. "At many fast-food restaurants, employees are already mentally checked out before they even walk in the door and punch the clock."

One of the biggest challenges Joy has overcome with Checkers and Rally's is rapid-fire changes in top ownership and management. A series of private equity firms have owned the parent entity since 1999, when Checkers and Rally's, separate businesses at the time, merged.

At one point, Joy says, "I think we went through five presidents in six years. That's hard. Some of them just didn't get our system. For example, to try to save on labor costs, they'd want to close the low-side drive-thru, and we would never ... we've always had two drive-thrus."

Joy's used C-suite churn as an opportunity to deploy his institutional knowledge of the fast-food industry. He's a member of both the company's franchisee advisory council and its marketing committee, for example.

Joy has bought into the Checkers and Rally's system so much he's made it a family affair. His son, Ryan Joy, is the company's director of research and development, working out of the corporate office.

Bhagwandat says Joy, in another team-player move, goes out of his way to help educate new franchisees in the area — instead of viewing them as a threat. "Craig really is what we call a brand champion," Bhagwandat says. "He's just a different type of franchisee that I truly enjoy working with on a day-to-day basis."

Although at his age he could easily be a grandfather of some employees, Joy doesn't plan to slow down. "I think I've won the franchisee of the year award four or five times, but it's because I've been around so damn long," he quips. "But I don't ever give up on trying to improve the guest experience in our restaurants. I'm relentless about operating standards."