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Demetria Peterson,
Senior Construction Manager,
Checkers/Rally's

The disruptors

How the Checkers/Rally's
brand continues to keep its
competitors on their toes

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Cover story photography by Marina Delaine-Siegel, MDS Photographer



The disruptors

By Michael J. Pallerino

How the Checkers/Rally's brand continues to keep its competitors on their toes

While building several Wendy's franchises in the '80s, Jim Mattei took a keen interest in how the burger chain's customers were using the drive-thru and ordering burger combinations. It sparked an entrepreneurial thought. Working in tandem with his business partner, Herbert G. Brown, Mattei decided to start a new kind of burger franchise. In order to set themselves apart, they decided to make their burgers different from competitors like Wendy's and McDonald's. Rather than sell pre-made burgers, they made their burgers to order, ensuring peak freshness.



In 1986, Checkers Drive-In Restaurants was born with a company mission to offer great tasting burgers at a value price. In 1992, Checkers revealed its first combo meal to the public—its signature Champ burger, a small fry and a medium drink for \$2.29. A dynasty was afoot.

In 1999, Checkers joined forces and became Checkers & Rally's, the largest double drive-thru restaurant in the country. Today, with nearly 900 restaurants across the country, Checkers & Rally's continues to be a fast-casual pioneer. Included in that definition was an 2012 appearance on the TV show "Undercover Boss," in which CEO Enrique "Rick" Silva experienced an inside look at how his Checkers/Rally's team operates.

The plus was that the brand estimated that Silva's appearance on the show was equivalent to \$20 million in advertising for the company—another strategic step in the burger war battles.

Commercial Kitchens sat down with Demetria Peterson, senior construction manager, to see what the brand is up to in 2019 and beyond.

Give us a snapshot of the Checker's/Rally brand?

Based in Tampa, Florida, Checkers & Rally's Restaurants Inc., is an iconic and innovative drive-thru restaurant chain known for its "Crazy Good Food," exceptional value and people-first attitude. We operate and franchise both Checkers® and Rally's® restaurants. Our food showcases bold, unique flavors, creating its own lane versus similar quick-service hamburger restaurants.

Walk us through how and why the restaurants are designed the way they are?

Our newest modular prototype is a single-lane concept that promotes operational efficiencies, all while keeping the walk-up and patio experience that so many of our guests enjoy. The exterior design with large checkered tiles, red LED lighting and iconic stainless wings are now angled with protruding canopies that grab our guest's attention, creating a brand distinction within the industry.

Our first-generation modular restaurants have two lanes that increase throughput and allow us to serve guests efficiently. The



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T-style kitchen layout with dual sided prep promotes efficiencies within a small space serving two windows.

What changes are you planning for the first generation of modular restaurants?

Over the past few years, we have been remodeling Rally's restaurants. We've seen tremendous growth in sales, employee engagement, guest satisfaction and ROI. We are now focused on a new re-image prototype for the Checkers restaurants. This design includes a crisp exterior with large checkered tiles like the new restaurant prototype. We updated our canopy design, incorporated more stainless appeal and introduced a towering blade wall. Our logo has been updated with a new oval design displaying our tag line, "Crazy Good Food."

Take us through your construction and design strategy.

With this design, we wanted to be as bold and crazy good as our food. We were also conscious of the impact this program would

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have on our franchisees. It needed to be durable, cost efficient and easy to construct.

When I came to Checkers & Rally's in late 2017, I immediately began creating the components of a re-image program that met the demands from our employees, guests and franchisees. The design and construction team worked tirelessly to value engineer every component of the prototype, beginning with structural components and material finishes.

Simultaneously, we built new tools and processes for the assessment, design and construction phases. We tested a few designs along the way, each one yielding more ideas to reduce timelines, cost and ease of construction. We introduced our new re-image prototype late last summer. It was met with optimism and excitement by our franchise community.

What trends are you seeing?

Modular construction. Checkers and Rally's has been at the forefront of modular buildings since the brand's inception in the mid 1980s. Others are now trying to



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duplicate the success we are having. The idea is to build a restaurant offsite and speed up the entire construction process. As the underground work commences, your building is fast underway with minimal inspections needed. Within a few weeks, you are setting your building, hooking up utilities and preparing to open your restaurant.

What's more exciting is the cost that is much less (up to \$100,000) than traditional ground up construction, and is not affected by weather and other timely delays.

Another growing trend is technology, such as the use of time lapsed cameras and commercial drones. Not only can you keep tabs on your project from the comfort of your laptop, tablet or phone, it is now being used to assess and survey current conditions used in the planning phase. There's much more to come in its ability to collect data that can be used to expedite the construction process.

What's the biggest issue today related to the construction side of the business?

Labor shortages have been a growing challenge for this industry. Specifically, the electrical and plumbing trades are the most in demand at a time when construction is at its all time high for retailers, governmental agencies, education institutions and restaurants. I am confident this will improve now that more students choosing to attend technical colleges where they can learn a trade and become a part of the workforce in less time than traditional four-year colleges.

We still need engineers, but I am excited to learn there are many programs now that allow high school students to earn college credits while gaining technical knowledge useful in our industry.

What do you see as some of your biggest opportunities moving ahead?

Expediting the development plan against rising construction costs.

What is your growth plan?

We have nearly 900 restaurants and are planning for 65-75 new ones per year over

the next three years. We have a strong approved pipeline and we continue to attract new franchisees who are equipped to develop large markets across the U.S. Simultaneously, we are re-imaging our existing portfolio of company and franchise locations. This dual approach allows us to update our image and gain market share in a very competitive QSR industry.

What is the secret to creating a “must visit” environment in today’s competitive landscape?

When designing for a new location or simply remodeling an existing restaurant, I look for ways to enhance the experience for our guests. Does the building provide distinction from our competition? Is the signage properly placed to capture the guest’s attention? Are the entrances, parking lots and drive-thru areas well lit, beautifully landscaped and easy for our guests to navigate around the site. My goal is to attract the guest, engage the guest, and satisfy the guest so they return again and again.

What is today’s consumer looking for?

Today’s guest have a choice where they will spend their time and money. Some are looking for inviting environments to hang out and enjoy an afternoon meal. Others prefer digital ordering and delivery options. We provide both. Most importantly, they are looking for a brand that represents the values they hold for themselves and the diversity of their neighborhoods.

Tell us what makes the Checkers/Rally brand so unique?

It’s a family, from our restaurant and support teams, to our franchisee family, we take care of each other. This brand has been around for decades, but is relatively unknown to many parts of the country. We are in the midst of tremendous growth, so we’ve brought on talented resources to transform the brand from restaurant operations to restaurant growth. The support we receive from executive leadership empowers us to be innovative, collaborative and decisive. **CK**



One-on-One with...

» Demetria Peterson

Senior Construction Manager, Checkers/Rally’s

Describe a typical day.

I am working on many different initiatives right now, so I have to be strategic with my time. I begin by defining the most important outcome for the day, the week and the month. This could range from a collaboration meeting with my team or walking a site with a franchisee. Many days are spent planning with cross-functional departments and executive leadership. At the end of every day, it is important for me to feel that I have provided good direction, listened to great ideas and made a contribution to the future of this brand.

What’s the most rewarding part of your job?

I love being in the field sharing some windshield time with a franchisee or visiting a project under construction.

What was the best advice you ever received?

Do what you say you are going to do. Trust is an important part of a relationship so it’s critical that you communicate and meet expectations.

What’s the best thing a client ever said to you?

I spend a lot of time planning and solving problems so when someone thanks me for just listening, I am humbled and appreciative.

Name the three strongest traits any leader should have.

Leading with integrity and transparency, communicating with a level of humility and empowered accountability.

What is the true key to success for any manager?

Be a good resource to remove obstacles, mentor and support your team.

How do you like to spend your down time?

Sitting on a dock with a fishing rod or traveling with my family and friends.

What book are you reading right now?

“Good to Great” by Jim Collins. Although this will be my third time reading this book, I always learn something new I can implement right away.