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Checkers & Rally's travels 2-way communication highway to QSR success

Quick-serve: The very name connotes the fleeting nature of this type of business. Customers are moving targets — here and gone. It's all too easy for operators to miss the kinds of communication opportunities that build customer relationships and better brands in the process.

But for Checkers & Rally's Restaurants Inc., that challenge has been like a schoolyard dare that has brand leadership piping back, "Oh yeah? Well, just watch how we do it!"

The Tampa-based company has more 870 locations operating under both the Checkers and Rally's names and this year ranked No. 140 on Entrepreneur's 2018 Franchise 500. A lot of that success has to do with an emphasis on strong two-way communication with customers aimed at improving customer experience, service and its overall menu offerings.

QSRweb thought other restaurant leaders might like to hear more about the tactics Checkers & Rally's employs and how they've helped build a more profitable brand in the future. To that end, we recently bounced some questions off Checkers & Rally's Director of Brand Marketing Lauren Axe about building customer connection through strong communication initiatives.

Q: What vehicles and venues do you use to "talk" with customers and how do you approach that task?

Axe: We have several ways to interact with and better understand and serve our Guests. Consumer input is critical to our new product development process. In order to ensure we are always offering the most craveable products at an amazing value, we maintain an online consumer panel that includes over 5,000 participants from across the country.



We routinely communicate with this group as well as localized focus groups to gauge interest in new ideas and learn more about their needs, dining occasions, and how they live their lives. We also use social media as a way to communicate with and engage our Guests. Our approach is to both inform about our latest creations and deals as well as entertain and share that social space with them.

Q: Do you have to actively pull thoughts out of customers by asking questions or other promptings? Or do they pretty much tell you anyway or a combination of both?

Axe: Our guests are generally excited to give input and let us know right away what they're in love with and what may need improvements. They are happy to help us create something even better by suggesting improvements.

Q: What's the most popular communication channel with your customers and why do you think that's so?

Axe: Guests seem to be attracted to the real-time interaction that social media offers. We take every opportunity to let the guest know that they are heard and appreciated, whether it's sending us some "fry love," inquiring about new locations or even sending us their feedback on a recent visit.

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Q: What are some of the frequently hit-upon topics for customers?

Axe: Through our consumer insights tools, we receive feedback on product ideas including how well items meet the needs of their specific dining occasions as well as suggestions for new products. On social media, feedback about a not-so-great experience is the most important. We want to take care of the guest and their feedback helps us to deliver a better guest experience.

Q: Are most of the conversations via local venues or national?

Axe: Most of our tools and media are on a national scale. We also conduct frequent focus groups on the local level.

Q: Do customers take and send a lot of pictures and if so, what kinds of things are they sharing visually with you?

Axe: We receive guest photos all the time through our social channels, especially Instagram. The photos range from "in-car feasts" to "check out my latest home-made seasoned fry recipe."

Q: How does the brand look at the overall strategic value of customer communication relative to your path forward or even reviewing the effectiveness of current or past campaigns?

Axe: Deeply understanding and engaging our guests is critical to being as relevant as possible for what matters to them most. Guest communication and feedback is what drives our ability to bring them crave-able new products at a great value.

We are constantly engaging with Guests and feeding back information to drive new development and increase our relevance. As a result of that we have several new products planned to launch in the next few months.

Q: What have been the biggest mistakes and successes you've experienced and what have you learned from each of them?

Axe: Our biggest mistakes have come from not following our process and listening to our guests. Examples of this have included moving forward to test products that consumers liked in focus groups, but that didn't have broad-based appeal or full brand credibility.

Our biggest successes are the flip side of that. When we really listen to our guests and stay in tune with what matters most to them that we can deliver best (the combination of bold flavor and great value), we win.