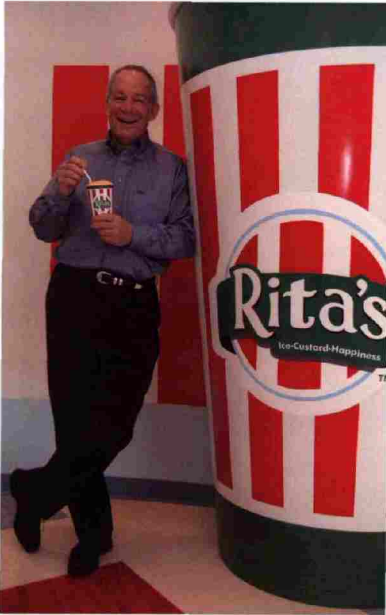


Jim Rudolph's Hot For a Cool Idea: How His Passion for Rita's Turned Him from Franchisee to Leading Franchisor

by Debbie Shiring



Jim Rudolph, CEO of McKnight Capital Partners, is a master multi-tasker. At one point, the lifelong Pittsburgher had a franchise empire that included 47 Wendy's, six Chuck E. Cheese, and two Baskin & Robbins, plus four bowling centers and a real estate development and construction business.

While Rudolph's business portfolio no longer includes the bowling centers and the above-mentioned franchises, he is still a major player in the food service industry. Today, he is chairman and CEO of the popular Rita's Franchise Company, the largest Italian Ice concept in the nation.

Rudolph, along with his brother and investors, took notice of Rita's Ice in 2004 when the 310-store organization, famous for doling out its signature brand of frozen, fruity confections, went on the market.

In May of 2005, McKnight Capital Partners purchased the Bucks County-based franchise concept and planned for Rudolph to run it for three to six months, promote a president from within, and oversee the company from McKnight's downtown Pittsburgh headquarters. But things, as the saying goes, don't always work according to plan.

"Four years later, I'm still very much a daily part of Rita's," says Rudolph who takes a cross-state flight to Philadelphia each week. "I fell in love with this business. I loved the opportunity but I didn't expect to be so passionate about it."

His enthusiasm for the tasty warm-weather tradition shows. Since 2005, the number of stores has grown to 560 in seventeen states, with plans to open an additional 75 this year alone, doubling the size of the company in just four years.

Once at the helm of the company that was founded in a small Philadelphia-area storefront in 1984, Rudolph began to evaluate every aspect of the business, both large and small, in an effort to position the company into one of the country's top franchise systems.

"Other than the quality of our products, there is not one thing that hasn't changed with Rita's in the four years since we took over, even down to the smallest detail; it's always evolving. In business, you have to move fast, no matter what," Rudolph

shares.

His background as a franchisee gave Rudolph a unique advantage as a franchisor. He knew, first hand, what franchise owners were looking for in terms of support and how critical it is for the company to have a culture that supports the vision of the company.

"When we got into Wendy's, there were only two dozen restaurants nationwide and the burgers cost four times higher than McDonald's. We liked the burgers but we loved the people. The vision was pervasive throughout the company and that was very reassuring," Jim says as he explains his efforts to emulate the Wendy's franchise culture.

While Rita's signature products like the famous Italian Ice, as well as its Ritaccino and Misto, have amassed legions of fans for the franchise, the company is also using progressive outreach practices to find new converts.

Recently, Rudolph hired a social media staff person who works full-time to expand the company's reach through influential online networks. While there's simply no substitute for experiencing a Rita's treat from one of the nation's nearly 600 stores, you can visit Rita's virtually and chat with other like-minded Rita aficionados on sites like Facebook® and Twitter. The campaign is working to strengthen relationships with Rita's fervent fan base and engage new ones, including prospective franchise owners.

So how long will this ambitious Pittsburgher continue to make his cross-state commutes on Sundays to the company's corporate headquarters, aptly named Rita's Cool Support Center?

"I won't do this indefinitely but I hope that I've created a culture that will live beyond my tenure. That's the power of a good system." ▼

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