



Ruby Tuesday's IT strategies pay off again through advanced kitchen technology from QSR Automations

BY NICK SCAVONE

It is not often that a food-service company receives recognition from outside of the industry for its technology. But recently, Ruby Tuesday, Inc. has proven to be the exception, having received press and recognition from the likes of CIO magazine as well as a wall full of industry awards for its forward thinking IT initiatives. Continuing its trend of employing cutting edge technology to drive revenue and guest delight, Ruby Tuesday has added a complete kitchen management system with the ConnectSmart Hospitality Automation Solution from QSR Automations. The open, standards-based hardware and software enables Ruby Tuesday to fully customize each of its kitchen video stations, routing and displaying items and orders to specifically fit the Ruby Tuesday environment. Furthermore, the QSR kitchen solution provides reliable, rich feature sets and access to critical production data with the added benefits of advanced multi-media and graphical capabilities.

It was a somewhat bumpy road for Ruby Tuesday before securing its place among the technologically elite restaurant companies. After the company was spun off from Morrison's Cafeterias in 1996, its IT department was geographically and organizationally outside the mainstream of corporate operations. But all that changed in 2000 when a new IT structure was put in place, operating within corporate headquarters and with representation on the executive leadership team. Under the leadership of Nick Ibrahim, senior vice president and chief technology officer for Ruby Tuesday, Inc., IT is now a strategic planning tool capable of giving the organization a competitive advantage with a focus on making each restaurant more efficient and even more guest centric.

After working to update its infrastructure and enterprise systems, Ruby Tuesday turned its attention to the kitchen. With QSR's ConnectSmart Kitchen (CSK) software and eXpert hospitality controller, Ruby Tuesday found a perfect

technology solution to employ its IT philosophies and improve how it manages its business.

Ruby Tuesday's selection of QSR as its kitchen technology partner centered around three main criteria:

- sophisticated technology with extensive capabilities, including graphics, built around an open architecture, such as Microsoft .NET and Windows XP Embedded, that would fit easily into the company's other technology initiatives
- a solution with the most innovative feature sets, functionality, and reliability available in order to make an immediate and measurable impact

- a stable, flexible solution partner that is the leader in kitchen automation technology

Ruby Tuesday, like many other table service restaurants, relied on ticket control by kitchen staff and management level employees in order to orchestrate firing times and order assembly to move orders through and out of the kitchen. This manual system

was inherently slower than Ruby Tuesday preferred, and was prone to errors. Worse, store-level management and the corporate team received no information on the productivity of the kitchen.

According to John Doyle, director of IT support systems for Ruby Tuesday, Inc., “QSR fleshed out the concept of the kitchen automation technology for table service restaurants, offering a radical shift in kitchen management.”

The QSR ConnectSmart system installed at Ruby Tuesday includes user-defined screens in the kitchen preparation and expeditor areas with built in business rules and intelligence to automate the production process and provide management with necessary information to better control efficiencies and maximize the guest experience. Now, items appear on screens at the appropriate prep stations based on cook times, and in relation to the cook times of the other items on the same ticket. For example, a ticket with a fish item and a beef item are automatically timed to drop to the pantry and grill prep stations based on each item’s cooking time. Similarly, the other items on the ticket are scheduled to ensure that all items complete at the same time. The expo station tracks the entire order, reflecting all changes as they occur for each of the items at each of the prep stations. This leads to a more efficient, less stressed kitchen team that provides faster service and higher

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– Nick Ibrahim, senior VP and CTO, Ruby Tuesday, Inc.

quality food – and ultimately, happier, more satisfied guests.

Another key feature of the CSK, the menu cards functionality makes recipes readily available to kitchen staff via a button on the keypad, providing Ruby Tuesday another huge cost savings over having to print and ship recipe cards to its restaurants. Menu cards will be especially helpful in the bar, where Ruby Tuesday is among the first to employ kitchen video to tighten control over bar orders and service while capturing this vital speed of service data.

Ruby Tuesday also uses the demand projections feature of the CSK for managing high volume side items, showing the number of menu items needed within a predefined time frame in easy to understand colors and fonts. Using this information, the kitchen knows how to pace the preparation of key side items, reducing waste and keeping fresh product available at all times.

The intuitive nature of the system coupled with real-time speed of service data allows every team member — back-of-house, front-of-house, and management — to see in an instant what is happening with guest orders and at what pace. With a focus on providing

actionable, timely data that allows restaurant management to make the best business decisions quickly, Ruby Tuesday managers rely on key reports regarding kitchen activities, including those highlighting exceptions. And with the CSK, Ruby Tuesday corporate now also has access to critical production data, such as actual cook times and volumes by specific time periods, for comparison within its enterprise reporting.

The results of adding QSR’s system have been dramatic. According to Ibrahim, “We have been able to refocus the attention of our managers on our guests, and on motivating the restaurant teams. Freeing up managers from the expeditor and automating production overall has created a substantial savings in labor. Order times have significantly dropped, overall efficiency is better, and table turns are faster. But most importantly, all of these improvements have made a direct, positive impact on our guests’ experience.”

When it comes to improving operations, driving down costs, and enhancing service through IT, Ruby Tuesday clearly has a winning strategy with QSR.