

Life of the Party

The stuffy obligatory business events of yesteryear have gone by the wayside.

Today's corporate events are fun, creative and—most important—effective marketing tools.

According to local experts, corporate affairs are alive and well. "Before 9/11 and the dot com crash, we saw tons of events," explains Jeff Johnstone, CEO of Party Perfect special event rentals. "Then they dropped off. Now we are seeing more events, they're being held more frequently and the size of the events is growing too."

Return on investment

Jim Lorimer, owner of Business Events Management, says companies are recognizing the power of events for both internal and external marketing.

"[Companies] realize they get a bigger bang for their buck," he says. "Events are a way to give employees enjoyment as a benefit. They provide a situation where employees can get to know each other and give employees and executives an opportunity to interact."

Lorimer said external events help build brands, create a positive image and give companies a chance to interact with customers (and potential customers) in person.

Andrew Hardy, owner of Chez Foushee restaurant and catering, agreed. "Events do make a good impression. They generate awareness and exposure for the organization."

Amanda Guyre, marketing and community relations manager at CJW Medical Center, produces numerous employee and public events.

"Events get our name out there and help put a human face to the company. As a hospital, it gets people in the doors when they are not in a crisis situation. They can see the technology and talk to medical professionals when they don't need emergency care," she explains.

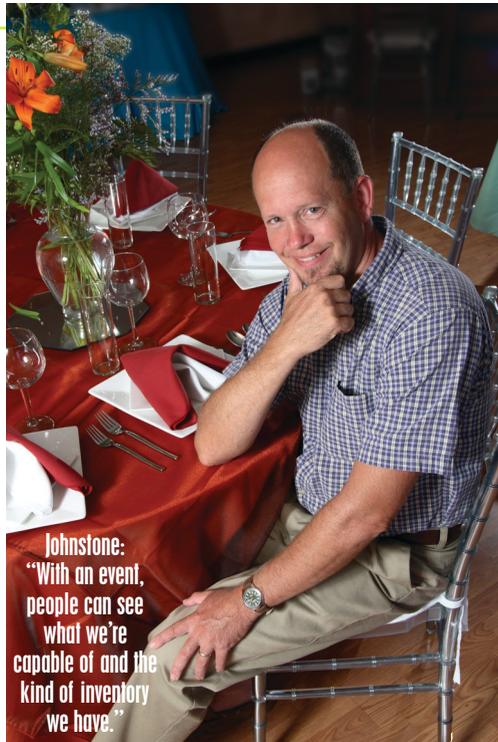
Guyre says events are one way to be a good corporate citizen. For CJW, this means providing education to the community.

They're also a good way for a company to market itself.

"We used [our 10-year anniversary party] as a celebration to thank customers," says Johnstone. "We also invited people who have not done business with us so they could see what we have and get to know us. With an event, people can see what we're capable of and the kind of inventory we have."

Conferences allow companies to invite targeted prospects or the public to learn about their products and services so they are seen as an expert, said Lorimer. Event sponsorships are an opportunity to tie a company into an event or cause to create a positive image.

In fact, cause marketing is the fastest growing segment of sponsorship. It's an effective way to reach a targeted audience, particularly



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young people who have an affinity for companies that sponsor causes they support.

A study in *Special Events Magazine* reports that 70 percent of chief marketing officers view events as an important part of the marketing mix because they give CEOs direct access to customers.

It's all in the creative

Lorimer said he's seeing a mix of the types of events his clients are requesting. Employee events, or very large events, tend to be themed—say casino night or a tropical theme.

Black tie events, on the other hand, have become simpler, said Guyre, with less frou-frou.

Suzanne Clayton, an event coordinator at Party Perfect, sees clients using resources more creatively, using scale in ways that create impact or using standard materials in new ways. Recently, for example, a client used children's tables, which are low to the ground, and added pillows for seating. The client accessorized Party Perfect's linens and plates with black and red

BY KATHLEEN HALL PHOTO: JAKE LYELL

décor to create a Japanese-themed event.

To make an event special, Hardy says the food should be the most important element, unless the event is about making a huge production.

"What is the client's goal? What are they trying to get across?" she asks. "Once I know this, then I help them make it happen."

Guyre says, "Your imagination is the limit. If I dream it and call someone, they can find a way to make it happen. It's amazing. Of course, I may not be able to afford it!" ■■■

'Party On Dude'

1. Plan early. Allow at least three to four months, more to reserve popular locations. A year is even better for large events. Planning early saves money. You can better negotiate with suppliers who still have inventory available and it helps avoid costly, last minute changes. And, of course, it's less stressful.

2. Be flexible. Lorimer said if you're not tied to a certain date or time of year you may be able to negotiate better rates.

3. Select a theme. They're like the hub of a wheel, says Guyre. Once you establish a theme, everything else revolves around it.

4. Involve professionals early and take advantage of their expertise. They can help you avoid unnecessary costs and last minute surprises.

5. Check. Double check. And check again. It's the details that make an event succeed or fail, said Guyre. Lists are great!

6. Work with reputable companies. Ask to see their certificate of insurance, said Johnstone. Ask for references. Check for complaints with the Better Business Bureau.

7. Think entertainment. Despite the serious business of developing positive relationships and driving sales, Guyre says you must engage your audience and make it fun.

8. Budget. Allot \$20 to \$30 per person for hors d'oeuvres and beverages said Hardy. Since corporate events are often after work, hors d'oeuvres are generally sufficient.

9. Don't be limited by time of year or size of crowd. Johnstone said most corporate events are tented because there are few venues to accommodate very large groups. Today's tents are so sturdy you feel like you're in a building. With Richmond's mild climate, you can hold outdoor events year round by adding heat or air conditioning.

