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# PARTY with PASSION

Whether it's private or for business, themes and a bit of extravagance are back in party planning.

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Robin Leach was recently in Hunt Valley, but it had nothing to do with the lifestyles of anyone rich or famous. In fact, it wasn't even really Robin Leach. As part of a 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary event for KCI Technology, the faux Leach's job was to introduce the CEO and lend a certain amount of glamour to the evening.

He was not alone; other actors guided tours through the company's offices where each department had created displays about what they do. An award that was given to the company was used as a centerpiece on one of the food tables to highlight the firm's achievement and to spice up the décor. Guests were given a card for a trivia-based scavenger hunt where they picked up information about the company throughout the night and the winner was given a prize.

Response to the party was so big, a tent was added at the last minute to accommodate guests.

"The purpose of the event was to really see what the organization was about, not just have a cocktail," says Blake Goldsmith of Extraordinary Events, the event-planning company that helped mastermind the party.

Which all went to prove that with a little bit of brainstorming and a lot of planning, an event—whether business or private—can be more than just a party.

### Business Acumen

Whether for a company anniversary, a fundraiser, or even a Bat Mitzvah, parties are big business. For the fourth year in a row, event marketing is up over 20 percent nationally, according to Michigan-based global event-marketing firm The George P. Johnson Company. Nowhere is this more apparent than in corporate parties, where the business world is catching on to what nonprofits have known for years—that a good party can bring in the people and the cash.

"Traditional marketing is down," says Goldsmith. "The trend is toward out-of-the-

box, guerilla marketing, because it works. It's a profitable enterprise to put on a party."

That's in part because parties can help companies or nonprofits grow their brand and foster better relationships with their clients or audience. According to Goldsmith, the new wave in corporate entertaining is the anniversary party. "It [the party] has more impact on an anniversary because it authenticates the event," he says. "Even if there's a theme, it needs to brand the company into the party itself." By example, he points to an event at the Washington County library for its 100th anniversary. Originally, the idea was to have a *Gone With the Wind*-themed event. While it may have made for a nice party, it had nothing to do with the library. Instead, the event was constructed around a period theme with the room lit by

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A Western theme was the order of the day for this Bar Mitzvah party at Greyrock Mansion in Pikesville. The party was put together for the client by Simply Elegant Catering, which operates out of the mansion.



gas lamps and old books as the centerpiece pedestals. An actor portraying Teddy Roosevelt, resplendent in his Rough Riders outfit, greeted guests as they walked through a giant book into the party.

A corporate event should have clear goals, be it business development or a thank-you to a group of employees for a job well done. So when planning the event, picture the experience through the eyes of the attendee. Is the event appropriately timed? Is there enough parking? How late are your guests willing to be out? How far are they likely to travel? Knowing the audience will smooth the way to a better event.

Think about the format, too: In the past year, event planners say they've seen fewer sit-down dinners and more cocktail parties or even breakfast events where the sales pitch, nonprofit testimonial, or award ceremony is powerfully delivered—and brief.

### Big Ideas

From raging brides on *Whose Wedding is it, Anyway?* to raging teenagers on MTV's *My Super Sweet 16*, American media is full of party-planning excess. And after a brief period of more toned-down events following 9/11 and the last recession, that's again influencing party planning on Main Street.

"The TV shows and media are influencing what's happening in our industry today," says Heidi Hiller, co-owner with Zozzie Golden of Zozzie & Heidi Innovative Party Planners in Owings Mills. "People are more aware of how exciting and elaborate an event can be. In turn, they want their event to be unique, jam-packed with exciting interactive activities, and full of memorable decorative accents."

Not surprising, given this atmosphere of over-the-top entertaining and creative corporate branding, themes are still alive and kicking. Innovative Party Planners has created themes around everything from scuba diving and theme parks to a Middle Eastern fete.

A theme can liven a party up and give guests something to talk about instantly, but how the concept of "theme" is put into play is really up to the host. While a full-blown hoe-down with hay bales and pony rides may suit one person's style, a dinner party where the centerpieces are accented with fishing



rods to reflect an honoree's passion for fly fishing gives a party motion without guests leaving with straw in their hair.

For a birthday party, guests can dress in the fashions of the year of the birth. Throw a wine party where guests can sample a different vintage at each food station. Interactive foods like fondue and tapas inspire guests to pass foods and mingle. Something as simple as a signature drink for each guest as they enter can be an icebreaker.

Regardless of the theme of an event, the invitation is essential because it creates anticipation for the event and sets parameters, from the timing of the party to the all-important dress code. And of course, there's more than one way to get the word out, from traditional stationery invitations—which can be computer-generated at home or at Kinko's—or with snappy email invitations. These invites can become interactive, featuring sound and video clips to set the tone for the event.

### What's the Point?

Regardless of who you are entertaining, the question to ask is, "Why?" Are you there to celebrate a couple preparing to get married? Are you there to schmooze potential clients?

Celebrate a birthday? Raise awareness of a capital campaign?

"Know what you are trying to accomplish and where you want to focus your energy," says Terry Willner, a partner in the event-planning company Affairs to Remember. While the look and feel of the event are important, would-be party planners should also focus on entertainment and food, especially when planning a large event.

"It's important to have your space look good, but in the end it's the food and entertainment people will remember most," says Willner. "That's what people are there for—to be entertained and have a good time."

Once you know why you are gathering people together, the task is to be organized enough to bring the concept to bear. Ask anyone who has ever planned a wedding and they'll tell you the guest list and the budget are the key issues.

"Start by knowing how many guests you are having," says Hiller. "Often clients will book a space first and later come to the realization that the room may be too small or too big. So before you do anything, make your guest list."



A Cabaret for Kids was the theme executed by The Classic Catering People for this fundraising event in Baltimore held by The Children's Guild.

And that, in turn, will help establish a rough budget, which the event planner needs to do his or her job. Because if the budget is fuzzy, the event planner may create a party whose look and feel include rare orchid centerpieces and a headline band for entertainment. When the client realizes they can't pay for that amount of decadence, everyone loses time and money.

Time is also of the essence. Golden and Hiller note that with Bar Mitzvahs being booked two years in advance and weddings at least one year, it can be a race for space at country clubs, hotels, and unique event locales. The key is to start planning early, using a complete to-do list. Book the location first, followed in rapid succession by the entertainment and the photographer if one is needed. Unlike a larger caterer who typically has the capacity to work several events in one evening, that band you've been dreaming of for your anniversary party can only be in one place on the big night.

And Golden recommends that party organizers hire vendors with references and who can demonstrate samples of their work, whether it's caterers or DJs.

### Party Savers

Admirable though it may be to try to organize and host an entire party alone, the hostess may end up too exhausted at her own

party to enjoy it. The sign of a great hostess is knowing when to ask for help. "A lot of people, in planning, don't know where to start," says Willner. Her company provides each of its clients with a helpful checklist. "As an event planner, we're able to pull together a look and the details for a small bridal shower to a huge social event."

For those that balk at hiring an event company or caterer, there are ways to meet the process halfway. If the event is in the home, many caterers will deliver all the food the day of the event so the hosts need only reheat and place the food on their own serving dishes. If you are famous for one particular dish, go ahead and make it and have a caterer handle the rest. Maybe the host wants to arrange the flowers but not the food. Take on the task you can manage yourself; you'll feel like you contributed to the event and it will keep your costs down.

If you just need a little piece of mind the night of the event, most event-planning companies offer day-of services to ensure that the party moves expertly.

"You can be so worried about your event going off smoothly that you can't enjoy it yourself," says Willner. The best part about having an event coordinator is that at the end of the day, you can kick back and enjoy that signature cocktail you put so much creative effort into concocting.

### Party Planning Tips

Party-loving companies have marketing directors to help them plan, but when your big idea for a private event goes beyond inviting a few friends over for pizza, there are some basic rules to follow to ensure it's a success. We asked the pros for thoughts on how to make your next party a hit:

#### PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR GUEST LIST

The right mix of people can make or break a party. In other words, if you want genius-level dialogues, pad your guest list with rocket scientists, brain surgeons, and Federal Reserve board members. But if you want a party where people dance, make sure you invite people who will actually get up and dance.

#### PICK THE RIGHT VENUE

Having a party at home offers a great opportunity to show off your house and entertain in a relaxed and familiar setting. But be sure your home, or whatever venue you choose, offers suf-

ficient space. If you're not at home, pick a venue that suits the theme or mood of the party.

#### CONSIDER THE DATE

Check the calendar to make sure you don't set a party date when your friends will be out of town, watching the Super Bowl, or otherwise tied up.

#### PLAN FOR THE WORST

If you're throwing an outside party, plan carefully what you will do in the event of rain. If your fallback plan is to retreat indoors, your indoor space needs to be big enough.

#### CONSIDER YOUR MENU CAREFULLY

When passing off the cooking to a caterer, most people like to choose items they can't prepare themselves. The food should be special, but beware of going too exotic.

#### CHOOSE YOUR CATERER CAREFULLY

Not all caterers are right for all events. Be sure you choose a caterer who excels in the type of party you want to plan. Also, be sure to taste the food before you choose the caterer, and talk to past clients who've used the caterer for similar parties.

#### MUSIC MAKES THE PARTY

Even if it's only background music, music can soften the atmosphere and bring a party to life. Of course, if you're leaning toward a band, ensemble, or DJ, make sure there's room for that.

#### THINK THEME

Themes have been taken to new heights in recent years, with more party planners attempting to find new ways to individualize a party. The choices are limited only by your imagination: Think holidays (like Halloween), sports themes, tropical themes, even political themes, as in an election-day party (pick your guests carefully on this last one to avoid a brawl).

#### PLAN AHEAD

If your party preparation committee consists of one—i.e., you—get started four days in advance, shopping and preparing items that can safely be chopped, cooked, or cleaned ahead of time. The night before the party is a good time to set the table, polish the silver, or put together a flower arrangement. ■