

Your Career: The holiday party

Many are scaling back festivities, but not all are party poopers

By Eve Tahmincioglu

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Many companies in the United States are putting the kibosh on a lavish party this holiday season because the economy is in the dumps.

Nearly 20 percent of companies polled by search firm Battalia Winston Amrop said they wouldn't be hosting a holiday party this year — the highest number in the history of the survey. And a separate survey by Towers Perrin, a consulting firm, found that 58 percent of businesses planned to scale back the annual soiree in order to save money.

But take heart: Not every employer is a party pooper.

MyWedding.com, an online advertising service for wedding professionals based in Bainbridge Island, Wash., is pulling out all the stops.

The company plans on partying like it's 1999, renting a loft in a trendy Seattle neighborhood, spending \$10,000 on food and booze, \$4,000 on decorations and even handing out Wii Fits to all of its 30 employees. (They gave all workers a Wii gaming console last year.) There will be a band, a DJ, karaoke, and a raffle drawing with a grand prize of a 60-inch flat screen TV.

It's not like MyWedding.com hasn't felt the sting of tough economic times. The company saw its sales rise only 6 percent this year, well below the expected increase of 25 percent, says company co-founder Rob Johnsen.

So why is MyWedding.com celebrating big while so many firms are scaling back or canceling holiday parties?

"The holiday party is the last thing that should be cut," says Johnsen. "It's about celebrating our accomplishments and recognizing that without employees, we wouldn't have a company. We made it through another year. This year should be the year we throw the biggest party."

"Even though the economy is in rough shape, we absolutely think it's critical to never skimp when it comes to employees and treating them like family."

Spreading a little holiday cheer

Indeed, workplace experts say a bit of merry making would help the sour mood that's pervasive in so many offices and factories throughout the country.

Rob Wilson, president of human resource outsourcing firm Employco Group, has been getting a lot of calls from his clients asking if they should cancel this year's festivities. His answer: "The party must go on."

"A fair amount of employees at large and small companies are wondering how financially sound their companies are. They wonder, 'Will I have a job tomorrow?' Canceling the holiday party further creates doubt and worry," he says.

And without the shindig, it's all work and no play for an increasingly asocial U.S. workplace.

"The holiday party is the last vestige of socialization left in corporate America," says Dale Winston, CEO of Battalia. With everyone so busy these days, events like summer company picnics or cocktails after work are a rarity.

People crave some socializing and the camaraderie that comes with it, and this desire becomes even more critical during tough times, she says.

"Should you be spending money on champagne and caviar right now? Probably not. But you want to create some goodwill," she says, because it leads to a happier, more productive workforce.

That's just what the folks over at candy giant Cadbury were thinking when they decided to go ahead with their annual, semi-formal holiday party at a fancy banquet hall. And they are even adding an extra party this year for the children of workers at the company's North American headquarters in Parsippany, N.J.

"We're all about making this a great place to work," says Katharine Beyer, a spokeswoman for the firm. "It's part of our culture. We're a candy company; we're supposed to be fun, especially at holiday times."

Despite the fact that Cadbury is in cost-cutting mode, the firm is planning on spending the same amount of money on the party this year. About 300 workers and guests are expected to attend the party, which will feature music, dancing and a comedians. "Everyone has the afternoon off to get ready," she says.

The company is also hosting a party for children, which will include games, crafts and photos with Frosty and Santa Claus.

And in Nebraska, 25 employees at Kracky McGee's, a restaurant in the Omaha airport, recently were treated to a day of fun at The Amazing Pizza Machine, an entertainment center that includes arcades and bumper cars.

"I guarantee you if we didn't do a party it would be pretty glum around here," says co-owner Mickie Wetzel.

Even though sales at Kracky McGee's took a nosedive after fuel prices skyrocketed earlier this year and air travel fell off, the owners have no plans to cut back on this year's festivities.

"Everyone is working harder, and we know a lot of our workers are struggling, too. They're looking to grab extra hours," she says. "At least we all can say, 'We're having a Christmas party.' Everyone is so excited."

Scaling back the party budget

At Blinds.com, the holiday party is being scaled back to about \$8,000, compared to the \$20,000 budget they had last year.

Despite the cutbacks, the event will still be quite lavish. It will be held at the Majestic Metro, a converted old movie theater in downtown Houston and include food and alcohol, as well as a videographer.

"We're bootstrapping the whole thing," says company CEO Jay Steinfeld, who says they are getting the booze from a wholesaler and using an in-house videographer.

"I'm asking people to work harder," says Steinfeld about his 80 employees. "We have to recognize and reward success."

While the company is in the black and outperforming competitors, he says, sales are not as robust as last year. There were no plans to cancel the party because of the economic slowdown, he adds, but bonuses for all the C-level employees at the company have been cut.

For all of you who are feeling a bit jealous right about now because your employer canceled your holiday party, you can always ask your manager to reconsider.

"Try to convince your employer that the holiday party is an opportunity to thank everyone for their hard work," says career expert Nicole Williams, author of "Earn What You're Worth." "With the economy as rough as it is, a potential downsize looming, and budget cuts occurring left and right, it would be blow to morale not to show some love. Couldn't they at least just arrange for some cupcakes and cocktails and call it a day?"

If your plea falls on deaf ears, Williams suggests organizing a potluck or drinks at a bar with co-workers outside of the workplace.

"The office party is about bonding and celebrating a few much-deserved days off," she says. "The shindig you throw together out of pure holiday spirit will be less corny and less pressure than the company event, and colleagues will love you for that."

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