

14 HOLIDAY PARTY TRENDS 15 INNOVATIVE MEETINGS

BIZBASH

EVENTS
MEETINGS
MARKETING
STYLE
STRATEGY
IDEAS

BIZBASH IDEAFEST
NEW YORK

OCTOBER 30, 2013

JAVITS CENTER

bizbash.com/events

\$9.95 FALL 2013 BIZBASH.COM

TOP 100 EVENTS

The most powerful annual festivals, conferences, and other spectacles in the United States and Canada.



'Tis the Season



The company holiday party is back—and while it may be less lavish than before the recession, it's become more thoughtful and employee-focused. Here are the top 14 trends shaping corporate end-of-year festivities right now, and how to harness them to keep your event feeling fresh.

By LAUREN MATTHEWS



MERRY

This season, stylish in-office holiday celebrations will be easier to pull off, thanks to new budget-friendly party-in-a-box collections like Minted's line of customizable decor. See page 251 for more.

When the recession was in full swing back in December 2008, companies across the board were scaling back on holiday events in light of economic constraints—or cancelling them altogether, deeming the celebrations either needlessly extravagant or highly inappropriate in the wake of layoffs.

But, last year it seemed that the corporate holiday party scene was returning to normal: A study conducted by executive search firm Battalia Winston reported that 91 percent of companies polled had a Christmas party, the highest percentage in the past six years, while a poll by the Society for

Human Resource Management found that 72 percent of respondents attended a company celebration, up from 68 percent in 2011 and 61 percent in 2010 and 2009.

Industry pros across the country echo the sentiment that corporate holiday party bookings and budgets are on an upswing, reporting that some companies are even once again investing in multiple events and big-name headliners. "People want to celebrate—the increase in the number of parties we booked last year grew dramatically over the year prior, and this year the pace is already picking up," says Marianna Accomando, the vice president of sales and assistant manager at the Seaport Boston Hotel. Adds Lisa Gorjestani, founder of Los Angeles-based Details Event Planning: "A couple years ago, even if a company had the ability to host a nice holiday event, they felt guilty and didn't want to rub it in others's faces. But now, they've gotten past that." A holiday party survey conducted by BizBash and food delivery Web site Seamless last December (see details on page 25) indicated that as the economy regains

its footing, companies are realizing that year-end festivities are not a meaningless expense, strongly influencing productivity and morale. Of the 1,500 event professionals who took the survey—the majority of whom help plan the holiday party—67 percent reported improved team dynamics as a direct result of office holiday get-togethers, and 75 percent reported improved office friendships.

Still, while many companies are hosting holiday gatherings again, the recession has effected a lasting change in what those events now look like, with hosts valuing smart spending over free-wheeling excess and designing more thoughtful affairs. "Companies are still trying to get the most bang for their buck while at the same time staying away from the typical 'cookie-cutter' holiday party," says Brett Galley, director of special events at Hollywood Pop Gallery, an event planning company with offices in New York and London. "Corporate clients are savvy—it's not an 'anything goes' mentality." Here's a closer look at the ideas and trends that we predict will shape company holiday parties this year.

Chef Nathaniel Neubauer of Contemporary Catering in Los Angeles says that house-made sausages, charcuterie, and cheeses will be popular at holiday parties this year.



Guests at company holiday parties now expect custom menus that emphasize fresh, locally sourced, and seasonal fare.

1 The focus is on food...

When it comes to divvying up the budget, **food is undeniably a priority at holiday parties—and it better be good.** According to the BizBash and Seamless survey, 60 percent of companies spent more than \$25 on food and drink per employee. Thanks in part to TV programming, people are more educated about food and therefore more aware of what they're eating. Translation: A generic, one-size-fits-all banquet won't cut it. "I expect that this year we'll see an even bigger demand for food to be taken to the next level—clients want to excite and wow their crowds," says Andrea Chinae, the catering sales manager at the Wyndham Grand Orlando Resort Bonnet Creek. But that doesn't mean guests want caviar and filet mignon—rather, they're expecting event organizers to work one-on-one with chefs to develop a custom menu that emphasizes fresh, locally sourced, and seasonal fare. "Because of shows like *Chopped* and *Top Chef*, and because people are more familiar with high-end dining, everyone eats differently now than in years past," says Nathaniel Neubauer, owner of Contemporary Catering in Los Angeles. He expects the farm-to-fork movement to stay strong during the holidays with an emphasis on house-made sausages, charcuterie, and cheeses. "Event guests want to have the experience that they would at a favorite restaurant," he says. "They want to know the story behind their food and where it came from." The use of globally influenced flavors, especially from places like Vietnam, Thailand, and India, is also on the rise as guests become more adventurous and open to trying new culinary offerings.



Made-to-order stations are hot: For a corporate party held last November in the Washington area, Magnolia Bluebird Design & Events worked with Occasions Caterers to design several custom stations, including one that offered guests their choice of freshly made salmon, tuna, or beef tartare.



Although some companies are still attached to sit-down dinners, experts say that guests prefer artfully presented bite-size fare.

2

...and how it's served

What you won't see at this year's parties: carving stations with big hunks of pot roast, troughs of food lying under heat lamps, or sushi bars lined with rows of premade California rolls. What is trending: small plates, interactive food stations, and artfully presented bite-size fare. While some corporate clients are still attached to the formality of sit-down dinners during the holidays, experts say that guests love the variety that comes with cocktail and dessert receptions. "Throughout the year, employees are used to being served filet and fish at conferences and business dinners—at the end of the year, they want to have more fun," says Gorjestani. Adds China: "Guests like to see a chef creating a little masterpiece just for them. With small plates, everything is more interactive and focused on presentation." And for those looking to go a step beyond static make-your-own and live-action stations, servers at Mary Giuliani Catering & Events in New York are now passing out tasting plates from trays strapped on cigarette-girl style: A recent event had staffers wearing "walking" mac 'n' cheese stations that allowed guests to grab an individual serving of the cheesy comfort food, then choose from an assortment of D.I.Y. toppings, including scallions, jalapeños, bacon, and fried chicken, right on the spot.



Mary Giuliani Catering & Events staffers wore "walking" D.I.Y. mac 'n' cheese stations at an event earlier this year.

At the Tampa Bay NACE holiday party in 2012, guests could mingle in lounge areas placed throughout the venue. Decor and furniture for the 1920s-theme event, planned by Sandy Rule Events, was provided by MMD Events.



3 Flexible seating is in

With the popularity of grab-and-go food, it follows that guests also favor more fluid events during the holidays. "When it comes to teams of people who haven't seen each other in a long time, they want the ability to mix and mingle," says Accomando. "Guests don't want to be stuck sitting down at round tables all night—a free-flowing setup is more dynamic and better for interaction." A less-structured mix of conversational settings—such as high-tops, tables in various sizes, and lounge areas with a cozy feel—encourage interaction and make the most of available space.

4

Activities rule over splashy headliners

While rare during the height of cutbacks, show-stopping performances from high-profile celebrities, comedians, and winners from reality shows such as *American Idol* are returning to some holiday affairs. However, these acts are the exceptions to the rule. "One new trend I've seen emerge at holiday parties is having several different activities in one room, like a virtual ski machine, a cookie-decorating station, and a craft area where guests can make snow globes to take home," says Accomando, echoing a sentiment expressed by many other planners. Also popular: social photo booths like TapSnap and PhotoMingle, tarot-card readers and psychics, game-show-style challenges, and roaming performers. "With the popularity of the free-flowing cocktail setup, there's no focal point for entertainment, so clients want to mix in performers that can move through a crowd, like magicians," Gorjestani says.



Companies are skipping celebrity acts in favor of budget-friendly activities employees can bond over, such as photo booths.

In addition to roaming actors and burlesque dancers at last year's Tampa Bay NACE holiday party, aerial performers from Event Show Productions poured champagne for guests.



At Refinery29's holiday pop-up event in New York last year, guests could sit down with a tarot-card reader.



Ideal for creating a stylish office event, stationary e-tailer Minted's new holiday party decor collections start from \$65, and include customizable banners, plates, napkins, signage, and more.

5

In-office and at-home events are more popular

Some methods of saving money that came about during the recession are likely to stick around, including the move toward more intimate, low-key events. While 64 percent of respondents in last year's holiday survey said their party was held at a bar, restaurant, or event space, almost **37 percent of survey-takers reported that their festivities took place at the office or at the home of a boss or colleague.** And while parties at low- to no-cost venues may have initially been an idea born out of tight budgets, it's a trend that's continuing for different reasons. "Starting last year, I saw more companies hosting the event at the C.E.O.'s home, with made-to-order food stations set up throughout the space," Gorjestani says. "Companies are distributing what they spend their money on differently. Inviting employees into your home is a really nice touch because it adds such a thoughtful, personal aspect to the event." As for in-office parties, newly launched all-in-one holiday party decor collections from Revelry House, MarthaCelebrations for J.C. Penney, and Minted make it easier than ever to make the meeting room look festive.

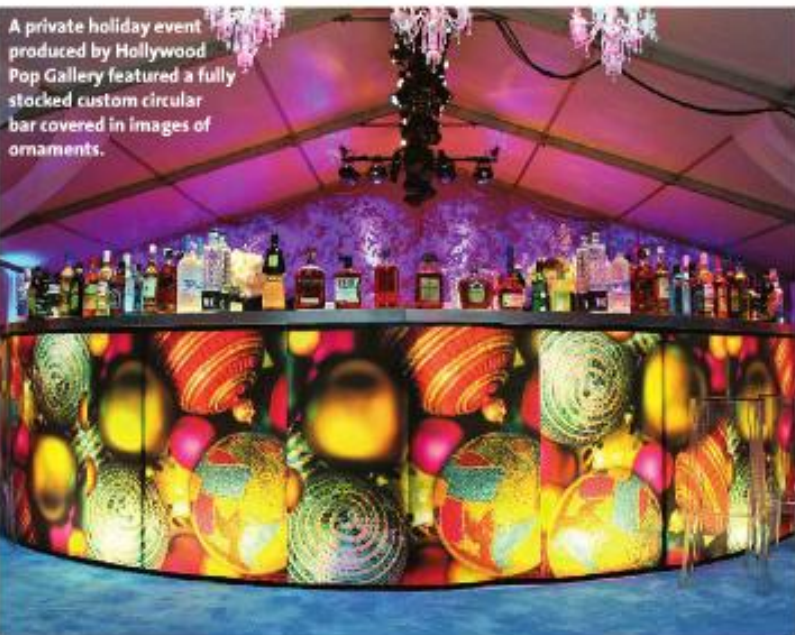
6

Hosts are rethinking timing

Just as some companies are still opting for venues outside of the holiday party norm, another money-saving measure that has stuck around since the recession is avoiding the standard Saturday evening event in December. In the BizBash survey, 42 percent of respondents said their offices threw a holiday lunch, and according to Carolyn Horton, the director of catering sales at the Westin Diplomat Resort & Spa in Hollywood, Florida, clients are now more open to weekday parties thanks to limited budgets. Arthur Backal, C.E.O. and founder of Backal Management Group in New York, says the most popular evenings for holiday parties now are Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays. "If you're looking to cut down on costs, consider asking if any discounts apply for holiday parties during the earlier weekdays," he says. Also consider a bash in the new year. **"Year-end events used to always be in December, but now we're seeing an uptick in January bookings, as well as in family-oriented Sunday brunches,"** Accomando says. Galley adds: "We've done brunch setups during the day on a Friday. It's a festive alternative from the typical evening get-together and a way to cut some costs on pricey spirits and entrées."



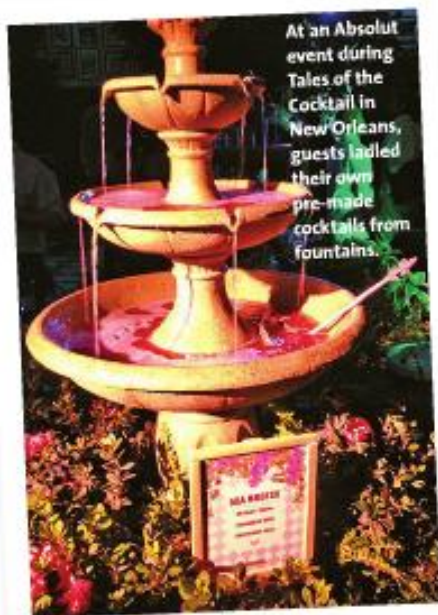
Make-your-own mimosa bars are an interactive addition to a brunch event during the holidays. ONEHOPE Wine can set up a mimosa station that lets guests customize their own drinks with juices and muddled fruit.



A private holiday event produced by Hollywood Pop Gallery featured a fully stocked custom circular bar covered in images of ornaments.

7 Full bars are back—
as are cocktail
fountains

During the recession, a limited bar of beer and wine—or no alcohol at all—seemed to be the go-to choice. But now the fully stocked open bar is back, with 45 percent of companies opting for one last year, according to the BizBash survey. Industry pros predict that number will be even higher in 2013: **"The open bar is not where clients are cutting back this year—they're doing a full bar, plus a few specialty cocktail options,"** Gorjestani says. Speaking of which, the interest in craft cocktails remains strong. "Society is still attached to classic cocktails and chef-driven mixology—guests get excited by throwback, Prohibition-style drinks made with bourbon, as well as cocktails made with



At an Absolut event during Tales of the Cocktail in New Orleans, guests ladled their own pre-made cocktails from fountains.

fresh herbs and house-made syrups," Neubauer says. But the latest trend may be something you remember from your high school prom, updated with a boozy twist: the drink fountain. While punches have been popular at holiday parties for several years, booze-filled fountains were one of the top trends spotted at this year's Tales of Cocktail, the annual drink festival in New Orleans. "I think these will gain popularity at corporate events because they are both fantastic for serving signature cocktails to larger groups and also serve as a gorgeous decorative element for an event," Belvedere's head of spirit creation and mixology, Claire Smith, told BizBash. Still, it's never a bad idea to make sure nonalcoholic options are on hand, and Neubauer suggests offering more than just Diet Coke. "House-crafted sodas and elixirs make nonalcoholic options seem more enticing," he says.



At holiday parties hosted inside the Seaport Boston Hotel's Action Kitchen, guests get to prepare their own meal—and can even bring in family recipes.

8 Teambuilding activities gain steam

Hosts are reconfiguring the traditional “food, drinks, and mingling” party format as post-recession holiday events become less about flaunting success and more about connecting with co-workers. While big, company-wide holiday parties are still the norm—47 percent of respondents in the BizBash survey had one—19 percent said they had a smaller divisional party, and 20 percent said they had both. **And as groups get smaller, planners say that interactive teambuilding-style holiday events are on the rise.** “I do find that companies are more likely to host a creative teambuilding-focused department outing around the holidays, like a scavenger hunt followed by a Broadway show,” Galley says. “I have one client who always hosts a group of between 70 and 100 at a restaurant for dinner, but last year they wanted to mix it up with something fun, so we rented out a Spanish restaurant and let guests cook their own meal—everyone loved it.” China also confirms she’s seeing more companies booking teambuilding classes as holiday parties. “We’ve done mixology classes, cooking classes, and one option that’s really popular is murder-mystery dinner theater,” she says. “It allows guests to really get to know the people they work with and feel like they contributed to the event in a meaningful way.”



Last holiday season, the Washington division of Vornado Realty Trust teamed up with charity organization Bikes for Goodness Sake to host a teambuilding event that had guests build bikes for low income children.

9 The lavish dessert table is out

“Before the recession, parties would have extravagant dessert stations, but now some companies are economizing by offering guests a boxed dessert and to-go coffee in branded cups at the end of the night,” Accomando says. “It does double-duty as a favor and gives guests the chance to reminisce about the event when they’re eating the treat later at home.” **Takeaway desserts can also be creatively worked into tablescapes** as a design element to liven up tables and save on the decor budget. So what will companies be boxing up when it comes to desserts? Cupcakes are decidedly over. Instead, expect to see whoopie pies, macarons, gourmet marshmallows, doughnuts, pie slices, or berry crumbles in portable containers.



The Sweet Escape Patisserie can package up its snowman macarons for events in the greater Toronto area.

10 Employee appreciation and charitable efforts are top priorities

As lavish affairs have waned, a new understanding that a holiday party should focus on employee appreciation has prevailed. Rather than using an event as an avenue to advertise success to competitors—as may have once been the case—companies are finding ways to make the party more thoughtful. **“I think there is a desire to take care of employees,”** Gorjestani says. “It’s not about having the most expensive champagne, but instead spending that money on a photo booth so that guests have a memento to take home. Companies are opting for that personal touch over opulence.” Other ways planners have seen clients make employees feel appreciated: asking guests to include a favorite holiday recipe with their R.S.V.P.s, which can then be incorporated into the menu, or screening a 20-minute film that highlights the company’s achievements and successes throughout the year. “I find that there is much more thought put into holiday events now than before the recession,” Accomando says. “There’s a need to recognize the team.”

That sense of community also extends outside the company. Planners say it’s popular to add a philanthropic component to holiday events by donating leftover food or by hosting a volunteer drive. “Companies partnering with charity organizations is a trend that has picked up in the past several years,” says China, noting that she’s seen hosts ask guests to bring in canned goods or feature an on-site activity like packing gifts for local homeless shelters. “Companies want to send the message that they’re thinking of others and remembering what’s important about the holidays,” she says. Adds Backal: “We’ve seen some interesting activities at Apella, including one where teams worked together to build bicycles and then donated them to underprivileged children. Charity-focused teambuilding exercises can be the perfect feel-good activity.”



11 Color schemes stay classic—or go neutral

Red and green are the colors that immediately come to mind when thinking of holiday events, but they aren't a requirement—in fact, event designers say they typically avoid pairing the two in an effort to avoid appearing to favor Christmas over Hanukkah. However, red—especially when paired with black and silver—continues to stay hot, as it evokes a feeling of holiday nostalgia. “Rich, deep shades of red will be big this holiday season, and touches of sparkle will stay strong,” says Jennifer Iovino at Peterson Party Center in Boston. “Industrial metallic, especially brass, is a look that will also be seen quite a bit.” Also trending: emerald green, Pantone’s 2013 color of the year. Or, opt for a subtler palette, mixing silvers and whites with shades of grey for a cool, wintery look. “For the holidays this year, I’m going to be keeping colors neutral,” Gorjestani says. “I’d leave out the red and opt for whites and muted winter tones.” Add in organic textures, and the color scheme lends itself to an updated twist on the ever-popular snowflakes-and-icicles winter wonderland theme. “To create a sort of *Narnia*-esque winter forest, pair an earthy color palette with burlap, branches, birchbark, and organic materials like wood and leaves,” Galley says.



A tabletop look designed by Boston’s EFD Creative, with a centerpiece by Jeri Solomon Floral Design and rentals from Peterson Party Center, shows off one of the season’s most popular color schemes: red, black, and silver.



Event pros say clients are favoring sophisticated looks. New York rental company Prop N Spoon carries a large assortment of vintage, bordello-esque furnishings that can complement the theme.

12 Modern is out, and tradition is in

While the sleek, contemporary look still has its fans, the popularity of *The Great Gatsby* and *Downton Abbey* has hosts moving towards a more classic aesthetic when it comes to events. “Themes are becoming increasingly sophisticated—we already have several requests for over-the-top *Gatsby* themes for holiday parties this year,” China says. Gorjestani adds: “The rustic trend is on its way out. Now there’s more of a residential feel with dark leather couches mixed with metallic accents.” The *Downton* theme even extends to the menu: “This holiday, we’re focusing on old-school English and traditional with a twist,” says Toronto caterer Lindsey Shaw. “Think petite shooter glasses of rosemary-scented trifle with blackberries, and fig pudding with kumquat custard set alight with warm brandy.” And event designer Bronson van Wyck’s forthcoming English hunting lodge-inspired holiday workshop pop-up—a collaboration with interior designer Celerie Kemble—will feature monogrammed details, tartan fabrics, rich textures, and lots of vintage flea market treasures. According to van Wyck, the bottom line is that “when it comes to the holidays, traditional will always be fashionable.”



Event designer Bronson van Wyck’s holiday pop-up will be outfitted with tartan fabrics, rich textures, flea market treasures, and monogrammed details.



In lieu of floral centerpieces at last year's Ronald McDonald House Toronto holiday gala, McNabb Roick Events used crystal candle holders and sequined linens to decorate the tables.

13 Decor budgets favor lighting, not elaborate flowers

Budgets have started to include room for lighting and rentals once again, but when it comes to tabletop decor, hosts are opting for simple floral arrangements or lots and lots of candlelight. "Clients are choosing lighting over flowers for sure—it creates more of an ambiance versus a big, expensive flower arrangement," Gorjestani says. "Some clients just want simple—greenery and potted plants with twinkle lights." Bacal suggests uplighting in warm colors or "projected graphic imagery like pine trees and snowflakes." In addition to candles and programmable lighting, one of the easiest ways to transform a room and make a statement this upcoming season is linens, as companies expand their inventory of patterned and sequined options.



Holiday cards on display at the 2013 National Stationery Show (above); Checkerboard's "Topped with a Star" design (right).

14 Cards are still common

Even in an age of digital correspondence, 35 percent of the respondents in the BizBash holiday survey indicated that they continue to send clients seasonal cards or presents. "Sending a physical card is a smart PR move," says Sarah Schwartz, editor of *Stationery Trends* magazine. "Not only is the company taking a moment to send goodwill, but it's also a chance to put their business name in front of clients in a positive way and let them know they're appreciated. It makes a better impression than sending out an e-card that someone is likely to just look at and delete."

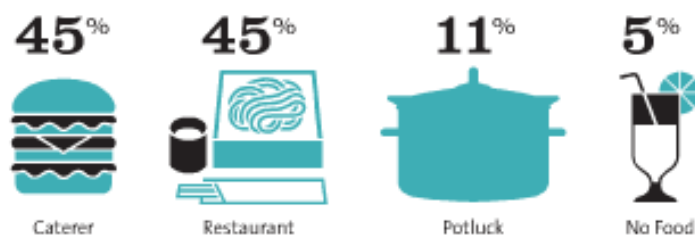
As for design trends, expect hand-lettered calligraphy, mixed fonts, gold foil accents, honeycomb and chevron patterns, and mint green in lieu of traditional hunter green. "I've also been seeing more cause-related cards where the profits are donated to charity, such as Smock Paper's 'Change the World' letterpress card series, and I suspect that that concept will be popular with companies for the holidays," Schwartz says. "It's definitely now possible for a company to say a lot more with its card choice than just 'Happy Holidays.'"



Survey Says...

BizBash teamed up with Seamless last December to conduct a survey on the state of holiday parties. More than 1,500 event professionals participated, providing insight on topics including morale, budgets, and venues.

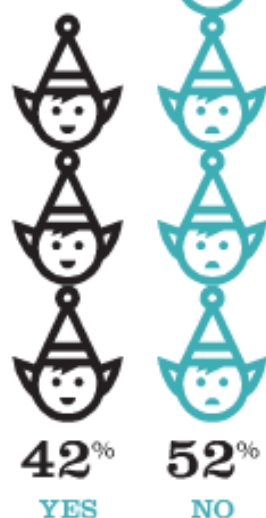
Where is the food from?



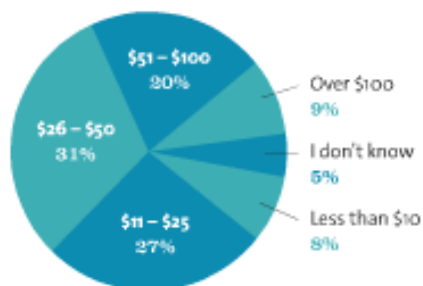
What effect does a party have on morale?



Are you allowed to bring a guest?



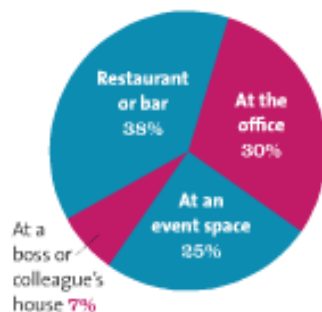
How much was spent per head?



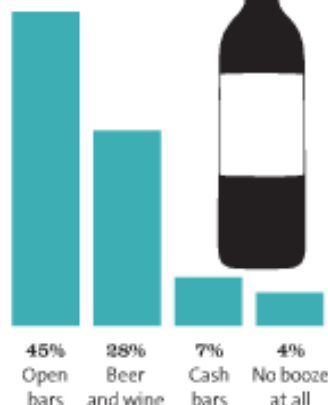
When is your party held?



Where was the party held?



What is the booze situation?



94%

of respondents said they would be disappointed if all office holiday festivities were cancelled.



of companies decorate the workplace.