

14 HOLIDAY PARTY TRENDS 15 INNOVATIVE MEETINGS

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2013 HOLIDAY PARTY IDEAS

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 China, 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.

PHOTOS: CHRISTOPHER TODD STUDIOS (CONTEMPORARY CATERING); ROSSICA CLARE PHOTOGRAPHY (TURKEY MENU)