



Everything Jersey

After years of pulling back, companies hosting holiday parties again

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Noah K. Murray/The Star-Ledger

Members of the Newark Regional Business Partnership attend the annual holiday party held at the Mezzanine event space at 744 Broad St. in Newark.

'Tis the season for the holiday office party — and this December, companies are opening up their pockets a bit more this year after years of scaling back.

Long gone are the five-hour lavish affairs with cocktails, dinner and dancing from the early 2000s, event space managers and business leaders said. But companies have decided against canceling the party entirely, too, and are instead turning to cocktail receptions or a catered meal at the office itself.

"There has been a gradual change this year," said Deborah Dowdell, president of the New Jersey Restaurant Association.

"As opposed to saying we're not going to have a party at all, we're returning to the tradition of appreciating our employees, appreciating our customers, in a setting that is affordable (and) that is doable so that it doesn't have to be abandoned," she added. Members have reported an increase in reservations, she said.

But companies are being more creative with their tighter budgets. The events are structured differently than they were five years ago, said Robert Frungillo, owner of Frungillo Caterers, which has five facilities throughout the state, including the Mezzanine in downtown Newark, and also operates an off-premise catering business. Now, many companies are foregoing liquor to keep costs down, or limiting partygoers one or two drinks. January has also become just as busy as December for booking parties, when rental costs are lower.

"It's more about bringing people together," Frungillo said. "This is the world we're living in today, and this is how we want to say, 'Thank you.'"

At Mayfair Farms in West Orange, business in December will be up about 6 percent, said its general manager,

Joanne Szibdat When the economy collapsed in 2008, companies canceled their holiday parties on short notice and in many cases did not host them in 2009. Last year, Szidbat said. she started to see more confidence from her clients, and this year several companies are even expanding their guest lists.

"We probably are not seeing the total revenue that we saw in '03, '04, but we're comfortable with the volume of business we're doing," she said.

Another way of keeping costs down while still hosting a party is booking for 2012 at this year's rate, in case prices go up. Several longtime customers of the Pines Manor in Edison are doing that, said Janet Baio, the facility's business development manager, who also chairs the Edison Chamber of Commerce board.

During the recession, business at the Pines has held steady because of longtime customers, and this year Baio said revenues are looking up.

"It came back a lot this year," she said. "It looks like the business community is too, because they're inviting their clients, not only their employees."

"It's a very good feeling that we have right now," she added.

Particularly in this economy, the parties are an important expense to boost morale and thank employees, many of whom are doing more with less. But companies are mindful of what message they send, said Philip Kirchner, president of the New Jersey Business and Industry Association.

"People certainly want to avoid anything perceived as being excessive because the economy is still weak and there are still other basic needs that need to be taken care of," Kirchner said.

But, he added, "it's a good way to boost morale and bring everyone in the office together on one day, and, where employers can, I think they're trying to bring that back."

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