

Small Talk: A downscaled party can still boost worker morale

By Joyce Rosenberg

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It doesn't have to be a downer when the weak economy forces small businesses to scale back their holiday parties from the big catered or restaurant affairs they held in the past. These events can still be opportunities to build teamwork and boost morale.

An owner hoping for a great party should include employees in the planning. The camaraderie that results can make the planning as worthwhile as the event itself, and create goodwill.

"The very coming together over a non-work task is in itself delightful, delicious and engaging," said Beverly Kaye, an employee retention consultant in Sherman Oaks, Calif.

Owners who have had to downsize agree -- it doesn't have to be a depressing process.

"We're going to scale back and still have fun together," said Carin Warner, whose public relations firm, Warner Communication, is based in Boston. Her company used to have weekend getaways. This year, it'll be a potluck party on the beach.

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No money? no obstacle » Remember that even if there's little money for a party, it's still possible to have a good time. But if you've had to cancel the company's usual lunch or dinner at a restaurant, don't think that just ordering pizzas in one day will suffice. It may be effortless and inexpensive, but it's also pretty sterile and won't give employees or the company the kind of benefits that a full-scale party will have.

Kaye suggested telling employees, for example, "I have \$250 to feed everybody. What can we do that's out of the box, that would be a great, fun party?"

Often the answer is going to be a potluck party in the office or at someone's home. Many employees love potluck affairs because it gives them a chance to show off their culinary skills and to get new ideas from co-workers. Potlucks give staffers a chance to get to know more about each other, and they have a warmth that catered parties often cannot duplicate.

In that case, with the staff supplying most of the food, an owner should be sure to contribute something substantial -- a cake and beverages or ice cream sundaes, for example.

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Ask the employees » Before you tell everyone to start cooking, you should ask employees what kind of party they would like -- and be sure they want to have one. Many employees feel as if they have little control over their work lives these days, especially in companies where there have been layoffs or workloads have increased. So let them decide.

Some companies are having a particularly hard time right now even as the economy shows signs of recovering. All the more reason to rally the staff, Kaye said.

"Use the opportunity to have fun, to say, 'we're a team, we're going to get through this together,' " she said. "This is a great example of recession thinking: How do you go from, 'Oh, woe is me' to 'Oh, wow this is fun.' "

Another reason to bring staffers into the process from the get-go is that someone may want to volunteer to host a party, or they may have friends or relatives who can offer party space, supplies or food.

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Be creative » Urging staffers to be creative is the best way to have a great party.

Carin Warner's public relations firm has had to scale back dramatically. "We've had the luxury of going away to what we call our spa retreats the past few years, but not this year, for obvious reasons," she said.

So Warner talked to each of her 12 employees and asked them what they wanted to do. The result: Warner Communication is having a bonfire on the beach near the company's office. It's going to be a mostly potluck affair, with hors d'oeuvres and dessert catered, but all the staffers are bringing seafood dishes. They're hoping to have fireworks.

Manta, which runs a database on small- and medium-sized businesses, has had some traditional parties in the past, but this year will bring in lunch for staffers at the company's Columbus, Ohio, headquarters. But lunch is just a small part of the event.

CEO Pam Springer says the centerpiece of the party is "The 12 Days of Manta," a roast in which the company's various departments do their take on the Christmas carol. There'll also be a white elephant exchange -- a gift swap involving unique and sometimes odd items -- and a sugar cookie baking competition.

Contests are often popular. Kaye suggested a party with a chili cook-off theme. Springer said Manta has also had a cubicle decorating contest, with one employee creating a manger scene complete with hay.

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Make the process year-round » The benefits a company can get from planning a party can be fleeting, disappearing right around New Year's, unless an owner finds ways to keep the process going. That doesn't mean year-round partying, but it means the boss needs to let employees know their work is appreciated no matter what time of year it is. And along with the positive feedback an owner needs to give, there should be periodic events to lighten the collective spirit.

"Where things fail is where people try to force things because it's Christmas," Springer said. If staffers feel unappreciated most of the year, they are likely to respond to party plans with, "you never cared about any of us before, and now we're supposed to have a white elephant exchange."

"If you lay the groundwork throughout the year, it makes for a much richer environment, and people are much more willing to share."

Joyce Rosenberg writes about small business for The Associated Press

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