

Holiday parties back in full swing, and then some



ALLI ARNOLD/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

By **Katie Johnston** | GLOBE STAFF DECEMBER 19, 2014

Back in 2009, when the economy was reeling, many companies scrapped their holiday parties or held scaled-back cocktail hours at the office, no spouses allowed.

Seasonal soirees have been slowly ramping back up since then, but this year, the party is back on, in a big way. Nearly 90 percent of companies around the country are hosting holiday festivities this year — the most since 2007, according to a Chicago outplacement firm’s survey — and they aren’t just hiring a DJ and spiking the punch bowl.

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The Boston branch of an international financial firm hired an aerialist to pour champagne into people’s glasses from the ceiling. A local pharmaceutical company put on an elaborate “Alice in Wonderland”-themed event with life-size chess pieces, 20-foot hedges, and chairs hanging from the ceiling. The Somerville entertainment company Paint Nite rented a trolley with a disco ball and took its employees on a pre-party shoe-shopping spree.

“They’re going over the top,” said Ken Barrett, executive director of BG Events and Catering in Boston, noting that his holiday party business is double what it was five years ago.

Large financial firms, banks, and insurance companies in particular are going all out this year, event planners say, and the price tag for some of the most lavish galas can reach \$150,000 or more.

In the years following the recession, the mindset was cautious: We can spend more money for a party, but it can’t show. This year, as profits mount and employers look for new ways to reward their workers, all bets are off — though many are still reluctant to talk about anything that could be perceived as extravagance and declined to discuss their festivities.

But even companies that are blowing the lid off this year have retained lessons from the economic downturn. Organizers are seeing more company-wide parties, versus separate events for different departments, perhaps spurred by a greater “we’re in this together” spirit as companies grew leaner and barriers were broken down during the recession.

Fostering this type of camaraderie can have benefits: It increases trust and boosts productivity in an age of nonstop work when there is little opportunity to socialize at the office, said David DeLong, a Concord workplace consultant.

Enter the holiday party — “one of the few places where we actually have time to interact with our colleagues in a social way,” DeLong said.

Adding in the “wow factor,” as those in the party business like to call it, doesn’t hurt. Think tarot card readers, aerialists, and casino nights — and that’s just at the Revere Hotel, where holiday party revenues are up 40 percent from last year.

One local insurance firm had musicians from the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Boston Children’s Chorus and set up a simulator where guests could try snowboarding as snow fell from the ceiling.

The food has to be unusual, too. Forget foie gras and truffles. This year’s parties featured lobster roll push pops, cheese plates with locally sourced pickled cranberries, and chefs baking made-to-order flatbread. One had “dragon’s breath” popcorn balls fried in liquid nitrogen that caused guests to exhale smoke.

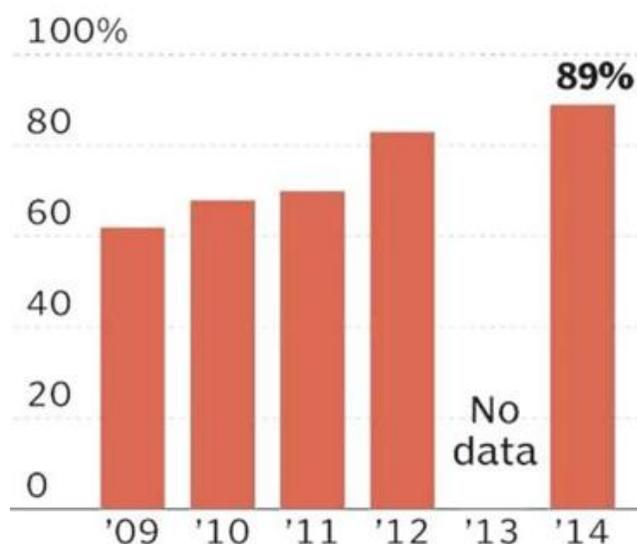
Even more modest festivities, such as South Shore Hospital’s annual employee gala in the cafeteria, are bigger and better than ever. Last year, for the first time, the South Weymouth hospital sprang for a prime rib dinner, served by the executive team. This year, the hospital added a dessert bar, hired a one-man band, and closed down the dining room for five hours.

“We wanted to give employees something extra because of what they’d been through during the downturn,” said Lisa Rabideau, manager of patient relations, noting that the hospital did not have layoffs but some people’s families were struggling nonetheless in the faltering economy. “It was a tough few years for people.”

Paint Nite, a 55-employee Somerville business that holds learn-to-paint parties at bars, rented a trolley with drinks and a disco ball to take its employees on a surprise lunchtime shoe-shopping spree. Once they had their party shoes, they came back to the

Corporate holiday parties

The percentage of US companies surveyed that are planning parties:



SOURCE: Challenger, Gray and Christmas

JAMES ABUNDIS/GLOBE STAFF

office for a bash with a bartender, a DJ, and professional breakdancers that went into the wee hours.

It was a considerable upgrade from last year's ugly-sweater party, when the company was smaller and took its employees to Target to buy gifts for an office Yankee Swap, cofounder Sean McGrail said.

Newton-based PR Management Corp., which owns 35 Panera restaurants around New England, threw a "Denim and Diamonds" gala this year — a blinged-out Western hoedown with cowskin rugs and chandeliers dripping with crystals. Glass-topped hay bales served as cocktail tables, and the food was similarly down-home: fried green tomatoes, baked beans, salad served in mason jars, and smoked brisket. Entertainment was provided by a country band, a line dance instructor, and, up on the bar, dancers decked out in cowboy boots and jean shorts, "Coyote Ugly" style.

Unlike many other businesses, PR Management didn't cut back its holiday festivities during the recession, chief executive Mitch Roberts said, noting that ditching the annual party "sends a really aggressive message." But the restaurant company continues to up its game as it expands, adding to the escalating holiday spirit.

"A lot of companies are recognizing that their growth and success is a team effort, and they want to be sure that their employees feel special," said Janie Haas, a North Andover event planner who dreamed up the "Denim and Diamonds" theme.

"There's more to celebrate, and therefore the celebrations are often more elaborate."

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