



Ten Steps to Throwing a Great (and Effective) Business Party

by Lela Cocoros

Congratulations! Your company has allocated precious resources towards hosting a shindig, and you're in charge. Maybe it's to gain visibility at one of the industry confabs, or to launch a new product or service in a local community. Whatever the reason or the budget, a party shouldn't just be about feeding people weenies and wine. Every event is an opportunity to communicate your message and market your business – make sure you maximize it, keeping the following points top of mind:

1. Identify your business goals.

Recognizing that no single event can grant you all your business-related wishes, a clear understanding of what business purpose this happening fulfills helps keep everyone on track. Ask yourself if you're doing everything possible to move your cause forward – without looking too obvious. Is it clear to your guests what you're celebrating? Are there enough opportunities for guests to learn something about you and your business?

2. Nail down your messages.

Make sure you are clear what information and positioning you want to convey to guests. Boil it down to two or three key points you can remember and relate naturally. Practice in advance, though, so you don't sound like one of the puppets from the Thunderbirds. This is a party, after all.

3. Go with a clever theme.

People get a kick out of parties that take a fresh approach (as long as you don't require guests to wear, do or bring anything off the wall – this can create confusion and intimidate your more reticent partygoers). All the elements – invitation, food, drink, venue, décor, entertainment and party favor/gift – should be seamlessly connected by a common thematic thread. Your dress should even reflect the theme while still being appropriate attire. Tricky? Can be, but when all the elements come together, it can make for a standout result.

4. Sweat the small stuff.

Even before you get the date, theme and venue finalized, make a list of every detail you need to address and accomplish before the big day. Update your invitation database. Check the room flow, the lighting and the particulars of the entertainment program. If you're doing something interactive, such as a bowling tournament or a cooking class, go through the program first, so that you know all the ins and outs from personal experience. Decide on RSVP information capture, name tags, check-in procedures and company/product information before things get too close, and document it. Bottom line, work your way

through the entire experience from a guest's perspective and keep honing that which doesn't feel just right.

5. Prepare your work staff.

Whether those working the event are internal staff or hired help for the evening, make sure they're well versed. Meet with them before the start of the party and go over everything from the messaging and positioning you've developed to the locations of the restrooms and coat check. Provide a "cheat sheet" for them to refer to, anticipating the questions they're likely to get and offering up brief answers and directions.

6. Mix it up.

If possible, expand your guest list just enough to bring in some fresh faces, new perspectives, and energizing conversation. For instance, if you can accommodate the administrative assistants that your company talks to regularly, the educators and top students from the local university's business school, non-profit executive directors or the local independent bookseller, you're bound to add some diversity and value to the whole event. And from a business perspective, you never know when one of these people will be in a position to help you in some way.

7. Make sure you mingle.

Human nature usually keeps many people in their comfort zones, talking and staying close only to those most familiar. As host, however, you need to keep moving around and about. Challenge yourself to collect business cards from at least 5 to 10 new faces. Introduce people to one another and tell each person a little tidbit about the other as you do so. Sounds pretty basic, but you'd be surprised how far it goes towards making an impression.

8. Avoid long-winded presentations and speeches.

Nothing can kill the mood of a party faster than stopping the chatter cold to gather everyone around for some soporific speech or power point presentation. It's the business equivalent of a timeshare pitch. If a formal presentation is unavoidable, be creative with your approach. Encourage brevity and levity – keeping it short and light can help deflect some of the lost momentum. Give guests details via a brochure or media kit, or include a simple card with your parting gift (see below) pointing them to your company's Web site.

9. Don't underestimate the power of the parting gift.

If you can afford the time and the money, a clever premium item that ties into your theme and reinforces your messages can help sustain your party's effectiveness and increase its "memorability" factor. Add a friendly and pithy note that subtly but effectively hits all your key message points.

10. Follow up in a timely fashion.

It's important to follow up with those you and your colleagues spoke with during the event, providing whatever you promised them, along with a friendly thank you note for attending. Perhaps send a photo or two from the party, or an article you found about something you discussed with them at the event. Practice and perfect the ability to balance between staying top of mind while not appearing bothersome.

People appreciate the opportunity to relax in a business setting, so above all, be

on the lookout for fun and enjoyment for your guests. With the proper planning and preparation, you can create a comfortable and entertaining atmosphere while still getting what you need out of your investment.

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