



## Small Business Builder: The Right Holiday Party

### Company Celebrations Can Still Be Fun, Festive, Philanthropic

By Mary Campbell

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Who's stealing Christmas this year? The Taliban? The economy? The anthrax scare? Or the closet Scrooges in our midst?

Consider the comments I overheard at an early-November retail marketing seminar recently:

"We're sending our company's Christmas-party fund to the American Liberty Partnership."

"Our holiday party is going to be pretty somber. Nobody feels much like celebrating."

"Management wants to tone things down this year. We canceled our restaurant reservation; we're having a holiday pot luck at lunchtime instead."

Many a Small Business Builder topic comes from eavesdropping at business breakfasts and professional meetings. At last week's seminar, the buzz was all about the "climate" for the employee holiday party.

#### Cut the Comedy

Companies of all sizes are planning scaled-back festivities or none at all. According to recent reports, Alaska Airlines canceled its event to cut costs; and a New York Ernst & Young office, among its many laudable contributions to the cause, donated its holiday-party funds to three nearby fire stations.

Even Martha Stewart is exercising restraint. Last year, 660 employees at Martha Stewart Living enjoyed a sit-down meal; but "in the somber post-Sept. 11 climate," Stewart asked for "smaller, more intimate gatherings" at employees' homes, according to a Nov. 7 Reuters report.

Whether it's a question of taste, budget, philanthropy, or apathy, the trend — at least temporarily — is to shun splendor in favor of moderation at this year's office bash. Stan Heimowitz, who owns Celebrity Gems Entertainment in Castro Valley, Calif., told the East Bay Business Times that many customers had already called off their holiday parties — bad news for Heimowitz and his cast of musicians, magicians, mimes and jugglers.

East Bay employers Mervyn's and St. Rose Hospital, on the other hand, plan to party hearty. Heimowitz, who is supplying a steel-drum band, balloon-sculpture artists and face painters for the Mervyn's event, told the Business Times that Mervyn's "made the right decision & It's still important to have fun... and to enjoy ourselves."

#### No-Frills Affairs

Heimowitz, Mervyn's and St. Rose aren't the only champions of holiday cheer. My eavesdropping uncovered sharp disagreement with the do-nothing or do-little approach to this year's seasonal

celebrations. Some people cited the holidays' religious significance, but for others □ whose companies may employ workers with diverse spiritual preference and observances □ the thinking ran along these lines:

Traditional celebrations are life's punctuation marks, as essential as a comma, reminding us to stop and take a breath. Some managers seem to view the annual holiday event as a frill □ nice, but unnecessary □ according to a woman whose employer has decreed "business as usual" during the holidays. It's the same reasoning, she added, her husband invokes for not sending his mom a Mother's Day card: holiday celebrations are part of a giant commercial scam, a way to get people to spend money they don't have on things they don't need.

The economy and its struggling entrepreneurs need all the help we can give, others observed. Many small businesses rely on holiday revenue to get them through the rest of the year.

We celebrate because of all the reasons not to, a sales manager pointed out, stressing the need to honor cultural and individual traditions for the sake of continuity, employee morale, and company culture.

Indeed, some behavioral-health professionals warn that a flat or forgone party could not only damage morale but depress employees' moods - both especially vulnerable right now. Instead, business owners and managers might profitably seize the chance to inspire employee creativity and involvement.

Be of good cheer. Whatever you decide, do pause for refreshment. Deck the halls, sing carols, don your holiday duds & and salute peace on earth, good will toward humankind.

An editor since the age of 6, when she returned a love letter with corrections marked in red, Mary Campbell founded Zero Gravity in 1984 to provide writing, editing, marketing and other services to small businesses. Her presentations and workshops address small-business topics from Web sites to business writing. An editor of and contributor to dozens of publications (books, journals and newsletters), she is co-author □ with her sister, Pipi Campbell Peterson □ of the second edition of Ready, Set, Organize! A Workbook for the Organizationally Challenged (JIST Publishing, 2001). Please e-mail her your comments, questions and suggestions at [whywalk@about.com](mailto:whywalk@about.com). Small Business Builder is published on Wednesdays.

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