

# PHILADELPHIA BUSINESS JOURNAL

Philadelphia Business Journal

November 26, 2010 Friday

## Office parties a little more festive

**BYLINE:** Peter Van Allen

**LENGTH:** 647 words

Companies are returning some of the holiday party cheer of yore but without the extras.

This year's improved economy has convinced companies that they do not have to be in the hibernation mode of the recession, though they're still keeping a tight hold on spending, according to a random sampling of restaurants, caterers and event venues.

"We are seeing an increase in the corporate parties but most are keeping it rather low key, nothing too extravagant," Garth Weldon, managing partner at the Prime Rib restaurant in Center City, said.

Holiday parties are considered a perk for employees, a way of showing appreciation in a bonding atmosphere. Yet they're also aware of the message a lavish party sends not only to employees but to customers and shareholders.

This year, companies have been scouting out their options but may be retreating to a fiscally conservative course of action - as the Independence Visitor Center has discovered.

"We're actually right about where we were last year. Certainly no better, I'm sorry to say," said James J. Curato, president and CEO of the Independence Visitor Center, which has event space overlooking Independence Mall. "We had a lot of calls and a lot of 'tentatives.' But when we followed up it seemed like many said they would forgo a party or go to a lower-priced option. Or some said they'd do something in-house."

At the Franklin Institute, bookings for corporate events and corporate holiday events have both increased since May, said spokeswoman Kat Stein. In general, companies are spending more on holiday parties, "but nothing like it used to be," Stein said.

The Hub, which has corporate meetings space at three Philadelphia locations including the Chemical Heritage Foundation, has seen a significant increase in meetings business but not holiday parties.

"We haven't seen a significant difference for holiday parties for all three locations as of yet," said Peter Chun, director of operations at The Hub. "I sense lean and fiscal responsibility is still in play but not as much as last year."

National numbers seem to back that view: A survey of members by the National Association of Catering Executives showed that 10 percent said clients planned to increase spending on holiday parties, compared to just 1 percent last year.

Ryan O'Connor, director of sales for the new Philadelphia Belle harbor-tour vessel at Penn's Landing, said some of its clients are making a return to the holiday party.

"Many of our corporate groups mentioned how this is the first time in two or three years that they are having their holiday party off-site," O'Connor said. "Some groups are even getting creative and combining their employee holiday and client-appreciation functions."

Along those lines, Cashman & Associates, a Northern Liberties-based public relations firm, plans to combine its holiday "soiree" with its 10th anniversary celebration. It's holding the event at Tangerine, a venue owned by one of its clients, Stephen Starr Events.

At the Radisson Warwick Hotel, which has undergone a major renovation in recent years, clients are still keeping it lean.

"Corporate holiday or end-of-the-year event interest has definitely increased over last year, but budgets are still tight and the parties are smaller in size," said Joanne Cunningham, director of sales and marketing at the Center City hotel. "There has been a great deal of interest in Tavern 17 restaurant for small happy hours. And since the restaurant is closed for lunch, organizations are having private events in a restaurant setting, which seems to be particularly appealing this year."

At historic City Tavern, proprietor Walter Staib said companies started cutting back after 9/11 and it never returned to the level before that.

"The ones who are booking are ordering just food, no drinks. It's a cash basis," Staib said. "Everyone is nickel-and-diming you. Everyone is making deals."

**LOAD-DATE:** November 27, 2010

**LANGUAGE:** ENGLISH

**PUBLICATION-TYPE:** Newspaper