

Holiday Planning for Your Business

The holidays are an important time for any business as it gets ready to thank customers, clients, and partners for the year's business and celebrate a successful year with employees. This short course gives you some tips and tricks you can use to get organized for holiday activities and events so you can both take advantage of the season as an opportunity to connect with key customers and remind employees of how important they are to your organization.

The Key to a Successful Holiday Season: Advance Planning

If your business is like most, this holiday season may be a time of tightened belts, instead of spinning dreidls, drumming drummers, piping pipers, leaping lords, dancing ladies, swimming swans, golden rings, French hens, turtle doves, and partridges in pear trees. After all, all that good cheer gets expensive, not to mention distracting.

However, the holidays are a critical time for showing employees, customers, clients and partners how much you value them. The trick is figuring out an economical plan that allows you to connect with key players, while adhering to your bottom line. This short course will help you get organized for the holiday season, brainstorm about office gifts and greetings, and plan company events.

We'll start with the most important task of all: Planning.

The holidays present most companies with a big challenge: After all, you have a lot of people to remember, and missing any can be a costly faux pas. So it's worth it to take the time to plan your activities thoroughly and well in advance. After all, a comprehensive holiday plan will reduce costs, insure that you recognize all the players who make your business work, and simplify holiday tasks like sending out cards and party planning. And should you decide a holiday party is right for your business? A good organizational strategy means that by the time the party rolls around, everything will go off without a hitch. Better still, if you record every step of your strategy as you go, you'll have a huge head start on next year's holiday season.

As you plan, be sure that you remain sensitive to the beliefs of all your employees and clientele. A Thanksgiving party is fairly innocuous, but rather than a Christmas party, consider having a nondenominational celebration of the holidays. And if you send out holiday greetings, make sure the message is inclusive enough to embrace all your clients, partners, customers, and employees' beliefs.

Step One: Deciding What You Want

The first thing you need to do is figure out what activities are right for your company. Let's start by reviewing a few options. Think about each question now, we'll revisit some of them later on:

Should you send gifts to clients and partners? What about cards?

If you have a retail business or restaurant, is there some way you want to recognize your customers? Is a seasonal sale appropriate? Are cards?

Will you have a party for your employees? If so: Will it be during or after work hours? Will it be on site or off? Will there be a meal involved? Will you ask employees to bring their families or partners? Will you serve food? Alcohol? Will you do a gift swap? Will you have music? If so, will you have a D.J., a live band, or CDs?

Is there some other way you'd like to celebrate the season? Perhaps by organizing a company gift or food drive, or by volunteering your business as a drop off point for other charities?

Step 2: Establishing a Budget

Once you decide how you'd like to celebrate, it's time to get down to brass tacks:

Budgeting.

First, establish a ballpark budget for all your holiday spending. Next start a brainstorming and budgeting file. In it, create a folder for each list the activities you'd like to include. For each activity, indicate how much money you plan to allocate. Knowing your budget in each category will help you plan more effectively -- for instance, if you have a party with a \$500 budget, that figure will go a long way toward helping you decide questions about whether you want to serve alcohol and food, what kind of music you'd like to have, and where you want to host the party. Everything hinges on what you can afford.

Step 3: Sending Out Gifts and Cards

If you want to send gifts to clients or partners, draw up a list of everyone who should get a gift -- don't forget to consider your clients and partners' support staffs, especially if you're in frequent contact with them. Include this list in your binder, under the correct section header. Now, divide your gift budget by the number of people on your gift list. That will give you a ballpark spending limit for

each recipient. If the amount allocated per person is too small, consider reducing the number of recipients on your list. A thoughtful card is often as well received as a gift that seems like a throwaway. Reducing the number of recipients on your list will allow you more flexibility in choosing gifts for the few people you choose to give them to.

Whether you send a gift or card, be sure to keep an accurate list of who gets what. This list should be in a secure place (so prying eyes can't see how you prioritize your clients, employees, and partners), and it should include the correct name spelling, address, and title of everyone on it.

Great Gift Ideas

Once you decide who will receive a gift, it's time to decide what you'll send. What you choose depends on your budget, but there are a few classics. As you review the list below, be sure to take brainstorming notes about any ideas that seem like they might work. Review the list with an eye toward your budget and what each gift recipient might enjoy:

Food. Several online distributors offer gourmet food-baskets at a wide variety of price points. You might also consider fine chocolates (a luxury with a low price-point), holiday classics like HoneyBaked Hams, cheese baskets, or even fresh fruit baskets.

Gift Certificates. In the days of online shopping, a gift certificate is the ultimate in convenient, choose-it-yourself appreciation. The list of options is endless, but a few classics include Amazon.com; Williams Sonoma; and Renaissance Hardware are just a few options.

Desk accessories. A great looking desk accessory can be the most appreciated, useable gift your clients, partners and employees receive all year.

Home spa products. Your partners work hard for you. Encourage them to pamper themselves.

Bonus checks. Need we say more?

Making Cards Count

Depending on the number of people to whom you plan to send holiday greetings, you may want to handpick each card, or you may want to get cards printed specifically for your business. Regardless, remember a few pointers so that the recipients feel appreciated, not jilted:

Be sure to spell the recipient's name correctly. Nothing feels less personal than an incorrectly addressed card! Sign the card yourself. It's important to remember that the whole point of this exercise is making the recipient feel appreciated. A signature will go a long way toward accomplishing that goal. Write a short note. Even a handwritten "Happy holidays! Hope you're well!" can make it seem like you took extra time out to say something personal. Finally, be sensitive to the recipients' beliefs. We said it once, we'll say it again: If the client, partner, or employee who gets your beautiful Christmas greeting is Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, or anything other than Christian, the message may not go over the way you intended. It's safer and more thoughtful to stick with a more generic holiday greeting.

Tips and Tricks for Savings

Get started early. Waiting until the last minute is always costly -- especially when it comes to shipping packages, whether you do it yourself, or order from an online service that does it for you.

Buy in bulk. If you are buying enough, you may receive a break on the merchandise and/ or shipping. Take advantage of tax breaks: Did you know the IRS offers the following breaks to help with holiday cheer? Reasonable expenses for holiday parties for staff are fully deductible. To qualify, these parties must be for the benefit of all employees, not just upper management. You can generally deduct half the cost of parties that include clients and customers. To be deductible, these parties must help further business. You can deduct up to \$25 in gifts per client per year. Packaging, shipping and insurance are also deductible, even if they bring the cost to more than \$25.

Of course, you should have a quick chat with your CPA to make sure that the deductions you're anticipating will materialize at tax time, but rest assured that throwing down for your professional near and dear won't throw you into the hole.

Funny that the IRS should bring us to the topic of holiday party, but go figure: That's what happened. So let's take a quick look at what it takes to throw a great company party, then you'll be ready to?

Don't Lose a Thing . . . Party Like It's 1999 (a.k.a., Step 4)

What kind of party will you have? We already discussed some of the questions you need to consider in order to plan a successful holiday party. Go back and review them, remembering, as always, to keep an eye on your bottom line. No matter whether you plan to celebrate Thanksgiving, New Year's, or the Holiday season more generally, you'll need to decide on basics like where you'll have the party,

what time, and who will be invited.

Let's look at some options:

A catered cocktail party for employees and their partners at a local landmark or eatery. A Jack Frost-themed, team-building bowling extravaganza. A family event at an amusement center. A potluck luncheon for employees and their families at the office. A catered luncheon with entertainment for employees and their families at the office. A party at a team manager or executive staff member's house. A beer tasting at a local pub. Dancing and hors d'oeuvres for employees, partners and clients.

Whatever format you choose, be sure you're a responsible host. If you serve alcohol, be sure you also provide transportation home. As host, your company may well be subject to "social host liability," a legal theory that holds the host of a party responsible for damage by drunken gusts.

Now let's look at a few other considerations:

Building the Anticipation

One great way to get people excited about the party is to hand the planning over to an employee committee. After all, your employees may well know a lot more than you do about the hip spots, great party games, and best music. Keep final approval of all decisions at a management level, but trust more junior employees to help put together a great shindig. Just make sure that the planning committee pays attention to details such as adequate seating and refreshments, appropriate decorations and entertainment, timely invitations, and always? cost, cost, cost.

Music

Nothing spells celebration like music. That can get expensive, of course, but there are ways to control costs. In general, hiring a DJ is cheaper than a live band, but a live band adds an element of unforgetability to your event. DJ costs average from \$400 to \$2,000, while a live band costs much more (from \$800 to \$10,000, depending on the band, date, day, and time.) Another great option is asking your employees to bring their favorite cds. If that's your choice, make sure they label the cds, and make sure you have a designated DJ who will man the cd player -- which should have multiple cd capability and a shuffle play option.

Family Fun

If you invite your employees to bring their families to the office, make sure you've provided some kind of entertainment for the kids. A holiday theme -- a winter wonderland, for instance -- may provide some options. Perhaps you can have someone dressed like Jack Frost or a sugarplum fairy hand out small party favors to the kids. If you hire a photographer to take pictures of the kids with this character, you'll also be creating a great, cost efficient gift for both parents.

Dealing with Caterers and Outside Venues

If you plan to have a caterer or host your party at a popular venue, be sure to book well in advance of your party. The best places are booked early. Once you've found a caterer or restaurant where you want to have the party, do a taste test. If possible, make an appointment to sample some of their best offerings, as well as see their work at a live event. What does the presentation of the food look like? Are the ingredients fresh? What do your taste buds and nose tell you?

More Cost Saving Tips

Serve simple food. Expensive or out-of-season ingredients will run up your bill. Stay simple with the hors d'oeuvres; instead of heavy appetizers, serve raw vegetables and dips, and a cheese and fruit display.

Try to purchase food in bulk -- for example, by the dozen, pint, liter, or pound -- rather than by person.

Request a child's menu if several children will be attending. Their smaller portions should be reflected in the price. Consider all the alternatives.

A catered, sit-down dinner may be cheaper than a buffet; lunch can be served at a fraction of the cost of dinner. Potlucks or drinks are cheapest of all.

Have a dessert-only party.

Cut alcohol costs by only offering beer and wine. If you have the party outside the office, consider bringing your own wine and beer, if the facility permits it. Often your purchase price and the corkage fee would be less than what the caterer or facility would charge.

Happy Holidays!

However you decide to celebrate, always remember that the holidays allow you to connect with key customers and partners, and to remind employees of how important they are to an organization. A little planning will go a long way toward allowing you to make the most of this time with the least hassle!