

# Entertaining on the cheap doesn't need to be shoddy

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SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

In light of the recession, less is definitely more when entertaining customers.

**Tasha Bracken**, owner of Newton-based **SD Events**, said that there is an increased awareness on the part of companies about their public image when wooing clients.

"You see all these stories about AIG and other companies' excesses, and people are a little nervous about looking silly or ostentatious," said Bracken. "You don't want to go over the top."

Traditional client entertainment vehicles like business dinners at expensive restaurants and golf outings at country clubs are seeing significant declines as entertaining choices for business people.

A recent poll by the **National Restaurant Association** reports a decline in sales for the 13th consecutive month, with higher-end restaurants hit the hardest. And in an interview with Bloomberg News in February, **Andrea Sartori** of tax giant **KPMG's** Golf Advisory Practice predicted that "corporate events like golf days, taking a client out for a round of golf, those activities will suffer. There will definitely be a cut."

**Michael Snedeker**, president of **Watch City Financial** in Waltham, said his firm leans heavily on client interaction as a marketing tool, but the wealth management firm "has scaled back extensively" on the frequency and types of client events they choose.

"You want to be cognizant of the fact that people have lost money in the market and equity in their home, and I find that clients respect that you're scaling back as well," explains Snedeker.

So instead of taking a large group to the EMC Club at Fenway Park for "five-star" cuisine, he opts to take clients to a Red Sox game individually or in small groups for hot dogs and peanuts. Instead of a catered clam bake, it's a cook-out with burgers and sausages.

One of Watch City's most popular cli-

ent events over the years has not been affected by the recession. Snedeker said the company takes 20 or so clients out of Gloucester for fishing trips about five or six times a year. With group rates available, a half-day trip runs about \$1,000, and also provides he and his associates ample face time with customers.

**Dusty Rhodes**, president of Boston-based event planner **Conventures Inc.**, said companies are withdrawing from traditional types of entertainment, particularly food and drink, and above all, "no high-end stuff."

"It's almost imperative, not only financially, but style-wise," she said.

Event planners are turning not only to more inexpensive entertainment, but using a more creative eye when organizing events for customers. Instead of the Red Sox, for instance, it's minor-league baseball like the Pawtucket Red Sox, Lowell Spinners or the Brockton Rox, which offer packages and special accommodations for large groups.

"Instead of a Live Nation concert, it's a night at the Hatch Shell. It's thoughtful, it's eco, and it's more friendship (oriented)," said Rhodes.

**Improv Asylum**, the popular North End comedy theater that features improvisation and sketch comedy, is literally a creative alternative, as some shows are conceived and executed on the spot.

Whereas some conventional stand-up comedy clubs are riskier for client entertaining because of potential "blue" content, shows at the Asylum are comparatively tame, while still delivering solid laughs, according to HR types.

**Kristen Martin**, corporate events manager, has seen a shift in corporate ticket-buying behavior since the recession, with a decline in the private corporate shows that the theater offers.

"But our group sales have definitely taken off over the past year," said Martin. Groups that used to do the private shows are now opting for the less expensive group tickets, she said.

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