

## EVENTS

# Plan for Client Serving, not the Self-Serving

Have you ever arrived at a client appreciation event only to discover that the entire venue is all about your host: marketing materials everywhere, speeches about how great the company is, and pressure to sign on the bottom line for the next project?

These types of self-serving events end up serving no one. The guests feel like prey and the company weakens its client relationships. So how do you make sure that your clients feel pampered, instead of pressured, at your next client appreciation affair?

Here are some strategies for planning and hosting an event that puts the emphasis where it should be – on your clients.

### Invite Clients Only

Too many companies use their client appreciation events as an excuse to throw a big party and invite not just clients but their vendors, advertisers and more as well. Clients will not feel special at these types of parties. Keep the guest list to clients so they get the attention they deserve. Some firms choose to hold three or four smaller client appreciation events per year, inviting a different group of clients to each one so they can devote one-on-one time to guests.

### Showcase Your Clients

The event should acknowledge your clients' accomplishments. Of course, your company has contributed to the projects you'll highlight, but the client should be the focus.



Jennessa Durrani

An architectural firm, for example, can showcase a client's completed project rather than the designs the firm created. A marketing firm can announce that one of its clients won a prestigious award, rather than saying that it researched, nominated and promoted the client to be recognized.

Some ways to keep the attention on your clients include event programs, presentations and visual displays throughout the venue.

### Choose Appropriate Entertainment

Your event's entertainment should be devoted to your clients' enjoyment. As inspiring as you think it may be, your company's awards dinner will bore your clients. Every speech and presentation should focus on your guests, not your company.

For entertainment, do not have a DJ and dancing if people are attending as singles. Comedians, improv groups and other performers can be successful entertainment options – just make sure their routines will be enjoyable and not offensive.

### Choose Right Time, Place

Many companies think it's a great idea to invite clients with their significant others, but the truth is that most spouses would rather not go. This reality means that weekends are not appropriate for client appreciation events.

Large corporations, eager to showcase their facilities, often want to have events on site. But a client appreciation event should be in a neutral, unique venue. Choose a venue that people will look forward to visiting.

Remember where your clients are coming from. If your customers live and work in Metrowest, traipsing into downtown Boston on a weeknight, to a venue with limited parking, will not be appealing. All parking or valet should be paid so clients feel taken care of from the moment they arrive to the moment they leave.

### Stay Out of a Rut

A common trap is getting tied into a Thursday evening cocktail party year after year. How about trying a more adventurous or more relaxing affair, depending on your client base? For example, you can host a golf or sailing outing or a spa event. Think outside the box a bit. As long as you tailor the event toward your

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clients' tastes, you'll have a winning event.

### **Celebrate Milestones**

Consider holding your client appreciation event around company milestones. You can do this successfully by positioning the event as "We're celebrating 10 years in business and couldn't have done it without you." Depending on the size of your company, you may choose to hold one large event every few years or several small events throughout the year. The key is to get face time with clients and build long-term relationships.

### **Keep the Pressure Off**

A successful client event takes all pressure off your guests, so they're not worrying about the affair for days ahead of time. Some things to avoid to make sure your guests are

comfortable: swimsuits, costumes, making them speak publicly and making them sing publicly – no karaoke!

### **Leave Them Wanting More**

When your guests leave your event, think about giving them something to take home as a memento. Stay away from pens and coffee mugs, though. While your item may include your company's logo, it should be tasteful, whimsical and out of the ordinary.

Remember, also, to follow up the event with a handwritten note to your guests within two weeks of the event. Thank them for coming to share the special occasion. To save time, divide up the attendee list by sales person or project manager and have each person write notes to their accounts.

You can include the client gift

when you mail the note if you haven't distributed it at the party. You can also include a photo of the guest from the event, maybe in a frame. Many recipients will place it on their desks as a reminder of your thoughtfulness.

By following these tips and remembering the goal of your client events – to nurture longstanding relationships that ultimately benefit your company through increased revenue and referrals – you will be able to plan and run memorable, enjoyable client appreciation events. Your clients will thank you!

*Jennessa Durrani is president of Celebrate!, Andover, a marketing firm that helps companies and professional associations create memorable events and marketing promotions that resonate with target audiences and achieve the desired business results.*