

# Celebrate with Events That Say Thank You

**Be a professional host: You'll win referrals and influence former clients and customers with business appreciation events.**

*BY KERRY KIDWELL*

Are you searching for a solution to this common problem: Now that you've made a sale, how do you get clients and customers to use your services again and refer friends, relatives, and co-workers to you?

If you think your calendars, key chains, Fourth of July flags, and Halloween pumpkins aren't getting the repeat and referral results you hoped for, consider holding a business appreciation event. Besides enlivening your social calendar, it can build client and customer loyalty that keeps you performing in the black.

## **Did I Mention How Much Your Business Means to Me?**

I've found that a gift or thank-you card isn't as effective promotionally as a face-to-face greeting or an invitation to a special event. Anyway, you're more likely to get referrals from people when you're with them than by waiting for them to contact you.

And appreciation events let you have fun while working. Most of us are easier to get to know in a casual social setting than when we're sitting behind a desk. Many buyers and sellers may become your friends, but probably not until they see you as someone other than a salesperson.

Are these events a better investment than a magnetic calendar or a pot holder with your logo emblazoned on it? Yes, when you consider that the exposure value is greater and that the invitations probably cost less than the paperweights you sent to your entire farm during the last holiday season.

Say that Betty Bountiful sends 500 invitations to buyers and sellers. That adds up to about 1,500 exposures, because each invitee will most likely read the invitation, consult with a spouse or guest about attending, and reply to Betty. Her name has come up three times to each invitee, even if the person doesn't attend.

If invitees accept, they'll probably write "Betty's party" on a calendar, attend the event, talk with Betty, and write a thank-you note later. That's four more reminders about Betty for each guest, including a personal conversation with her.

Even a declined invitation, which costs you very little, has value to invitees. Think about it: If some-

one offers you two \$10 tickets to a play or an event, you've received a \$20 gift whether you attend or not. Perceived value makes an impression, too.

### **A Party Every Week?**

How often you host a business appreciation event depends on your advertising budget. Start with an annual event and go from there. You may want to hold a party as often as five to six times a year. After all, advertisers believe repetition makes a product or service memorable.

But be aware that if you arrange too many special events, they may lose their specialness. If a store holds a half-price sale every week, the sales lose their perceived value. Whatever you decide, be consistent: Hold a volleyball party every summer or a holiday party each December. Guests look forward to and mentally plan for regular events. You'll know your event is generating a buzz when you receive replies from people who can't attend but would like to be invited next time.

### **Party On, Dude**

Here's how to throw a blowout of a business appreciation event:

Pick a theme or type of event. To plan an event that invitees will probably like, consider what type of activities are popular in your area—for example, baseball, country-and-western line dancing, or opera (see "Party Ideas That'll Keep 'Em Talking").

Set a budget. Pick a realistic number based on your promotions budget but allow for at least 10 percent extra. After all, you may not know exactly how much food to order the first time you hold an event. The more you entertain, the more precise your calculations will become.

Keep the receipts from the event on file to budget for next year's party. And create a spreadsheet on your computer itemizing fixed costs (a bus or banquet hall) and variable costs (food, beverages, tickets).

To keep expenses down, include invitations with a previously scheduled mailing, such as your newsletter; ask your broker to chip in, in exchange for company publicity; and don't guarantee a guest count to the caterer until a day or two before the event. Then you'll have a better idea of how many people are coming, so you can order the appropriate amount of food.

As you look for savings, don't go too far and send a message that you're cheap. For example, if you plan a formal holiday party, don't mail photocopied flyers.

If you're short on cash, sponsor events in which invitees pay some or all of the costs. You'll still get the credit and pats on the back for organizing it.

I offer a bus trip to a baseball game each year at a fixed price—about \$30 per guest. I've found that guests don't mind paying, because they get good game seats and are conveniently bused from downstate Illinois to Chicago. Each guest also receives a cooler bearing my name, the event, and the date of the outing.

Set a time and date. Try to schedule the event at the same time each year. To avoid major conflicts, check the events calendars of local schools and of the chamber of commerce. Schedule holiday parties four to six months in advance if you're renting a room; arrange baseball trips in March or April to assure ticket availability.

Decide whom to invite. Your A-list should include past clients and customers as well as loan officers, cooperating salespeople, attorneys, title company officers, and your office staff. Or, you may opt to hold separate events for your ancillary business contacts or cooperating salespeople.

Consider starting small, say one event a year, and just invite the people who did business with you that year. Next year invite those same people and new clients and customers. You can increase the number of invitees and events as your expertise and confidence grow.

Set up a computer database to keep track of invitees, whom you'll probably pull from your mailing list or an existing database of buyers and sellers who've closed transactions. But don't send invitations to people you know won't be able to attend, such as out-of-town contacts. Ideally, your database should have a mail merge function to merge invitees' names into letters and invitations and to print envelopes or labels.

Mail the invitations. Consider sending a teaser to invitees a couple of weeks before the invitations go out. For example, if you publish a newsletter a few times a year, alert readers to look for the invitation, either in a separate mailing or within the next issue. Send formal invitations at least a month before the event.

The type of event will dictate the type of invitation. Have invitations to a formal holiday party at a country club professionally printed on fancy paper. Create a picnic invitation on your computer and photocopy it on colored paper.

Always indicate Address Correction Requested in the bottom left-hand corner of envelopes and cards to track those people you may have lost contact with. And require an RSVP for all your events. That gives you another contact with the invitees.

Work the room. Be the greeter, master of ceremonies, waiter, chef, or whatever the occasion calls for.

Bring your spouse and family to give your clients and customers a glimpse into your personal life. If appropriate, set up a guest sign-in book at the door so that you'll later be able to quantify the turnout.

Review and critique. Analyze the event within the next few days by soliciting candid feedback from attendees who know you well. Talk about it at sales meetings, too.

If the turnout was poor, was it because of the date, the event, or a mailing glitch? Decide whether to make adjustments and try it again or switch to a new event.

Follow up with thank-you-for-attending notes. That way, you make yet another promotional contact with those who signed the guest register.

Promotion is hard work. But at least with an appreciation event, you get to enjoy your marketing efforts in a tangible way—socializing with the people who've helped your business grow.

## **A PARTY ISN'T THE SAME WITHOUT GUESTS**

Ever hold a party and nobody came? Here are some hints to make your event a success:

- Make invitees feel special. Include "Thank you for your previous business" in your invitations.
  - Designate bus trips nonsmoking and publish that fact in the invitations. Bus companies will often give you a better rate if you do. If children are welcome, note that in the invitations, too.
  - If RSVPs aren't coming in as expected, get on the phone and call invitees. The personal touch might convince someone on the fence to attend.
  - Tried everything and still have lots of extra baseball tickets? Donate them to a local radio station to give away. The advertising value of having your name mentioned on the air could outweigh the cost of the tickets.
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## **PARTY IDEAS THAT'LL KEEP 'EM TALKING**

If you don't want to throw a run-of-the-mill cheese-and-fruit-plate mixer, try one of these jazzy ideas:

- Ivey Weaver, of Weaver & Associates in Bloomington, Ill., holds an annual business appreciation party but varies the theme each year. She has held everything from a theater-in-the-round to a Tex-Mex barbecue in her backyard. Every year she invites her clients and customers and the people who referred clients or customers to her that year.

If you hold a barbecue in a park or in your backyard, schedule activities with prizes for children. Weaver offered pony rides. And volleyball is popular with all ages.

- Marilyn Vogt, managing sales broker with Traders Realty in Peoria, Ill., throws camaraderie-generating St. Patrick's Day parties at her office for cooperating salespeople. She festoons the office in green, and invitees wear green and are served traditional Irish foods and green beer. Halloween and Valentine's Day also lend themselves well to business appreciation parties.

Not enough ideas? Consider these:

- Sporting events—Organize a tailgate party, or a bus trip to a baseball, basketball, or football game or to the racetrack.
- Plays—Many local theater groups and colleges stage command performances for a corporate sponsor. (You may need your broker's backing on this one.) Your name or that of your company will appear in the playbill as a sponsor.

Call or send invitees a notice saying "We've reserved two tickets for you to a command performance." That way, they have to call you for the tickets.

- Shopping trip—Rent a bus to take guests to a mall, especially if your farm is in an area that's not near shopping centers. November or early December would probably work best for holiday shopping. Plan to eat lunch as a group.

- Dancing—It could be anything from ballroom to country-and-western line dancing. When the band goes on break, take the microphone and thank guests for attending. Tell them you hope they'll think of you when they need real estate services, but don't go into a spiel about your company. It isn't the time for aggressive advertising.
- Cruise—Do you live near a lake, river, or ocean? Consider offering a sightseeing-and-dinner cruise at a group discount.
- Gambling—Some hotels and floating casinos will bus your group free to the casinos.
- Bowlathon—Team up with clients and customers, other salespeople, or affiliated businesses to raise money for a local charity.
- Tour historic sites or other points of interest—You'll find that many longtime residents and relocated buyers have never visited local historic homes, museums, national parks, or theme parks.

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