

Company picnics feel the pinch

Belt-tightening causes businesses to cut back on entertainment, alcohol and guest list

By Leslie Mann, Special to the Tribune

May 30, 2012

One day each July, no one at the Steppenwolf Theatre Company cares all that much about when the curtain rises or if tonight's show is sold out.

Staff members leave their worries at work, pack up their families and dogs, and head to the Linne Woods Forest Preserve in Morton Grove for their annual company picnic.

"We paint the kids' faces. Someone always brings a guitar. We play croquet and badminton and have our Steppenwolf Olympics," said Jessica Stratton, wardrobe supervisor and picnic chair. "We work in three different buildings, so the picnic is a chance for us to get together and have fun with no agenda."

Though the Steppenwolf is keeping its summer tradition going, the number of company picnics across the country is declining. Nationwide, only 55 percent of companies hosted one in 2011, compared with 64 percent in 2007, according to a study by the Society for Human Resource Management. And many companies that still have picnics have scaled back on the size of the event.

"More companies are having picnics for staff only and during the week," said Doreen Warsaw, the administrative assistant who oversees reservations at the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County. "We see fewer family company picnics on weekends."

"Recession-proof companies like fast-food restaurant chains and insurance companies still have big ones," she said. "But many smaller companies don't have the money anymore. Or they say their employees don't have time. I'm a working mom, so I know how valuable your weekends are."

"We used to have a big picnic every year, with families and entertainment. It grew to about 1,200 people and got bigger every year," said Andrea Newmes, project manager for Nation Pizza and Foods in Schaumburg. "This year, though, the company is watching its budget, so we will have lunch just for the employees on company grounds during the week."

Maggi Pasquini, administrative assistant at the International Union of Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers District Council 1 in Elmhurst, said the local bricklayers unions each used to have their own picnics.

"But since the construction industry has been affected by the recession, they've been cut," she said.

If the picnics survive the company budget, chances are cuts are made elsewhere.

"We've seen a downturn in holiday parties, but we still do 400 to 500 company picnics a year," said Ellen Harte, director of key accounts at Tasty Catering in Elk Grove Village and spokeswoman for the Chicago Chapter of the National Association of Catering Executives. "Since the recession, many of our clients have told their employees it's one or the

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other, and they want the picnic."

No longer are budgets carte blanche, though, Harte said.

"They want to reward the employees with a picnic but keep costs low and mitigate risks, so they're less likely to have alcohol or to have picnics where people have to drive far," she said. "They're more likely to have them on company grounds. They're less likely to rent a tent, though with Chicago weather, that means you're throwing caution to the wind."

While larger party planners like Tasty Catering hold their ground, subcontractors that once counted on company picnics for much of their revenue are seeing their services cut.

"We used to do five to eight company picnics a year, but now it's much fewer or they're having us come every other year," said Maribeth Joy, director of CircEsteem in Chicago, which provides circus performers for events.

Musician Ronnie Rice, of Evanston, said his company picnic business fell 70 percent with the recession.

"We rock 'n' roll people feel the crunch," said Rice, formerly of the band New Colony Six. "They call close to the date instead of booking ahead, try to talk down our prices or go with a DJ instead of live music."

Normajean Price of Wheaton, whose stage name is Aunt Nora the Clown, said she's used to doing 15 company picnics a year but only has three booked so far this year.

"Times have changed," she said. "The company wants to cut extra costs, which means us."

The rental industry feels the trickledown too, said Chris Wright, chairman of the American Rental Association of Chicagoland.

"We're doing the same number of company picnics, but instead of a day in the forest preserve, some do 'hot-dog day' without families at the company facility on a weekday," he said.

Chicago event planner Pam Paul, president of Eventive Inc., said many companies now combine or replace their picnics with service days.

"You bring your family to the food bank on Saturday morning," she said. "The company buys breakfast or lunch, but it's a way for the employees to be philanthropic too."

Steppenwolf started combining its picnic with its community service day last year.

"Before we went to the picnic, we met at the park in Chicago where our softball team plays and helped fix up the park," Stratton said. "We'll probably do the same this year."

"Keep it simple" is the rule for the company picnics for the employees of Half Price Books' Chicago-area district, said district manager Kent Hedtke.

"I bring the grills from my house, the company spends \$300 to \$400 tops on food and we meet at Busse Woods (Forest Preserve in Elk Grove Village)," Hedtke said. "We tape up a huge old dictionary and use it for a shot-put contest and we see who can speed-price paperbacks the fastest with a price gun."

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Hedtke said he understands if people opt out.

"The best company picnic I did was a simple one in the boss's backyard," Price said. "It wasn't ostentatious, but it was thought out, like having a baby pool and baby sitter for the little ones. When the boss's wife said, 'Cleanup will take me a while — oh, well!' everyone took her lead and just relaxed. These days, when people work so hard and such long hours, a little bit of money goes a long way to show the employees they're appreciated."

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