

Breaking Away from the Same Old Routine

by Ellen Rundbaken

It is the customary question event planners must face each year.

How do I make this year's annual event top the last?

One way to answer this question involves breaking away from the same old routine. Design a unique event and make it incomparable to previous years.

There are many ways to create distinction in an annual event. Two easy avenues for infusing creativity and excitement are the event's entertainment and its menu design.

Here are some ideas for helping to set your next annual event apart from all the rest.

Making Reality TV a Reality for Your Group

Focusing on current pop culture trends naturally lends an event planner to keep entertainment ideas fresh and new for their annual event. Just look at the most popular shows on television and it is easy to see that reality competitions are a hit. For example, American Idol, The Apprentice and Dancing with the Stars are among the most watched of all network shows.

Why not bring that competitive spirit to your annual event? Depending on its scope, the event could potentially include entertainment that features stars from popular reality shows. Cast members from the hit show Dancing with the Stars can be hired to perform a few meringue or salsa numbers on stage. Or for a more interactive night, make your own “Dancing with the Stars” show by bringing in dance coaches to teach your guests some moves.

Reality competitions can be incorporated into all types of events. To illustrate this point, for a local insurance company, Roberts Event Group, Inc. recently planned a team building event based on the reality show “Survivor.” An annually held, company-wide event, its goal is to keep employees engaged with new and exciting ideas every year. What better way to get people involved than to put them head-to-head in Survivor-themed challenges?

For this particular event, employees were divided into “tribes” and took part in tests of physical endurance as well as mental challenges. This

From pop culture to world culture, current events create a constantly changing spectrum of entertainment and menu ideas for annual events.

had the result of creating a friendly spirit of competition and also team building.

The catered barbecue menu for the event also incorporated the Survivor theme. Guests enjoyed rice and seafood dishes that were accompanied by tropical fruits and juices served in coconuts. A “dirt and worm” eating contest ended the day as competitors devoured buckets of a simple pudding and gummy worm recipe.

Another interactive option is to make food preparation the entertainment for an event. With reality shows such as Iron Chef America, Ace of Cakes and Top Chef gaining popularity, this is a great way to infuse creative food and entertainment into one’s event concept. If budget allows, event planners may seek reality food show stars to act as celebrity chefs for their event. The selected chef can then create signature dishes on stage in front of the audience of event attendees.

At the conclusion of (or throughout) the cooking demonstration, guests can enjoy samples of the dishes being prepared. To add another element, a celebrity sommelier can be brought in to select wines for each dish, and to discuss the reasons for the pairings with guests as they enjoy their meal.

Gold Medals and Ballots

From pop culture to world culture, current events create a constantly changing spectrum of entertainment and menu ideas for annual events. What is going on in the news can

help guide event planners as they develop themes and ideas.

Does the annual sales meeting fall during the same dates as The Masters this year? If so, consider creating a golf-themed opening night reception that features “9 holes” of food stations. The chef can then develop a menu inspired by the theme and ask guests to complete a scorecard throughout the evening when visiting stations.

Golf carts can navigate through the reception area as wait staff serve specialty drinks such as the “Arnold Palmer” or the “Bogey.” For entertainment, event planners can bring in golf simulators so guests can test their swing and get the feel of playing at Augusta National.

Roberts Event Group took event goers to Beijing with an Olympic themed reception in anticipation of the recent summer games. This annual event, typically held in a hotel ballroom, previously entailed some basic decor and musical entertainment. To help their client take the event to “the next level,” Roberts suggested the Olympic theme to honor the games and infused it throughout the event.

Decor included large Golden Foo Dogs at the door that greeted guests coming into the ballroom, paper lanterns on tables with rich colored linens, international flags, as well as an Olympic torch.

Entertainment built on the theme with Chinese Lion Dancers and Olympic theme music. Guests even enjoyed some Olympic-spirited competition through a Nintendo Wii game tournament, complete with a medal ceremony at the end.

Its menu featured Asian-inspired cuisine such as noodles passed in Chinese take out containers, fried rice, spring rolls and pot stickers. Guests received a variety of themed favors at the conclusion of the reception, such as custom fortune cookies and medals as a memento of the games.

The 2008 Presidential election buzz electrified the country this past year. As Election Day drew closer, event planners used the impending momentous occasion to draw inspiration that brought some patriotic flare and variety to annual events.

For politically themed events, the candidates themselves are likely to be too busy to make a guest appearance, but you can still book the next best thing - a celebrity impersonator! These talented performers can work the crowd with walk-around comedy, or put on a stage show for your event guests.

Another option is to hire a political satire troupe to perform a clever show highlighting recent newsworthy events. After all, many comics are at their best when incorporating a current event into their act.

With regard to the menu, food for a political event should center on the candidates and signature dishes associated with them. For example, recent election party menus included personal Chicago-style deep-dish pizzas, Delaware Blue Crab Cakes, and Alaskan Salmon.

Be a Kid Again

Sometimes adults really just want to have fun. Instead of entertaining event guests, make them the entertainment with interactive concepts that help to bring out the kid in all of us. Take guests to a venue that features built-in entertainment such as a bowling alley or an arcade center or an interactive museum.

Just as each annual event in your personal life isn't always observed in the same way (ahem, birthdays!), yearly corporate events should have a renewed style each time they are celebrated. Here are some tips and trends to break away from the same old routine and to add a personal touch to every annual event you plan.

The Staycation: Consider a "Staycation" for your event. The event doesn't have to be "all or nothing" - you could host the event at your office and bring in food and entertainment to jazz the place up.

Splurge on Something: Choose one thing to splurge on that will help to make your event memorable - this could be the location or venue, musical entertainment, the theme, giveaways, etc.; incorporating a "special moment," or offering top-shelf bars. There are many options to consider.

Change the Scene: If you hold your event at the same space or location every year, change up the scene. Instead of a sit-down dinner, make it a buffet, enhance the space with decor, and bring in live and interactive entertainment. This will give familiarity a breath of freshness.

Outweigh Obligation with Celebration: If your annual event has become more of an obligation than a celebration, consider moving it to a less busy time of year when employees have more time for celebrating.

Tight Budget? Add Something: If the budget is tight, get creative! If you can only afford wine with your dinner event, bring in a sommelier and no one will miss the open bar. Beer connoisseurs are also available for another option that is fun and out of the ordinary.

Reception Perception: If your company's financial outlook has you avoiding celebrations, look to pair your annual event with a team building or volunteer opportunity for colleagues. It is still a chance to connect with each other, and it will really give them something to talk about over dinner.



Jen Rodgers Tis,
sales director for
Roberts Event
Group, a full
service events,
DMC and
Hospitality Support
company in
Philadelphia.

www.robertseventgroup.com



Roberts
Event
Group Inc.

If your event is taking place in a hotel or ballroom, you can bring the games there instead. Set up a casino tournament, bring in old fashioned pinball and arcade games, create a pool hall complete with a hustling pool shark, or make it all virtual with multiple Wii stations with various games to play. For a more active crowd and event, consider oversized game boards for playing games such as chess (with people as the pieces) or Jenga, or even a competitive game of laser tag.

Along with the interactive entertainment, event planners should ask the chef to create a menu that satisfies an adult palate but reminds guests of their childhood. Mini grilled cheese sandwiches passed with tomato soup shooters, a build-your own personal pizza station, carnival food such as corn dogs and funnel cakes served from vendor carts, and a gourmet sundae bar complete with everyone's favorite toppings are just a few ideas to make the menu fun.

No matter which direction an event planner chooses to take for their annual event, they should always consider their audience. Not all ideas will work for every group. But with creativity, careful planning and the proper execution of a menu and entertainment, you can surely break away from the same old routine.

Ellen Rundbaken is the event and marketing coordinator for Roberts Event Group, Inc., a full service special event, destination management and hospitality support company in Philadelphia.
www.RobertsEventGroup.com

Along with the interactive entertainment, event planners should ask the chef to create a menu that satisfies an adult palate but reminds guests of their childhood.

Events that stand out from the rest.



Fresh. Crisp. Different and Distinctive.

Taste the difference.

For events with taste, Roberts Event Group is a natural alternative to ho-hum, ordinary, run-of-the-mill events, with a fresh, crisp approach that satisfies your craving for something different and distinctive. Take a bite...you'll like our taste.



215-887-7880 | robertseventgroup.com