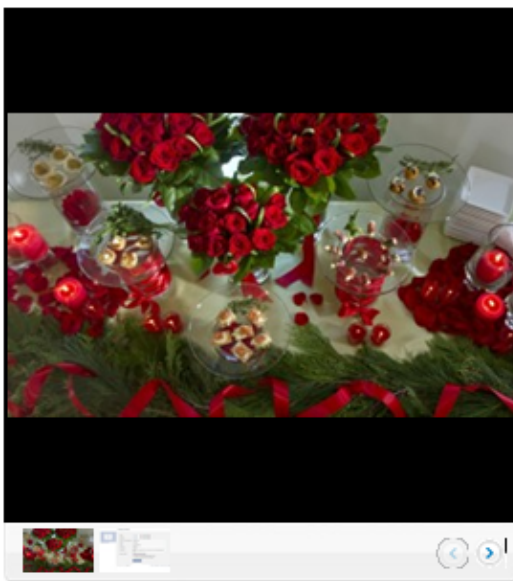


## Hosting the perfect party is all about managing guests, from the invite to the ‘Goodnight’

By Associated Press, Published: November 8

NEW YORK — It would be so easy to give holiday parties if it weren't for the guests.

Guests who fail to RSVP, then show up with friends. Guests who arrive late and stay past your bedtime. Guests who clean out your shrimp cocktail but won't touch your pasta salad. Guests who knock over drinks and nearly set their sleeves on fire reaching over your candles.



( Safeway / Associated Press ) - This undated photo courtesy of Safeway shows a holiday table. Entertaining expert Debi Lilly recommends simple decorating tips to achieve a classic red-and-green color scheme for a holiday party buffet, including scattered red rose petals, evergreen boughs, red ribbon and red candles.

And the worst guest of all: the one who's busy the night of your holiday party and can't make it.

But you can outsmart them all and host a party as carefree for you as it is fun for them. Here are some tips for Party Management 101, from the invite to the "Goodnight!"

**TIMING:** Send the invitation for a holiday party too early and people forget. Wait too long and everyone's booked.

Kaity Eagle, a marketing specialist with InvitationConsultants.com, recommends sending invitations "no later than one month before the party. November and December are busy months."

Sunday evenings are a good alternative to busy Friday and Saturday nights. Yes, everyone has to go to work or school the next day, but if you schedule your party for late Sunday afternoon or early evening, you could end up with a crowd. Friends might welcome a way to relax after a busy weekend of shopping and chores, especially if you offer a dinner

buffet and save them the trouble of preparing a meal.

INVITES AND RSVPs: Paper, electronic or phone invitations? So many options, and yet so few result in RSVPs.

The paper invite makes an impression, but it's more work for you. It also may suggest an unintended formality or level of fuss for your party.

On the other end of the spectrum is the phone or text invite. That may be a little too casual and easy to lose track of, especially if you're sending them several weeks out.

Electronic invitations — Evite, email, Paperless Post, Facebook and other sites — have become the default for many people, and may yield the most responses in our no-RSVP culture simply because responding requires just one click.

But there are always a few who never RSVP. Some have no intention of coming; others may show up unannounced with uninvited friends. And a few will pledge their attendance, then never show, or cancel last-minute. How's a hostess to cope?

Jennifer Gullins of the Boston-based Sapphire Event Group suggests pinning down commitments from a few BFFs. "It's OK to take a pulse on your core group of invitees well in advance. ... This will ensure that you already know a good handful will be attending even before sending out the official invite."

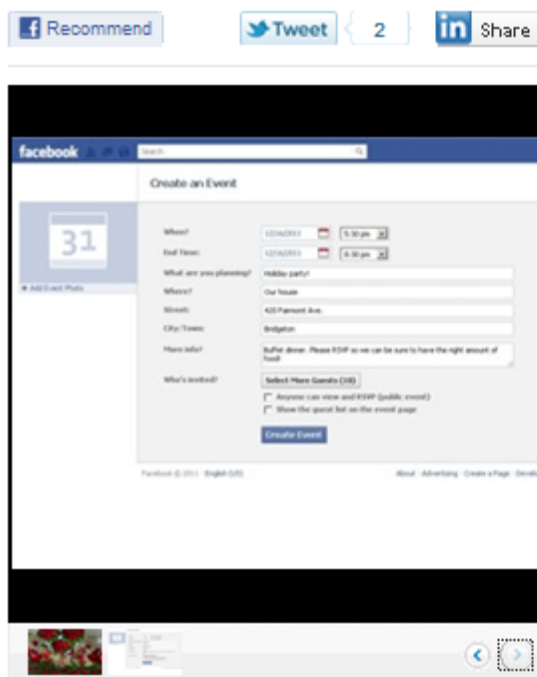
Should you make follow-up calls to those who don't respond? Debi Lilly, entertaining expert for the supermarket chain Safeway, says a gracious call or email to sincerely say, "I wanted to make sure you got my invitation," is always appropriate.

Another way to go is to send out a single email reminder a week before the event to everyone you haven't heard from. If that too is ignored, they're probably not coming.

I've had luck over the years getting RSVPs to my annual Hanukkah party by including a special plea on the grounds that I want to have enough homemade latkes for everyone. Threatening that a tantalizing treat might disappear if you don't have a reliable head count might be enough to shake the RSVPs out.

Patricia Mendez, who offers tips at [ezentertaining.net](http://ezentertaining.net) and wrote a book called "Easy Entertaining for Beginners," says it's prudent to assume that a few surprise guests will show up. "If you have 12 that RSVP, then plan for a few more just in case — 16," she said.

She also suggests inviting a third more people than your space fits: "If your space will fit 12 to 16 people, send invitations to 20 to 24."



( Facebook / Associated Press ) - The screen shot made on Friday, Nov. 4, 2011 shows a Create an Event Facebook page. Electronic invitations \_ Evite, email, Paperless Post, Facebook and other sites \_ have become the default for many people, and may yield the most responses in our no-RSVP culture simply because

**FOOD AND DECOR:** Food that's good at room temperature is easiest on the host, though it limits the menu.

See what prepared foods your supermarket is offering before you splurge at specialty stores; you might be surprised by the selection and quality of cold party platters and easy-to-bake frozen hors d'oeuvres. Safeway's Lilly says it's easy to dress up frozen puffs with fresh herbs, fruit slivers, a drizzle of balsamic cream or shaved parmesan. "The trick," she said, "is to elevate them."

And remember that variety is a virtue. I used to offer pasta salad as a side dish for potato pancakes until someone pointed out that it was just too many carbs. Fruit platters with berries, toothpicked pineapple chunks and melon balls, on the other hand, proved much more popular, as did chicken wings.

Many people have dietary issues these days, so consider offering something for the vegetarian and for the low-salt, low-fat crowd, along with holiday treats that may be high-calorie or high-sugar.

Lilly also advocates a self-serve drink area with a couple of fun choices in labeled pitchers so you're not stuck making cocktails all night. Keep a few dishtowels or rolls of paper towels in easy reach for the inevitable spills.

Lilly's suggestions for easy, inexpensive decor include covering the table with wrapping paper instead of a tablecloth. Or decorate the table in classic holiday colors by layering evergreen boughs across the edge and scattering red rose petals over the rest.

She also fills large glass vases with layers of dried beans and nuts for a chic, organic look, then plops a candle inside. Both the vases and the candles are available at Safeway stores through the debi lilly design collection.

**ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES:** Some folks will come early; some will stay late. Minimize stress by having everything ready a half-hour before your start time, and deputize someone else to answer the door and take coats.

Set the tone by listing a clear start and end time on the invitation. Open house is nice and informal, but it also means some folks will drop by just when you were hoping everyone would leave. If you're planning on serving real food and not just chips and cookies, a window of a couple of hours also makes it easy to keep food fresh.

Exact times also are "helpful for guests that might be double booked that day and may want to try to make both parties," said Gullins, of the Sapphire Event Group.

To manage lingerers, Gullins recommends planting someone among the guests to help. "This friend could make casual comments to the crowd such as, 'Wow, I can't believe how late it is already,' or 'I really should get going soon, I know you have an early day at work tomorrow' or 'Let me help you get this place cleaned up a bit.' These type of comments make others take notice and follow suit without you looking like a lame party host."

Eagle, of InvitationConsultants.com, suggests preparing take-home favors. "Passing out these favors — perhaps small bags of cookies or candy — at the end of the night is a subtle and sweet way to say goodnight," she said.

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[http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/hosting-the-perfect-party-is-all-about-managing-guests-from-the-invite-to-the-goodnight/2011/11/08/gIQAiPYX1M\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/hosting-the-perfect-party-is-all-about-managing-guests-from-the-invite-to-the-goodnight/2011/11/08/gIQAiPYX1M_story.html)