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'fantastic for morale'

## Businesses ditching traditional office parties

Season now celebrated with activities, cruises

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Lattice Engines' Boston office participates in Paint Nite, a service that gives painting lessons at bars and restaurants rather than have a traditional office holiday party. (Lattice Engines / AP)

Buddy DiFonzo isn't sure what he'll buy at his company's holiday party. That's right, what he'll buy — the celebration, a company-sponsored shopping spree, will be at an upscale Dallas mall.

The six employees of consulting firm Idea Harvest will meet at NorthPark Center next week. The bosses will buy lunch, then hand each staffer an envelope with \$200 to \$300. One crucial requirement: Staffers must spend every penny on themselves.

"This is fantastic for morale and employees look forward to opening those envelopes for weeks," CEO Mike Solow says. "I hear people talking about it at lunch. It's awesome."

Many bosses are ditching traditional holiday parties. Instead, they're sponsoring shopping sprees and cruises to reward staffers and celebrate at the end of the year. Others are holding parties that include a special activity or are doing volunteer events that they say are good for business.

Several factors are behind the change, says Leslie Yerkes, president of Catalyst Consulting Group in Cleveland. Younger workers aren't as interested in standard holiday celebrations; the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks made many companies look for events that were meaningful, like volunteer work; and the last recession curtailed spending on over-the-top affairs.

When DiFonzo and his colleagues at Idea Harvest are done shopping, they'll meet for drinks and compare purchases.

Solow borrowed the shopping spree idea from a previous job, where staffers got lunch, money and time to go shopping. A lot of the fun is in the anticipation, he says.

"They print out the mall map and take note of where their favorite stores are," Solow says. "Some take the money and buy as many clothes as they can from Old Navy or Gap, and some look for one knockout item."

Last year, DiFonzo used his money to buy a North Face jacket he had coveted. It cost about \$185. There was a little money left over, so he grabbed some underwear. This time, he's considering a pair of hiking boots.

Employees of Konnect Public Relations are getting a four-day cruise to Mexico. The Los Angeles-based company uses the trip as a reward for productivity. Top producers get extras like upgrades to a suite or spa treatments.

In past years, employees went to Lake Tahoe and toured wine country. Spouses have to stay home, but can attend a special holiday dinner.

The trip for 26 staffers will cost about \$15,000, a worthwhile investment, Chief Operating Officer Monica Guzman says.

"We go through a lot to find really good quality people, and once we have them, we try everything in our power to keep them happy," she says.

Lattice Engines' employees painted while they partied at a Boston restaurant. The software company brought in Paint Nite, a service that gives painting lessons at bars and restaurants. About 65 people painted trees on canvas while they drank and ate hors d'oeuvres.

The company holds parties with special activities to encourage staffers to interact with people they don't know well, officer manager Alicia Thomas says. Employees tend to work quietly in teams, with little contact with other staffers. And a paint party, or the trivia party held last year, is more fun for spouses who might otherwise sit in a corner by themselves.

With 65 people painting, including 40 employees, there was more mingling and chatter as partygoers admired everyone's artwork, says Thomas, who was one of the painters. The fun continued when staffers gathered for their weekly lunch meeting.

"People were showing pictures of the paintings on their phones. It's a conversation piece," Thomas says.

Nautilus used to have lavish parties with employee gifts like big-screen TVs. In 2004, the fitness equipment maker decided to focus less on itself and more on the community, says Wayne Bolio, a senior vice president. So Nautilus began sponsoring an annual shopping trip for children at a Target store near the company's Vancouver, Wash., headquarters. The children, selected by social service agencies, are economically deprived or had to be removed from their family homes, Bolio says. This year, more than 40 staffers and about two dozen family members volunteered to help about 50 children pick out gifts. Each child got to spend about \$75.

"When you walk out afterward, you say, 'I feel good about this and I feel good that the company supports it,'" Bolio says.