

for FUN and PROFIT

BY CHRISTIANNA M^cCAUSLAND

Especially in a downturn, corporate entertaining is one of the keys to success.



In May, Biddle Street Catering created custom food sculpture for a party at the Discovery Store to announce the arrival in the Inner Harbor of the Amphibious "Ducks" tourist vehicles.

THE PERFECT SOLUTION

Corporate entertaining isn't just about showing appreciation for clients; often, it's about employees, too. But in any case, creativity is important to achieve the desired outcome.

Elaina Ward, a division event planner at Freddie Mac, throws at least four major quarterly events for staff a year as well as smaller events like pizza parties and ice cream socials. Most recently, she organized a March Madness-themed party for 325 employees and their spouses at a major hotel. The highly interactive night featured dance instructors, virtual-reality games, and a slam-dunk contest.

"It's a way of telling people 'Thank you, we appreciate your hard work,'" she says. "And thanking their spouses, too, for tolerating the long hours and the work they do on weekends. I believe it goes a long way in letting them know they are appreciated. It may not keep them [employees], but it makes them happy."

Carefully planned events also can be the solution to a public-relations problem, says Larry Levy, owner of **Biddle Street Catering**.

He recalls the case of a major downtown office building, where a construction project at the main entrance forced hundreds of valued tenants to walk around the building for months to get to the parking garage. Approached by worried building managers, Levy's solution was a "construction party" for all the tenants—decorations ranged from scaffolding to blueprints, and waiters wore hard hats. The tenants got good eats, a presentation on the project, and thanks in advance for their patience. The result was no complaints to the landlord, says Levy.

Another of Biddle Street's novel solutions went to work for a local drug manufacturer whose four shifts of workers had recently worked hard to exceed sales quotas. Levy set up a lavish thank-you dinner at the end of each shift—even at 4 a.m.—

with company execs and the company president serving up the food.

"No Ants Picnics" are another fairly inexpensive, impromptu way to thank employees, says Levy. He's done several such events, often on a Friday afternoon, with beer, pit-beef, and entertainment on parking lot roofs, in the park on Federal Hill, even transforming board rooms with outdoor scenery and props. Then there was the party held so that the staffs of two recently merged law firms in Washington and Baltimore could meet each other. Several of the workers' cubicles were turned into food stations. And at a recent open house for a copier company showing off its new line of machines, Levy was called on to produce a server in a red-striped jacket and straw hat serving up hot dogs, hot pretzels, and popcorn for the sales prospects.

"We're sort of the idea makers," he says. "If you have a challenge, we work with your team and come up with a game plan. If it's done right, the event pays for itself in goodwill over and over." There are photo ops, too, so everyone is reminded later of how swell the host company was to throw the bash.

