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# Going Social

With corporate budgets down, should you be getting into social events?

By Diana Rowe



“I still get emotional when I see a bride walk down the aisle with her father,” admits Courtney Caplan, president of Caplan Miller Events, a full-service event planning company based in Austin, Texas. “How can you not after spending six months or more getting to know the family and then witnessing one of the most personal events in their life?”

With increasing scrutiny on budgets across a number of sectors — from corporate to government to association and beyond — many event businesses are taking a fresh look at different ways to supplement their revenue streams. And, many of them are finding, social events offer that much-needed business boost — and a few unexpected perks.

To find out how event pros are adding social events to their offerings, *ES* talked to planners from around the country who are finding success in both worlds. Here’s what we found.

Planner and designer Shawn Rabideau says the social market is an opportunity for independent planners and others in a down economy.

Photo: David Vaughn, Photography



As with corporate events, understanding your client's unique personality is key to creating successful social events, according to Rabideau.



Photos: Courtesy, Pam Gillin - Bullidog Photography

## {Caplan Miller Events} 'Rewarding and Challenging!'

With opportunities scarce for planning corporate events, independent meeting planners are stretching their skills and going social. Social events, such as weddings, bar mitzvahs, birthdays and anniversaries, are enabling planners to supplement or boost their revenue stream during challenging times. The bonus, planners are discovering, is that social events give them an emotional high that they don't get from corporate events.

"Planning social events broadens my resourcefulness," says Caplan. "For example, bar mitzvahs are often three-day themed events, such as creating a carnival atmosphere. In the wedding or corporate world, I wouldn't have to look for carnival companies, but it was fun for me to meet new vendors — and bar mitzvahs bring in as much, if not more, revenue."

"Although logistically social events are much like corporate meetings," says Caplan, "social events are a different dynamic and full of emotion. Social clients are connected to the event emotionally and financially, so I'm often dealing with several family members with different personalities and sometimes different agendas. Yet those same reasons are why social events can be so rewarding and challenging!"

Since opening their full-service event planning company three years ago, the company has found social events to be their bread and butter. "We've always been successful with weddings and are now expanding to other social events and corporate meetings," she says. "We've discovered that no matter the state of the economy, people don't cancel events that celebrate milestones."

In order to find new social clients, Caplan suggests frequent contact with vendors. "Kindle the connection with old and new vendors. Meet with (or call) them often and make sure they have a supply of your cards. Remember to connect with the local venues, such as hotels, churches and synagogues, which are often booked before hiring the planner."

For example, Caplan wanted to reach Austin's Jewish community, so she advertised in the local newspaper, *Jewish Outlook*.

She also suggests planners take advantage of free social media and promote their services on wedding blogs, such as [stylemepretty.com](http://stylemepretty.com).

## {Shawn Rabideau Events} 'Opportunity in a Down Economy'

Shawn Rabideau, president of New York-based Shawn Rabideau Events & Design, has made his mark as a planner over the past decade. His client list includes corporate and private events with names that inspire: Kenneth Cole, Jennifer Lopez, Star Jones, Barbara Walters, AXA Financial, *Chief Executive* magazine, Citadel, Foxwoods Resort Casino, March of Dimes and Touchstone Pictures. He was also cast as a featured planner on the Style Network's hit reality series, "Whose Wedding Is It Anyway?"

"The social market is an open opportunity for independent planners, producers and suppliers in a down economy," says Rabideau. "Something is happening all the time: a wedding, anniversary, birthday, bar mitzvah. Corporate downsizing has created a group of busy people who don't have time to plan their own events."

"Whether the event is corporate or social," Rabideau adds, "the planner that asks all the right questions — and really listens — will be successful. You have to understand who the client is as an individual or company, and asking the right questions formulates a good party."

For example, Rabideau says, perhaps the bride loves lamb, but her parents' budget won't fit the dish. "Instead, suggest serving baby lamb chops on the appetizer station, rather than the main course — and she's happy and so are her parents." ▶



Photo: Ben Strahmann Photography

The satisfaction of touching someone's life personally is one perk of doing social events, says Shawn Rabideau.



Photos Courtesy: Complete Lifestyle Photography



Everything Events created "Network and Nosh" and "Martinis and Manicures," two sponsored event series that are driving business in the slow economy.

▶ At the end of the day, Rabideau says, he finds social events more rewarding. "When the meeting is done, your corporate client may say you've done a good job, but they've moved on to the next thing. However, planning a social event touches someone's life and there's emotion in their gratitude."

For planners wanting to break into the social market, Rabideau offers these tips: Learn the trends. Do your research. Hit the streets. Go to bridal shops and florists. Become familiar with religious ceremonies and customs. Find out what is the

new hot trend for a wedding or bar mitzvah. Switch gears, and be proactive. If you don't have experience, volunteer your services to a social planner.

### {Everything Events} 'Be a Planner of the Future'

Jill Lazar, co-owner of Everything Events, started in the corporate sector, but with a slowing economy, she and her partner wanted to branch into the social sector. Several brainstorming sessions later, they created "Network and Nosh," a lunch event to connect event and marketing industry peers in a fun, innovative and social atmosphere.



Photo: Complete Lifestyle Photography

Jill Lazar branched into the social sector by focusing on the social aspects of business gatherings.

"Word of mouth is essential to our business," says Lazar. "We wanted to create more opportunities for our business by building more personal vendor relationships within our community. We could go out there and pound the pavement, or we could bring everyone under one roof."

The group invited industry peers, event planners and vendors to showcase their services and products. While there, invitees experienced firsthand Dave & Busters' trendy, unstuffy atmosphere. "Instead of a pushy sell-sell atmosphere, everyone's attitude was, 'How can my business help yours, and how can you help me?'" says Lazar.

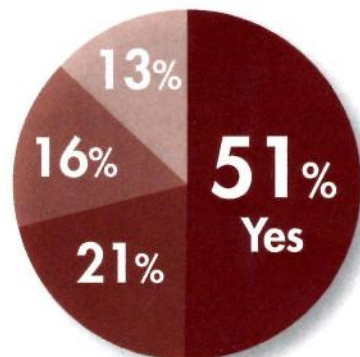
The event was a win-win for everyone, and reviews from the three dozen attendees were positive — and eager for the next event. "Network and Nosh" merged a social setting with a networking and teambuilding event. Dave & Busters was the sponsor, providing room, food and teambuilding exercise, and Everything Events made a little money. More importantly though, Lazar and her partner forged new relationships with vendors and cemented old ones.

Another example is "Martinis and Manicures," a sponsored event Lazar created for a restaurant and spa on a Tuesday night. The social event created more revenue on an evening when neither was traditionally busy.

The key, according to Lazar, has been the willingness to work outside her comfort zone and negotiate. "Social events don't have to be limited to weddings or bar mitzvahs," she says. "I'm always willing to get my hands on any type of event. Planners of the future must stretch their skills and imagination, or they won't survive."

## Is the Social Event Market Hot?

- Yes, I am already doing more work in the social market.
- I am considering doing more work in the social market.
- Yes, I believe it's a promising market, although I'm not currently pursuing it.
- No, I do not see social events as an opportunity for my business.



Source: event-solutions.com Poll