

Night Vision

Summer picnics don't have to be sunny. More companies are holding their outings in the evening.

TO MOST PEOPLE'S MINDS, the summer company outing involves a barbecue of some sort, perhaps a friendly game of softball between colleagues, and—with any luck—a sunny day. But it doesn't have to be that way. Instead, picture an early-evening outdoor cocktail hour followed by dinner on a weekday in August, or a family picnic that kicks off at 5 p.m. on a summer Saturday. More and more companies are hosting their annual staff get-togethers during evening hours.

"Summer 2006 was the first time we tried an evening picnic, and I have to say it turned out better than imagined," says Stacey J. Milch, senior human resources coordinator in the Chicago office of engineering firm Thornton Tomasetti. "You're not in the heat of high noon. It's the perfect time." That year's location was the University of Illinois's Chicago campus; the event was produced by Windy City Fieldhouse, a teambuilding and entertainment company. "Our employees loved it so much that they insisted we do it again this past summer, even though we usually don't do the same thing two years in a row."

While somewhat counterintuitive to the stereotype of this seasonal tradition, the evening summer corporate event—often with the same slate of activities as its daytime predecessors—is a trend that's gaining steam. Executives and vendors at venues say these nighttime events are increasing year after year. "Three years ago we did two evening picnics, last year we did about eight, and I expect that number to double this year," says Murrel Karsh, president of Windy City Fieldhouse. "Every client that did it last year has re-upped. They have grown to love it."

As Karsh explains, one of the most compelling arguments for an evening gathering is increased attendance, across all demographics. "The 20- to 30-year-olds are always tough to get to a daytime picnic," he says. "By doing an evening picnic, you're saying, 'Come have dinner with us, then go out.'

You're falling right in with their schedule." Similarly, an evening picnic for employees with young children is less likely to conflict with daytime activities like soccer practice and playdates.

"We used to do a picnic on a Saturday, and more and more families couldn't do it," says Julie Bohl, director of corporate relations at White Plains, New York-based health and beauty company Combe Incorporated. Then Combe formed an employee committee to answer the question "What would get you to a picnic?" The answer: Hold it on a weekday evening.

In 2001, Combe's event became an evening outing at Playland, an amusement park in Rye, New York, which raised employee attendance to 74 percent, from 31 percent the previous year. Now an annual tradition, the company's event boasts an 80 percent participation rate and includes dinner under a pavilion from 5 to 7 p.m., with guests roaming the park afterward.

Playland marketing manager Ken Puccia, who has overseen corporate bookings there for 20 years, says, "[The number of evening events] has definitely built up. We had a handful in the mid-'80s. They were few and far between on a weekday, let alone in the evening. [Since then] it's quadrupled."

Alcon Laboratories, an eye-care company in Irvine, California, has had success with nighttime outings since trying one in 1997. "We said, 'Let's try something different,'" says accounts payable supervisor Sherry Duncan, who enlisted James Events Productions, which specializes in corporate picnics and owns private locations in Southern California. "We had a DJ, rides, go-karts, softball,

volleyball, basketball, boats, and a putting green." Now the company chooses a day or evening time slot for its 1,100 employees based on the venue, which usually changes from year to year.

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The Toronto Botanical Garden is experiencing a rise in evening company outings.

It's not only family-friendly outings taking place in the evening. "I have noted a trend toward moving summer employee-appreciation events from afternoons to evenings," says Kristin Campbell, the Toronto Botanical Garden's facility sales supervisor. Campbell says the city's law firms and financial companies are particularly fond of evening events. "[So far this year] we have confirmed about 12 ... which is an increase from 2007, and an even greater increase from 2006, when we only hosted about four such events."

Lindsey Ash, director of human resources at the Toronto division of advertising giant Publicis, made the switch to an evening event last summer. "Over the years, we would have an afternoon picnic where we'd go play softball, or we'd go on a boat," Ash says. "We found that people go at three and they leave by five." So last July, the company hosted a tented "Havana Nights" theme party for 220 employees in Toronto's distillery district, with a Cuban band and mojitos. "It was a huge success. We had more turnout than expected. People felt it was a nice, special evening for them."

Across town at Toronto's lakeside megaplex Polson Pier, evening summer events are on the rise as well, according to Mirela Davis, the venue's director of corporate and group services. "Thursday night is typically booked solid," she says, counting investment and insurance firms among the clients who have used the 23-acre complex for summer evening activities ranging from cocktail parties to volleyball tournaments to rock climbing. "It's a different atmosphere at night. You dim the lights and it becomes more relaxing," she says.

While Karsh of the Windy City Fieldhouse acknowledges that an evening event may not involve as many water-related activities, he says that's pretty much where the limitations end. "There's nothing you can do in the day that you can't do at night," he says. Plus, Karsh notes, "You tend to not have bees." —Mimi O'Connor