

TAMPA BAY
BUSINESS
30th ANNIVERSARY
JOURNAL

Est. 1981

JUNE 24, 2011

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**TAMPA BAY
BUSINESS JOURNAL**

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Event planners get creative in competitive market

BY MARGARET CASHILL
STAFF WRITER

ST. PETERSBURG — From coordinating media appearances to finalizing the guest list, staff of the Children's Dream Fund is almost ready for "Rays on the Runway" on June 29.

With support from Tampa Bay Rays players and Rays wives, the cocktail hour and fashion show are expected to draw 400 guests to the Tampa Museum of Art.

Executive Director Cynthia Lake said since the economic downturn, event holders have had to learn to be creative, both in terms of stretching a dollar and coming up with different kinds of events.

"Some events have a lifespan. How many can you attend?" Lake said. "People are trying to find events that haven't been done over and over."

STRETCHING THE DOLLAR

While the Children's Dream Fund has an event coordinator on staff, many companies outsource the work to event planners. In addition to corporate events such as nonprofit fundraisers and company meetings, event planners handle social events like weddings and bar and bat mitzvahs.

While many in the industry anticipate a rush of work from the Republican National Convention in 2012, in the meantime they must compete for business in an increasingly competitive marketplace.

The sparkling, large-scale galas so common a few years ago have been scaled down, said Brooke Palmer, owner of event and wedding planning company RSBP Events.

"The bottom line has become more important in terms of every event I've done — weddings, corporate and charity," Palmer said.

Even as events become less lavish and fewer in number, new companies continue to join the Tampa Bay market, showing the industry still has room to grow.

One example is Orlando event and catering company Puff 'n Stuff, which entered Tampa Bay in 2010 as caterer at TPepin's Hospitality Centre in Tampa. Puff 'n Stuff in early 2011 acquired Catering by Design and by March was operating out of South Tampa offices.

The company now has five full-time and about 50 part-time employees in Tampa, in addition to about 30 full-time and more than 200 part-time employees in Orlando.

A numbers-based analysis and the perception of a receptive market led the company to make the move, said Marketing



KATHLEEN CABBLE

Puff 'n Stuff's Gerry Malynowsky, executive chef, Kasia Lavigne and Leonard Newton, sous chefs, in the kitchen at TPepin's Hospitality Centre.

Manager Erin Watson. Much of the company's business comes through "relationship marketing," Watson said.

RELATIONSHIP-BASED BUSINESS

The event planning industry relies heavily on referrals, said Kim Baker, a senior event planner at Tech Data and president of the Tampa Bay Chapter of the National Association of Catering Executives.

While NACE is primarily a catering organization, its 160 local company members include hotels, florists, photographers, tent rental companies and other vendors. The chapter meets once a month for educational programs, speakers, or mixers and social events.

Networking, advertising and getting to know people all are important to building business, Baker said. Being included on hotel and venue vendor lists, as well as event-based websites like WeddingWire, also help referrals.

Working with vendors is a large part of an event planner's job, said Valerie DiVecchio, founder and president of Events by Divine Creations Inc. in Tampa, whose business consists in equal parts of social and corporate events. Working on clients' behalf, she will check vendors' availability and pricing, facilitate interviews and coordinate contracts.

DiVecchio is careful about referring vendors, she said. She relies on those with whom she has worked with before or those she has met.

Planner draws a crowd

Event planning may seem like a natural career path for brides and grooms who've planned their own weddings, but it's not as easy as it looks.

The advice of Bryan Rafanelli, an event planner whose resume includes Chelsea Clinton's wedding and inauguration events for President Obama, is to develop a business plan and adhere to it.

"You have to think it through, understand it's a service business, understand how much time it takes," Rafanelli, owner of Rafanelli Events based in Boston and Palm Beach, told *TBBJ*.

Nearly 120 members of the Tampa Bay event planning industry gathered June 14 at URBANcoast, an invitation and event design studio in Belleair Bluffs, to hear remarks from Rafanelli and take part in a Q&A session.

While Rafanelli's events are often large-scale, the principals of design and having a streamlined operational plan apply to any event regardless of its size and budget, said Soosie Lazenby, owner and founder of URBANcoast.

— Margaret Cashill

"When I refer a vendor, my reputation is on the line," she said.

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