



Sailing past the pack

Creative and unique events to entertain clients and leave a lasting impression may give law firms the leading edge in the current economic crisis, writes **Sarah Sharples**.

Many law firms have tightened their purse strings in response to the downturn, with companies who provide corporate entertainment noticing reduced demand for their services. However, innovative entertainment activities may help a law firm stand out from the pack. "It's all very hands on, everyone is creating their own chocolate and they do get to keep them and take them home. It's a gift – especially if the company is paying.

David Segal, executive director of boutique consultancy firm Front Row Events, advises organisations on how to spend their budget to achieve core marketing objectives. He says companies are currently budget conscious and are looking to host events that are small and intimate, rather than spending hundreds of dollars on entertainment.

"Everyone still needs to entertain [but] people are being a bit more careful about where they spend their money – a bit more strategic," he says.

"Each firm is looking for that edge that's going to give them something a bit more unique, something outside the square, something that differentiates them from other law firms."



Traditionally, client entertainment has involved activities such as golfing, attending sporting matches like rugby, as well as fine dining in restaurants. However, there are alternatives which may forge stronger bonds and leave the client with a memorable experience.

Leona Lewis, managing director of the Cheeky Food Group, offers a corporate entertainment cooking party and says that typically taking clients to a restaurant prevents people from genuinely talking.

“Conversation can actually be quite forced – especially if you don’t know [the clients] particularly well and it’s probably a restaurant that they’ve been to before, [so] there’s nothing new about it and they’ve probably been taken there by a competitor,” she says.

Success can lie in offering something different says Lewis, such as the Cheeky interactive cooking event where participants are given a quick demonstration by a chef and then go on to cook the dish together.

“I think the great thing about it is they actually get to create something together, which, in our instance, is all about creating a really great meal – a five-star restaurant meal to eat and enjoy together, so you get that sense of camaraderie of having achieved something,” she says.

“The second thing is that you’re in an

environment where you are genuinely chatting and talking and a level of trust develops when you’re connecting.”

Principal of Sydney Private Sailing Annie Bennett, whose husband Martin Bennett is a partner at law firm Minter Ellison, has used her boat to entertain clients and agrees that restaurants can impede client interaction.

“If you go out to a restaurant, most clients have been to Aria and they have been to Bilson’s [restaurant] and they’ve been to all the well-known restaurants and then once you arrive there you just spend the whole lunch with the person that you’re sitting next to,” she says.

“[Sailing’s] not just about eating or drinking, you’re actually experiencing as well, and you’re moving around, which makes it better for talking to different people. [Also with] conversations which you don’t want overheard in a restaurant, you’ve got total privacy on a boat because no one is listening. I think it’s just more memorable, a lot more of a treat.”

David Krynski, manager of Victorian Yacht Charters, says his company offers a range of activities which encourage relationship-building and teamwork. Events include cruises, a half-day regatta and a treasure hunt, where teams sail competitively against each other, solve clues and win prizes.



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Sweetening relationships:
a chocolate workshop

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“We have found that sailing offers a unique environment where participants work together towards common goals. It also offers clients an opportunity to bond with the hosts in a non-threatening, relaxed [environment]. However, it is a captive environment. They can’t leave unless they swim back to shore,” he says.

Meanwhile, Clint Gurney, owner and director of Perth-based company Chocolate Attraction, is swamped with work due to his innovative mobile entertaining service.

He can bring a mobile cocktail bar to a company’s office and teach clients how to make drinks with common equipment and ingredients at home. The “wow factor” offered, though, is the chocolate workshops, where participants make their own handmade treats.

“It’s all very hands-on, everyone is creating their own chocolate and they do get to keep them and take them home. It’s a gift – especially if the company is paying,” he says.

“It’s a gift ... as far as they get their chocolates but it’s also a gift because it’s something that they can do and repeat the process at home, so they’ve actually learnt something for the day.”

Like Gurney, ThirtyFifty, a wine-tasting company operating in Sydney, Melbourne,

Brisbane and Perth, is also using innovative ideas to entertain clients. Christopher Scott, director of ThirtyFifty, says the company has run structured wine-tasting characterised by company themes.

“The themes can be in line with company’s core values, if they want to go down that route. For example, I’ve done tastings where their values are things like value for money, so we can do tastings about value for money [by] comparing expensive wines with cheap wines, which is quite good,” he says.

The value of client entertainment cannot be lost in the current economic climate, according to Lewis.

“Number one you want to show that you’re a business who is interested in your client because everyone else is going to be knocking on doors, so you need to strengthen any existing relationships you have before you go off looking for other business,” she says.

“When times are a little bit tougher, anything that is going to develop that relationship, where [clients] develop more trust in you, and you’re showing a genuine concern for their business, is going to mean protecting existing business – and also give you a chance of creating more.”



The cost of client entertaining

- Sydney Private Sailing prices start from \$695 for seven people for a four-hour skippered yacht charter.
- Victorian Yacht Charters’ prices for the regatta race program are \$220 plus GST per person with a minimum of 14 guests. The treasure hunt is a three to four-hour activity priced at \$185 per person with a minimum group size of 14.
- Chocolate Attraction’s prices for a chocolate workshop start from \$25 pp for 30 people. For a mobile cocktail bar, prices start from \$45 per person.
- Cheeky Food Group’s prices for a cooking party start from \$100 per person.
- ThirtyFifty’s prices for wine tastings start from \$45 per person.
- Front Row events works on a management fee of 15 per cent for clients who spend \$500,000 and 12.5 per cent for clients who spend over \$500,000. Trade discounts it has in place with suppliers are passed on, says Segal, meaning the service is provided at a minimal cost.