

MONDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2012

# DAILY REPORT

A SMART READ FOR SMART READERS

An ALM Publication

## Tuxedos or table saws

WHETHER PHILANTHROPIC OR POSH, Atlanta firms find their celebration niches

**MARY WELCH**

Special to the Daily Report

R. CLAY MILLING remembers the glory days of law firm holiday parties. “We had a big black tie event at a county club and we invited our families, clients, suppliers,” he says.

“We’d have 300 people and a large budget. It was quite a gathering. All the firms did it. And then the economy tanked. It just didn’t feel right.”

Milling, a partner with Henry Spiegel Milling, isn’t alone. In the not-too-distant past, an invitation to a law firm holiday party was a ticket to a pricey venue where men in tuxedos and women in sequined dresses would dance, dine on fabulous food, enjoy entertainment and toast each other to the good fortune that would never end.

But then it did.

In today’s more restrained economic climate, the decision to have—or not—a holiday party is not easy. It has become a reflection of the firm’s image, a human resource tool for firm



COURTESY OF HENRY SPIEGEL MILLING

**Henry Spiegel Milling** staff pose at a Habitat for Humanity house they built. About five years ago, the firm replaced its annual party with a new holiday tradition of service.

morale and a gauge of a firm’s good taste and social conscience rather than simply a social soirée.

Henry Spiegel Milling changed its holiday tradition about five years ago. It now co-sponsors a Habitat for Humanity house and on the last day of the build, those who want to can

participate. They also sponsor that day’s barbecue lunch.

“We like to say we’ve turned in our bow ties for a hammer. It’s our way of giving back and getting involved. We like being there on the last day because that’s when the keys are presented to the owner,” Milling says.



R. Clay Milling

The first year about a dozen employees showed up; now it's in the 30- to 40-person range, he says. "The reaction has been tremendous," he says. "It's a full day of giving back and it's consistent with our values and of being plaintiffs' lawyers—helping those who need help."

Giving back is the new normal for the holiday season. Firms are looking for ways to spread the holiday cheer more to the less fortunate than perhaps to clients and staff.

David Rubinger, president of Rubinger Communications Solutions, recommends firms consider a more intimate party environment that emphasizes the client relationship over a showy bash.

### Emphasize the relationship

"For example, perhaps the chair of a particular practice group would organize a client dinner at one of the partner's homes or in a private dining room for that group's clients. On top of that, the firm as a whole would make a charitable contribution in that client's honor," he says. "By emphasizing the relationship, the firm accomplishes several goals."

It allows clients within the same business or discipline to network with each other thanks to the firm's nice dinner party. It allows the attorneys within the practice group to introduce other attorneys that clients may not know. It shows that the firm is not

going over the top on its expenses. And the donation in the client's honor shows the firm's thoughtfulness of "giving back" during tough times.

Many firms seem to be on the same page.

Burr & Forman considered ending its annual holiday party. "We thought long and hard about cutting out the party when the economy went bad. We decided not to," says Erich N. Durlacher, managing partner of the Atlanta office. "We find it builds a cohesiveness across the firm. We'll get 220 to 240 to come. It's just an internal party; it's a way to put names with faces."

But there is a twist. The attorneys found the holiday social and work season was too crowded, so the firm celebrates after the holidays with a "meaningful holiday party in January," says Durlacher. In addition, clients no longer receive gifts. "We

started getting requests from clients saying that it wasn't the right economic atmosphere to be spending on gifts and some saw it as currying favor."

Instead the firm makes "impact" donations to charities in the names of clients and the firm. The decision for charity recipients is decided by a committee based on clients' requests, how involved the client or a firm's attorney is with the charity and if it is a charity the firm might want to get involved with in the future. Some of the charities have included Camp Sunshine and the Winshape Cancer Center.

"We're seeing a huge benefit in giving to charities," Durlacher says. "It's our goal to give back; we're involving our clients and donating in their names as well as the firm's. It shows our hearts are in the right place. We're not looking for any benefit or reward; it's the right thing to do."

A way to get together



COURTESY OF HENRY SPIEGEL MILLING

**On the last day of construction,** all HSM employees who want to may help build. The firm also on that day sponsors a barbecue luncheon, pictured above.





COURTESY OF HENRY SPIEGEL MILLING

**The first year that HSM staff** co-sponsored a Habitat house about a dozen employees showed up, says Clay Milling. Participation is now in the 30- to 40-volunteer range.

Arnall Golden Gregory traditionally holds a holiday party for attorneys and staff, but its execution varies. Sometimes it's a firm-only event during the week, sometimes a weekend gathering with families. "We look at the holiday party as a way to get together with the people who work hard and acknowledge it in front of everyone and their families," says Bob Greenage, director of human resources.

Baker Donelson usually has a luncheon at 103 West and then closes up for the day, says Linda Klein, managing shareholder in the Atlanta office. "It's really what the staff prefers," she says.

The firm also does not send gifts to clients. "Although I'm sure some of the individual attorneys may do so, but sometimes it's not allowed because attorneys may be viewed

as a vendor and it becomes an ethics issue."

At Womble Carlyle Sandridge & Rice, the firm celebrates winter holidays by working with an Adopt-A-Child gift drive. Although it was started 14 years ago, the excitement hasn't waned, says Michael Sullivan, managing partner of the Atlanta office. "It creates a real buzz around the office for weeks," he says. "Everyone shares gift ideas or talks about how interesting this child is or how much the child has accomplished. You can't tell sometimes if they're talking about their own children or the one they've connect with through the project."

The litigation firm partners with the Atlanta Children's Coalition, which services 1,200 children annually, to provide toys and clothes from each child's "wish" and "needs" list. Last year the firm's attorneys and

staff adopted 26 children and plan to increase it this year. So far, Sullivan estimates the firm has sponsored more than 200 children.

### Toning it down

Hotels also are feeling the economic pitch of toned-down corporate parties and have found the spirit of giving as well. "I remember those days of big flashy holiday parties," says Jennifer Phillips, director of sales and marketing for W Atlanta Downtown. "I miss those days. But today companies don't want to be perceived as being too extravagant. There's a stigma to it."

Today's holiday parties are more low-key, intimate affairs consisting of maybe a lunch or a cocktail reception



Bob Greenage

but without a dinner or entertainment, she says.



Linda Klein

In keeping with the holiday spirit and the new corporate dedication to charity, the W Atlanta Downtown offers a way to give back before the party. "We created a way to give back and incorporate it into your holiday party," she says. The hotel

has partnered with the Atlanta Day Shelter. Before the party, attendees can help make fleece blankets, fill plastic bags with snacks and make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. "It's a nice way to kick off a party. Not

only are you helping a child but you're feeling happy and in the party spirit," Phillips says.

Family law boutique Warner, Bates, McGough & McGinnis hosts a small informal gathering for employees with cocktails and hors d'oeuvres. They also send gifts to clients.

"I used to send bottles of champagne to clients and I still think that it's a good marketing idea," says Jim McGinnis, partner. "But I found that anyone rarely acknowledged it. It was like putting a message in a bottle and floating it down the river. It was good for business and the return was much greater than the expense, but this year we're doing something a little different."

The firm is sending food baskets to clients for Thanksgiving. "It's a little different and won't get lost in all the



COURTESY OF WOMBLE CARLYLE

**Womble Carlyle** employees sort toy bags for Atlanta Children's Coalition volunteers. From left: Susan Weaver, Colleen Dunne, Cessie Wells and Kay Newman.

other gift baskets that clients receive in December. I think it'll be good," McGinnis says. "And, by the way,

I'm getting a lot of notes saying that instead of me receiving a gift, people are making a donation in my name or the firm's name to a charity, which also is nice."

As for holiday parties, McGinnis likes the new smaller gathering.

"I think those big parties where you had a massive amount of people—clients, suppliers, friends of the firm, employees, spouses—and spent massive amounts of money are a thing of the past," he says.

Years ago, his firm held

its holiday party at a country club "where everyone got dressed up and the firm spent a lot, a lot of money and [it] took a lot of work to get everything ready. It was more trouble than it was worth," he says.

He added: "And do you know what? I think no one had a good time." DR



COURTESY OF WOMBLE CARLYLE

**Leandre Anthony and Emily Costarides** of Womble Carlyle get into the season of giving. Last year the firm's lawyers and staff adopted 26 children and they plan to increase that number this year.