

[Home](#) > [Archives](#) > [Distant Archives](#)

## It's a tougher sell for the big boat

By CAROL HOPKINS

6/12/2003

**June 12, 2003**

**When it comes to entertaining with clients in a sagging economy, lavish is out, and simple but focused is in, say area company managers. The practice trickles down to sporting venues, caterers, hotels, upscale restaurants, golf courses - industries that provide the services to clients.**

"We have noticed a 'tightening of the belt' when it comes to larger client entertainment, dinners and meetings," said Mikki Gardner, owner/chef of Troy-based Mikki's Gourmet Catering, noting that companies have cut back on employee parties.

"There was a time when they asked, 'What else can we buy?' " said Norm Silk, one of the owners of the Birmingham-based florist shop, Blossoms. "Events were very lavishly decorated, with linens and the finest food. But now it's not the sky's the limit anymore."

Companies still see clients, although many were reluctant to divulge specifics. Some said they've drastically cut networking costs and pointed out that their hands are tied by corporate dictates forbidding fraternizing with suppliers or contractors.

Golf is still a popular client relationship builder, said Gary Skog, corporate marketing officer with Southfield-based HarleyEllis Corp., a 300-person architectural engineering firm.

Skog has done the math and found the company gets its money's worth with golf outings.

"Last year, a full page magazine ad was \$17,000, which was almost a full year of golf outings with clients," he said.

"We do entertain clients at the opera, sports events, golf outings, high midrange lunches and dinners," adding, the company doesn't dine out at upscale restaurants like Tribute or The Lark any more. And concerts aren't high on lists.

"We dropped symphony tickets because it was hard placing them with clients," he said. "There are a lot of people who don't enjoy it."

Plante & Moran has altered its focus in seeking out new clients. "We have never been a company to go out and buy concert tickets," said Bill Bufe, human

resource director at the Southfield office of the Michigan- and Ohio-based accounting and consulting firm. "Our efforts now are on a real tailoring on a specific industry. We believe it's working, despite the recessionary economy."

Troy Chamber of Commerce president Michele Hodges acknowledges tight budgets have even made the chamber more cognizant of its own entertainment budget.

"At a meeting now, we'll serve a pastry and continental breakfast rather than three courses," she said. "We're still feeding them, but we work to find a balance between reasonable and lavish."

As a result of the squeeze, some service businesses have lowered their costs to bring companies in. Steve Rybicki, general manager of Infinity Yacht Charters, a 100-foot yacht that cruises the Detroit River, has lowered prices 10 to 15 percent this year for companies holding meetings on the yacht, but he admitted he is glad for wedding business to boost rentals.

"Some companies are saying they don't want the most expensive menu because it makes it easier to get approvals," Rybicki said. "Then some say, we want to add the shrimp or different entertainment than last year. It's so hard to gauge this year."

One local golf club is finding companies agreeing to double up on golf outings as a way to cut costs.

"We're seeing more of it," said Frank Maple, club manager at Indianwood Golf and Country Club in Lake Orion. Because the club has two separate courses, two companies can have their events on the same day and all attend one lunch buffet together.

Experts advise companies to keep spending on client relations.

"The three-beer dinner is long gone," noted Michael Bernacchi, University of Detroit-Mercy professor of marketing. "But the one coffee or Coke messaging meal is still in. Companies have to meet with clients. You have to do relationship marketing. It's the call of the day."

*©The Daily Oakland Press 2004*

[Search again](#)

---

[Feedback](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Place A Classified Ad](#) | Copyright © 2004 The Oakland Press, All Rights Reserved |