

SUMMER FARE

The New Power Picnics

After the beer and barbecue, it's time to brainstorm by the pool

BY ELLEN GAMERMAN

WHEN EMPLOYEES of 5W Public Relations gathered for their company picnic this week, they chowed down on grilled hamburgers and tossed back cold drinks. There was something extra on the menu, too: a PowerPoint presentation.

"Every dollar I spend has to be maximized for company growth," says CEO Ronn Torossian, who came up with the idea for a working pool party this spring. "They can eat their potato salad and drink their beer while they listen to me."

As corporate excesses continue to come under the microscope, one of the business world's most enduring traditions—the company picnic—is increasingly doing double duty. Along with the burgers and sack races, the agenda now includes...an agenda: discussions of corporate strategy, brainstorming sessions and group problem-solving drills.

Managers say this change is necessary. With businesses scattered around the globe, companies need to make the most of the time when employees are gathered in one place. And given that outings are not cheap, every dollar has to count.

At Nutrition 21, a nutritional-products company in Purchase, N.Y., golf and tennis also served as networking opportunities with vendors. Workers at Mack Molding, which makes custom-injection plastic molding, won't visit a local amusement park as they did last year; instead they'll give their families guided tours of the factory floor in Inman, S.C. Elsewhere, office picnics are including everything from employee training to client development.

As PowerPoint presentations replace softball, the guest lists are changing. Business partners, vendors and potential customers are being invited and families are getting nixed. Marty Greenstein, CEO of the Event Pros Group in Ronkonkoma, N.Y., whose license plate reads MRPICNIC, says there are now so few children at the events that his company's 800 animal and clown costumes spend most of the summer in storage. "The Pierrots and Harlequins aren't getting a lot of action," he says.

Last year, Office Depot's picnic included carnival games, a softball tournament and hot dogs and hamburgers for about 1,000 employees and their spouses and kids. This summer, top executives at the Delray Beach, Fla., headquarters of-



What's on the Menu

COMPANY	SUMMER EVENT	COMMENT
Acuity	Picnic at the insurance company's headquarters in Sheboygan, Wis.	More than 600 staffers and their families chowed down on bratwurst, hamburgers, steak, German potato salad and Mai Tais. Between bites: a petting zoo, pony rides and paint-gun games.
FedEx	Barbecue for about 2,200 at a minigolf course in Memphis	Local BBQ purveyor Corky's provided pork shoulder (cooked in a pit with hickory logs for 22 hours), BBQ chicken, hotdogs, spaghetti, beans, cole slaw, banana pudding and chocolate fudge brownies.
FreshDirect	Picnic on a "beach" with trucked-in sand in Queens, N.Y.	The grocery-delivery service offered supplies from its own shelves: freshly ground hamburgers, chicken and apple sausage, veggie burgers, cherry pie, watermelon, popcorn and pink cotton candy.
GameStop	A midday cookout for staff at the videogame company	About 1,500 gathered in shifts at the headquarters in Grapevine, Tex., for a feast that included buffalo burgers from a Texas-raised herd and traditional burgers and pizza for more timid diners.
Microsoft	Two-day picnic for 30,000 at an outdoor facility near Seattle	Bill Gates, who was on vacation, missed the picnic and its 12,600 pounds of ribs, 10,700 pounds of hamburger and Halal, Kosher and vegetarian options—plus roving clowns.
Nicholas & Associates	Pig roast in the general contractor's parking lot in Mount Prospect, Ill.	A 125-pound Iowa pig was roasted on a spit for about 170 staff and families. There was no apple in the pig's mouth—that "turns some people off," says Tasty Catering President Tom Walter.

ferred employee-only events, including one where bosses served the staff icy treats. "I had a frappuccino and a strawberry-banana smoothie," says senior production manager Phil Tucciarone, "and continued my work day."

Daisy Vanderlinde, Office Depot's executive vice president for human resources, says employee-only options do a better job humanizing bosses for staffers. "They really enjoy seeing the leadership serving ice cream," she says. The company is also offering tickets to family-

friendly events like a baseball game through a lottery system.

Firms that organize corporate events report a shift toward adding work to what was once simply a celebration. Chicago's Windy City Fieldhouse, which hosts company picnics, has seen a 20% increase in employee outings with a work dimension over the past year. "A client wants to have a summer event, but they always say, 'We usually have two hours of meetings beforehand,'" says President Murrel Karsh.

One reason for the pressure to make

BBQ Brisket (Google) ▶

Tasty Catering, based in Elk Grove Village, Ill., served this 18-hour beef brisket at this summer's picnic for employees in Google's Chicago office.

Yield: 20 servings

- 8 cups Sweet Baby Ray's BBQ Sauce or another molasses-based smoky barbecue sauce
- ½ cup garlic powder
- ¼ cup coarsely ground black pepper
- ½ cup Cajun seasoning
- 6 to 8 pounds beef brisket, trimmed

- Preheat oven to 240 degrees.
- Combine the first four ingredients to make the sauce. Reserve 1 cup of sauce. Immerse the brisket completely in the sauce, and rub vigorously.
- Transfer brisket to a sheet pan lined with parchment. Place brisket in oven and cook for 18 hours, or until the meat registers 175 degrees on a meat thermometer. Remove from oven and let cool.
- Slice brisket ¼-inch-thick and transfer to a 12 x 10-inch disposable foil pan. Top meat with reserved sauce and cover with aluminum foil.
- Freeze for two or three days. (Freezing and thawing tenderizes the meat.)
- Remove from the freezer and thaw in the refrigerator for two days.
- Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Uncover brisket and warm for 40 minutes.



Ranch Beans (Anheuser-Busch)

At its recent beach picnic in a public park, the San Diego County wholesaler/distributor for Anheuser-Busch served more than 400 of its staffers and their families barbecue, drinks—including their own beer, hatch—as well as a local specialty: Keith's Addictive Ranch Beans, a twist on traditional baked beans prepared by Picnic People, a San Diego special-event and catering company.

Yield: 4 to 6 servings

- 1½ pounds canned pinto beans
- ½ yellow onion, chopped
- 6 ounces barbecued meat, chopped
- ½ tablespoon onion powder
- ½ tablespoon garlic powder
- ½ tablespoon Lawry's Seasoning
- 1 teaspoon coarsely ground black pepper
- 1 teaspoon chili powder

- Sauté onions on high heat for 2 to 3 minutes or until translucent.
- Reduce heat to low-medium. Add the meat and beans and cook until well heated, about 8 to 10 minutes.
- While the beans and meat cook, blend the spices together.
- Add spice blend to the beans and meat mixture, and stir in well. Serve.

outings more productive: Even a modest picnic can cost several thousand dollars. Food ranges from \$15 to \$30 a person; for 500 people, that adds up to \$7,500 to \$15,000—and that's without wandering clowns and pony rides. Alaska Airlines spent upwards of \$75,000 for food for more than 3,000 people, according to a spokeswoman.

And it's not just the bills for food and facilities. With more employees in far-flung offices or working from home, travel costs are going up. A portion of the \$15,000 picnic tab racked up by 5W Public Relations, based in New York, came from flying in 11 staffers from the Los Angeles office for the picnic in East Hampton, N.Y.

DeVry Inc., a higher-education company near Chicago, spent an additional \$1,500 this summer to spice up its employee outing with a "core values" awards ceremony. Staffers gathered near the polar bear grotto at the Brookfield Zoo while

some of their colleagues received \$50 gift certificates. DeVry President and Chief Operating Officer Daniel Hamburger says the motivational awards are worth it, even if they bumped the picnic price tag up to \$20,000. "It's a productivity driver," he says. "It's about work."

Power picnics often include networking. This year the Cumming-Forsyth County Chamber of Commerce in Georgia decided to ditch its old Family Fun-Fest for employees and members; instead it's joining in a corporate 5K run/walk in Atlanta. Spokeswoman Kris Carroll says she hopes the staff will meet Atlanta real-estate executives who could bring new development to the county. She says she expects to be "sweaty and disheveled" for her quasi-business outing, but everybody else will be, too.

Time pressures are also behind some working picnics. At a recent picnic for

300 staffers from the Kennedy Center, a nonprofit for people with disabilities based in Trumbull, Conn., a third of the employees gave up a chance to play light-hearted team-building games—think raw eggs and marshmallows—and chose instead to take open-book tests to recertify their credentials in subjects like crisis prevention. "I'd love to say it's a free day," says Vice President of Human Resources Lynn Pellegrino, "but the reality is, we needed to get more training done."

Some picnic purists still defend the summer outing, with all its foibles. Lee Morgan, president of Farr Air Pollution Control, a dust-collection system manufacturer in Jonesboro, Ark., says his staff of 65 blew off steam throwing whipped-cream pies at his head and making him sing "Like a Virgin" in the karaoke contest. The verdict: "Everybody says it's the best picnic we've ever had."