

EXTREME PARTY MAKEOVER

By, Sheryl Bindelglass

IAAPA WEBINAR MARCH 2, 2010 Q & A FOLLOW UP

Thanks to everyone who participated in the IAAPA webinar “Extreme Makeover Party Edition” on March 2, 2010.

The attendance and enthusiasm for this subject and the webinar was great. Ben and I want to thank everyone for all of the feedback, and positive reviews. While we covered lots of material, and had a great question and answer session, there were still dozens of questions that we simply could not address in the time allowed and that’s why we put together this Q&A. There were over 40 questions asked during the webinar, and we combined many to create our Follow Up Top 30.

Q: What is the future of birthday parties? Is there an up and coming trend?

A Kids will continue to have birthday’s and parents will look for different places to host the parties; a.) Trends will be many more businesses going into the party business, there are now craft stores, cooking schools, food markets, even home improvement centers creating party packages for kids; and b.) Another trend in many parts of the country is to host very high-end parties – new experience- like events that include fewer kids.

Q: What is the average cost you charge for Goody Bags for Birthdays?

A: Consensus at the last few seminars that I presented was an average of \$2.50. Depending on the items you put into your goody bags and the market area that you serve it is not uncommon to have one center charge only two dollars, yet another center offering the same goody bag, and charge three dollars. I believe that it is important to have the “perceived value” of a goody bag, appear high, and always offer a bounce back coupon inside your goody bag. What parent can turn down a goody bag for three dollars, if you have candy, prizes, and a coupon (with a value of five dollars) for a free activity? The “value” of that \$3.00 goodie bag far exceeds its cost.

Q: And what about the internet as a marketing tool?

A: Using the internet as a tool to market your parties is a great idea; make sure that the look, feel and copy compliment your onsite birthday party marketing plan.

Q: Do you think an inflatable party longer than 2 hours is too long?

A: I would recommend that inflatable parties only last a maximum of 2 hours. There is not a lot of variety in the activity.

Q: How do you capture email addresses for children who are 16 years and younger?

A: Check with the national law, and then check to make sure that your state does not have different or greater restrictions. Reference:

<http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/pubs/business/ecommerce/bus61.shtm>

Q: Should parents be included in the party packages; should they be allowed into the facility for free? We are a roller skating rink.

A: Welcome parents to your facility. If you are asking whether to charge parents who attend the party – my experience suggests to only charge parents when they participate in paid / gated activity, or if they are partaking in food, or in unique situations, for example, you have a party that has small children and they need additional chaperones.

Q: Where is the main source for birthday customers? Is the source customers who casually visit the facility or customers who come via external marketing, school visits etc?

A: In the beginning years of our facility, our attendance numbers were not high, so we gained more parties from small ads in parent magazines, community events, kid fairs etc. As our facility became more established, we gained more parties from our customers, guest, visitors; this shift took place over the course of 3-4 years. By our fifth operating year a large percentage of the party business came from referrals, guest who attended a previous party or visited our location

Q: How do you inform guests or give them information about what to expect during the party when they arrive? Example: Food, laser tag, mini-golf and so on, because it's different for every party

A: Posting signage indicating the birthday child's name, along with the party package will help attendees locate the party. Having a set schedule for your parties, will help your staff know where to send a guest who may arrive late. If you have party rooms, posting a sign with the child's name, and activity schedule will assist guests in quickly locating your group. An easel or marquee also helps inform and direct party attendees. If you have theater style parties, a table tent with the party name and activity schedule will work. Staff Communication: having all of your staff especially the host/hostess have a walkie-talkie to communicate with your front desk, or party manager, will help you keep track of your party; and help keep the party on track.

Q: What about marketing for places that have an admission fee - like a water park...we do not have people 'wandering in'? They have already paid to get in here. How about website/internet party marketing ideas?

A: For attractions that have an admission fee, and are concerned that once they pay, they can still see marketing materials inside your park. Here are a few tips - signs inside the lockers, flyers in the bathrooms; messages on receipts; coupons stuffed in bags. Think of a party the same way you do when to promote a special event. Here are a few website party marketing ideas

- Have a contest page, enter to win a free birthday party; host a cross promotion with a radio station;
- Have a birthday club registration, where you collect the information and send out a flyer one month prior to their birthday, that they receive a special offer to get them to book their party at your location; make sure your packages are listed on the website with current prices; have great pictures of parties on your website ... that means not just a picture of your party room, or a picnic area; include action pictures of kids having fun, and Mom or Dad looking happy. Have samples of your flyer – brochure – invitation – thank you cards, all pictured on your website. Tell your customers that you “host the best parties”. Post quotes from kids and parents raving about your parties.

Q: Which is better, a flat rate for "up to 8 kids" or a per person rate?

A: Different areas prefer different pricing. A survey of your competitors will help you in answering this question; also, take a survey of the parents who visit your location; if you were a parent – what would your preference be?

Q: Is there any data on the success of online reservations?

A. Using my clients for example, most have moved to online reservations, and we are seeing an increase in the number of parties booked.

Q: What are theme/amusement parks offering for birthdays? Do they offer birthday events/goodies for groups (15+ people) only? Do they allow people to carry-in cakes? Do they provide a specific location for birthday celebrations?

A: Several smaller parks offer birthday packages that include food, and activities. When checking a few of the larger parks, they have a 10-person minimum, food and activities (generally a park pass). As for the cake question, I have not heard of any allowing cakes to be carried-in, but it is an individual location policy. Some locations have a party area.

Q: We try to keep the per person price low for everyone. We recently started a member program. I am unable to offer a discount to members. What would be a good compromise of something to offer to them? A free balloon bouquet? A discount on the extra items they can purchase?

A: You can offer a small balloon bouquet as a special extra for members. The idea of offering an extra discount on any extra items they purchase could be a “membership benefit” (as long as you have enough profit margin to offer the discount).

Q: Any thoughts about marketing private rentals to churches, business, etc?

A: There is an excellent chapter in *The Pros Guide to Marketing, as well as party marketing information in the **FUNDamentals of the Party Business** books. And here are a few tips from the books:*

- Donate a party for the organizations fundraiser.
- Trade an ad in the church or business publication in return for passes to your location.
- Create a guide to, “The best birthday parties” and offer it to parents of the organizations
- Dress your mascot up in a “Birthday T-Shirt” have them deliver a balloon bouquet to the business or organization leader.

Q: Anything new with respect to gifts to birthday kids?

A: My favorite is still a cool t-shirt. Here are a few more ideas - a magnet with your logo next to a picture of the birthday child from the party; a balloon with the child’s picture it; a special blinking birthday pin.

Q: Where do you get goody bags?

A: You can make your own goody bags with products from the vendors. Here is a partial list of vendors who provide goody bags: Sure Shot, Redemption Plus, Rhode Island Novelty, Fun Express, please refer to the IAAPA website (laapa.org) for a complete list of suppliers.

Q: How do you showcase a party display table when you are an outdoor facility? If you operate as an outdoor only facility that does not lend itself to display tables or display walls, how do you accomplish these things?

A: My location in New Jersey was outdoors, so I understand the challenges you face working outdoors. We used displays in the ticket booths, on nice weekend days we set-up a small party table outside. Recently, I found a “display cube” that you use to create a simple display inside the cube and it can be placed outside in a high traffic area. Also, wall marquees, like those used by movie theaters are another all-weather way to display party and promotional materials.

Q: We do not up-sell; we just offer one price that includes everything: admission, goody bags, decorate your own cupcakes, food and other stuff; b-day child is free... is this good or should we sell everything separate?

A: If when you created your packages you were able to comparison price the package separately, and include all the cost, you are likely ok. One friend just taught me after so many years, that they marked the price of the package up to include everything, and therefore, they are pre-selling a cake to everyone. Many locations find that in order to charge the correct amount for all the extras, they are pricing themselves out of the market. You will have to evaluate if you are charging enough and you have included all the items in your basic package you should be ok.

Q: Regarding “thank you cards” - are you referring to thank you cards sent from the FEC or from the birthday child?

A: Having Thank You cards online that your party parent/guest of honor can use as “their” Thank You card is a nice touch. I recommend also including a bounce back coupon on the back of the Thank You card. YES... you should always send a thank you card from the facility as well.

Q: How much time do you think there should be between parties for private party rooms?

A: 15 Minutes should work for cleanup and set-up for the next party. Scheduling extra “party runners” who will help set rooms is great during busy times. Keep in mind that every location is unique, if you have all of your supplies in the room, and the cabinet is stocked, it will make it much easier to turn the room over and get ready for the next party. If you are hosting themed parties, you may need additional time, depending on the amount of special / unique set-up you do for your party.

Q: What are some sources for Birthday wall graphics?

A: Local sign shops; student artist; partypeelz and readymade graphics. I suggest searching the web.

Q: What are some of the ways to get the word out that you are a party place?

A: One of best methods is donating a party for school and civic auctions

Q: What kind of events do schools ask for donations?

A: The schools will ask for donations during the year for Bingo nights, Tricky Trays, Silent Auctions, Chinese Auctions, Fashion shows etc.

Q: How do you find out about fundraising events?

A: If they have not found you, read your local paper, and when you find a fundraising night being hosted by a local organization, contact the person, and let them know you have a special donation for their event. You will them. Make sure you have them pick up the gift certificate at your facility, allowing you the opportunity to meet, and gather key information about them, and give them a quick tour of the facility. Ask the person to consider hosting their next event at your location

Q: How does Sheryl feel about "at home" party competition?

A: I have found that often after a parent hosts a party "at home" they cannot wait to book a party at a location that specializes in parties. After they realize how much work, and time they put into the "at home" party, they will discover that we are the party expert, and we can host a hassle free, fun easy party. You show up and we do all the work

Q: What is an ideal number of packages to offer?

A: This is a difficult question to answer, without knowing how many activities/attractions. It depends on the number of activities you have at your location. If you have an indoor facility that includes some rides, or if you are outdoors and you have three or four attractions, I would recommend at least a 3-tier package, offering the low, the medium and the high price points. That does not mean all locations need three. It depends on the number of attractions, revenue generators and space that you have to work with and that you can orchestrate through the layout properly.

Q: A party lasts 1-1/2 to 2 hrs, what is your opinion of providing about 45 minutes in the party room and then moving guests out into the facility, therefore freeing the room for other groups to use?

A: 45 minutes in the room and then 15 minutes to turn it over is absolutely fine if you are able to get all the activities in. Sometimes I think groups get stuck in the party room and party hosts are not trained to entertain the kids for 45 minutes, which actually takes away from a party. Moving the group along is fine provided you have a place for the leftovers, presents and personal belongings.

Q: What are the preliminary on-line booking aspects that you would recommend for getting started?

A: When you try to capture basic data online, you will likely have a hard copy of the reservation form and you should post most of those questions on line, in check box format. That way visitors to the website can check Party Package 1; and I would like this date and this time as my first choice. And when I say preliminary, it is not confirmed until the facility circles back and says yes that date / time are still available. So you want to capture the basic information and hold those tentative reservations so you can confirm it.

Q: Do you market through churches or businesses?

A: I say, "Market to any and everybody" ... could be the church's 10th anniversary and they are looking for a venue to hold this event. I believe market and promote at every opportunity. The best outcome is that those churches and businesses will want to partner with you and cross promote with you.

Q: If providing food and beverage is an issue, what do you suggest?

A: I guess from the question that they do not have food and beverage on site? At Congo River, a small miniature golf only, outdoor facility, we did not have any food source; we arranged to have pizza delivered for every party. We hosted about 200 parties per 125-day season and half-included food. It is a little bit tougher logistically, it takes a lot of coordination, but it can be done.

Q: What has been the main source for your birthday party customers? Is it customers that already know your facility and are visiting your facility? Is it more frequently from advertisements and other marketing efforts?

A: I do not know the percentage of who came from where, even though we have done exit surveys to answer that question. But the majority of the best marketing comes from people who are visiting your location and word-of-mouth.

Q: We try to keep the price low for everyone and we recently started a member program and I am not able to offer a discount for those members. What would be a good compromise to offer them? A free balloon bouquet, a discount on some of the extra items. What would be appropriate?

A: I think membership has its privileges whether you give them preferential time, spaces or events – reserve these for your Members. A regular package could be "X" amount, but if you are a member of our VIP Club, you get first choice of rooms, times and a free balloon bouquet – anything that is a small token of your appreciation for them being a VIP Member is good.

Q: How much time is a good amount of time to average for turnover between parties or private rooms?

A: I am guessing the question here is do you need to do a block of 2 hours and then have a 15 minute turn over. This goes back to the earlier question, can we have a group in the party room for X time and then move them out into the facility so we can clean the room and get it reset. I like to see parties run back-to-back-to-back, because I do not suggest keeping the kids in that party room until the very end. They are going to be out doing an activity and then we have given them a central pick-up spot. This frees up the room so your staff has enough time to prep and clean that room for the next party.

END Q & A

SUMMARY

We truly hope that this follow-up Q&A is helpful. If you missed the webinar broadcast, you can listen and/or download the webinar from IAAPA at [iaapa.org](http://www.iaapa.org). Link: <http://www.iaapa.org/education/elearn/elearning.asp>

A big “Thank You” to Linda Gerson and the IAAPA staff for compiling the questions and to Mr. Ben Jones, who assisted and worked for hours to develop this information and collaborated with me to create the answers that we’ve presented herein.

There are many resources available to help you plan and host great parties, if you need any advice on special events and party planning, please feel free to contact me, Sheryl Bindelglass, President of SherylGolf at 732.302.4439 or email at Sheryl@sherylgolf.com.

Thank you for caring enough about your business to take the time to attend IAAPA’s webinars, and to follow up and read this Q&A material.