

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

## For Event Planners, The Hottest Invite Is Made of Leather

Corporate Party Throwers Win  
Honors for Lavish Affairs;  
Pink Eraser Centerpiece

By **BROOKS BARNES**

NEW YORK—The suspense, in certain circles, was unbearable: Would the award for Best Use of a Tent go to EventQuest Inc. for a Mercedes promotion—or Matthew David Events for the Central Park Conservancy's Halloween party?

With some audience members literally biting their nails, Richard Aaron, president of the company bestowing the award, stood center stage and pulled his finger across the top of an oversized envelope. "And the award goes to...EventQuest!"

The firm's co-founder, John Schwartz, clambered onto the stage to collect the award, a Lucite "B" about the size of a gallon of milk. Like other winners, he posed for a photo with the mistress of ceremonies, who wore a red-sequined bathing suit and a 5-foot-tall feather headdress. "To be recognized is just a huge deal for us," he said afterward.

Corporate parties and product launches have grown so lavish that event planners now have their own Oscars. The best-tent affair was anointed Tuesday night in Manhattan at BizBash Media's third annual Event Style Awards, along with 15 other categories, such as Best Food Presentation and Best Gift Bag. (The winner: A black leather picnic basket, filled with two \$100 bottles of wine,



Photo: Verablog

**A cake made to look like a sushi platter, designed by Confetti Cakes for New York restaurant Nobu's 10th anniversary, was honored for Best Food Presentation.**

golf balls and wood-grilled onions, for prospective members of the Liberty National Golf Club, under construction in New Jersey.) In a closely contested category, AOL Media Networks took home Best Invitation Design for a plastic, leather and foam entry about the size of a small suitcase.

Fifteen years ago, a company's event planner was most likely an assistant to the CEO. But as gatherings have grown into more expensive and complex marketing tools, an industry has sprung up. Meeting Professionals International, a Texas-based trade association, says its membership has grown to 19,000 from just 159 in 1972.

The money that companies are spending on events now sometimes rivals their traditional advertising budgets. BizBash, which runs a Web site and an industry trade show, estimates companies spent \$4 billion on parties and meetings last year in New York City alone. Invitations to corporate events can cost anywhere from \$15 to \$1,000 each, says Marc Friedland, the owner of Los Angeles-based Creative Intelligence and a past Event Style winner.

Mr. Friedland just sent out 3,000 invitations to this month's bash for the opening of casino magnate Steve Wynn's new Las Vegas hotel. After touring the place to drink in its "ambiance and architecture," Mr. Friedland says he spent months devising the invite, which comes in a large, flat box, covered in iridescent brown taffeta outside and wallpaper from the hotel on the inside.

Events can get expensive as organizers seek to break through the clutter with over-the-top touches. Among the nominees for Best Event Concept this year was a Dom Perignon party orchestrated by public-relations maven Susan Magrino. Held on the 70th floor of Manhattan's Time Warner Center, guests swilled 179 bottles of Dom Perignon Vintage 1996

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