

Do's & Don'ts of Holiday Parties for Medical Practices

How to celebrate without wishing you hadn't

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When you read the title of this article, did you have frightening visions of employees wearing lampshades on their heads or yawning with boredom? These are the two extremes of bad office parties. The good news is, you don't have to get stuck in either extreme. Your medical office can have wonderful holiday office parties where everyone enjoys themselves – but not too much.

Should your practice hold holiday parties?

If you've had a bad experience hosting holiday office parties – or maybe funds are tight this year – you might be tempted to scrap the whole idea. Before doing this, consider the impact on your employees. (Read *MOT*'s article "[Keeping Staff Morale High](#)")

Medical offices are really no different from any other employer, says Todd Frederickson of Fisher & Phillips LLP, a national labor and employment law firm in Denver. "They should weigh the relative benefits of hosting a holiday party such as improved employee morale and teambuilding with the attendant risks such as exposure to third-party liability if alcohol is served."

Internal exposure for employees who misbehave in violation of office policies, such as anti-harassment policies, is another risk

to be weighed. (Read *MOT*'s article "[Preventing Harassment in the Workplace](#)")

"Office holiday parties can be an enjoyable way to boost employees' morale and thank them for their efforts during the year," says Rosemary Gousman, managing partner at Fisher & Phillips' Murray Hill, N.J. office "Unfortunately, they can lead to lawsuits if an attendee drinks and drives, or if offensive, discriminatory or harassing conduct occurs at the party."

Parties should be avoided or strictly limited if you know that someone in authority is a "walking lawsuit" after a few drinks, Gousman recommends.

Do hold holiday parties if it's in your budget and the practice is big enough to warrant a party, says author and advice columnist April Masini in Naples, Fla. "Other ways to celebrate for smaller businesses are a holiday lunch at a restaurant for the entire office – or one that is catered in to the office, but special – to mark the holiday and do something nice for people who work there," she adds.

"Dos" for medical office parties

Here are some guidelines to follow if you choose to host a holiday party:

- Choose a venue carefully. "All employees should feel comfortable and be welcome at the location," says Gousman. "Ideally, the venue should encourage good conduct and not tarnish the practice's image."
- Respect that employees may celebrate holidays other than Christmas. Many employers are shifting from Christmas to holiday parties out of this respect, says Frederickson.
- Consider the office party an extension of work. This is a good opportunity for employees to show their boss and other higher-ups how graceful they are in social situations that involve work, Masini says. Gousman recommends reminding employees that the party is a social, but work-related function. "Their conduct and dress should reflect that (e.g., provocative or revealing attire, intoxication, discriminatory or harassing conduct is not appropriate)."

Also remind healthcare providers and managers in advance that the party is an extension of the workplace and that conduct that would be inappropriate in the office is inappropriate at the party and could subject the practice to liability.

If you decide to serve alcohol, consider using drink tickets and/or cab slips to make employees aware of how much

they're drinking and other options for getting home besides driving if they do drink.

Remember that even at an off-site social gathering, you are perceived to represent your practice. Your actions and failure to address inappropriate or offensive conduct toward an employee may be attributed to your practice and could have serious consequences.

- Consider inviting spouses and significant others, as this will minimize the potential for sexual harassment claims, Gousman says.

- Station a manager at the door as the party winds down to say "good night" to, but not kiss guests, and also to check the condition of those departing, Gousman says. "Arrange transportation for any employee who feels that he or she should not drive home or who appears impaired," she adds.

- Serve plenty of food and delicious non-alcoholic holiday drinks (i.e. non-alcoholic beer, eggnog and alcohol-free mixed drinks) to prevent intoxication while providing an enjoyable atmosphere

- Decorate the party area and create a festive ambiance. Consider fun additions like a chocolate fountain, candy station, ice cream sundae bar, comedian, magician or other type of (clean) entertainment. You may also want to hire a band or DJ if you have a large enough group and want to encourage dancing.

"Don'ts" for medical office holiday parties

- Avoid entertainment that includes conduct or language that is sexually explicit or that contains material that could be offensive to any gender, race, ethnic group, age group or other protected group, Gousman advises.

- Do not serve alcohol to employees under 21.

- Don't hold the party on a weekend evening if you're not inviting spouses or significant others. Consider a lunchtime party or after-work gathering to avoid a long night of drinking that might lead to an overly relaxed atmosphere, fighting, harassment or discrimination claims, Gousman suggests.

- Never ever hang mistletoe!

- Don't hold or attend "after parties" or share a room with an employee who cannot drive home

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Carrie Rossenfeld is a veteran of the publishing and editorial world. As a Manhattan-based trade magazine and newsletter writer and editor, and more recently as a San Diego-based freelance writer and editor for magazines, newsletters and websites, she has written extensively on topics ranging from property licensing and giftware to commercial real estate and the history of the atomic bomb. She has also ghostwritten a book about starting a home-based business and edited a book about profiting from distressed real estate in a down market.

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