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The Party Planners

BOB SENDALL & BONNIE WALKER CHIRIGOS OFFER A SNEAK PEEK AT THIS SEASON'S EVENT TRENDS

BY DANA BLACK MCGRATH

as the spring event season nears, movers, shakers, and socialites wonder what new party trends await them on the gala circuit. Whirl checked in with two event experts for a sneak peek at what trends will make upcoming spring and summer soirées extra-special.

Bonnie Walker Chirigos and Bob Sendall, two of the region's most sought-after event planners, are each coordinating two of this season's most high-profile events. Chirigos, who owns two companies, Creative Affairs and studio-e, is the planner behind Pittsburgh Public Theater's Crash the Prom and the Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center Sports Museum Opening gala. Sendall's company, All in Good Taste Productions, is producing The Andy Warhol Museum's 10th Anniversary Gala at the SouthSide Works, taking place April 9.

Both Sendall and Chirigos attended Special Event 2005, a trade show for event planners held at the Fontainebleau Hilton Hotel in Miami's South Beach earlier this year. Chirigos has been a regular at Special Event for the past 10 years, and while she does not always stay for the duration of the show, she benefits even from a one or two-day stay. "Even if I get one thing out of it, it's worth it," she says. "I like knowing what's new and 'up and coming' — even internationally." She says her clients always get something new, and she never likes to repeat anything. A trade show veteran, Chirigos attends nearly eight different shows each year. We asked both Chirigos and Sendall to share the newest trends in event planning that they noted at The Special Event. In fact, these dynamos are already utilizing some of the "new" concepts presented at the show. The tips that follow are a sampling of what impressed our party planners at Special Event:



PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID BACHMAN



HIP TO BE SQUARE

Sendall said one of the trends he observed at the show was the use of 30-inch square cocktail tables. But it's not a trend that he particularly likes. The square, he says, has form, but little function. He prefers long tables, which are more conducive to good conversation. He also sometimes uses rounds, as long as they are not too big.



FUN FURNITURE

A few years ago, Chirigos learned of a company that rented furniture for special events. Now, many more companies are getting in on the action and renting unique pieces — not just standard tables and chairs. Chirigos has seen a rise in the rental of large 8-foot by 8-foot square pieces that are almost like a bed and can be found in the hottest restaurants and lounges in South Beach. Covered in leather, suede, and silk, the oversized ottomans are modern and sexy and can be used for multiple purposes — sitting, lounging, and serving drinks and dinner. "You could create your own South Beach party," she says.



LIGHT AS A FEATHER

"Feathers were everywhere!" Sendall exclaims. He has seen feathers decorating the edges of tables or tucked into a napkin. This past holiday season, he used feathers in a holiday decorating design for one of his clients and put them on the mantle, on the tree, and even in a wreath. This trend is not inexpensive, though; depending on the type of bird, individual feathers can range in price from \$1.50 to \$4.



FANTASY FABRICS

A new product Chirigos "absolutely fell in love with," is a line of tents and canopies that are far from the basic white party tent. Made of exotic fabrics from Asia, Paris, and India and adorned with rich tassels and ties, these structures are architectural replicas of buildings from the regions they represent. They are available locally through All Occasions. The same company also manufactures a line of oversized umbrellas and pillows for use with the tents. Portable fabric walls made from luxe materials can be used to create a new space in the home or outdoors that is truly spectacular, Chirigos says.



ICE AGE

One of the events that Sendall attended at the show was a wedding lunch that was set like a wedding reception and divided into four sections, each with a seasonal theme. Seated in the winter section, an ice carving of a wedding cake incorporating orchids, feathers, and gems served as the table centerpiece.



THAT'S ENTERTAINMENT

Since one of Chirigos' two companies, studio-e, is an entertainment company, the planner is always on the lookout for interactive entertainment. It helps to set the mood of an event and can help guests feel more comfortable. One of her finds is The Candy Man. One of only two men in the world skilled in his art, he creates 12- to 15-inch sculptures out of candy in less than 60 seconds. Imagine a balloon animal that is made from a lollipop — edible, too! He is represented exclusively in this region by studio-e. Another fun new product that keeps guests entertained is a machine that takes a digital picture and then produces the image onto a piece of chocolate — all in about one minute.



ORCHIDS

Orchids remained the flower of choice at The Special Event, Sendall says. Locally, many more people are interested in raising orchids than in the past, and they have recently become more readily available here at the Drew Mathieson Center on the North Side.



SHOWTIME!

Chirigos says it's no longer enough to just have a band at a party; guests need a show. For example, a performance such as a "through the decades" set of favorite pop hits, accompanied by impersonators of celebrities from each era, really jazzes up the event's entertainment.



IN THE PINK

As in fashion, pink is still a very hot color for events. Soft and refreshing, Sendall says it gives everyone a nice glow. He always uses pink lights at his events. Incorporating pink lighting into a party's decorating scheme is also a tip that home entertainers can easily try, too.



ACCESSORIZE, ACCESSORIZE, ACCESSORIZE

Taking another nod from the world of fashion, Chirigos stresses the importance of accessories and details in the design of an event. For example, the faux fur shrugs that are gracing the shoulders of stylish women everywhere also have appeared as chair covers. Personalizing and monogramming, classic treatments that have become popular as of late, were also a big hit at the show, employing everything from a logo to an initial. "You can take something simple and classic and really add to it," Chirigos says.



OVER YOUR HEAD

Aerial sculptures and shapes clad in Spandex are another trend that Sendall saw in use at the show. Always a step ahead, he already used this feature at the UPMC Hillman Cancer Center gala last fall.



THE LIGHT FANTASTIC

Both of our experts agree that lighting is an essential element at any event. "You can do a lot with lights," Sendall says, "especially in combination with fabric. It takes on anything and you can create whatever you want." Chirigos agrees, "Lighting is so important at an event. It just 'pops' everything."



MIX IT UP

Sendall also shared a hot trend for entertaining at home — working with some fun dishes. His advice: never buy less than 12 of anything. He encourages mixing and matching by varying the style of plate by course — each guest should have the same dish for the course, but then use a plate from a different service for the next course. ☺

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