

Escaping the grind

Corporate retreats serve as opportunities for employees to build relationships and have fun

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Have you ever wanted to see your boss do yoga? Or watch your manager ride a bike that is decorated to look like a horse? Perhaps you've wanted to test a colleague's float-building skills.

These things may sound silly, but their purpose is quite serious - building a company's team environment.

Employers are taking these corporate retreat activities not to the breakroom or the parking lot, but to some of the more colorful locations in Birmingham and beyond.

One place local companies go for an off-site corporate retreat is St. Vincent's One Nineteen Health and Wellness. Since wellness is such a hot-button issue, many companies are incorporating wellness activities into off-site company meetings, said Philip Holmes, wellness supervisor.

Holmes said the staff at One Nineteen offers a mini health fair around corporate meetings, where tests are taken and results are returned by mid-morning. Yoga, spa treatments and spin and stress relief classes are offered in the late afternoon.

The facility on Alabama 119 also has a test kitchen where a chef can come in and prepare lunch for guests, while a registered dietitian offers tips for healthy eating.

Holmes said One Nineteen's corporate retreat business has tripled since it started offering the service six months ago, with many employees coming back on their own.

It's a way for employees to "see their employer has their best interest at heart," he said. "The employer is saving money on a healthier staff. It's a win-win for everybody."

Holley Kahn, senior technical recruiter at AllStates Technical Services, agrees.

Kahn recently returned from a three-night corporate retreat in Nashville, where the recruiting company's offices from around the Southeast gathered for team building, focus meetings and a little fun.

Since the meeting was in Nashville, AllStates incorporated a country-western theme into its activities.

In addition to break-out sessions, which included reflecting on the past year and looking forward to the next, employees and managers were divided into teams to decorate bicycles to look like horses.

Once complete, the employees ran an obstacle course and won prizes for the fastest time and the best decorated horse. Kahn said the bikes were later donated to the Boys & Girls Club of America.

"There were some people I don't get to talk to very often," she said. "This was a chance to get away from the corporate setting and break down those walls. We did line dancing one night. I got to see my boss really enjoy herself. You get to see that side of her."

Hoover's Renaissance Ross Bridge Golf Resort & Spa hosts companies from all over the country, which come to mix business with pleasure, said Steve Miller, general manager of the resort.

"A lot of people come down South where they can count on weather that's more consistent," he said.

Family members are often invited on the retreats as an added perk, he said.

One company rented the entire resort out for a weekend and brought their families.

Activities such as golf, spa treatments and shopping were offered to the families, while employees attended corporate meetings and team-building sessions.

In this particular instance, the company divided into teams and built parade floats, which were later judged by the families and staff members of Ross Bridge after a procession that lined the main drive of the resort.

The corporate retreat industry is very consistent and has been for years, said Roger Hale, president



Bob Farley | f8photo.org

St. Vincent's One Nineteen Health and Wellness facility hosts corporate retreats and offers relaxing massages or time in a workout room between team-building sessions.

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of AdTrav Travel Management, a local travel agency that offers corporate travel services.

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"If there had to be one variable, it would probably be the economy and how the economy is running," he said. "When it's good for people it's an easier decision. You have a little more money and can afford to do it."

Hale said AdTrav uses some of the services it offers by taking management and employees on out-of-town retreats, often using scavenger hunts to allow employees to visit the area while building team work.

But one of the hardest parts of planning a retreat is getting everyone together all at one time.

"You can't please everyone and you can't accommodate everyone's schedule," he said.

AdTrav's management team typically consists of 18 to 20 people, but it's rare if all are able to travel at the same time. But the benefit for those who attend far outweighs the absence of a few, he said.

Whether companies pack up their employees and fly them to remote locations or just take them down the street, incorporating fun is an important part of retreats, said Dallas Teague Snider, account director/recruitment manager for ConferenceDirect.

Thinking outside of the box doesn't have to be expensive, but it does take some creativity, she said.

"Everybody wants to be a kid. When we let ourselves go in that type of environment, we learn because we don't have those barriers. The professional world has walls that inhibit," she said.

The locale of the meeting can play a large part in planning team-building activities. Snider said she has seen everything from ropes courses to scavenger hunts centered around a certain city or region.

One example she cited was from a meeting held in Lexington, Ky., where teams of mostly ladies were charged with designing and building Southern-themed hats, while creating a character around the hat.

She said one gentleman participated and won over the crowd with his Southern charm and the overall winner of the contest was a woman from Canada.

"Depending on where you are having the meeting, you can find something that relates to the area and relates to the company and make something fun where people work together."

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