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Party planner: Tips from New Jersey events expert Allison Sargent

Published: Thursday, June 16, 2011, 5:00 AM Updated: Thursday, June 16, 2011, 8:35 AM

By **Kimberly L. Jackson/The Star-Ledger**
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Courtesy of Allison Sargent Events

Festive paper lanterns and floral arrangements carry the chosen colors for a Sweet 16 party.

Thinking of all the events that add the most meaning to our lives, it would be easy to imagine the year as one big calendar whose dates are filled in with various festive gatherings.

Starting with New Year's Day brunch and moving through the birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, weddings and baby showers, our happiest moments are often those spent with others. Through the shared celebration of milestones, accomplishments, holidays and just plain friendship, we facilitate expressions of love, appreciation and camaraderie while reinforcing important social traditions.

But with those traditions, there are often a lot of tension-generating

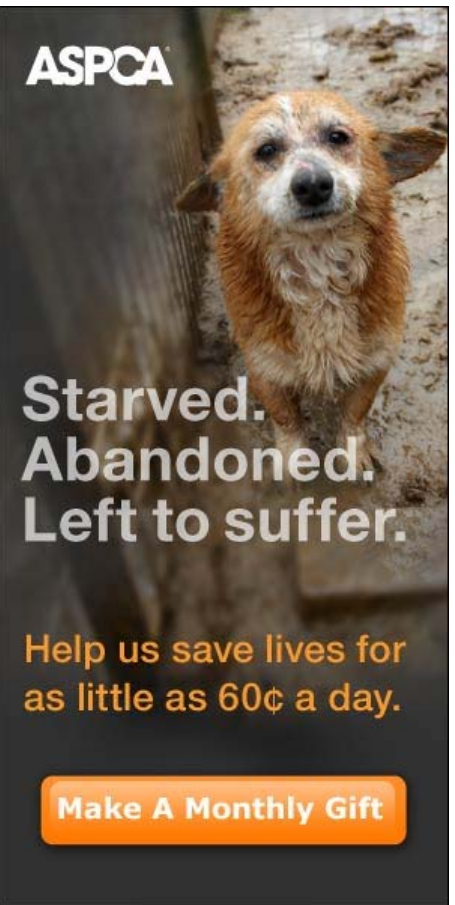
expectations. And when the setting for a celebration is also our home, worries about getting everything just right can be magnified.

"It is just a human condition that when we entertain at home -- no matter what that home is, no matter what size or scale -- we're always concerned what people are thinking of our surroundings or if we are doing a good job," says Allison Sargent, a Montclair event planner.

And she should know. As the lady wearing the "expert" badge, she is under even greater pressure to accurately interpret the traditions and values of various corporate and social cultures while staging gatherings for the likes of Donald Trump and major corporations such as American Express or British Airways. Last October, her company was behind the launch celebration for Hilton hotel corporation's Eforea spas, which drew hundreds of VIPs to Short Hills for opening night.

Whether it's a business gala, a Sweet 16 party, a wedding or a fundraiser, Sargent maintains the same calm, in-control presence. Along with planning an event, she often finds herself acting as an

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arbiter of good taste when clients consult her on the menu they should serve their guests, the condition of their homes, and even what they might wear.

Sargent says one of the goals of her 20-year-old company **Allison Sargent Events** is to infuse the gathering with the host's personal style and interests. Parties, she says, should be "a reflection of your brand whether it is a product launch or just you and your girlfriends getting together."



Allison Sargent, owner of Allison Sargent Events, a 20-year-old Montclair event planning company

There's a lot of talk about the packaging and branding of people these days, and much of Sargent's finesse is linked to image management for herself, her company and her events. For this story, which sought her tips on making the most of summer gatherings at home, Sargent requested interview topics in advance and consulted with her staff editor who advised her (as did this writer) against submitting essay-type responses that would be far less likely to capture her spirit.

When asked to share an instructive party-planning mishap, Sargent mentioned not a personal failing, but an act-of-God-type challenge in which she

needed to do some climbing for a do-it-yourself repair that stopped a torrent of rain from pouring into an outdoor tent. Lesson learned? Always bring another outfit to the party.

Sargent's need for job-interview-like readiness has translated into international contracts, an impressive client list and her being named among top New Jersey businesswomen and event planners by NJBIZ, a state business magazine. Her eye for high-style was honed by her years working with color and fabrics as a fashion director for Lord & Taylor, where she also planned large-scale promotional events. But anyone who is planning a party at home would benefit from homing in on the solutions-oriented pluck that Sargent channels to her staff and vendors. An effective party planner's greatest trait "is the overall ability to manage events and to keep a good attitude," she says. "In the worst situation, I don't want anyone to see me freaking out." The mantra in any crisis is "We're going to take care of this. We're all good, smart people and we're going to move ahead."

Anyone who has been an at-home host knows the challenges can come in the form of dishes that don't quite cook up according to schedule or drinks that don't last through the party's end or a major etiquette faux pas. So, how can one accomplish the goal of feeling like a guest at her own party?

The solution, Sargent says, is in entertaining at your comfort level and planning well. If you cook rather than hire a caterer, choose a winning dish with which you've previously had success. If you are not a disciple of Emily Post, perhaps the backyard barbecue would be a better option for entertaining your colleagues than a formal dinner. Summer is a great time for informal gatherings, Sargent says. "The clothing is more casual, the food is more casual."

And even while Sargent is passing on such potentially disheartening tidbits as: "When someone comes into your home, you are being measured very definitely by your home," she advises simply making your place the best it can be. "You want to really think about organizing, not redesigning your house and spending thousands of dollars," she says. "Do what you have to do to make it comfortable for you -- whatever that means. It's different for everyone."

Allison Sargent Events

Decorative touches at the buffet are key for the host who appreciates impressive design.

The most important aspect of party planning is being a gracious host, she says. Her advice in that regard is to take the time to

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consider your guests' needs in advance. Start planning early, and pay attention to the details that will translate into a memorable experience.

Here are some of Sargent's tips for entertaining at home.

Getting started: After you've picked a date, the next step is establishing your budget based on the type of event and the number of people you will invite. "The more people you invite to anything, the more costly it will be," notes Sargent. Also, determine the event's significance. "If this is the most important thing you are doing all year, then put the money behind it."

Guest list: Your list should include contact information for each person you plan to invite. "This will ease communication throughout your process," Sargent says.

Invitations: "Your invitation is the first impression. If you want to make a good one, your invitation is critical," says Sargent. Decide whether the invitations should be casual or more elaborate based on the nature of your event. "If your invitation is elaborate, then the expectations are higher," she said. Even if the invites are electronic, Sargent says it's important to pay attention to the spelling of a guest's name and punctuation. A general rule of thumb is to send invitations six to eight weeks in advance. For weddings and major events, a save-the-date notice can go out up to six months ahead.

Planning: Your plan is the key to everything. In addition to the guest list, there will be many other matters to manage including menus, housekeeping and purchases. Sargent suggests creating a folder with a copy of the invitation, the guest list, to-do lists, service estimates, receipts and other related documents. Keep it where it can easily be referenced by family members or others who might need to be tapped for assistance. Another tip: Plan to set your table five days prior. "When you prepare everything in advance, you know what you are missing and you can fill those things in," she says.

Be camera ready: "Photography is the lasting imagery of this special event that you've worked really hard on," says Sargent. She favors hiring a professional or designating a capable friend or family member to photograph events of all levels. "If it's a 50th birthday party, let's get it on film," she says. "It's really nice to have a record of your own."

Take-home gift: A parting gift will send guests off with a last positive memory of the party. Sargent suggests a home-baked treat packaged with a motif or colors that match the event.

Put "you" in unique: Themes can be wonderful when the party planner needs direction, Sargent says. "But you don't want to get pigeonholed into having to use one." For decorating, she advises "simple, creative and meaningful." The unifying element – from the invitation to the décor – should be something significant to the host or guest of honor. If sailing is the passion, incorporate nautical elements.

Often, favorite colors can be enough to guide the selection of party materials, she says. Try to also incorporate something unexpected. "Everybody is so used to what they always see. The craziest, fun little element will be what people remember."

What will you wear: In the frenzy of preparation, you will thank yourself if you plan your outfit in advance and have it hanging up and ready to slip on.

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Allison Sargent Events

Nautical elements personalize the party of a host who enjoys sailing and socializing.

Additionally, Sargent advises factoring in enough time for the salon and professional grooming appointments. "When you feel good about how you look, you just feel better about the whole process."

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